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A COUNTRY ON THE BRINK OF A REGION? GERMANY'S BALTIC SEA POLICIES

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What is Germany's interest in the Baltic Sea region (BSR) and regional cooperation? What are the country's motives and incentives? It seems that it is not that easy to answer these questions as certain contradictions in the German stance as well as contradictions in the perspectives on the region of the different actors and observers in Germany have been evident throughout the years.

On the one hand, there are strong indications that Germany as a country in the center of Europe never had an outstanding political interest in a, from a German point of view, marginal region and that it was and still is a rather reluctant partner in the regional cooperation. By this token, for Berlin the region was and is only one of many fields within Germany's foreign relations; the country's foreign policy priorities are different. On the other hand, for the German states (*Bundesländer*) with a Baltic Sea coastline the BSR is of great importance. Even more than the German federal government, they played and still play a pivotal role in regional cooperation on the sub-national level and even beyond. They may be regarded as a vital link between Bonn/Berlin and the region. Economically, Germany is deeply integrated in the region and is the most prominent trading partner for most of the countries of the BSR.¹ To some extent, Germany has also contributed to the development of the region and regional cooperation. For example, the former Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher together

1 | Carsten Schymik, "Germany", in: Bernd Henningsen and Tobias Etzold (eds.), *Political State of the Region Report 2011*, Copenhagen, Baltic Development Forum, 2011, 29, <http://bdforum.org/activities/reports-publications/thematic-reports> (accessed 12 Apr 2012).

with his Danish counterpart, Uffe Elleman-Jensen, initiated the launch of the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS) in 1992.

Today, even though Germany currently holds the Presidency of the CBSS for the second time after 2000/2001, there is hardly any debate on the region in Germany, at least on the federal level. Overall, Germany's position in the region is well characterised by the assumption that the country "is playing a role within the region but prefers not to draw too much attention to its actions".² At times, Germany's actions in the region were even very limited in their scope. As a large country with undoubtedly many relevant links into the region, "Germany is present – but not visible".³

GERMAN REGIONAL INTERESTS BETWEEN 1989 AND 2004

Germany experienced fundamental changes from the late 1980s onwards, culminating in the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 and reunification in 1990. In those first years, several German actors promoted cooperation in the BSR, a region that was in the process of reunification after having been divided for 40 years, and a strong German engagement and commitment in this process. In the initial phase of developing practical cooperation, sub-state actors, such as counties, and individuals acted as driving forces. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, think tanks had explored the possibilities of cooperation in the BSR. The Denkfabrik Schleswig-Holstein, a think tank composed of renowned German researchers, outlined the composition of the new BSR and produced background material.⁴ The efforts of the think tank resulted in the launch of *Ars Baltica* in 1991. *Ars Baltica* promotes cultural cooperation in the BSR. The think tank was also behind the plans of Björn Engholm,

In the first years of German reunification, German actors promoted cooperation in the BSR and commitment in this process.

2 | Bernd Henningsen, quoted in: Tom Schumacher, *Documentation of the seminar Mare Nostrum – Economy and Communication in the Baltic Sea Region*, 30 Oct - 3 Nov 2006, Research Group for Northern European Politics, Jan 2007, 8, <http://for-n.de/details/mare%20nostrum.pdf> (accessed 14 May 2012).

3 | Ibid.

4 | Leena-Kaarina Williams, "Post-modern and intergovernmental paradigms of Baltic Sea co-operation between 1988 and 1992. The genesis of the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS) as a historical case study", in: Bernd Henningsen et al. (eds.), *Nordeuropaforum*, 15 (1), 9-10.

the former social-democratic Prime Minister of Schleswig-Holstein, which were inspired by the Hansa concept and aimed at establishing a sub-regional non-statist Baltic Sea Council or Baltic Forum in which actors representing sub-state units around the Baltic Sea, parliaments, NGOs and societal groups could gather.⁵

Plans for intergovernmental cooperation were revealed in autumn 1991, when then German Foreign Minister Genscher and his Danish colleague Ellemann-Jensen invited ambassadors of the Baltic Sea states to a meeting in Rostock.

