Governing Regional Seas in Europe:
the Baltic Sea from a comparative perspective

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1. Introduction

Due to environmental problems, European integration, and various waves of European enlargement, the governing systems of Europe's regional seas underwent rapid changes since the 1970s and are now shaped by a combination of national, international, European, and transnational governance. In recent years the EU has pursued new approaches that are more reliant on macro-regional strategies for balancing enlargement, external relations, and regional development. Initiatives like the 'Northern Dimension', which also includes countries neighboring the EU, constituted a first step in this direction, and more recently this has led to the development of macro-regional strategies.

In the Baltic Sea region, the geopolitical landscape changed rapidly when Sweden and Finland joined the European Union in 1995, followed by Poland and the three Baltic Republics in 2004. Today, the Baltic Sea is virtually an internal sea of the European Union, with Russia as the only exception. The fall of the Berlin Wall triggered radical institutional changes since the early 1990s and strengthened the regional governing system in the Baltic Sea region considerably. Environmental governance in the Baltic Sea region has been transformed by EU enlargement but joining the EU had different implications for the countries in the region. For the Nordic countries it was essential to maintain their high environmental standards and, at the same time, gain more influence on environmental decision-making in Brussels. In Poland and the three Baltic States, EU accession triggered a new phase of environmental policy because the candidate countries had to adopt the *aquis communautaire* and adapt to EU standards before being allowed to enter the Union. In June 2009, the EU Commission presented the 'EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region' as its first macro-regional strategy.

This article uses the Baltic Sea region as an example to examine the various elements that constitute multi-level governance in regional seas and asks as to how the regional governing system has changed over time due to EU enlargement. It discusses first how national, international, European, and transnational governance interact and contribute to the sustainable development of regional seas and then analyzes the limitations of regional governance systems. In the next section this article focuses on general aspects of the governing and governability of regional seas; and in the third section, the various elements of governing systems for regional seas are presented. The paper then turns to the main limitations of existing governing systems and asks as to how macro-regional strategies may help to meet the challenges and facilitate the prospects for the sustainable development of regional seas.

2. Governing and governability of regional seas in Europe

From the perspective of interactive governance theory, governing a regional sea such as the Baltic Sea can be regarded as a relationship between two systems, a 'governing system' and a 'system-to-be-governed'. Both systems are diverse, complex, dynamic, and vulnerable. While the former system is a social system made up of institutions and steering mechanisms, the latter system is partly natural and partly social because it consists of both the resources of the ecosystem and the stakeholders who may form political coalitions (Jentoft, 2007, p. 360). Kooiman (2008) defines governability as a concept consisting of three main components, i.e. a system-to-be-governed, a governance system, and the interactions between these two systems. Governance systems and the forms of interactions between the two systems differ, depending on the specific governance activities.

In the Baltic Sea region, the ecosystem (i.e. the system-to-be-governed) is a shallow and semi-enclosed sea and one of the largest brackish water bodies in the world. It is divided into several basins (such as the Gulf of Finland) and has a drainage basin four times larger than the sea itself, which includes non-coastal countries such as Belarus and Ukraine. The Baltic Sea ecosystem is unique and fragile, contains a low number of species only, and is highly sensitive to pollution. The pressure on the system is high because the sea harbors some of the busiest shipping lanes in the world and is surrounded by many large cities (such as St. Petersburg, Stockholm, and Riga) and regions with intensive industrial and agricultural activities. As water exchange between the Baltic Sea and the North Sea takes several decades, the concentration of toxic substances is much higher in the Baltic Sea than in open seas and oceans. The main risks to the Baltic Sea's coastal and marine environment are (cf. HELCOM, 2007):

- *Eutrophication:* Excessive nutrient inputs, originating from both diffuse sources (e.g. agriculture) and point sources (e.g. from sewage treatment plants), have disrupted the natural balance of the Baltic Sea. Symptoms include algal bloom and marine dead zones on the seabed.

