In the Baltic drainage area, the three main currents of Christendom coexist and confront each other, i.e., Orthodoxy, Catholicism and Protestantism. Furthermore, in the south-eastern part there is the Uniate Church, also called the Greek Catholic Church. Before World War II there was also a strong Jewish presence in the region. In addition, for fifty years, the secular religion of Marxism-Leninism was dominant from Rügen to Viborg. In Russia it was the official ideology for an additional twenty years before that, i.e. from the Bolshevik takeover in 1917. With regard to views on the individual and society, the pattern may be simplified to comprise only two varieties, the individualist Western Christian, including the Uniates and the Jewish traditions on the one hand, and the collectivist Orthodox and Marxist-Leninist traditions, on the other hand. Historical structures have left traces both in the landscape and in language that are still visible.

There are different collective identities in the Baltic Region. For most individuals, national identity is more important than a Baltic identity when it comes to inter-state relations. However, politics in the contemporary Baltic area is influenced by ideas of a European community. The notion of a Baltic Region is included in the concept of the European Union. It is assumed by most politicians and many scholars that all societies in the Baltic region shall and will converge according to the West European example of representative democracy, market economy and rule by law (Fontana 1995). The practical conclusion is that the former communist states must conform to this Western “model”. The view of the future influences decision-makers and thus both politics and social developments in states such as Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia.

1. Does history matter?

We are confronted by two different notions concerning both ontology, what is real, and epistemology, what we can know. A cultural approach implies that there are profound differences, rooted in history, between distinct societies. Traditions and habits are understood to be causal factors behind contemporary developments. Adherents of this view argue that history matters. A rationalistic approach implies that all human categories behave according to the same principles. In this context, not history per se, but perceptions and understanding of history “matter”. In the former case, it is assumed that history is important in its capacity as a causal matrix for contemporary behaviour. Concepts such as ‘path dependence’ and ‘Sonderweg’ (special track) are used in order to suggest that the past has a direct influence on the present and the future (see box on pg. 86). In the second case, it is assumed that the influence of
History does not come from history as past reality, but from the past only as interpreted by contemporary players. In their endeavours, which are principally rational, the actors can be informed or motivated by their view of history or use “historical” arguments.

History relates to collective memory and identity. Societies consist of people who are united by a shared identity, which separates them from other societies. The notions of “us” and “them” are fundamental in collective identity building. The sense of shared identity is created by collective memory, i.e., something that the individual acquires by upbringing or by choice. A basic carrier of collective memory is language, the mother tongue. Another basic carrier is ideology as a set of beliefs, attitudes and practices. Language and religion are fundamental identity markers. They are usually called ethnic markers, because the idea is that the individual has them from birth, in their blood. This is compatible with the concept of ‘culture’ as the basis for collective identity.

The third carrier of collective identity is territory, the landscape, both the natural environment of society and the existing neighbourhoods. When related to territory and not to ethnicity, collective identity has the connotation of civilisation, of civic society. If one declares that history is important, it is necessary to keep the distinctions in mind. Is it about the “roots” and “institutions” of a people and linked to the notion of factual history, or about shared memories and interpretations linked to a certain geographical space and historiography?

If we suppose that there is a Baltic Region, how shall we give it a history? By telling the stories of the different contemporary states existing there today or of the different nations, defined according to the criteria of language and customs? Does Sweden have a history? Do Swedes have a history? The same goes for Latvians, Danes and so on.

The ideology of the Baltic University Programme requires the construction of a Baltic history that “matters” today in the respect that it promotes social sustainability in the Baltic Region. However, the concept ‘Baltic history’ is not easy to define. If one writes the history of the Baltic Region, it is obvious that the point of departure must be territory. There is not any self-conscious ‘Baltic’ people.