Although the exact nature of such a council remained undefined, it would have been rather different from the traditional design of inter-state cooperation. Plans for intergovernmental cooperation were revealed in autumn 1991, when then German Foreign Minister Genscher and his Danish colleague Ellemann-Jensen invited ambassadors of the Baltic Sea states to a meeting in Rostock to explore the possibilities of enhancing regional cooperation and possibly establishing an intergovernmental regional organisation. This can be interpreted as a governmental counter-measure to sub-state efforts to foster regional cooperation. Governments seemed to have feared the loss of control over the process of establishing regional cooperation. Genscher, for instance, was opposed to Engholm's plan as this would have contradicted the federal government's primacy in foreign policies.⁶ In addition, this plan was closely affiliated with social-democrats who were in opposition in Denmark, Sweden (since 1991) and on the German federal level at the time. Thus, the Danish and German Liberal-Democratic foreign ministers seemed keen to prevent these plans for sub-regional cooperation mainly because of party rivalries.⁷ There were also indications⁸ that Genscher and Ellemann-Jensen were not personally interested in BSR cooperation but assumed that such cooperation could serve their countries' interests and that the activities of non-state actors required the control of the state.

5 | Ibid., 15-16; Carl-Einar Stålvant, "The Council of Baltic Sea States", in: Andrew Cottey (ed.), *Subregional cooperation in the new Europe: building security, prosperity and solidarity from the Barents to the Black Sea*, Macmillan, New York, 1999, 56.

6 | Ibid.

7 | Williams, n. 4, 16.

8 | Cf. Marko Lehti, "Possessing a Baltic Europe: Retold National Narratives in the European North", in: Marko Lehti and David J. Smith (eds.), *Post-Cold War Identity Politics. Northern and Baltic Experiences*, Portland, Frank Cass, London, 2003, 23.

Consequently, the foreign ministers of the nine Baltic Sea littoral states and Norway and a representative from the European Commission gathered in Copenhagen in March 1992 and established the CBSS on the basis of the Copenhagen Declaration. Genscher and Ellemann-Jensen stated that "in light of political changes in Europe, the dream was to create a forum, which could serve as a driving force behind political and economic stabilisation and co-operation in the new Baltic Sea region".⁹

However, despite having co-founded the CBSS and despite being a Baltic Sea littoral country, the BSR did not seem to have become a political priority for the federal German government during the 1990s. Instead, Germany's interest and commitment in general BSR cooperation and the CBSS was fairly limited, confirming the above assumption that other reasons than a genuine interest were the main motives behind the launch of the CBSS. Germany focussed instead on the development of the EU, the EU expansion process, relations to other large countries and good bilateral relations with its direct neighbours to the east, especially Poland. Although generally supportive, Germany perceived the CBSS primarily as a symbol for the changes in the region and for building relations between the countries of the region rather than as a motor for cooperation.¹⁰ Therefore, the federal government had not intended to establish a highly institutionalised and bureaucratised body.¹¹ They did not support any further institutionalisation of the Council, for instance in the form of a permanent secretariat¹², which some other countries intended to inaugurate. Germany also did not assume the CBSS Presidency in these first years,

Germany's interest and commitment in general Baltic Sea region cooperation and the Council of the Baltic Sea States was fairly limited.

9 | Hans-Dietrich Genscher and Uffe Ellemann-Jensen, "True Partnership and Co-operation Can Make the Baltic Sea Region a Winner", *Baltinfo – The Official Journal of the Council of the Baltic Sea States*, 45, Stockholm, 2/2002, 2.

10 | Stålvant, n. 5, 58.

11 | Ole Wæver, "The Baltic Sea: A Region after Post-Modernity?", in: Pertti Joenniemi (ed.), *Neo-Nationalism or Regionalism: The Restructuring of Political Space around the Baltic Rim*, Nordiska Institutet för Regionalpolitisk Forskning, Stockholm, 1997, 305.

12 | Axel Krohn, "Schleswig-Holstein goes international", Working Papers, No. 30, Copenhagen Peace Research Institute, Copenhagen, 1998, 12.

because, as one of the largest member states, it did not wish to impose itself on the other countries of the region.¹³

The reluctance to be more actively engaged in the region was also linked to Germany's special relationship to Russia. The country tried to avoid actions, such as a strong engagement in the Baltic states and Kaliningrad,¹⁴ that could have given Russia any sense of German ambitions to play a dominant role in the region, lest these reawaken the still fresh memories about the German past. Bearing this in mind, Germany avoided making the impression that it had any "great-power ambitions" in or around the BSR.¹⁵

On the other hand, the North German states, Hamburg, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania and Schleswig-Holstein, were more actively interested and engaged in BSR cooperation, recognising their potential of functioning as a link between the regional, domestic and European levels.¹⁶ Although as a sub-state entity not being represented in the CBSS, the state government of Schleswig-Holstein was supportive of it and promoted the inauguration of a permanent secretariat.¹⁷ The three states are actively engaged in the Baltic Sea States Sub-regional Cooperation (BSSSC); several German cities along the Baltic Sea coast participate in the Union of Baltic Cities (UBC).

