

YOUTH COOPERATION IN THE BALTIC REGION

IF RUSSIA HOLDS OUT ITS HAND, IT SHOULDN'T BE REJECTED



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Germany belongs to the group of countries actively promoting the ideas of international cooperation in the Baltic Sea region. Youth policy is an important and promising guideline of this policy. In October, the Youth Ministries of the federal states of Schleswig-Holstein, Bremen, Hamburg and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern organized

the fourth international conference which addressed various aspects of Baltic youth interaction. KIRILL VYATKIN, mission head of Amber Bridge fund in Berlin, talked on the sidelines of the forum to Lars Kascha, a youth cooperation enthusiast, representing the Council of the Baltic Sea States Secretariat for Youth Affairs.

Mr. Kascha, let us start with an overview. What is the current situation of youth cooperation in the Baltic Sea region?

Well, there is no short answer to this question, since there are so many levels and areas of cooperation. In general I think, it is safe to say that there are a lot of well-functioning structures and projects. The Baltic Sea States Subregional Co-operation does a good job in bringing young people together on the regional level and the

same is true for the Union of the Baltic Cities. The Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS) has been active in supporting projects like "Baltic Lab" and the Kaliningrad tent camp "Baltic Artek". The Regional Youth Council successfully organizes the Baltic Sea Youth Media Camp and the Baltic Sea Youth Conference. This is really only an extract of what is going on in the region.

This sounds like everything is just fine and there is hardly any room improvement. Is that right?

Not quite. Although there are a lot of people doing an outstanding job in their field of responsibility it seems to me that what is often lacking is actual co-operation between the different structures and projects. This is not all meant to be an allegation and is in fact an opinion shared by many stakeholders in the field. Since the Baltic Sea Secretariat for Youth Affairs (BSSYA) had to be restructured this year due to the reasons which would be too complicated to explain at this point, I had the unique opportunity to do some research in order to form the Secretariat into an entity that would best serve the interest and needs of Baltic Sea cooperation. This research brought me to two conclusions. Firstly, the already mentioned lack of networking between the different structures and projects and secondly, which to a certain extent emerges from the first point, the lack of a common forum, where influence could be bundled and youth interest could be voiced with the

highest feasible degree of legitimacy and authority. Tackling the first problem would mean to offer a platform, which facilitated co-operation. On this platform stakeholders could find help to promote their projects and to find partners, participants and funding. If all the projects are promoted through a common platform a much broader audience could be reached than by having each organization doing it only by itself. Concerning the other mentioned topic I was surprised to learn that the Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference, where representatives of the national and regional parliaments around the Baltic Sea work together, was very interested in youth input, but so far had been unable to identify a legitimate and fitting forum, where delegates could be elected to represent "youth" at the Conference.

That is an interesting assessment of the situation. What could you do and have you done to tackle these challenges?

We have partnered with the Federal Russian Youth Agency and the BSSSC-Secretariat in Uusimaa, Finland and have concentrated on the idea of establishing a "Baltic Sea Youth Forum", for which we could win the EU-Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region to fund an assessment period. Broadly speaking, the goal of such a Forum would be to gather youth representatives from regional as well as national youth and student councils as well as multilateral Baltic Sea structures in order to give them the opportunity to discuss current topics, pass a resolution and elect delegates. In this regard it would be very important to create some sort of feedback system, so that the youth representatives can get an understanding where their resolutions go and that they are taken seriously. In mid-November there will be a first stakeholder meeting in Vilnius in order to shape the concept

for a Forum in a way that it best serves all those who are interested. I personally will not attend the meeting anymore, since I will move on to another post, but I am very happy that the Regional Youth Council of Schleswig-Holstein, with which the BSSYA is associated, will nonetheless continue to pursue the establishment of the Baltic Sea Youth Forum.

Why did you decide to move on?