During the last 450 years the shores of the North and the Baltic Seas have been inhabited by Protestants. Lithuania and Poland, both Catholic countries, were almost landlocked behind Protestant Germans until 1945. Although the Russian Empire acquired all territory from the Tornio river to the Nemunas river during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, both the Russian language and the Orthodox religion remained rather insignificant in the Baltic Region in the narrow sense. That is, until the Russification policies were introduced in the late nineteenth century. In spite of Russia’s rule over the Baltic provinces and Poland in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it is only between 1945 and 1991 that one can speak of a culturally specific Russian presence in the region. St Petersburg, founded in 1703, certainly was Russian, but above all it represented European civilisation in general. Its culture was intimately related to that of the Netherlands, Germany, Poland, Finland and Sweden. Except for the language, there were not any specific ‘Russian’ characteristics in the Petrine state as such, although the society at large remained specifically Russian.

2. Defining the Baltic peoples

All this causes an intriguing ambiguity in our time when it comes to defining “Baltic” peoples. The Scandinavians, the Germans, the Finns, the Estonians and the Latvians are Baltic without question. This cannot be said unequivocally of Russians, Poles and Lithuanians and not at all
of Belarusians and Ukrainians. However, both because prominent individuals from the latter
states clearly express the wish, on behalf of their nations, to be counted as belonging to the
Baltic Region, and because of the ideological goals of the Baltic University Programme, these
peoples are included in the project of creating a sustainable Baltic Region. To the extent that
contemporary peoples are conscious that they share parts of their past with other peoples,
the collective identification of Finns, Swedes, Danes, Norwegians, Icelanders, Fareoese and
Estonians, can be said to be Northern. Latvians, Germans, the Dutch and the British, but to
a certain degree also Poles, Lithuanians and Russians, constitute a more ambiguous case.

Deciding on where the boundaries of the Baltic Region should run when the task is to
create a sense of a shared past for the present inhabitants, it would be ridiculous to use physi-

cal landmarks such as mountains and rivers. To take the closest example, the watering area
of the Baltic Sea is not a territory which is either united by a shared memory of a common
past or strictly delimited against other political, cultural or economic communities. Writing
a history of the Baltic Region must be a pragmatic exercise. The boundaries must be vague
and historiography must proceed from the assumption that there is at least a core. The main
challenge is how to reconcile the quite separate Western and Eastern Christian societies and
create a sense of community in spite of the fact that historically, the two have been forged or
constructed with one another as “the Other”.

3. How to construct a Baltic Region?

The concept of Northern Europe has a special content in the Scandinavian and Finnish words
Norden and Pohjola, as Finnish sociologist Mikko Lagerspetz has noted in a contribution to
the discussion of who belongs with whom in the Baltic Region:

The romantic ideology of Scandinavianism depicted the people living in regions then possessed by Denmark and
Sweden-Norway as bearers of a common, ancient tradition. [——] Finland could also be counted as belonging
to ‘the North’. [——] With the eventual accession of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania to the EU, the chances are
that even (at least some of) these new members might be willing to strengthen the voice of that bloc. (Lagerspetz
2001).

A shared history? What is of concern is thus whether the contemporary Baltic Region is per-
ceived as a basically uniform entity with a shared history and culture and a ‘Nordic’ iden-
tification, or as an area of cultural clashes with different historical parameters (Huntington
1996). A very important aspect is whether Russia is excluded (the clash of civilisations thesis)
or included (the shared memory thesis).

The Finnish geographer Anssi Paasi has analysed the concept of region in its political and
territorial aspects and noted that it is a social construction. Paasi’s definition is relevant for a
discussion of the question, whether there is a Baltic Region in a socially meaningful sense:

Regions are not ‘organisms’ that develop and have a life-span or evolution in the manner that some biological
metaphors – so typical in Western political thought – would suggest. Rather […] regions and localities are
understood in this framework as being a complex synthesis or manifestation of objects, patterns, processes, social
practices and inherent power relations that are derived from simultaneous interaction between different levels of
social processes. – Through the institutionalisation process and the struggles inherent in it, the territorial units in
question ‘receive’ their boundaries and their symbols, which distinguish them from other regions. (Paasi 1995).
The most important symbolic manifestation of a region is its proper name. It “recollects” and creates one whole out of historical developments and important events. The individuals concerned acquire a sense of a collective identity, which is linked to the region (Paasi 1995). The obvious question to pose is whether political actors can construct a new region and legitimise it by way of retroactively creating a history, which gives a sense of collective identity to the people inhabiting this region.