It was only from 2000 onwards that interest and engagement in regional cooperation by the federal government slightly increased, a shift that was possibly triggered by the concrete prospects of four Baltic Sea littoral countries (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland) to join the EU. The change in government in 1998 contributed to this develop-

13 | Wolfgang Schultheiß, "Wie weit liegt Bonn von der Ostsee entfernt? Der Stellenwert Nordosteuropas und des Ostseerates im Rahmen deutscher Außenpolitik", in: Christian Wellmann (ed.), *Kooperation und Konflikt in der Ostseeregion, Gegenwartsfragen*, 81, Landeszentrale für politische Bildung Schleswig-Holstein, Kiel, 1999, 30.

14 | Bernd Henningsen, "At the Dawn of German CBSS Presidency: Hopes vs. Doubts", *Baltinfo – The Official Journal of the Council of the Baltic Sea States*, 32, Stockholm, 10/2000, 4-5.

15 | Axel Krohn, "Germany", in: idem (ed.), *The Baltic Sea Region: National and International Security Perspectives*, Nomos, Baden-Baden, 1996, 96.

16 | Krohn, n. 12, 13.

17 | Ibid., 12.

ment. The *Süddeutsche Zeitung*¹⁸ reported that the new Social-Democratic federal chancellor Gerhard Schröder attributed more relevance to the region and the CBSS than his conservative predecessor Helmut Kohl. Despite the continuous lack of a coherent German Baltic Sea policy, Germany's CBSS Presidency (2000-2001) indicated at least some good will and a more active approach.¹⁹ This active approach was evidenced by a number of intergovernmental meetings, (academic) conferences and cultural events organised by the presidency. The German Presidency continued Norwegian efforts to develop the CBSS into the key coordinator of cooperation efforts in the region, emphasised the complementary character of EU and CBSS activities and specified the CBSS's role within the Northern Dimension (ND).²⁰ The Northern Dimension policy of the EU emerged on a Finnish initiative in 1997. In geographical terms, the ND covers the BSR, North-West Russia, the Barents and the Arctic regions. The ND, focussing on economic and soft security issues, established a political framework for (cross-border) cooperation between EU member states, candidate, non-member and non-candidate countries. Germany also underscored the importance of involving actors from civil society in BSR cooperation by initiating and co-organising the first official Baltic Sea NGO forum under the auspices of the CBSS in Lübeck in May 2001. Around the time of the German CBSS Presidency, the Federal Parliament (Bundestag) discussed regional cooperation, revealed a certain interest in the region and praised the CBSS for promoting regional cooperation.²¹ The opposition parties directed questions on these issues to the government which were answered thoroughly and concisely.

Germany initiated and co-organised the first official Baltic Sea NGO forum under the auspices of the CBSS in Lübeck in May 2001.

But even then, the German government was still criticised for showing low ambitions, and little enthusiasm and

18 | "Ein Meer verschiedener Interessen. Deutschland übernimmt den Vorsitz des Ostseerates und muss Balten, Russen und Südeuropäer zufrieden stellen", *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 1/2 Jul 2000.

19 | Leena-Kaarina Williams, *The Baltic Sea Region: Forms and Functions of Regional Co-operation*, Gdańsk, Berlin, 2001, 31.

20 | Hans-Jürgen Heimsoeth, "A look back on the German CBSS Presidency", *Baltinfo – The Official Journal of the Council of the Baltic Sea States*, 38, Stockholm, 5/2001, 2.

21 | Deutscher Bundestag, 111. Sitzung, Berlin, 29 Jun 2000, 14. Wahlperiode, 10504 and 10514, <http://dip.bundestag.de/btp/14/14111.pdf> (accessed 12 Apr 2012).

engagement. Most CBSS ministerial meetings were attended by Foreign Office junior ministers instead of the foreign minister. Cabinet ministers instead of the federal chancellor attended most of the Baltic Sea States Summits. The German CBSS Presidency's priority list contained only the usual topics without any visible effect, major surprises, innovations and inspiration; despite good intentions and ambitions, concerning the German position in intergovernmental BSR cooperation, there was much rhetoric but little action.²² The same critics acknowledge, however, that, unlike today, there was at least more rhetoric at the time and that quite a number of prominent politicians expressed their thoughts and views on the region.²³

GERMANY AND THE POST-ENLARGEMENT BALTIc SEA REGION

Foreign Minister Fischer believed that real Baltic Sea cooperation would only start effectively after EU enlargement.

