Governing the Baltic Sea Region at critical junctures (1991–2021)

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Governing the Baltic Sea Region at critical junctures (1991-2021): How do transnational and intergovernmental organizations cope with external regional change?

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Since the end of the East-West conflict, various intergovernmental and transnational organizations have collectively governed the Baltic Sea Region. Exploring key features of the organizational architecture of three such organizations – HELCOM, the Council of the Baltic Sea States, and the Union of Baltic Cities – we ask how their institutions evolved in the aftermath of critical junctures affecting the region over the past three decades. Findings show that specific-purpose organizations are more robust with respect to changes than general-purpose organizations whereas general-purpose maybe less so. With growing geopolitical tensions and global turbulence, this finding holds lessons for the design of transnational cooperation in the future – and beyond the Baltic Sea Region.

Keywords: critical juncture; transnational organizations; Baltic Sea cooperation; Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS); European Union; Helsinki Commission; Union of Baltic Cities (UBC); Russia

Introduction

How organizations adapt to external challenges is one of the core questions posed by scholars of international relations. Historical institutionalism seeks to grasp the dynamics unleashed by fundamental ruptures and during "windows of opportunity". External challenges in the guise of "critical junctures" (Copoccia and Keleman 2007) often create

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the starting point for new path-dependent processes. Junctures are precisely "'critical' because they place institutional arrangements on paths or trajectories, which are then very difficult to alter" (Pierson 2004, 135). More recent research has gauged the extent to which organizations become more robust vis-à-vis external challenges and stress, with the ultimate aim of (self-)protecting the internal organizational integrity (on "resilience" in the EU, see Joseph 2018). Public administration scholarship has joined this debate by considering how transnational and international public organizations face turbulence, situations "where events, demands and support interact and change in highly variable, inconsistent, unexpected or unpredictable ways" (Ansell and Trondal 2017, 2–3). To understand the internal coping mechanisms, it is necessary to "unbox" organizations in their efforts to cope with turbulence.

Our paper contributes to this unboxing by exploring intergovernmental and transnational network organizations in the Baltic Sea Region. We ask how three prominent organizations – the intergovernmental Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS) and two transnational network organizations, the Helsinki Commission for the Protection of the Marine Environment of the Baltic Sea (HELCOM) and the Union of Baltic Cities (UBC, particularly its Sustainable Cities Commission UBC SCC) – have responded to significant critical junctures affecting the region. Whereas HELCOM was founded already in 1974, the other two bodies only emerged after the collapse of communist rule in central and eastern Europe (Cottey 1999; Schymik 2012, 69–71.; Lehti 2010). The UBC was established in 1991 and the CBSS in 1992 as a pivotal "regional undertaking to promote new ideas for cooperation" (CBSS 1992, 1).

As the former fault line between the West and the East, the Baltic Sea Region has experienced a number of (geo)political changes over time, which have also impacted the transnational space and organizations (Metzger and Schmitt 2012). "Europeanization," in other words, the expansion of EU-centered political transformation in Europe (Olsen

2002), has increased since Sweden and Finland, and the three Baltic states and Poland, became EU members in 1995 and 2004, respectively. Further measures and policies aimed at collaboration with the Russian Federation – including the Northern Dimension (ND) initiative in 1997, which morphed into a common policy in the EU, Iceland, Norway, and Russia in 2006, and the launch of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR) in 2009 – presented yet another important step toward Europeanization. In terms of security, one should not underestimate the impact of NATO expansion to include Poland in 1999 and the three Baltic states in 2004, which occurred in sync with EU enlargement, on the relationship between Russia and "the West" in northeastern Europe. Then again, the region has been affected by the changing foundations of the EU–Russia relationship after the Ukraine crisis in 2014 and the subsequent endorsement of mutual sanction regimes.

For our article, we consider the following junctures as critical and of paramount importance: the end of the East-West conflict in 1989–91; the EU's enlargement of 1995 and 2004, "flanked" by conciliatory policy attempts vis-à-vis Russia; and the geopolitical implications of the Ukraine crisis in 2014, with the junctures of 1989/91 and 2014 being the most definitive ones. One could argue that the end of the Soviet Union provided ample opportunities for expanding interdependence amongst the various actors of the Baltic Sea Region, whereas the fallout of the Ukraine crisis and Russia's subsequent eagerness to reduce its dependence from Europe in several policy sectors eventually reduced the precondition for "positive interdependence" (see various contributions on the concept in Raik and Rácz 2019). Although these processes often overlap and continue in parallel, we use them as empirical yardsticks to indicate a major change in the overall geopolitical context. We introduce organizational perspectives in a systematic and comparative way, focusing on key features of the three organizations and examining how they have been impacted externally and over different scales of transnational governance.

The article leans on document analysis of various reports, meeting minutes, and memorandums of the organizations. The empirical data include a dozen interviews with current or former representatives of the organizations conducted in 2014–2020. The semi-structured interviews have primarily been used as supplementary material to validate our assessments of institutional developments along core organizational characteristics, such as membership and policy scope. While we have primarily relied on both primary and secondary sources, we were particularly interested in distilling evidence from our material on how these actors have adjusted to these periods of critical junctures.

A historical institutionalist approach: intergovernmental and transnational network organizations and exogenous change

The transnational sphere today includes states, international organizations (IOs), non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and transnational network organizations (TNOs). Consequently, governance in transnational spaces "is not exclusively the product of the bureaucratic action of state and local governments…. It is also undertaken by international organizations, corporate actors, NGOs, and other network actors that coalesce into transnational policy communities" (Stone and Maloney 2019, 4). Whereas HELCOM and UBC clearly qualify as TNOs, we conceive of the CBSS as an intergovernmental organization that still has a strong anchorage in the (neo)realist order with states as the main actors. Although the CBSS has undergone significant institutional change in the highly transnational environment of the Baltic Sea Region, its treatment as an intergovernmental organization is fully in line with its perception as an intergovernmental platform for the region. TNOs, in contrast, link autonomous and independent actors and form a larger entity based on mechanisms for cooperation and coordination of their members beyond the nation states. Both transnational network organizations, as well intergovernmental organizations, can be either general-purpose or

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specific-purpose, and they may focus on a broad range of issues or be task-specific on exclusive issues, such as environmental protection.

We depart from a historical institutionalist analysis, of which the theoretical perspective of critical junctures is "an essential building block" (Capoccia and Kelemen 2007, 341). The concept seeks to explain how geopolitical change can become a catalyst for positive and negative institutional developments (Calder and Ye 2004). Critical junctures have been defined "as *relatively* short periods of time during which there is a *substantially* heightened probability that agents' choices will affect the outcome of interest" (Capoccia and Kelemen 2007, 348). Some scholars conceive critical junctures as episodes of political and institutional challenge during which the agency decides to set an institution on a new developmental path (Capoccia 2015). Contrary to crisis, but similar to research on "turbulence" (Ansell and Trondal 2017), the emphasis here is on transformation.