- *Toxic substances:* Despite all efforts to reduce pollution, concentrations of hazardous substances (mainly from industrial activities) remain high in the Baltic Sea. Levels of dioxins in fish, for example, are above EU safety levels for foodstuffs.

- *Biodiversity:* Natural characteristics limit the biodiversity of the Baltic Sea and make the ecosystem(s) exceptionally sensitive to pollution. The activities of commercial fisheries, offshore activities, and invasive species represent the most important threats.

- *Maritime activities:* With the growth in the economies of the countries around the Baltic Sea, traffic in the Baltic Sea has intensified. This increases the pressure on the marine environment and the risk of a potentially disastrous oil spill.

- *Over-exploitation of marine resources:* Degraded water quality and over-fishing has had an impact on the fish stocks in the Baltic Sea, and the recovery of depleted resources and damaged habitats require cooperative actions.

Reducing these risks depends on the governing system of the Baltic Sea region. As the Helsinki Convention was adopted in 1974 as the first regional sea convention world-wide, regional environmental cooperation started long before the EU enlargements in 1995 (Sweden, Finland) and 2004 (Poland, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia). However, the end of the Cold War had profound repercussions on the governing system of the Baltic Sea region. Numerous new organizations were founded in this period, including intergovernmental organizations, such as the Council of Baltic Sea States (CBSS) (1992), transnational NGOs, such as the Coalition Clean Baltic (CCB) (1990), and transnational networks of subnational governments, such as the Union of the Baltic Cities (UBC) (1991). Although such multi-functional organizations pursue a variety of goals, all of these organizations had environmental policy and sustainable development high on their political agenda from the outset. Apart from the emergence of new organizations existing organizations were also transformed and adapted to the new situation. Thus, the Helsinki Convention gained four new signatories (Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, and the European Community), while another signatory, the German Democratic Republic (GDR), disappeared from the map due to German reunification. These profound changes of the institutional landscape in the region included the introduction of new forms of public involvement and stakeholder participation. Such arrangements aim to utilize the specific knowledge of users and stakeholders, and are also essential for the legitimacy of decisions (Jentoft et al., 2007). Overall, it may be

concluded that EU integration triggered the transformation of the regional governing system, which now involves a variety of public and private actors at different levels, and improved the preconditions for the shift in the Baltic Sea region towards sustainable development.

3. Elements of the governing systems of Europe's regional seas

The governing systems of Europe's regional seas are constituted by four elements:

- the environmental governance systems of the riparian states form the basis for the sustainable development of regional seas;

- forms of international and intergovernmental environmental governance have developed gradually since the 1970s in all regional seas in Europe;

- European governance is a newer phenomenon, which has gained momentum in recent years only, in particular through the various EU enlargement; and

- transnational governance can provide an additional basis for the development and implementation of innovative new forms of regional environmental governance.

The analysis of the regional governing systems and their capacities to improve the region's prospects towards sustainable development needs to take all four components and their interactions into account.

National environmental governance systems

National environmental governance may vary considerably among the states surrounding regional seas. Moreover, we find considerable differences among the various regional seas in Europe. While the North Sea is bordered by countries that all possess very well developed national environmental governance systems, the group of Baltic Sea states includes both environmental pioneers and countries that started to develop their environmental policy only recently. Like the Baltic Sea, the Black Sea has been directly affected by the end of the Cold War, and many of the riparian states, including Russia, are in transition from socialist states to market economies. However, in the Black Sea region only two countries (Bulgaria, Romania) are member states of the European Union. In the Black Sea and in the Mediterranean Sea the riparian countries seem to differ to a much higher degree than in the North Sea and in the Baltic Sea regions. Moreover, in these regions we find both interstate conflicts (for example between Georgia and Russia in the Black Sea region) and intrastate conflicts (such as the civil war in Libya). As national environmental governance systems are still the backbones of regional environmental governance, prospects for a sustainable development of Europe's regional seas varies considerable and seem to be best for the North Sea and the Baltic Sea.