EU and NATO expansion was central for Germany and influenced the country's attitude and interest also toward the BSR. For the German government, it also implied fresh opportunities for Baltic Sea cooperation. Then German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer believed that real Baltic Sea cooperation would only begin effectively after EU enlargement.²⁴ However, he did not specify whether this would happen within the CBSS or within an EU context. German government officials confirmed Germany's interest and commitment in official statements: "Germany encourages the CBSS to use all its comparative advantages to take new initiatives as well as to support the implementation of EU regional policies." Germany believes in the BSR's potential and wishes to participate as much as possible in its future development, in order to enhance economic and political cooperation.²⁵ German government officials also repeatedly stressed that the structures of the CBSS

22 | Henningsen, n. 14, 4-5.

23 | Bernd Henningsen, "Germany and the Baltic Sea region", *Baltic Rim Economies*, 1/2012, Pan-European Institute Turku, 29 Feb 2012, 35, http://www.tse.fi/EN/units/specialunits/pei/economic_monitoring/bre/Pages/default.aspx (accessed 12 Apr 2012).

24 | Deutscher Bundestag, 150. Sitzung, Berlin, 9 Feb 2001, 14. Wahlperiode, 14713, <http://dip.bundestag.de/btp/14/14150.pdf> (accessed 12 Apr 2012).

25 | Busso von Alvensleben, "Germany and the Baltic Sea Region after EU enlargement", *Baltinfo – The Official Journal of the Council of the Baltic Sea States*, 69, 11/2004, Stockholm, 11.

should remain light, adaptable and demand-oriented.²⁶ The CBSS should remain the active coordinator of regional cooperation and foster its upgrading.²⁷ Former Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier explicitly stated that he wanted the CBSS to continue as a unique forum for exchange among the Baltic Sea littoral states.²⁸ During a visit to the CBSS Secretariat in summer 2008, Steinmeier confirmed Germany's interest in the BSR, in the work of the CBSS and in expanding networks.²⁹ In the CBSS reform process, which became necessary after the fundamental changes in the region, which also altered the pre-conditions for the work of the Council, the German government made a few specific proposals as regards the content of future cooperation. The government, supported by Schleswig-Holstein, was particularly interested in elaborating a maritime policy including a fully functioning regional maritime economy as a potential growth sector³⁰ and to establish related working and expert groups.

There was, however, also some scepticism among governmental officials toward post-enlargement regional cooperation and Germany's role therein. Some did not perceive the BSR as an area that should be a specific focus of German foreign policy; a distinctive German Baltic Sea policy was not required, as all the requirements for regional cooperation could be sufficiently fulfilled within EU and NATO.³¹ According to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, the German government has regarded the CBSS as meaningless

According to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, the German government regarded the CBSS as meaningless since EU enlargement.

26 | Ibid.; Hans Martin Bury, *A sea which connects*, speech by the Minister of State at the Federal Foreign Office at the 12th Ministerial Session of the Council of the Baltic Sea States Pori/Finland, 11 Jun 2003.

27 | Deutscher Bundestag, Antrag der Abgeordneten: Ostsee-cooperation weiter stärken und Chancen nutzen, Drucksache 16/5910, 4 Jul 2007, 2 and 4, <http://dip21.bundestag.de/dip21/btd/16/059/1605910.pdf> (accessed 12 Apr 2012).

28 | Federal Foreign Office, *Enge deutsch-baltische Beziehungen*, 2008.

29 | "Aus dem Hause Strömsborg", *Balticness – The Official Journal of the Council of the Baltic Sea States*, Autumn 2008, Stockholm, 7.

30 | "Reforming and Strengthening the Baltic Sea Region", *Balticness – The Official Journal of the Council of the Baltic Sea States*, Autumn 2008, Stockholm, 13.

31 | Schumacher, *Documentation of the seminar Mare Nostrum*, n. 2, 8.

since EU enlargement.³² Thus, governmental scepticism has been reflected by the German media that generally did not pay much attention to the region. Even the current German CBSS Presidency and related events in Germany such as the foreign ministers special meeting at Plön Castle (see below) went widely unnoticed by the media, with the exception of a few local and regional newspapers and TV channels.