The institutional adjustments made during turbulent times often have long-lasting effects. Therefore, critical juncture deviations from the established institutional path typically are triggered by some sort of major political, economic, social, or security disruption. A simple typology of sources of change within international organizations, be they intergovernmental, non-governmental, or transnational network organizations, distinguishes between exogenous and endogenous sources of change (Kapur 2002). To eventually explain organizational change, we are interested in changes in the transnational space in which the organizations are embedded. In general, these kinds of changes in the external environment affect international organizations in somewhat contradictory ways. Key characteristics of the regional organization in question – its goals and instruments, governance, and financial structure – shape the specific trajectory of change consequent to exogenous changes together with the "precipitating factors driving change" (Kapur 2002, 349). Although we identify three junctures as critical in the context of our study to

which it provides structural background, our analysis focuses on a historical institutionalist account rather than engaging with critical junctures theory and its emphasis on the importance of counterfactuals (Capoccia and Kelemen 2007). Our core question is: What kind of changes have occurred in terms of the subsequent organizational development that can be attributed to critical junctures? We assume that organizational factors, such as the overall character as an intergovernmental or TNO and its aims as specific- or general-purpose, play a significant role.

We focus on the evolution of the key organizational characteristics: legal status, organizational structure, objectives, main issue areas, leadership, and funding scheme, and how these aspects evolved over time amidst the exogenous changes that have taken place in the Baltic Sea Region since the early 1990s. We have selected three major regional organizations active in the Baltic Sea Region, which ultimately represent four cases (see Table 1): (1) the CBSS as a general-purpose intergovernmental organization of regional nation-states including Iceland, Norway, and Russia, as well as the EU member states of the region; (2) HELCOM as a specific-purpose organization focusing on protecting the Baltic Sea marine environment with the same type of members, i.e. nation-states in the Baltic Sea Region, including Russia and the EU; (3) the UBC as a general-purpose organization with cities as members, including many coastal cities around the Baltic Sea; and (4) the UBC's Sustainable Cities Commission (UBC SCC) as a specific-purpose organization working with UBC member cities as well as cities that are not (or no longer) members of these TNOs. For reasons of space constraints and lack of research data commensurate to the one accumulated on the three other instances, we did not include the case of the Baltic Sea Sub-regional Cooperation (BSSSC) or some other organizations which, as noted, are numerous in the case of the Baltic Sea Region. Perhaps our approach inspires other scholars to address this desideratum in future research.

The organizations were selected as they represent important instances of regional cooperation at different levels and are often mentioned as indicators of network governance in the Baltic Sea Region (Grönholm 2020; Koivurova and Rosas 2018; Vandeveer 2011; Tynkkynen 2013). Regarding membership, the studied organizations concentrate on national and subnational governance in the region, including Iceland and Norway in the case of the CBSS. Norway does not border the Baltic Sea, but it was a founding member of the CBSS, and Norwegian cities (Bergen, Kristiansand) became founding members of the UBC.

Legal status, objectives, and issue areas: CBSS, HELCOM, and UBC (SCC)

In March 1992, the Russian Federation, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Germany, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and Finland agreed to form the Council of Baltic Sea States (CBSS) as an intergovernmental organization. The founding vision of this "regional undertaking [was] to promote new ideas for cooperation while maintaining close relations with other States and international organizations" (CBSS 1992, 1). The founding declaration has been neither formally signed nor put into a legally binding international agreement. The legal status of the CBSS has been characterized by institutional and cooperative flexibility and, consequently, has been referred to as an instrument of "soft law" (Koivurova and Rosas 2018, 212). Over time, this flexible governance architecture has allowed members to programmatically move ahead without the risk of slowing cooperation through national procedures, which would be triggered by default via an

international treaty. Yet, such a procedural approach embodies the risk that cooperation will not be fully embraced by domestic actors.

The declaration did not formulate specific objectives but agreed on six areas of cooperation (CBSS 1992): (1) assistance for new democratic institutions, (2) economic and technological assistance and cooperation, (3) humanitarian matters and health, (4) protection of the environment and energy, (5) cooperation in the fields of culture, education, tourism, and information, and (6) transport and communication. Thus, the CBSS clearly qualifies as a general-purpose organization. However, its activities have changed over time. Prior to the EU's Eastern enlargement of 2004, the CBSS covered a wide range of issues, including youth and intercultural dialogue, entrepreneurial and creative industry collaboration, labor markets, research, innovation and science, climate change mitigation and adaptation policy coordination, spatial planning, law enforcement cooperation, critical infrastructure protection and emergency preparedness, child protection, and human trafficking. Over several years, the CBSS also supported the EuroFaculty in the Baltic states, Kaliningrad, and Pskov. Addressing several potential common "soft security" threats, the CBSS has meticulously avoided engaging in military matters or "hard security" (Hubel and Gänzle 2002).

Following the EU enlargements at a time when the EU reformed its previously "external policies" for the region, including the Northern Dimension, the future of the CBSS moved into the spotlight. The Lithuanian Foreign Minister Vygaudas Ušackas (2009) recommended upholding the CBSS' political dimension:

> Its broad membership, comprising all Baltic Sea countries, is the CBSS's biggest advantage, providing it with a strong position in the region's political landscape …. The CBSS is still able to create an environment for a better understanding among participating countries and could provide a natural platform for EU relations with Iceland, Norway, and Russia.

Russia itself called for the independence of the CBSS vis-à-vis the EU (see Makarychev 2012, 9). In an attempt to foster reform, the CBSS refocused its core objectives and subscribed to five long-term goals: (1) environment, (2) economic development, (3) energy, (4) education and culture, and (5) civil security and the human dimension (Council of the Baltic Sea States 2008, 2) in 2008. Only six years later, in 2014, were the priority objectives reduced to three: (1) regional identity, (2) sustainable and prosperous region, and (3) safe and secure region. This can be seen as a collective effort to ensure the future relevance of the body by gauging its activities towards a core of objectives that somewhat stress its "unique selling points" as the core intergovernmental organization of the region bridging a growing divide which emerged between its EU member states and, in particular, Russia in the aftermath of the Ukraine crisis. Thus, we can see that the critical juncture of EU enlargement ultimately excluded other institutional trajectories of the CBSS. It eventually became restrained to being primarily a body where EU member states and Russia can, by and large, engage in functional cooperation along a set of comprehensive and narrowly defined objectives outside the context of the European Union.