However, even in the Baltic Sea national environmental governance in the states surrounding the Baltic Sea varies considerably because the region comprises three Nordic countries, reunited Germany, and five former socialist countries (including Russia). While the Nordic countries and (West) Germany have gained a well-deserved reputation as environmental pioneers since the 1970s, in the new EU member states and in Russia, the development of modern environmental policy had to start from a background of centrally-planned economies, characterized by state-owned property, a one-party-system, and a lack of public debate on social and political issues (for the Baltic states see Kontio & Kuitto, 2008; Joas et al., 2008).

Although policies may gradually converge, individual attitudes are slow to change. Hermanson (2008), for example, finds that while the value shift towards more post-materialist attitudes that can be found in advanced industrial societies is only visible to a certain extent in the Baltic Sea region. In the Nordic countries and (West) Germany, environmental issues

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appeared on the political agenda as far back as the 1970s and social movements started to influence decision-making, first at local level and eventually at national level. In Poland, the Baltic States, and Russia the political institutionalization of environmental concerns started much later due to the political-institutional differences. Although environmental movements played an important role in some CEE countries, the region is still divided into two distinct clusters of countries with regard to environmental/post-material values.

Moreover, the analysis of the relationship between economic and environmental performance reveals essential differences between the political systems within the region. The relationship between economic growth and environmental pollution differs between the Nordic countries and Germany, on the one hand, and the former socialist states, on the other. In the latter group of countries, the decoupling of economic growth and environmental pollution occurred at a much earlier stage of economic development (Jahn & Kuitto, 2008).

The development of the political institutions shows a similar pattern. While in the Nordic countries and Germany environmental governance and environmental awareness evolved gradually and incrementally over several decades, the time-frame for such changes is considerable shorter in the new EU member states. EU influence during the accession phase became an essential driving force for the shift towards modern environmental governing systems in the former socialist countries (Kontio & Kuitto, 2008). This means that EU integration has facilitated the convergence of environmental governance and environmental performance of the countries surrounding the Baltic Sea, although marked differences remain and will persist for many years to come.

Although the EU and intergovernmental organization such as the OECD have facilitated the spread of new forms of environmental governance, traditional forms of environmental governance, such as the Swedish ban on phosphates in detergents, still play an important role at nation-state level and dominate many areas of environmental policy. However, such hierarchical policy instruments may cause compliance problems and implementation deficits. If conservation goals can only be fulfilled by restricting the existing and well-established activities of citizens, who do not share these goals or the perception that their activities influence the pursuit of the goals, serious problems may arise and new forms of governance may be required to solve the underlying conflicts. Stakeholder involvement may help in the attainment of a higher degree of legitimacy and understanding for environmental regulation and create innovations designed to cope with the governance of complex, multi-level issues (cf. Varjopuro & Kettunen, 2008).

International environmental governance systems

Regional seas are affected by global agreements (such as the IMO convention and UNCLOS), for example in the area of shipping (Suárez de Vivero and Rodriguez Mateos, 2002), and by international treaties for regional seas. Initial efforts to improve the environmental situation in regional seas started relatively early. The Helsinki Convention on the protection of the marine environment of the Baltic Sea area was already signed in 1974. It was the first regional seas convention and triggered the creation of UNEP's Regional Seas Programme. Today this program covers 18 regions in the world, including the Baltic Sea (Helsinki Convention), the Mediterranean Sea (Barcelona Convention, 1976), the North-East Atlantic (OSPAR Convention, 1992), and the Black Sea (Bucharest Convention, 1992) (Costa, 2009; Hoballah, 2006, Doussis, 2006).