With the elaboration of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea region (EUSBSR) as from 2008 onwards, the German interest and engagement in the BSR seems to have slightly increased again. Within the strategy, Germany has taken assumed responsibility for three priority areas: natural zones and biodiversity, promotion of small and medium-sized companies, as well as education and tourism. Compared to, in particular, the Nordic countries, the German commitment in the EUSBSR is, however, fairly modest.³³

Nonetheless, the three states Schleswig-Holstein, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania and Hamburg, contributed actively to the elaboration of the EUSBSR and are involved in its implementation. The coordination of the strategy's priority areas, education and tourism, has been assigned to the state governments of Hamburg and Mecklenburg-West Pomerania respectively. In the context of the strategy,

Hamburg has developed a proactive approach toward the BSR and regards itself as an integral part of the region.

Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania became politically more visible and active in the BSR.³⁴ One of the big stakeholder conferences held in the context of a wide consultation process on the strategy was co-organised by the state government of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania in Warnemünde in February 2009. Hamburg has developed a proactive approach toward the BSR and regards itself as an integral part of the region, fulfilling the function of a major maritime transport hub between the Baltic and other seas. Hamburg naturally focuses on trade and transport in the BSR but also on cultural exchange.³⁵ While interest

32 | "Merkel und Sarkozy in Hannover – Abendessen mit Krisenstimmung", *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 2 Mar 2008, <http://sueddeutsche.de/politik/77/434824/text> (accessed 12 Apr 2012).

33 | Schymik, n. 1, 30.

34 | *Ibid.*, 31.

35 | *Ibid.*, 30.

and engagement in the BSR in Schleswig-Holstein was very advanced when the country was run by social-democratic-led governments, its commitment slightly decreased under the Christian-Democratic-led government from 2005 on. Nonetheless, Schleswig-Holstein also actively contributed to the strategy and, although it does not coordinate a priority area, is involved in implementing several flagship projects.³⁶

GERMANY'S CBSS PRESIDENCY 2011-2012 AND THE STRIVE FOR COHERENCE

On 1 July 2011, Germany took on the presidency of the CBSS for the second time after 2000/2001. It is serendipitous that Germany, as a country that had co-initiated the launch of the CBSS, assumed the Presidency of the CBSS in the year of its 20th anniversary. The first highlight of the German Presidency was a festive get-together linked with an special meeting of CBSS foreign ministers at Plön Castle in Schleswig-Holstein on 5 February 2012. The Baltic Sea days in Berlin on 23-25 April 2012, including the Baltic Sea NGO Forum and several high-level meetings, and the Baltic Sea Summit of heads of government in Stralsund on 30 and 31 May 2012 will follow. These events have some potential to increase the awareness of the region among the German public. The priorities of the German Presidency cover the five long-term priority areas of the CBSS as decided during the CBSS reform summit in Riga in 2008: economic development, environment and sustainability; energy (in Plön, the foreign ministers adopted a declaration on energy security in the BSR); education and culture; and civil security and the human dimension. Additionally, Germany places emphasis on the South Eastern Baltic Sea region including Kaliningrad, and is striving for modernisation through cooperation. Also the ability of the CBSS and its Secretariat to design and implement concrete projects is to be further developed.³⁷ Germany intends to make the CBSS strong and fit for the future so that it will

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36 | Ibid., 30-31.

37 | Federal Foreign Office, *German Presidency of the Council of the Baltic Sea States 2011/2012. Programme of work*, 3, <http://auswaertiges-amt.de/cae/servlet/contentblob/583552/publicationFile/155922> (accessed 18 Apr 2012).

be able to remain “a pioneer of regional cooperation” and a “symbol of the regional identity”.³⁸

A further high priority of the German CBSS Presidency is to create a “coherent framework for co-operation” in the region. This implies linking the various cooperation structures – in particular CBSS, ND and EUSBSR – more closely together and striving toward achieving a more efficient division of labour among the major players

The German Presidency aims to involve the CBSS more closely in the implementation of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region.

in the Baltic Sea cooperation.³⁹ Within this context, the German Presidency aims to use the potential of the CBSS more in the implementation of the EU Strategy for the Baltic

