History has a taste for surprise: The dynamic destiny of the Baltic Sea Region

BY DR. PER HÖGSELIUS

MORE THAN A YEAR has now passed since the radical enlargement of the EU in May 2004 when membership of the European Union grew from 15 to 25 member states. Four of the newcomers were Baltic Sea states, and although we have perhaps not yet had time to get used to the new map of Europe and the Baltic Sea, it will no doubt become quite clear that the Baltic states, Poland and other Central European countries have become integrated and dynamic parts of the European Union. It is a typical characteristic of radical political and economic changes that they initially seem highly improbable and difficult to even imagine, whereas with hindsight they tend to appear perfectly natural or perhaps even inevitable.

But this also provides an opportunity to remind oneself of how complex history actually is, how it is shaped by people, power and events, often unexpected, and how it turns out in a way that might have been very different. The making of history is much more open than one might imagine, and the final outcome is often not only highly unexpected, but typically also reflects – and embodies – the conflicting paths that the course of events could have taken. There are many good examples of this phenomenon in the Baltic Sea region, and from these examples there are important lessons to be learnt about the future and about the interacting, conflicting paths that lead us there.

For instance, no one would deny that Germany and the Germans have played a key role in the historical shaping of the Baltic Sea region. Some of us may today even find it more or less impossible to imagine a Baltic Sea region without this direct German input. However, before the 12th century, it would have seemed quite strange if it was suggested that within a century or two the Germans would have such a huge influence – whether welcome or unwelcome – on nearly all coasts of our sea. For a long time the Germans had hardly any direct, permanent access to the Baltic, and it would have seemed much more likely that it would be the Danes, Swedes or Russians who would Christianise and colonise the eastern shores of the Baltic, and that it would be the Gothenburgers, and possibly other Scandinavians, that would grow and expand the East-West networks of trade.

With regard to Christianisation, it was the Danes above all who constituted the superpower at that time. With the title Danske korstog – krig og mission i Østersøen, written by four Danish historians, they show in a fascinating way how omnipresent the Danes were in the Baltic Sea region of the 12th and 13th centuries, and how the interaction between Denmark and practically all the other coastal countries came to shape the region in unexpected but decisive ways. This was so not only in places such as Estonia and Pomerania, where the Danes exercised a very direct power, but also in Finland, for example, where it is apparent that it was the competition between Danish and Swedish crusaders that forced the Swedes to pursue a far-reaching colonisation of what later became Nyland (which even today has an unusually strong Swedish-speaking population), and in Livonia, which the Germans seem to have conquered largely due to their aptitude in learning from earlier Danish experience in that area of Christian mission. In the end, Swedish influence became dominant in Finland while German influence was similarly dominant along practically all the Eastern coasts of the Baltic, an outcome which was quite unexpected and which

was possible only through far-reaching interaction with the Danes.

In our own times, we may turn medieval Baltic history on its head – but history still surprises us in choosing a path quite different from what we might have expected. In the years around 1990, it was commonly believed that Germany – especially following its reunification – would re-establish its strong economic influence, and perhaps also its political and cultural presence in the Baltic Sea region. For more than 700 years, until the end of the Second World War, the Germans had been a dominant power in the region, and after the fall of the Berlin wall it was believed that the Cold War period would turn out to be no more than a minor interruption in the continuing German dominance in the Baltic. The concept of the ‘New Hanseatic League’ became popular, and many analysts thought it more or less inevitable that the Germans would regain their key historical role in the Baltic.

In reality, however, this has not come true at all. As I have pointed out elsewhere, the main conclusion one can draw today, 15 years after German reunification, is that German power in the Baltic Sea region, above all in the economic sphere, has fallen well short of what could be envisaged in 1989-90. This is particularly the case in the three Baltic countries, where the traditional German influence has now been radically replaced by a very clear reorientation towards the Nordic countries. Compared to the state of affairs further south in Central Europe, where it is hardly possible to imagine any development at all after 1989 without Germany, the Germans play an astonishingly weak role in the Baltic states. They have been out-competed by Swedish, Finnish and Danish players to such an extent that some observers now argue that the only ‘true’ Baltic Sea region that exists is the combined Nordic-Baltic area. In short, history has – again – chosen a surprising new path.

There are many other examples where history has surprised us by taking a path quite different from the one that had been virtually taken for granted. Let me here take just one example: the unexpected transformation of relations between Russia and the Baltic from the 18th century onwards. The Russians were, in the same way as the Germans, long regarded as representing a very continental culture, with its ‘real home’ being located far away from the sea. For the Russians the Baltic Sea even symbolised the alien and unknown, with which it could not really identify itself. Even today there are voices arguing that Russia is not really a ‘natural’ Baltic Sea state, and some analysts appear to believe that it would be much easier for coastal operation around the Baltic Sea to be effective if only Russia were located a bit further away from its shores.

In reality, however, Russia has for at least three centuries been a genuine and valuable part of the Baltic Sea region. It is not possible today to disregard the fact that there are more Russians – perhaps ten million – living in close proximity to the Baltic than any other people, and that Russia hosts the only real Baltic metropolis, St. Petersburg. That modern Russia, in particular since the founding of St. Petersburg, has to everybody’s great surprise become a genuine Baltic Sea state, has been expressed most beautifully by Joseph Brodsky in his essay Guide to a Renamed City (1979). In particular, Russian literature, music and art, which were to have such a great influence on the whole world, can only be fully understood in the light of Russia’s dramatic encounter with the Baltic Sea in St. Petersburg. It is through this process that the Baltic Sea region has become so deeply interwoven with Russian culture. By living on the shores of the Baltic, with the great opportunities that entailed for interaction with dwellers on its other shores, millions of Russians, as Brodsky puts it, were placed, as if it were, outside themselves, and therefore forced to a new and surprising reflection about themselves, to a new objectification of their own identity and spirit.

The lesson we can learn from these and similar developments is that regional destiny – and a country’s way of relating itself to a region – is never predetermined, that there is nearly always great scope for changing the ‘natural’ paths of development, that history has always had a taste for surprise – although, with the benefit of hindsight, the actual path taken might subsequently appear to have been the only one possible.

Our region, as an arena in which very diverse and heterogeneous countries, economies and cultures have throughout history met – and continue to meet – in unanticipated ways and with unexpected results

The question is then: Are we really aware of this? And if so: Is regional cooperation around the Baltic Sea really doing everything it can to exploit the opportunities that arise from this insight?

Here the historian leaves the floor to the policymaker.

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