HELCOM's main goal is to protect the marine environment of the Baltic Sea from all sources of pollution and to restore and safeguard its ecological balance. In 1974, the then seven Baltic coastal states signed a convention for the abatement of all sources of pollution around the Baltic Sea. The ratification process ended in 1980 and the convention came into force in May of that year. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the reunification of Germany, and the gaining of independence by the three Baltic States, the convention was revised, updated (in relation to the list of harmful substances), and broadened in scope (e.g. now also encompassing inland waters, coastal zone management, and biodiversity). The new convention was signed by all of the nine states that border the Baltic Sea and by the European Community in 1992 and entered into force in January 2000. In order to reduce land-based pollution, measures were extended to the whole drainage area of the Baltic Sea (Fitzmaurice 1992; Bruch, 1999; Hassler, 2004; Kern & Löffelsend, 2004).

The HELCOM Baltic Sea Action Plan (BSAP) (HELCOM, 2007) was adopted in 2007 and now sets the framework for action. Its ambitious target is to restore a good ecological status to the Baltic marine environment by 2021. The plan incorporates the latest scientific knowledge and innovative management approaches into its strategic policy implementation, and stimulates close goal-oriented multilateral cooperation around the Baltic Sea region. The plan aims to resolve the existing problems, for example the eutrophication and deterioration in the water quality of the Baltic Sea. The action plan mentions four priority areas (eutrophication; hazardous substances; biodiversity and nature conservation; and maritime activities). It also presents specific objectives, such as reduction targets for nitrogen and phosphorus. In addition, the plan contains provisions for assessment tools and methodologies, awareness raising and capacity building, funding, and the implementation and review of the plan (HELCOM, 2007).

This action plan is remarkable for several reasons: first, it is based on an ecosystem approach, i.e. the usual sectoral pollution reduction approach was replaced by a cross-sectoral approach that starts from the vision of a healthy sea with a good ecological status. The need for further reductions in pollution loads can be derived and the scope of human activities determined from this vision. Second, the plan emphasizes a broader view of sustainable development and thus combines ecological sustainability and a healthy environment with aspects of sustainable socio-economic development. Third, the plan is the result of the active participation of all major stakeholder groups in the region, i.e. the shared vision of a healthy Baltic Sea has been defined together with all relevant stakeholders. This decision-making procedure was chosen to ensure that the plan is truly relevant and can be implemented effectively. Forth, the BSAP starts from a multi-level approach and thus distinguishes between measures that can be implemented at national level, at EU level (e.g. Common Fisheries Policy, Common Agricultural Policy), and at international level (e.g. shipping control by the International Maritime Organization).

European environmental governance systems

The Europeanization of regional seas has developed very quickly. This is most prominent in the area of fisheries, which is dominated by the EU's Common Fisheries Policy (Princen, 2010), but includes a proliferating body of EU legislation affecting various aspects of the marine environment such as the Water Framework Directive, REACH, Natura 2000, and the EU Recommendations for Integrated Coastal Zone Management.

Moreover, the EU adopted a Marine Strategy Framework Directive in 2008 and is developing an Integrated Maritime Policy (see for example the Communication on Maritime Spatial Planning published in December 2010; COM(2010)771) (de Santo, 2011; Borja *et al.*, 2010; Juda, 2010; Koivurova, 2010; Wakefield, 2010; Fritz, 2010; Queffelec *et al.,* 2009; Suarez de

Vivero, 2006). The aim of Marine Strategy Framework Directive is to protect the marine environment across Europe, to achieve a good environmental status of the EU's marine waters by 2021, and to protect the resources, on which marine-related economic and social activities depend. The directive constitutes the environmental component of the Union's future maritime policy which is designed to enable the fulfillment of the economic potential of oceans and seas in harmony with the marine environment. The Marine Strategy Framework Directive establishes marine regions on the basis of geographical and environmental criteria and requires that Member States in all regional seas bordered by the EU ensure cooperation with all countries within a marine region and develop national strategies for their marine waters. These strategies must contain a detailed assessment of the state of the environment, a definition of 'good environmental status' at regional level, and the establishment of clear environmental targets and monitoring programs.

