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May 27, 2021 by *Zane Šime*

The Baltic Sea Region: More of a Space, Less of a Place ^[1]

Note from the CPD Blog Manager: *The views expressed in this post are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Latvian Association of Political Science. The author discloses affiliations with the Secretariat of the Council of the Baltic Sea States as a former staff member who was tasked with the implementation of the Baltic Science Network, and as a contributor to the SeaHer photo competition.*


Since the international COVID-19 outbreak, many inspiring locations and multilateral forums have lost their geographical attachment and have evolved as online intellectual spaces. Richard R. Weiner's coined phrase, "the transnational denotes space rather than place," gains additional weight.

Traditional in-person interactive encounters provide a rich contextual background for all parties involved. These occasions have dramatically decreased in numbers. Detached from its

geographical surrounding, the Baltic Sea region crowds into the virtual space where the 'new normal' and ways to 'build forward better' are crafted. All the intellectual infrastructure weaved by the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS), the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region, and other facilitating entities representing (what Viljam Engström refers to as) "[a] thickening "regulatory" or "governance" layer" have come fully online.

COVID-19 restrictions have proven that what binds together traditional and novel actors in public diplomacy is not solely their geographic proximity but a mutually maintained intellectual space.

The Baltic Sea region is one of the most integrated areas in the world. It is a compelling setting for observations and analysis of how the COVID-19-motivated shift to digital solutions has altered notions of spatiality, including in the realms of traditional diplomacy and novel forms of diplomacy. The digital shift strengthens the Baltic Sea region as an intellectual construct and weakens its attachment to specific geographic particularities.

Even amid all the complexities and multiple challenges, these are interesting times for the exploration of regional cooperation and its public diplomacy dimensions. Public diplomacy refers to "the public, interactive dimension of diplomacy which is not only global in nature, but also involves a multitude of actors and networks." This blog post pays attention to two of six taxonomies of public diplomacy defined by Nicholas J. Cull , namely, cultural diplomacy and exchange, with illustrative examples from the Baltic Sea region.

Cultural Diplomacy

Cultural diplomacy has a notable role in the CBSS context. One of three CBSS long-term priorities is 'Regional Identity.' Cultural heritage is an intrinsic component of this priority. Before the COVID-19 outbreak, the heritage of the Baltic Sea region was celebrated by joint visits, cultural events and other gatherings hosted in the vicinity of notable sites, such as the ones inscribed in the UNESCO World Heritage List.

In contrast with the earlier routines, natural landscapes of the Baltic Sea region are no longer jointly visited. Instead, snapshots that demonstrate an uninterrupted appreciation of the natural scenery and participatory activism are collected via online calls for contributions. The "Living with the Baltic Sea in a Changing Climate: Environmental Heritage and the Circulation of Knowledge" (SeaHer) project is one example of snapshot gathering. This is not a public diplomacy initiative. However, this outreach campaign plays a role in terms of how the Baltic Sea region will be portrayed in future years via diverse forms of online and print publications. It is worth reiterating a recent blog post by CPD Director Jay Wang that "[p]ublic diplomacy is primarily about creating and maintaining relationships." SeaHer captures certain types of relationships. The project benefits from the responsiveness of enthusiastic photographers across the region. Its outreach is relevant in the overall context of diverse impressions that are shared and promoted in parallel with traditional public diplomacy practices.

International Exchanges


In the pre-COVID-19 context, geographic considerations had a prominent role in the overall reflection process facilitated by the Baltic Science Network. Geographic proximity was praised as an advantage. If compared with more distant research destinations, being a physically mobile student or academic in the Baltic Sea region was less demanding in terms of required time for travel and costs and posed less administrative burdens.

The COVID-19-motivated digital shift has decreased the overall weight of earlier-discussed geographical considerations. The safety measures of the pandemic that require a proper physical distance between people and limited in-person interactions to avoid bursting one's 'social bubble' to the detriment of one's health are widespread concerns respected everywhere. What students and researchers in many parts of the world are missing out on during the pandemic are the traditional forms of in-person experiential learning and more established patterns of what Franklin Delano Roosevelt referred to as "the science of human relationships."

Along the lines of Virtual Exchange 2.0, academic mobility in the Baltic Sea region is not spared from the evolving COVID-19 realities. The bulk of the Baltic Science Network Mobility Programme for Research Internships (BARI) still took place in-person. However, a relatively small proportion of collaborative engagements required a shift to an online setting.

Public Diplomacy Online


Detached from its spatial anchorage, regional collaboration and its public diplomacy components have gained new dynamics and patterns of interaction. Before the pandemic, the CBSS website, social media and annual reports of rotating presidencies featured traditional family photos with stunning scenery or historical, architectural and artistic treasures. However, these picturesque snapshots have been replaced with screenshots of compactly stacked cubicles that display video conference attendants with recommended corporate or individually chosen background visuals. These changes in the depiction of joint work and affiliation to the CBSS demonstrate the fading role of specific geographic, landscape and architectural settings. It is a shared virtual space with its technical modalities rather than a geographic place with its distinct traits that sets the scene for consultations and meetings.

The Lithuanian Presidency  2020-2021 of CBSS is the ultimate presidency of the videoconferencing cubicles. Swift alteration of interaction mode ensured a continuous presence of the CBSS throughout the Baltic Sea region and beyond. To compare, the Baltic Science Network conference held in 2019 back-to-back with the CBSS High-Level Meeting on Science was hosted at the new campus of the University of Latvia. It was an inspiring setting for a discussion on the future of research collaboration. Whereas, the forthcoming Baltic Science Network final conference will be held in an online form.

As the region is gradually transitioning through the waves of the pandemic, it is expected to shift from the fully-fledged online mode toward a combination of in-person gatherings, hybrid events and online encounters. These expectations crafted with the Baltic Sea region particularities in mind tally with the most recent global observations that virtual activity enhances relationship-building, but it “is not a replacement for in-person programming.”

Conclusion

In the absence of safe options for traditional in-person interactions, the online turn strengthens the Baltic Sea region as an intellectual space that weaves densely layered configurations of various networks, partnerships, initiatives and actors. COVID-19 restrictions have proven that what binds together traditional and novel actors in public diplomacy is not solely their geographic proximity but a mutually maintained intellectual space. It is the space with its relational ties rather than the place with its geographic dispositions that matters the most.

Overall, the sense of presence and engagement has changed. Even if spared from the Palmerstonian reflex , it is way too early to make any definite conclusions about how the new modes of interaction and coordination of multilateral ties have altered in comparison to the pre-COVID-19 era. However, the Baltic Sea region will maintain its attractiveness as one of the most integrated places in the world that is ready to maintain its prominence also as a vibrant and intellectually engaging online space.