**Competing labels and notions.** The notion of a Baltic Region that would unite Russia, the Baltic States and Poland with the Scandinavian countries and Germany can be traced back to the Soviet political idea of creating a nuclear-free zone in northern Europe. However, the direct background lies in developments from the 1980s onwards. An early instance of thinking along the lines of creating a Baltic Region was the notion of the New Hanse, put forward before the East European revolutions in 1989 by the head of government of the German Land Schleswig-Holstein, Björn Engholm. Conferences were arranged in different cities, for example in Kotka on the Gulf of Finland in 1990. The choice of place revealed the ambiguity of the concept of the New Hanse. Kotka was not an original Hanseatic town, as it did not exist in the Middle Ages, but politicians, business people and intellectuals obviously interpreted the name Hanse in a symbolic way to mean co-operation and close relations in general.

Although the notion of the New Hansa faded away after the demise of Björn Engholm, after the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union, international co-operation has developed among the states facing the Baltic Sea. There is a Baltic Council and a lot of other institutions promoting contact and the exchange of goods, people and ideas. There is even a Baltic University, comprising far more than one hundred universities and with its administrative centre in Uppsala. In the Swedish official usage of the concept the Baltic Region, Russia has an ambiguous status, because quite arbitrarily the Kola peninsula, the Arkhangelsk oblast, the autonomous republic of Karelia and also the Leningrad and Kaliningrad oblasts are included, and sometimes also Novgorod and Pskov, but not Russia as such. Concerning Poland and Germany, it is assumed that it is not necessary to make a distinction between their Baltic littorals and the rest of the states. In any case, most of Poland and the eastern half of Germany belong to the Baltic drainage area. As for Belarus, it is taken for granted that this state is wholly ‘Baltic’. Ukraine’s status is also ambiguous. It seems that L’viv and Galicia are included, Kiev and Poltava (for reasons of Swedish history) also, but hardly Odessa and Charkiv or the Crimea.

It is obvious that geographical traits are not a sufficient condition for the creation of political, economic and cultural co-operation envisaged by the idea of a Baltic Region. In addition, a common history, similarity of political culture, economic interdependence, linguistic affinity, and even personal relations between political leaders, social groups and individuals may be considered to be main factors in discussions with a bearing on the
creation of a regional identity among the parties in question. As in the case of the geographic definition, the historical and cultural definition leaves Russia as the most ambiguous part.

In addition to the people actually living around the shores of the Baltic Sea and on the islands, those living on the shores of the North Sea form part of the history of the region. On the one hand we have the Scandinavian peoples of Norwegians, Icelanders and Faeroese and their descendants in the Shetland and Orkney islands, and on the other hand the English and the Scots, the Frisians, the Dutch and even the French. The Bohemian king Otakar II Premysl took part in the German crusades in the thirteenth century and is the reference for the historical name of the contemporary Russian city Kaliningrad, i.e., originally named Castrum de Coningsberg or Königsberg (Gornig 1995).

Whereas the Polish and Lithuanian names of the city are direct translations of the original German name, the Russian name was a transcription of the German name, Kenigsberg. When the city and the surrounding territory became Soviet in 1945, all Germans were expelled (most of them had fled at the close of the war). The German place names and geographical names were also removed and replaced by Soviet Russian names. Thus Tilsit became Sovetsk and Königsberg was named after the late Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, i.e., the figurehead of the state. He happened to be Mikhail Kalinin, notorious for continuing to perform his official duties until his death in 1946 regardless of the fact that his wife was purged on Stalin’s orders and imprisoned in a labour camp. In the course of the 1990s, some of the inhabitants took an interest in the province’s history. Students began to use the old German name, shortened to Kenig and referred to themselves as European Russians – apparently in contrast to their compatriots in Russia proper.
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