Currently, the CBSS is preparing its long-term strategy to contribute to the implementation of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Agenda 2030. In 2018, a report by experts was submitted containing further recommendations on areas for future cooperation (Koivurova and Rosas 2018, 216; CBSS Vision Group 2018), also reflecting the impact of the Ukraine crisis.

HELCOM was established to govern the Convention on the Protection of the Marine Environment of the Baltic Sea Area (Helsinki Convention 1974/1993). The Convention entered into force in 1980, marking the starting date of HELCOM as a regional organization. In 1992, the new convention, which was expanded to cover the

entire catchment area including inland waters, was born as a result of the dissolution of the Soviet Union (Valman 2014, 15).

The Helsinki Convention is a binding agreement of international law, but its provisions are vague (Bohman 2018, 51). It is amended when deemed necessary, for example, following the developments in international environmental and maritime laws (HELCOM 2019a). The main obligation is that "the Contracting Parties shall … take all appropriate legislative, administrative or other relevant measures to prevent and eliminate pollution" (the 1992 Convention art. 3 (1)). The Convention leaves a lot of discretion to the parties regarding implementation. The Baltic Sea Action Plan (BSAP), which currently serves as the main instrument under the Convention, has an unclear legal status (Bohman 2018, 51). All the HELCOM parties have given specified statements to HELCOM on their acceptance and intent to abide by the BSAP.

The main tasks of HELCOM include fostering international collaboration in the sphere of the environment, environmental monitoring, and promoting new knowledge about the marine environment (Valman 2014, 16). HELCOM's role in maintaining good diplomatic relations in the Baltic Sea Region is also acknowledged (HELCOM 2004, 24). HELCOM prepares pollution load compilations, periodic assessments, and holistic assessments about the state of the Baltic Sea. Non-binding recommendations are issued on measures which the Contracting Parties should implement through their national legislations. Since the beginning of the 1980s, some 260 recommendations have been adopted (HELCOM 2020b). External changes have not had a major impact on the legal status of HELCOM.

Since the early 1990s, various programs and plans have formed the backbone for action within HELCOM. The first program, the Joint Comprehensive Environmental Action Programme (JCP) adopted in 1992, was a 20-year program to address pollution hot spots and strengthen the formal institutions in the region. After JCP, the BSAP was

signed in 2007 (HELCOM 2007). HELCOM has been strongly affected by the first of our three critical junctures: the dissolution of the Soviet Union. This landmark event was critical in terms of launching a new convention which would subsequently expand the functional tasks and activities of the body, as well as in terms of the eagerness of newly independent ex-Soviet countries (including Russia) to engage actively in the organization throughout the 1990s.

Cooperation between cities in the Baltic Sea Region can be traced back in history to the days of the medieval Hanseatic League. City cooperation, particularly the twinning relationships between these cities (such as the one between Turku and Leningrad of 1953), even endured during the Cold War period. Thus, it is no surprise that the UBC developed relatively spontaneously soon after the fall of the Berlin Wall, based on the initiative of the mayors of Gdańsk (Poland) and Kalmar (Sweden) (Kern 2001; UBC 2001). The UBC was founded in Gdańsk in September 1991 by 32 cities from ten countries around the Baltic Sea; it grew quickly and soon had more than 100 members (Kern and Löffelsend 2008).

The UBC and its seven commissions, including the UBC Sustainable Cities Commission (UBC SCC), was established in 1991. The UBC's objectives are stated in its Statute, including (1) to promote, develop, and strengthen cooperation and exchange of experience among the cities in the Baltic Sea Region; (2) to advocate for common interests of the local authorities in the region; (3) to act on behalf of the cities and local authorities in common matters toward regional, national, European, and international bodies; (4) to strive to achieve sustainable development and optimal economic and social development in the Baltic Sea Region with full respect to the European principles of local and regional self-governance and subsidiarity; and (5) to contribute to joint Baltic identity, cohesion, and common understanding in the region (Statute of the UBC, Article 1).

During the 2010s, the UBC developed several strategies, most recently the UBC Strategic Framework 2016–2021 (p. 3), with the following priorities: (1) implementing the UBC Sustainability Action Programme 2016 to 2021 ("Stairway towards Sustainable Baltic Cities"); (2) EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR) and Blue Growth strategies; (3) EU Urban Agenda; (4) promoting smart growth and digitalization; and (5) making the UBC stronger, more proactive, goal-oriented, and member-driven. This list of priorities clearly documents the increasing Europeanization of the UBC.

Thus, it is primarily EU enlargement that accounts for a significant critical juncture in the subsequent development of the UBC after the transnational city alliance was incepted as a consequence of the demise of communism in its member countries off the south-eastern coastline.

Analyzing intra- and interorganizational change: a comparison of the CBSS, HELCOM, and UBC (SCC)

Membership

The CBSS consists of eleven countries – Denmark, Germany, Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Poland, the Russian Federation, Sweden, and Iceland (since 1995) – and the EU is represented by the European Commission or External Action Service (since 2010). The admission of the European Commission was symbolic with regard to a common future of the region inside the EU.

The CBSS has been significantly affected by Finland and Sweden (1995) and Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland (2004) joining the EU, underlining "the unique position of Russia as the only non-EU Member" (Koivurova and Rosas 2018, 214)

together with Iceland and Norway; the latter have been closely tied to the EU via the Economic Area Agreement (EEA). The CBSS presently has eleven countries designated with observer status: Belarus (2009), France (1999), Hungary (2016), Italy (2000), the Netherlands (2001), Romania (2009), Slovakia (2001), Spain (2009), Ukraine (1999), the United Kingdom (1999), and the United States (1999).

Originally, the Helsinki Convention contracting parties included seven countries: Denmark, Poland, Sweden, Finland, the USSR, the GDR, and the FRG. Since 1992, the contracting parties are all the coastal countries – Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Germany, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and Russia – and the European Community. Changes in membership resulted from the dissolution of the USSR and reunification of Germany. In the 1992 Convention, the European Community also became a contracting party, even if only two of the HELCOM countries were EU members at that time. Since then, there have been no changes in membership. HELCOM has a long list of observers, including the governments of Belarus and Ukraine.