Instead of a sectoral approach, the EU developed an integrated approach for the protection of its marine environment based on the Ecosystem Approach to Management. However, both the governance systems (actors, institutional design, policy-science interfaces, etc.) and the 'system-to-be-governed' may differ across Europe's regional seas. Despite common objectives, the Europeanization of Europe's regional seas may, therefore, lead to differing outputs. Moreover, trends towards regionalization and stakeholder participation can be observed in various areas, ranging from setting-up Regional Advisory Councils (RACs) for fisheries (Long, 2010; Stör and Chabay, 2010; Griffin, 2007; Griffin, 2009) to launching macro-regional strategies (EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region, 2009; European Union Strategy for Danube Region, 2010).

In the Baltic Sea region, EU enlargement had an impressive impact on national environmental governance and triggered crucial changes in the regional governing system. The influence of the Nordic countries on the European Union was strengthened with the enlargement of 1995 when Sweden and Finland joined the Union. The EU enlargement of 2004 was probably even more important for the region because, with this wave of enlargement, the Baltic Sea became (almost) an internal sea of the European Union. Today, only the Russian Oblast Leningrad with the metropolitan city of St. Petersburg and the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad remain outside the EU.

The Europeanization of the region has arisen due to both economic and political factors. Europeanization can be regarded as co-evolution between the domestic and European level (Radaelli, 2006, p. 59) because it combines top-down and bottom-up approaches. However, enlargement can be described as a top-down process as it puts candidate countries under extreme pressure. The EU strongly influenced Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia in the pre-accession phase. Although financial instruments also played an important role here, these countries were not allowed to join the Union before complying with the *acquis communautaire*, i.e. the entire body of EU legislation. This process of 'governance by conditionality' (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2004) led to a relatively high degree of compliance in the area of environmental policy (Andonova, 2005; Joas et al., 2008).

Soon after Finland and Sweden joined the European Union, the Finnish government initiated the 'Northern Dimension' as a regional EU strategy which established a partnership between the EU, Norway, Iceland, and Russia. This shows that the activities of the EU in the region have both an internal dimension (concerning the member states) and an external dimension (concerning the neighboring countries). In 2006, the Northern Dimension was transformed into a common regional policy. The new Northern Dimension has four geographical priorities (Baltic Sea, Kaliningrad, the Barents Seas, and the Arctic). The program has a rather broad scope, placing a strong emphasis on environmental issues. This initiative includes the

Northern Dimension Environmental Partnership (NDEP), which was established in 2001 by various international financial institutions.

More recently the EU started a new initiative which aims to develop an 'EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea region.' The Strategy was published by the European Commission in June 2009, first step towards its implementation have been taken already, and a report to the Council is due in June 2011 (European Union 2010). The Strategy concentrates on four goals: to make the Baltic Sea region (i) an environmentally sustainable place; (ii) a prosperous place; (iii) an accessible and attractive place; and (iv) a safe and secure place. The first general stakeholder forum took place in Tallinn (Estonia) in fall 2010, which focused, among many other issues, on the question as to how the Baltic Sea region could be made into an environmentally sustainable place. There is wide agreement that the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea region should facilitate the implementation of HELCOM's Baltic Sea Action Plan. This is remarkable because the EU has also acknowledged that HELCOM's Baltic Sea Action Plan could become instrumental to the successful implementation of the Marine Strategy Framework Directive.

Transnational environmental governance systems

Transnational governance is also important for the development of regional seas. In all regional seas in Europe governmental initiatives have been supplemented by initiatives of non-governmental and subnational organizations (Joas *et. al.,* 2008; Kern & Löffelsend, 2004). Such forms of transnational governance range from the Black Sea NGO Network (BSNN) to the Union of the Baltic Cities. Transnational city networks have developed and thrived in Europe since the early 1990s (Kern & Bulkeley 2009). In recent years, the transnationalization of regional seas transformed traditional international organizations such as HELCOM, and even led to the establishment of new institutions such as Baltic 21 that practiced stakeholder participation from the outset.