It wasn't so much a decision I voluntarily chose to take, but unfortunately the funding of my post from next year has not yet been secured, so I had to put out my feelers and was lucky enough to find a new task. I am leaving the Baltic Sea cooperation with mixed feelings. On one hand, I met many very motivated

people with whom it was a pleasure to work, and I think I could do some good for youth cooperation in the region. But on the other hand, I feel that I could have done more without having been constantly busy trying to find new sources of funding, because of the project focus in international cooperation. I am hard-pressed to believe that this project approach is very productive and beneficial. This doesn't



only concern myself, but I have seen enough other people leave taking along all their experience and acquired skills, because a project ended. And when after a certain period of time somebody takes notice that something is missing a new project gets started and a new person gets hired, who'll spend the first year finding his place in a rather complicated environment and the second year being concerned with finding new funding or another job. To use a political buzz word, this is not "sustainable" in my mind. But I still hope that new sources of funding can be found and a successor for me can be hired, especially since I'm convinced that the Baltic Sea Secretariat can help fill some gaps that exist in the co-

operational structure within the Baltic Sea Region.

When you look back, what were the most interesting and important projects you could work on in the context of Baltic Sea youth exchange?

Well, this year I was very busy trying to put the already mentioned "Baltic Sea Youth Forum" on track. Since my concern was to make it

fit into the existing co-operational structures I talked a lot to different stakeholders in the region. It was quite interesting to weigh all the different interests and try to make the concept fit the need and possibilities. One challenge is that the interests of the different countries and the way their youth representation and international youth work is structured vary to a great extent. While you have well-established structures on the national level in Scandinavia they oftentimes do not especially focus on the Baltic Sea cooperation, but rather on supposedly more interesting countries farther away. On the other hand, for example in Poland and the Baltic Sea States, you find

rather weak structures, and stakeholders therefore eagerly focus on the Baltic Sea region and see the chances and opportunities this region offers. This is of course a generalized statement, but in broad terms it reflects my experiences. All of this gets even more complicated, when you try to sort out the local, regional and national level and find suitable partners for international projects, who can somehow relate to each other in an institutional sense. Another important factor in all of this is Russia, which plays a prominent role in the Baltic Sea cooperation, since most of the other countries concerned cooperate on other levels as well, especially in the European Union, but Russia's involvement in the Baltic Sea cooperation is

one of the reasons that make it quite important and special. When I started working in the Baltic Sea context I was warned that Russia wasn't very actively involved in youth cooperation. In fact one of my tasks was to get Russia more involved, for which I seemed to be qualified, since I had been active as a volunteer for fifteen years in a county sistership between my home county and the rayon Zelenogradsk in the Kaliningrad region. I spoke Russian and had been to Russia more than 30 times. It took indeed some time, but then I experienced the Russians as partners, who were interested in the Baltic Sea region and who saw the benefits of youth cooperation in that context. The Russian Federal Youth Agency as well as the Russian National Youth Council are for example very active and committed partners in the planning of the earlier mentioned "Baltic Sea Youth Forum".

Another very interesting project I worked on was the tent camp "Baltic Artek" in Kaliningrad. This camp had already existed for some years, but the Russian decision-makers wanted to internationalize it more and so it became a higher-ranking topic of Baltic Sea cooperation during the Russian CBSS-presidency. Since the BSSYA was then structurally still very tightly connected to the CBSS it ended up partly on my desk to support the camp organizers in their efforts to make the camp more international. While the Baltic 21 unit of CBSS organized workshops on sustainability I tried to find international participants for the camp, which turned out to be a bit more complicated than I had assumed.

Why so? What made it complicated?

There is a certain reluctance in Western countries to advertise those tent camps and send young people there. This is partly based on bad experiences in the past, when the youngsters apparently ended up in propaganda camps for president Putin and the ruling party. And after having been inquired by the media, if that is really the right place for youth exchange, every youth organization thinks twice before sending somebody there again. Another obstacle is the dissatisfaction in Western Europe with some parts of Russian domestic issues. The picture many people have of Russia is for example shaped by court

decisions against “Pussy Riot”, Mikhail Khordorkovsky or Alexei Navalny or recent laws concerning homosexuals or non-governmental organizations, which are perceived as, putting it kindly, problematic. A widespread fear is therefore that young people will be exposed to the propaganda of a highly suspect regime once they arrive in the camp.

But you don't believe that's a reasonable concern?