Shortly after its foundation in 1991, the UBC grew quickly; small towns as well as the largest cities in the Baltic Sea Region joined. Cities from EU member and transition states were evenly attracted and represented in the Union as the UBC started as an initiative by the mayors of Gdańsk and Kalmar (Sweden). The mayor of Kalmar became the first UBC president, and the Secretariat has been located and funded by the city of Gdańsk from the outset (Kern 2001). In the early 2000s, the UBC had over 100 members, with almost 90% of the founding members still participating. Joining and staying in the UBC was mainly motivated not by specific characteristics of the municipalities but by their sense of belonging to the Baltic Sea Region (Kern 2001). As the UBC sees itself in the tradition of the Hanseatic League, it was particularly attractive to many former Hanseatic cities. Today, the 72 member cities still range in size from 5,000 (Mielno) to 5,000,000 (St. Petersburg) inhabitants, but the composition of member cities has changed

considerably (see Table 2). Membership is relatively stable or growing in Finland, Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, and Norway, but has dropped in Sweden, Denmark, Germany, Estonia, and Russia. Important cities in the region have left the UBC, including Stockholm, Uppsala, Gothenburg, Copenhagen, Aalborg, Lübeck, and Vilnius. Membership losses in Sweden can be explained by the election of a new generation of council members and mayors, who only became interested and involved in politics long after the fall of the Berlin Wall. They are more locally and nationally oriented and set different priorities for local politics. Russia is particularly striking because six of its seven member cities (including Kaliningrad) left the UBC. The only remaining city from Russia is St. Petersburg, due to its size and importance as the second-largest Russian city and its long-lasting relationships with many sister cities in the region (Aarhus, Gdańsk, Gothenburg, Hamburg, Kaunas, Riga, Tallinn, Turku, and Vilnius). For example, Turku in Finland was the first city in the world to establish official city relations with the Russian metropolis of Leningrad back in 1953. Turku has maintained an office in St. Petersburg to coordinate and improve existing ties. This cooperation helped the idea of sustainable city development to reach the national political agenda in the Russian Federation (Interview 1 with a UBC representative, 2020).

[Insert Table 2]

Organizational structure

Politically, the organizational set-up of the CBSS is determined by the Council of Foreign Ministers of member states and a member of the European Commission meeting annually under the CBSS Presidency.[1] Whereas other ministers meet on an ad hoc basis, the CBSS foreign ministers convened annually until 2003 and biannually since then. The annual

presidency rotates between the members (except for the Commission/EEAS) in a troika format, thus linking the previous, current, and incumbent presidency (Etzold 2010, 91). Since 1996, the ministerial meetings have been complemented by meetings of heads of state and government, the so-called Baltic Sea summits taking place biannually. However, the later format has been suspended as a consequence of the EU's sanction regime in the aftermath of the Ukraine crisis, still some ministerial meetings have been held. As put forth by a CBSS official:

> While crafting consensus is difficult sometimes, it remains a powerful tool of the CBSS Ministerials …, [a] unique strength, that only the CBSS holds in the region. And even if formal Ministerial Councils were not organized, meetings on a political level took place nearly every year. (CBSS official, personal communication, June 2, 2021)

At the administrative level, the Committee of Senior Officials (CSO), which consists of officials of Foreign Ministries and the European Commission, is the workhorse of the CBSS. At the time of the CBSS's inception, the CSO has been supported by three working groups focusing on nuclear safety, democratic institutions, and economic cooperation. Whereas the latter two were discontinued in 2009, nuclear safety has become part of an expert group for nuclear and radiation safety. The expert group is a professional and policy-making body aiming to improve cooperation among national regulatory authorities (Etzold 2010, 92). Today, the following specialized units are the Baltic 2030 unit (Expert Group on Sustainable Development, Baltic 2030 Network, B2030), Children at Risk unit (Expert Group on Children at Risk, CAR), and the Task Force against Trafficking on Human-Beings (TF-THB) (CBSS 2020, 1). In the words of a CBSS official: "… Expert Groups are good example of CBSS activities having both political (policy-shaping and collaboration building) and practical (initiating projects) impact" (CBSS official, personal communication, June 2, 2021).

Political controversies could not be avoided given the mandate of some of the CBSS institutions. In 1994, the post of CBSS Commissioner on Democratic Institutions and Human Rights was created to provide a focal point for observing the development of human rights and minorities in the member states of the CBSS, some of which exhibited a number of challenges, for example, with regard to Russian-speaking minorities. The position was abolished in 2003. As expressed by one CBSS official, what is important today is that the CSO aims for the following:

> … [to] give more support to the work with line ministries because the substance of the work is not that high a political dialogue; it lies on a plain with practical cooperation …. (Interview 4 with CBSS official, 2020)

Since 1998, the CBSS is operated by a small Secretariat based in Stockholm. The Secretariat employs around a dozen officials on limited-term appointments (which rose to 27 in 2020, excluding trainee assistants) (CBSS 2020, 2), several of whom also perform tasks for other bodies of the Baltic Sea Cooperation, such as "Children at Risk," the Baltic Sea Region Energy Cooperation (BASREC), or the EUSBSR. The Northern Dimension Partnership for Public Health and Social Well-being share the office in Stockholm, ensuring space for mutual exchange. Currently, there is a Director General, a Deputy Director, and six senior advisors in the top leadership of the Secretariat. Their role has somewhat developed from the original path:

> [Their role] was mostly to go to conferences, to represent CBSS, to provide speeches, and to make notes. Nowadays, senior advisors are responsible for everything: they make fundraising, implement long-term priorities which the senior advisor is responsible for, and they meet a lot of people and networks in the Baltic Sea Region. (Interview 4 with CBSS official, 2020)

These CBSS bodies and institutions dispose of their own decision-making procedures and budget but make use of the Secretariat's technical infrastructure and institutional memory as one of the hubs of intergovernmental cooperation in the region. While maintaining its own agenda, the CBSS Secretariat has become closely involved in the governance architecture of the EUSBSR, providing ample evidence for increased Europeanization. One might argue that the critical juncture of EU accession has, on the one hand, contributed to defining the Council's own role and contribution to Baltic Sea cooperation as a linkage between Russia and the EEA/EU member states that it represents. In terms of its organization structure, CBSS staff have become more project-oriented and managerial than one would perhaps expect from other examples of classical intergovernmental organizations. Yet, in the aftermath of the Ukraine crisis, diplomacy as the CBSS key organizational role has been put forth again.

The HELCOM meets annually, with the Heads of Delegation representing the contracting parties (HELCOM 2019b). A ministerial meeting every few years brings together the responsible ministers, usually ministers of the environment and the EU Commissioner for the Environment. The meetings result in the adoption of political declarations that complement the Convention (see HELCOM 2020c). The Commission adopts recommendations for the protection of the marine environment, decides on the budget, and makes other key decisions. Decisions are made by consensus and each contracting party has one vote. In addition, ministerial-level meetings are held every few years. The HELCOM chairmanship rotates between the parties every two years, starting from 1 July, according to their alphabetical order in English. The chairman for 2018–2020 is Finland. Russia has held the presidency once, in 2008–2010. HELCOM has a permanent Secretariat based in Helsinki, Finland.