Apart from Europeanization the most striking characteristic of the Baltic Sea region is its high degree of transnationalization (Kern et al., 2008), which has provided a fertile ground for other forms of transborder cooperation in the region. After the end of the Cold War, the Baltic Sea region developed into a highly dynamic area of cross-border cooperation and transnational networking. Numerous new organizations, that are often based on hybrid arrangements (including governmental, sub-national, and non-governmental actors) (Joas et al. 2007, p. 241), have focused their initiatives on environmental policy and sustainable development initiatives.

Transnational links have always existed in the Baltic Sea region. These links have certainly contributed to the development of initiatives, which aim to promote the sustainable development of the Baltic Sea region, including both subnational governments (regions, local authorities) and civil society actors. Three different forms of transnationalization exist in the Baltic Sea region. First, traditional international and intergovernmental organizations such as HELCOM have been transformed in recent years. As the development of HELCOM's Baltic Sea Action Plan shows, access to decision-making has improved for non-governmental and subnational actors. Second, new types of organizations have been established which aim to introduce non-governmental and subnational actors into the policy-making process. An outstanding example is Baltic 21 which was based from the outset on a multi-stakeholder approach and the active participation of civil society. Third, transnational networks, such as the Coalition Clean Baltic and the Union of the Baltic Cities, have worked intensively on sustainability and environmental issues.

The regional cooperation of subnational governments can be traced back to the Hanseatic League. The cooperation between Hanseatic League cities, and in particular the twinning

relationships between these cities, even survived the Cold War period. The Union of the Baltic Cities (UBC), a transnational city network with more than 100 members cities around the Baltic Sea, developed relative spontaneously soon after the fall of the Berlin Wall (Groth, 2001; UBC, 2008). The main goals of city networks such as the UBC are: (i) best practice transfer and learning among their members; and (ii) representation and lobbying. City networks run projects which establish direct links between their member cities and facilitate both transboundary policy transfer and the joint development of innovative solutions. The UBC's Agenda 21 Action Program certainly helped to spread LA21 processes in the region. Transnational networks are also created to bypass nation-states and to establish direct links between such networks and EU institutions (Kern & Bulkeley, 2009). The cooperation between subnational governments in the region appears to be a rather unique feature of the Baltic Sea area (Kern et al., 2008).

4. Challenges ahead

The different elements of the regional governing system and the complex interaction between national, international, European, and transnational governance may lead to three problems that will be discussed in the following section in more detail: (i) boundary problems and the need for (ii) horizontal and (iii) vertical coordination.

Boundary problems

Governing regional seas requires the establishment of a governance system for the entire region. Problems may occur because the boundaries of existing governance systems and the 'systems-to-be-governed' are not identical. Thus, the scope of regional conventions may be more appropriate than EU legislation because these regional institutions focus on the entire region, including non-member states (such as Russia). Decisions made in Brussels need to be adjusted to regional environmental institutions (see, for example, Backer *et al.,* 2010 on the relationship between the Baltic Sea Action Plan and the EU Marine Strategy Framework Directive). The development of macro-regional strategies by the European Commission (Baltic Sea region, Alpine region, Adriatic region) points to a more regionalized version of European integration, which may strengthen regional governance systems.

In the Baltic Sea region, boundary problems are most evident in relation to the drainage basin of the Baltic Sea which is four times larger than the sea itself. Although countries such as Belarus have observer status in several regional environmental institutions, the inclusion of such states in the governing structure poses considerable problems. Even if they attend important meetings, they do not have any obligations to comply with the decisions made by the signatories of an international treaty or by the EU institutions for its Member States.