Sea Region (EUSBSR).⁴⁰ The reason behind the endeavour to create more coherence in Baltic Sea cooperation is that the institutional framework of the BSR is complex and involves many different layers, formats, constellations and levels. Relevant regional cooperation structures include in addition to the CBSS, the Northern Dimension (ND) of the EU, Russia, Norway and Iceland and the EUSBSR, Nordic Cooperation, Baltic cooperation, Nordic-Baltic Cooperation (Nordic-Baltic 8) and informal cooperation among the EU members of the region (Nordic Baltic 6/NB 6 and NB 6 plus Poland and Germany). Several bodies operate on parliamentary and trans-national levels, such as the Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference (BSPC), the Baltic Sea States Sub-regional Cooperation (BSSSC) and the Union of Baltic Cities (UBC). Further specialised organisations add to the picture, such as the Baltic Sea Region Energy Cooperation (BASREC) and the Helsinki Commission (HELCOM), which promotes cooperation concerning the protection of the maritime environment. At times, this complex system creates overlap, implying negative consequences and co-ordination problems, which may result in inefficient and ineffective cooperation.

The fact that the level of coordination and coherence needs to be enhanced is nothing new. Calls to improve these have

38 | Federal Foreign Office, speech by Minister of State Werner Hoyer at the Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference (BSPC), Helsinki, 29 Aug 2011, http://auswaertiges-amt.de/EN/Infoservice/Presse/Reden/2011/110829-ST_Hoyer_BSPC.html (accessed 12 Apr 2012).

39 | Federal Foreign Office, n. 37, 3 and 9.

40 | Ibid., 3.

been made more or less since the inception of the various formats of Baltic Sea cooperation. Already during its first CBSS Presidency, Germany made efforts to improve the coordination of activities within the various frameworks and to develop the CBSS into the key coordinator in the BSR (see above). That Germany took this issue up again is good and necessary, but it also shows that little has been achieved in the past few years in this respect. However, concrete ideas and proposals on how to improve the system, to create more coherence and to enhance a better and smarter division of labour are currently only in the process of being discussed and elaborated. The ND is, in the German view, not suitable as a framework for regional cooperation in the BSR as it has a wider geographical focus than the BSR only. Additionally, Germany and Poland do not regard themselves as Northern. For cooperation in the different subject areas, an alternative over-arching and coordinating structure could be used, depending on what is most appropriate and equipped to assume such a role in the respective area of cooperation. For Germany, the adequate inclusion of Russia is of particular importance, implying that not all regional cooperation efforts should and could be conducted under an EU umbrella as Russia is not an EU-member.

Proposals on how to create more coherence and to enhance a better and smarter division of labour are currently only in the process of being elaborated.

CONCLUSIONS AND OUTLOOK

Owing to diverging views, Germany's real interest is hard to pinpoint. On average, Germany's BSR and CBSS engagement has not been particularly advanced in the past. However, according to critics, there is even less engagement now. For some, the current German CBSS Presidency is characterised by low ambitions.⁴¹ However, as one of the largest countries in the region, Germany still might have an important role to play in the development of the region and regional cooperation. Because of its CBSS Presidency, the region is currently more present on Germany's foreign policy agenda than previously. The risk is that, once the CBSS presidency passes to Russia on 1 July 2012, the region might vanish again from the political agenda. Owing to its close links, it would, however, be in Germany's best interest to develop a more sustainable and uniform policy toward the region.

41 | Schymik, n. 1, 30.

That currently the interest in the region and the commitment to joint regional efforts is not particularly advanced is not a specific German phenomenon. To a similar extent, this also applies to most of the other countries in the region. Hardly any of these countries has an explicit and coherent national Baltic Sea policy. Linked themes are not regarded as strictly necessary or as top priorities on the political agenda. Other topics in European and international relations dominate political debates, such as the European financial, economic and debt crises, and the changes in the Arab world. The development of the EUSBSR is a case in point. First, it was seen by most countries as a new milestone of regional cooperation, providing new incentives, a fresh impetus and energy. Most countries seemed to be strongly interested in the strategy, perceiving it as a fresh instrument to tackle challenges and to utilise opportunities the region has to offer. However, after a brief heyday, the aforementioned issues appeared more urgent and topical than, for example, the environmental problems of the BSR. Therefore, the implementation of the strategy has not made much progress as yet. Generally, it still is questionable to what extent the mostly positive joint and national official statements on the value of regional cooperation, expressing primarily a "diplomatic" interest – which are nice words but carry with them little action and effort – reflect the countries' "real" interest, engagement and commitment. Germany is indeed a good example for this assumption. There is some interest but it does not seem to be overly intense. Germany fulfils its duties in the region; it does not less but also not much more than that.