In the early years, HELCOM worked through expert committees, such as the Scientific Technological Committee, the Maritime Committee, and the Environmental

Committee (Interview 3 with HELCOM representative, 2020). The Programme Implementation Task Force (PITF) assisted with the JCP's implementation. Nowadays, the expert working groups implement strategies and propose issues for discussion at the meetings of the Heads of Delegations, where decisions are made. The five permanent groups have addressed different aspects of HELCOM's work since 2014: WG Gear, WG Maritime, WG Pressure, and WG State and Conservation. There are also time-limited groups and a number of other expert groups with more specific tasks (HELCOM 2020d).

In the EUSBSR Action Plan, some of the BSAP implementation projects were taken as flagship projects (Commission of the European Communities 2009), thus channeling some financing for the implementation of the BSAP. This enabled the establishment of some new working groups, such as the HELCOM-VASAB Maritime Spatial Planning Working Group in 2010 (Interview 4 with HELCOM representative, 2020). Overall, the groups were streamlined in 2014 with the key aim of achieving "a more efficient and flexible HELCOM" (HELCOM 2019c). In sum, HELCOM's organizational structure has been rather stable; no major changes have taken place except for the working groups, which were somewhat affected by the EUSBRS.

The organizational differentiation of the UBC is well developed. The Union's most important organs are the: (1) General Conference of the delegates of the member cities; (2) President; (3) Presidium, consisting of the President and four Vice Presidents; (4) Executive Board; (5) Secretariat; (6) Commissions of the Union; and (7) Board of Audit (Statute of the UBC, Article 4). The Executive Board, which is elected by the General Conference for a two-year period and chaired by the President, is the Union's highest authority between the General Conferences. It consists of one member-city representative from each country where UBC has member cities plus the President and the Vice Presidents. The Executive Board has the right to formulate and adopt internal regulations and approve the budget. Its main responsibilities include approving new

member cities, ensuring the implementation of the UBC Strategy, and guiding the work of the Secretariat and the UBC Commissions. During 2017–2019, Executive Board meetings took place in Elva (Estonia), Gdynia (Poland), Kristiansand (Norway), Lahti (Finland), Liepäja (Latvia), Næstved (Denmark), Rostock (Germany), St. Petersburg (Russia), Touragé (Lithuania), Växjö (Sweden), and Gdańsk (Poland). Between Board meetings, the Presidium is authorized to make decisions for the proper management of the Union.

In 1999, the UBC had commissions covering the whole range of (transnational) urban policy: (1) business cooperation, (2) culture, (3) education, (4) environment, (5) health and social affairs, (6) sport, (7) tourism, (8) transportation, and (9) urban planning. Several networks with cross-sectional functions were established, for example, the Local Agenda 21 Network, the Women's Network, and the Youth Network. A number of reorganizations took place during the last 20 years. In 2020, the UBC had seven commissions: (1) Cultural Cities, (2) Inclusive and Healthy Cities, (3) Planning Cities, (4) Safe Cities, (5) Smart and Prospering Cities, (6) Sustainable Cities, and (7) Youthful Cities.

Environmental policies have been on the UBC agenda from the outset, and the Environment Commission has been one of the most active UBC commissions. The UBC Agenda 21 Action Programme was launched in 1999 and updated in 2001 and 2003 (UBC 2001, 7). An exchange of best practices was high on the agenda and promoted via workshops, seminars, twinning, and by developing European Common Indicators for Urban Sustainable Development as benchmarking tools. Some projects aimed to establish temporary twinning agreements for mutual learning in environmental policy. In addition, an award scheme (Best Environmental Practice in the Baltic Cities Award) was set up to complement this approach.

The Environmental Commission was renamed and today the Sustainable Cities Commission (SCC) is still the central body for the implementation of the goals associated with sustainable development at the local level. The SCC is administered through a Secretariat in Turku, Finland. The SCC coordinates the UBC Sustainability Action Programme – "Stairway towards Sustainable Baltic Cities" – for the period 2016 to 2021. This program, which is closely linked to the EUSBSR, guides the Union's work in sustainable development. For the next five years, the program will focus on green urban economies, climate-smart cities, sustainable urban ecosystems, and natural resources.

Leadership

Leadership, in principle, occurs at two levels: political and administrative. At the political level, leadership can be assumed by members with a strong interest in the Baltic Sea Region. Most members held medium interest only, with Sweden and Russia being more positive about the CBSS in the late 1990s according to a specialist of the CBSS (Etzold 2010, 118). The EU as a collective actor has shown considerably less interest. Direct influence and leadership can be exercised at the Baltic Sea Summit, presumably the highest political authority of the Baltic Sea cooperation, as well as during a country's presidency of the CBSS. The diplomatic rank of a country's CSO, ambassadorial or not, can often be interpreted as a proxy of how much reputation the CBSS has in a given country. Indirect leadership can be exercised in alternative diplomatic arenas such as the European Union. In this regard, both Finland and Sweden have made instrumental use of their EU membership by advocating for the Northern Dimension and for the so-called Eastern Partnership within the European Neighbourhood (Sweden and Poland's initiative in 2008). Further, the EUSBSR was promulgated under Swedish EU Council Presidency in 2009. In all these initiatives, the CBSS was identified as one of the core institutional

hubs for Baltic Sea cooperation. Leadership can also be prompted at the administrative level: here, it is the CBSS Secretariat who assumes a key role, particularly the leader of the administration, i.e., the Director-General. Leadership contains an element of both personality and opportunity. Director-General Jan Lundin (2010–2016), a Swedish career diplomat, was acknowledged as a personality who pushed the Secretariat toward stronger project orientation and integration into the EUSBSR governance architecture set up by the EU following a CBSS decision.

Similarly, in HELCOM, leadership takes place at two interconnected levels. At the political level, ministerial meetings every few years bring together the responsible ministers and the EU Commissioner for the Environment. These meetings are "important forums for shared discussions and agreements on a high level," and they result in a political declaration (HELCOM 2020c). Rotating chairmanship is crucial from a commitment viewpoint. For instance, when the BSAP was being negotiated, Poland had the chairmanship and thus it was easier to commit the country to it (Interview 4 with HELCOM representative, 2020). Moreover, Sweden held the EU presidency (latter half of 2009) and started its HELCOM chairmanship (2010–2012) right after, which motivated it to negotiate funding synergies between EU instruments such as the EUSBSR and HELCOM (Interview 4 with HELCOM representative, 2020). Russia also demonstrated leadership during and right after its chairmanship in 2008–2010 (Interview 2 with HELCOM representative, 2020). At that point, Russian actors heavily emphasized HELCOM's role in balancing the EU's dominance in the Baltic Sea Region, which, according to their view, emerged after its enlargement in 2004 and the launch of the EUSBSR in 2009 (Korppoo, Tynkkynen, and Hønneland 2015, 70–71).