European integration has changed the geopolitical situation in the region fundamentally and has facilitated simultaneously the emergence of a more appropriate governing system. Serious problems remain although the Baltic Sea is almost entirely surrounded by EU Member States. St. Petersburg is the biggest metropolitan city in the region, and the situation of the Russian enclave Kaliningrad, a product of WWII and the breakup of the Soviet Union, poses serious problems for the development of a strong governing system. Governing the Baltic Sea region depends, therefore, not only on decisions made by regional institutions, but also on both EU-Russia relations and Russia's bilateral relations with individual EU member states. The recent debate on energy security and its repercussions for the Baltic Sea region, in particular the debate on the Nord Stream pipeline project, shows clearly that the positions of individual member states differ considerably.

Moreover, decisions made in Brussels may not always fully consider the situation in the region and, therefore, need to be adjusted to regional conditions. Contrary to EU policies targeting all Member States, the scope of HELCOM and Baltic 21 appears to be more appropriate in this respect because these regional environmental institutions focus on the entire region, including Russia. However, the development of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region may strengthen the regional governing system in the Baltic Sea region and facilitate the development towards sustainable development.

Need for horizontal interaction and coordination

The existing governing systems in Europe's regional seas are characterized by horizontal interaction (Gehring & Oberthür, 2008; Young, 2002). The need for horizontal coordination concerns, first, the EU legislation itself because different directives may lead to contradictory and incompatible policies. Second, increasing Europeanization of regional seas may cause coordination problems because the implementation of EU policies, such as the Integrated Maritime Policy and the new macro-regional strategies, require close cooperation with already existing environmental organizations (such as HELCOM). However, institutional overlap between EU legislation and international conventions may also lead to synergies because international conventions and guidelines, which are not binding, can be translated into binding EU legislation.

In the Baltic Sea region, the lack of horizontal interaction and coordination is most evident in the case of HELCOM and Baltic 21 because both organizations focus on similar issues. However, Baltic 21 appears to be broader in focus than HELCOM because Baltic 21 was stimulated by the Rio conference and aims to support the region's shift towards sustainable development. In contrast, due to its origin and establishment at a time when sustainable development did not yet feature on the political agenda, the original focus of the Helsinki Convention was primarily concentrated on environmental issues. The development of the Baltic Sea Action Plan, however, reflects a new trend towards the convergence of both approaches. HELCOM has now broadened its scope and chosen a perspective which is based on the idea of sustainable development. Moreover, the Baltic Sea Action Plan is the result of intensive stakeholder participation processes. HELCOM and Baltic 21 coexisted, and competed, for a couple of years, but more recently HELCOM has become dominant, while Baltic 21 has been weakened considerably.

Problems related to a lack of horizontal coordination may also result from the increasing Europeanization of the Baltic Sea region because all of the riparian states (except Russia) are now directly influenced by decisions made in Brussels. Thus, the implementation of the European Union's agricultural and fisheries policies, the implementation of the Marine Strategy Framework Directive, and the development of the EU Strategy on the Baltic Sea Region require close coordination with the approaches chosen by HELCOM, in particular the implementation of its Baltic Sea Action Plan. The dynamic development of a variety of new organizations in the Baltic Sea region may lead to institutional overlaps and serious problems if several organizations focus on the same issue and do not coordinate their approaches.

Need for vertical interaction and coordination

A lack of vertical interaction and coordination may also have negative effects on the regional governance system. The multi-level systems of regional seas cannot be governed solely by hierarchical structures. Alongside horizontal interaction between regional environmental institutions, vertical interaction is of special interest for the improvement of the regional governance system. The vertical integration of the (regional) multi-level system may result in

a shift of competencies, for example upwards from national governments to the European Union and downwards to regions and cities (Rosamond, 2010; Rosenau, 2003; Pierre & Peters, 2000, p. 77). Cross-level institutional arrangements such as transnational city networks may function as boundary or bridging organizations and play an intermediary role between different arenas and levels. This may also improve the performance of the regional governance system.