At the administrative level, all decisions are made in the Commission meetings of the Heads of Delegation unanimously and in accordance with the Convention. The

HELCOM Secretariat, including the Executive Secretary, has relatively significant powers. According to HELCOM's rules,

> [It] shall have the power of initiative, i.e., to prepare and present to the Heads of Delegation proposals on strategies, policies, Commission Recommendations and decisions and any other actions on administration, budget, etc. (HELCOM 2013, 9.4.).

UBC political leadership is exercised primarily by the Union President and the four Vice Presidents, who perform statutory functions and are members of the Executive Board chaired by the Union President. In 1991–2019, the UBC had only two Presidents. The first President of the Union, Anders Engström, served for ten years, from the UBC's foundation in 1991 until 2001. As Mayor of Kalmar (Sweden), he was one of the initiators of the UBC and was considered a charismatic and visionary leader. In 2001, Per Bødker Andersen, the Mayor of Kolding (Denmark), was elected UBC President and held this position until fall 2019, i.e., a period of 18 years. While he managed to stabilize the UBC in the 2000s, more and more cities left the Union during the last couple of years. At the General Conference in Kaunas (Lithuania) in October 2019, Mantas Jurgutis, Deputy Mayor of Kaunas, was elected as President for a two-year period. The four Vice Presidents elected in 2019 come from Turku, Gdańsk, St. Petersburg, and Kristiansand.

The UBC Secretariat in Gdańsk coordinates the UBC's daily work, is responsible for the communication, administration, and organization of UBC events, and offers assistance to Commissions and other UBC bodies. The Secretary General is elected for a four-year period by the Executive Board. Similar to the political leadership, administrative leadership has not changed for a long period of time and Secretary General Paweł Żaboklicki is still in office.

Funding and budget

In the early 1990s, the CBSS was dependent on the EU for financial support for its Commissioner on Democratic institutions and minority rights. It was praised for the EuroFaculty project, which promotes educational cooperation and cultural exchange financed through the EU's Tempus/Phare and Tempus/Tacis.

To date, the CBSS does not dispose of an operative budget in its own right (Etzold 2007, 156). For the financial year 2006, for example, the budget amounted to approximately €868,000 and relied on financial contributions from its member states. The three Baltic states and Iceland each contribute 4% to the overall budget; the remaining countries pay 12% each (Etzold 2007, 157). Member states' contributions have increased over the years and made up €3,65 million in 2019 (CBSS 2020, 7). This also includes "additional project funds received from Germany, Norway, Sweden, European Commission, Interreg Baltic Sea Region Program 2014-2020, European Social Fund, European Erasmus + program and Swedish Institute" (CBSS 2020, 2).

Since 2012, the CBSS has a Project Support Facility, with the main objective of co-financing the development and implementation of cooperation projects. The three priorities are to develop regional identity and a sustainable, prosperous, and secure region. The total amount of the CBSS PSF for three years is one million euro with one call per year. The projects initiated by a legal entity of CBSS member states need to be transnational in character and should aim to have a sustainable outcome.

The CBSS was granted money from the European Investment and Structural Funds and the European Social Funds (ESIF). The CBSS can compete for and partake in project implementation primarily through active participation in EU funding schemes provided through cohesion policy, ESIF, and transnational cooperation (Baltic Sea Transnational Cooperation) (Interview 2 with CBSS official, 2017). The establishment of

a dedicated fund for Baltic Sea cooperation under the auspices of the CBSS has been contemplated for quite some time, and the CBSS Vision Group has suggested "the creation of a Baltic Sea Cooperation Fund, based on voluntary contributions from interested Member States" (CBSS Vision Group 2018, 10). Yet, it seems that for the time being, as a consequence of the deteriorating relations between the EU and Russia, there seems to be limits for such innovative solutions which potentially could also strengthen the visibility and autonomy of the CBSS.

As for HELCOM, financial provisions for the Commission are established in the Convention and state that "the total amount of the budget, including any supplementary budget adopted by the Commission, shall be contributed by the Contracting Parties in equal parts, unless the Commission unanimously decides otherwise" (HELCOM 1993, Article 15). The European Economic Community contributes, at most, 2.5% of the administrative costs.

The annual budget has remained around two million euro for the last 15 years.[2] In the 2012–2013 budget, the national contribution shares were 6% for Latvia, 5.5% for Lithuania, 11.11% for Russia and Estonia, and 14.3% for Denmark, Finland, Germany, Poland, and Sweden. Since then, contributions have become almost equal, with Latvia and Lithuania lagging slightly in the budget for 2019–2020 (HELCOM 2019d; see a long-term budget comparison on p. 3). Russia's contribution has remained rather stable throughout the years, with constant incremental increases and following the request by the Commission for an equal share of contributions. The total funding of HELCOM activities comes from various sources and is thus difficult to assess. To finance the implementation of the BSAP, national budgets and EU structural funds are used. A BSAP Fund was established by the Nordic Investment Bank (NIB) and the Nordic Environmental Finance Corporation (NEFCO) in 2009 to support grants, for instance, for technical assistance (Pyhälä 2012). The Fund capital stood at €11 million (The BSAP

Fund 2015). In addition, various International Financial Institutions finance projects to meet HELCOM recommendations. For example, the European Investment Bank has allocated significant sums to support Russian projects, contributing significantly to upgrading water quality in the Baltic Sea and thus benefitting all neighboring Baltic Sea countries (EIB 2020).

Sources of financing UBC activities primarily include membership fees, but intergovernmental organizations, funding agencies, and individual cities also contribute, and donations and legacies are given by private persons. Based on a proposal by the Executive Board, the General Conference decides on the fees the Member Cities have to contribute to cover the Union activities and expenses.[3]

Although the UBC SCC receives some funding from the UBC, it is marginal compared to the expenses of the Commission with its more than 20 employees. Funding is also provided by the city of Turku (for example, expenses for the premises), but most funding is external for projects, particularly EU-funded projects. Due to the successful attraction of third-party funding, the SSC is better equipped than all other UBC Commissions and even the UBC Secretariat in Gdańsk. This Europeanization of SCC funding means that the Commission not only depends on EU funding but also that it cooperates with many European cities that are not UBC members.