The debate on multi-level governance has shown that top-down and bottom-up perspectives need to be integrated if we want to govern a dynamic multilevel system like the Baltic Sea region. An example is the development of LA 21 processes which emerged from the Rio conference and led to initiatives in many countries around the Baltic Sea (Joas, 2008), i.e. the global Agenda 21 initiative stimulated local innovations and experiments in many places around the Baltic Sea. Moreover, Baltic Sea cities such as Stockholm have not only established own offices in Brussels and influence European politics, they are also members of transnational networks such as the Union of the Baltic Cities, which has become an active player at both regional and European level. Evidence can be found for the successful integration of subnational governments in the implementation of the Helsinki Convention. Cross-level institutional arrangements such as the UBC can be seen as boundary or bridging organizations (Cash et al., 2006, p. 8) because they play an intermediary role between different arenas and levels.

5. Conclusions

Although various links exist between national, international, European, and transnational governance arrangements, research has focused primarily on specific environmental institutions (such as HELCOM), thereby neglecting the analysis of regional seas as multi-level systems. Governing regional seas requires a combination of national governance with forms of governance beyond the nation-state.

Despite the fact that national governments have become more and more involved in, and depend on international and European policy-making, national governance has remained the backbone of regional governing systems. Governance for sustainable development in regional seas undoubtedly requires a combination of national governance with forms of governance beyond the nation-state. Bilateral relations between the countries in regional sea areas need to be taken into account because they constitute an important part of regional governing systems.

Cooperation at international level fosters convergence, but differences remain, in particular when countries start from very different positions as, for example, Sweden and Poland. International and intergovernmental environmental governance started first in the Baltic Sea region. Since its establishment the Helsinki Convention passed through different development stages. Most striking in this respect is the increasing inclusion of stakeholders in decision-making. Shortcomings remain, however, as clearly demonstrated by the ongoing discussion on the integration of HELCOM's Baltic Sea Action Plan and the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region.

Problems related to horizontal and vertical interaction point to the changing role of the EU, which has become the most important political player in Europe's regional sea areas. The Europeanization of regional seas has gradually increased over time and this process will most likely continue in the future. The EU has chosen a combination of internal and external policies for governing regional seas. While the EU's internal policies concentrate on its Member States, its external policies focus on neighboring countries and, in particular, Russia. The tension between Europeanization and regionalization has led to the development of new regional institutions, including macro-regional strategies such as the EU Strategy for the

Baltic Sea Region. These strategies may not only help to resolve boundary problems, but may also provide tools for managing the horizontal and vertical coordination and interactions.

In addition, transnational governance is an important factor of regional governing systems. An active civil society and transnationally oriented cities and regions can help to complement traditional forms of governance. The important role of transnational governance is a rather unique feature of the Baltic Sea region because similar arrangements cannot be found in other comparable regions. In the Baltic Sea region we find both an active civil society and cross-nationally oriented cities and regions, which can help to complement traditional forms of governance. Recent initiatives such as the development of the Baltic Sea Action Plan and the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region, which have both relied on various forms of multi-stakeholder participation, show that these assets can be utilized to improve the legitimacy of such plans and strategies and may even support their implementation. Such an approach may also help to solve problems that relate to the need for stronger vertical coordination. Existing institutional arrangements, such as transnational networks of subnational governments, Euroregions, and EU-funded projects (e.g. Interreg projects) could be utilized even better to strengthen the regional governing system.

It may be concluded, therefore, that the progression of Europe's regional seas towards sustainable development depends on widening the scope of existing environmental programs and strengthening the regional governing system, which needs to become more integrated, both horizontally and vertically. The increasing Europeanization of regional seas requires that the EU, first, balances and integrates its own policies and, second, coordinates them with other regional (environmental) institutions, such as the Helsinki Convention and its Baltic Sea Action Plan. Moreover, the EU will have to focus its initiatives even more intensively on subnational governments. Even though most EU legislation and essential provisions of international agreements are eventually implemented at local and regional level, the latter's role in the sustainable development of regional seas has long been neglected.

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