Interorganizational relations

The EU's approaches to the Baltic Sea Region already identified the CBSS as "an important complement to the Union's bilateral relations in the region and serves important political and economic purposes for all participating countries" (European Commission 1994, 3). Subsequently, the CBSS came to occupy a central role in the EU's Northern Dimension. As part of the EUSBSR governance architecture, the CBSS began co-

coordinating several priorities, such as those in civilian security and climate change, "a smart move by the EU by recognizing that they really need the existing institutions" (Interview 1 with CBSS official, 2014). The CBSS did not occupy a central role at the launch of the EUSBSR in 2009 but was gradually recognized as an important player in the revised Action Plan of February 2013 and June 2015 when it started managing several macroregional projects. Since then, the CBSS has also co-coordinated a EUSBSR policy area focusing on civil contingencies and two Horizontal Actions: "Neighbours" and "Sustainability."

Since 2001, the CBSS has maintained relations with 17 strategic partners in order to further enhance regional cooperation on specific sectors. Strategic partners include, for example, HELCOM, the Union of Baltic Cities (UBC), and the International Organization of Migration (IOM), among others. Within the framework of strategic partnership, the CBSS is also collaborating with, for example, the Union for the Mediterranean on climate change issues and with the Central European Initiative on questions concerning migration (Interview 2 with CBSS official, 2017). Compared to the Arctic Council and the Baltic Euro-Arctic Council, the CBSS has engaged in more varied tasks but also "more demanding fields of activity, such as cooperation on border control, civil protection, nuclear and radiation safety, trafficking human beings or organized crime" (Koivurova and Rosas 2018, 218). Most importantly, however, two of the three current main priorities are identical to the EU's core objective for the Baltic Sea Region as part of the EUSBSR. Thus, one may argue that the CBSS has drawn increasingly closer to the EU as one of the main cornerstones – together with Russia – of political order in the Baltic Sea Region.

Other organizations lean on HELCOM for environmental issues but also "come to its field", which sometimes causes duplication (Interview 3 with HELCOM representative, 2020). Although there are examples of some institutional interactions, for example between HELCOM and IMO, there are noticeable and potential institutional

gaps in the interaction and coordination between HELCOM and other marine and sectoral institutions (Raakjaer et al. 2014).

HELCOM's website notes that HELCOM cooperates with several organizations, institutions, and frameworks, which often have observer status. The BONUS program (scientific cooperation between the Baltic Sea Region countries), the EU Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD), the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region, the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES), the Oslo and Paris (OSPAR) Commission,[4] and UNEP are mentioned as key partners. This list demonstrates the strong effort of HELCOM to emphasize its scientific character: HELCOM often "hides" behind the scientific mandate and underplays political aspects. The observer list also has international non-governmental organizations, including the World Wildlife Fund for Nature (WWF) and the UBC.

Particularly during the 1990s and early 2000s, international financial institutions financed HELCOM-related activities. For instance, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the Nordic Investment Bank contributed a lot to projects addressing HELCOM hot spots, particularly in Russia and other former Soviet countries. IFIs have significantly decreased their engagement in recent years, partly due to sanctions but also to policy change (Interview 3 with HELCOM representative, 2020).

The EU was rather invisible in HELCOM in the early years. After Finland and Sweden joined the EU in 1995, the Commission took a bigger role (Interview 3 with HELCOM representative, 2020). HELCOM was identified by the EU as the main instrument in advocating for related EU policies, including the environmental parts of the EUSBSR and directives in the field of marine protection, such as the Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD) (Interview 1 and 2 with HELCOM representatives, 2019 & 2020). The launch of HELCOM BSAP coincided with the introduction of a set of EU legislations including the Water Framework Directive (WFD) in 2000 and the MSFD in

2008. Article 6 of the MSFD mentions that "… Member States shall, where practical and appropriate, use existing regional institutional cooperation structures, including those under Regional Sea Conventions, covering that marine region or subregion" (European Parliament and Council 2008, 27). The BSAP was seen as such a structure. Moreover, one of the most important tasks of HELCOM WG Gear is to implement the MSFD (Interview 4 with HELCOM representative, 2020). Here, the impact of Europeanization is clearly visible but, contrary to the CBSS, the EU uses HELCOM as a venue for implementing and coordinating its policies in the region rather than limiting HELCOM's work as such.

EU structural funds are used to finance, for example, the implementation of HELCOM BSAP. Sometimes, issues that fall under the mandate of HELCOM in principle are handled bilaterally between various EU institutions and Russia, which has caused discussion regarding the share of responsibilities (Interview 3 with HELCOM representative, 2020). Critical voices have also questioned the purpose and future of HELCOM, whether it is merely duplicating the EU regulations on the one hand or implementing them on the other (Interviews 2 and 3 with HELCOM representatives, 2020). Arguments for HELCOM state that it is important to engage Russia, the only non-EU Baltic Sea coastal country.

The UBC combines transnational relations at the local level with the cooperation of other organizations in the region and an active outreach toward the European and international levels. The origins of the UBC show that the various forms of city-to-city cooperation are interdependent: the basis was provided by a long-standing relationship between Gdańsk and Kalmar (Sweden), seeking to win the support of their respective twin cities for this institutional innovation.

UBC cooperation with other regional organizations started with project-based cooperation and involvement in the Baltic 21 process launched by the CBSS and its role

as an observer in HELCOM. UBC even became involved in developmental aid. It cooperated with the "Lake Victoria Regional Local Authorities Co-operation" (LVRAC), which started with a project financed by the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) and concentrated on environmental management, urban planning, budgeting, human resources policy, equality policy, and cooperation between local authorities.

The UBC Strategic Framework 2016–2021 (p. 3) states that the UBC actively seeks partners and works closely with key stakeholders in the region: national governments, local authority organizations, and organizations such as the CBSS, HELCOM, the Baltic Sea States Sub-regional Cooperation network (BSSSC), the Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference (BSPC), the Baltic Development Forum (BDF), the Baltic Sea Region NGO Network, the Baltic Sea Region University Network (BSRUN), and the Euroregion Baltic. Additionally, the UBC tries to offer its member cities an opportunity to enter the European political arena and develop into European players. The UBC's work priorities for 2016–2021 show that cooperation with EU institutions is of strategic importance for the organization. The UBC Strategic Framework explicitly refers to the EUSBSR (including Blue Growth strategies) and the EU Urban Agenda. Together with the Baltic Sea NGO Network and the Swedish Institute, the UBC coordinates the Horizontal Actions "Capacity," aiming to increase the project capacity, skills, and competence of all stakeholders involved in the strategy through training programs.

Discussion and conclusion

Our analysis dissects the implications of geopolitical changes on important features gauging the organizational development of our three cases. We find that the impact varies quite significantly from one organization to another. Three major findings can be retained concerning the organizations' development over time, in a geopolitical context moving

from strongly inclusive and ambitious in terms of creating (positive) interdependence to increasingly competitive and restrained to "managing mutual vulnerabilities" (Raik and Rácz 2019). The EU's direct and indirect presence has grown significantly, and all organizations have become involved in EU governance.

Summarizing our findings with regards to the critical junctures that we have postulated, we see that the first major change occurred after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, resulting in a change in HELCOM membership as the newly independent states and the EEC joined its organization, in the establishment of the CBSS, and in the institutionalization of cooperation between cities (UBC). It also impacted HELCOM so that its activities became project-based with extensive funding from the IFIs and other funding bodies. The new openness in the former Soviet space also revealed pollution sources so that environmental hot spots could be identified and tackled.

Furthermore, we identified both EU enlargement and the launch of the EUSBSR as other major critical changes in terms the region's overall exposure to Europeanization and some dominance of the European Union. The main drivers of Europeanization were various pieces of EU legislation (for example, the WFD and MSFD), pertaining policies and strategies which needed to be implemented by all member states, and the EUSBSR, which became the EU's first macroregional strategy. Our analysis shows that, as a result of these processes, Europeanization affected the organizations in various ways. The EU became a founding member of the CBSS and, even before 2004, it received a lot of attention from states located in the Baltic Sea Region. In recent years, the CBSS has witnessed a significant concentration of its focus as a way to ensure its overall relevance in the region. It is the only political body bringing both EU member states and Russia together at the subregional level, despite a row of mutual sanctions in place between both actors at the global level. One may argue that the CBSS has reacted in a flexible way since 2014: "while political dialogue became problematic, the Council engaged in

projects, which have important influence on defining key issues in region and building capacity to deal with them" (CBSS official, personal communication, June 2, 2021).

As a result of Europeanization, the UBC oriented itself gradually toward "Brussels" too; most projects of the UBC Sustainable Cities Commission are funded by the EU Commission today. HELCOM, in turn, has contributed to the implementation of EU legislation. HELCOM's approach changed in the late 2000s from a sectoral-based to an ecosystem-based approach to management as an impact of the EU, directives that were based on an approach similar to MSFD.

Increasing EU integration on the one hand, and the changing relationship between the EU and Russia on the other, appear to be parallel but mutually reinforcing processes (Makarychev and Sergunin 2017). Europeanization has had a disintegrating flipside due to Russia's special role as the only non-member state in the Baltic Sea Region. Yet, in the late 2000s, Russia used its stake in the regional organizations to balance against the ongoing process of Europeanization in the region – for example, when it held the HELCOM chairmanship, showcasing regional activity through the respective organization (for the CBSS, see also Oldberg 2012) – at some distance from the EU.

Moreover, the Ukraine crisis had an impact on Russia's role as well as on the relationship between Russia and other countries in the Baltic Sea Region, thus affecting the organizations in various ways regarding membership, participation in meetings, and altered funding schemes. As noted, all Russian cities except St. Petersburg have left the UBC in recent years. Russia has become less active in HELCOM but is still engaged.

With respect to the interorganizational development of the three organizations, several conclusions can be drawn from the cases. First, relations between organizations with the same scope and scale seem to be rather cooperative. Conflicts are an exception and organizations complement, rather than compete, with each other, as demonstrated by

the relations between the UBC and BSSSC and the UBC SCC and "Energy Cities." Second, relations between organizations with the same scope and different scale are also characterized by collaboration and cooperation. The UBC Environment Commission was heavily involved in the implementation of Baltic 21, a CBSS initiative. All studied organizations have become engaged in the EUSBSR, for example, as coordinators of Horizontal Actions and as lead partners of several flagship projects supported by the EU. Third, relations between organizations with the same scale and different scope may lead to competition and conflicts. Conflicts between the CBSS and HELCOM had already occurred when CBSS launched Baltic 21, which covered some of HELCOM's most important issue areas. In addition, there are UBC-internal tensions between the UBC headquarters and its Sustainable Cities Commission.

In conclusion, as noted by Kapur (2002, 342), external changes can be identified as "critical junctures" that create distinctively new conditions and pressures for institutional evolution. Our comparison of the three organizations indicates that HELCOM, as an organization, has been the least affected by the changes in the Baltic Sea Region. This is partly rooted in the fact that HELCOM has the longest history and an institutional path dependency that makes it slow to make changes, but it is simultaneously more perseverant. Its robustness also has to do with its specific-purpose scope: HELCOM focuses exclusively on the environment, which is traditionally considered a relatively easy and non-political scientific field of cooperation (Darst 2001). Furthermore, Russia is generally very interested in maritime policy, so it has pursued an active role in HELCOM regarding issues related to maritime traffic and shipping. Yet, HELCOM has also been heavily impacted by Europeanization, which may ultimately question its existence in the future if its role and function are limited to the implementation of the EU regulations only.

Finally, the development of the organizations, as well as the comparison between general-purpose organizations (CBSS, UBC) and specific-purpose organizations (HELCOM, UBC SSC), suggests that specific-purpose organizations are rather well equipped to manage conflicts with other organizations and might also be more robust with respect to geopolitical changes compared to general-purpose organizations. Naturally, there are also other, contextual factors that play a role here. For instance, there seems to be sufficient political will as well as internal resilience in the case of the CBSS to support its functions, primarily because it has become the exclusive political body where Russia and EU/EEA member states cooperate against all odds.

Declaration of interest statement

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Interviews

#1: Interview with CBSS representative (by phone), November, 2014.

#2: Interview with CBSS representative, January, 2017.

#3: Interview with CBSS representative, February, 2020.

#4: Interview with CBSS representative, February, 2020.

HELCOM

#1 Interview with former HELCOM representative, June 2019.

#2 Interview with HELCOM representative (via Skype), March 2020.

#3 Interview with former HELCOM representative (by phone), April 2020.

#4 Interview with former HELCOM representative (via Skype), April 2020.

UBC

#1 Interview with UBC representative, February, 2020 (in person).

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[1] After entry into force, the European Commission representative was replaced by a member of the European External Action Service (together with a member of GD Regio). Instead of the European Community (and its representative, the Commission), it is now the European Union who is a member of the Council of the Baltic Sea States.

[2] See http://portal.helcom.fi.

[3] For 2020–2021, membership fees range from €500 for municipalities with less than 10,000 inhabitants to €7,250 for cities with more than 500,000 inhabitants. This equals around €231,000 in membership fees.

[4] OSPAR is the mechanism by which 15 governments of the western coasts and catchments of Europe, together with the European Union, cooperate to protect the marine environment of the Northeast Atlantic.