Look, even if you are highly critical of the political landscape in Russia, you should encourage young people to go there, if only to have them question the status quo. Nobody is better qualified to start a blunt dialogue about pressing issues and differences than youth, since mostly they don't have to be considerate of superiors, parties, voters, diplomacy or other outside factors that keep most of us from having an open dialogue. And the same is true for the Russians. If they for example happen to feel that their country is unfairly portrayed by the media in other countries, they have the chance to address this. I can only speak for the camp “Baltic Artek” in Kaliningrad, to which I accompanied groups of young people from Germany, Poland, Estonia and Norway twice, but there I have not sensed any efforts to politically influence the participants in an inappropriate way. I have not seen any posters of Putin or anything of that sort. Furthermore I have not experienced any form of intimidation if people spoke out about politics. And many of the young people did speak their mind either in free discussions or when they asked the lecturers. I cannot and will not claim that there might have been problems in the past, but if Russia holds out its hand now by turning those youth camps into a leveled playing field for exchange of opinions, it shouldn't be rejected.

So, would you recommend to participate in a youth camp in Russia?

Well, I think, there is one crucial indicator that tells best, whether it is worth going there or not. And that indicator would be the impression of the young people from abroad, who took part. Did they feel that they wasted a week of their life or did they learn something and brought mostly positive

impressions home? According to what I've seen and heard none of the participants had regrets about going to “Baltic Artek”. I think that was mostly due to the very interesting people they met there in terms of other participants and lecturers. I mean, surely such a tent camp is as well some sort of testing ground of cultural differences. The amount of guards present on the camp ground was for example irritating to some participants from abroad, who felt controlled. From the Russian point of view it was actually meant to provide safety and a sense of security, but it certainly wasn't perceived and appreciated by everybody from abroad as such. The same is true about some of the rules in the camp. Adult participants were originally strictly forbidden to leave the camp. So they couldn't for example swim in the adjacent Baltic Sea without professional supervision, which wasn't



available most of the time. That naturally led to some discontent, but since the organizers of camp were open to constructive criticism and interested in an ongoing dialogue this rule could be softened and much more freedom of movement was granted the second time I was there, without compromising the general order of the camp. Truth is that none of both sides had any sinister motives, but the cultural backgrounds and socializations of the different

people had to be aligned in order to make the experience beneficial to all of them. This in itself is by the way not all troublesome, but rather a fundamental part of what international youth cooperation is all about. Another problem that seems to exist is a lack of language skills among participants and organizers from the Russian side. Foreigners oftentimes felt left out, when for example everything on stage was in Russian and no or only insufficient translation was provided. Furthermore many of the Russian youngsters could hardly communicate in English, which is rather strange for a supposedly international youth camp. But, I think, this problem of a lack of language skills is noticed by Russian authorities and youth camps are seen as part of the solution.



But let us return to the initial question, whether I would recommend people to go to such a camp. Yes, I would. The feedback I received was much more positive than negative and I think that our Russian partners' need to overcome existing problems means more cooperation, since the willingness to improve things and work on shortcomings is given as far as I can see. On the other hand such camps offer an opportunity for non-Russians to get a first-hand insight into a country, many young people don't know very well. This brings me to broader point regarding youth co-operation in our region. It is not only Russia most youngsters from Western and Northern Europe know little about, the same is true for the

Baltic States and Poland. These countries are not high on the priority list for vacations or studying abroad and this leads in my view to a misallocation of future opportunities. If you look for example at the statistics of the Erasmus program, the ten most popular universities abroad are exclusively from Italy and Spain. I understand that the Mediterranean coast might be at first sight more appealing than the Baltic Sea coast in the above mentioned countries, but if you look how Poland got through the recent crisis and how Spain did, it might help your career opportunities much more to learn Polish than Spanish. And similar arguments could be made to learn Russian, Estonian, Lithuanian or Latvian. In the latter cases especially, because it is a rather rare skill not many applicants have to offer.

Some might wonder now how you all of a sudden arrived from the topic of tent camps to studies and eventually work. Could you explain that?

I did, because it is all interconnected. You don't decide randomly to focus your studies on a certain country or learn a language. You need an initial spark to wake your interest and youth exchange in a non-formal learning setting can provide that spark. Many young students don't even have those Eastern countries on their radar. They don't consciously decide against going there, they just never consider it. And the chance to initially get to know a country through international youth cooperation broadens their horizon and they might feel some interest to know more about it or study a language. Let me give you an example. As already mentioned, I have been active as a volunteer for many years in a county sistership and in that position I organized playground building projects in Kaliningrad for young Germans and Russians. One young man, who joined such a project some years ago at the age of sixteen, has recently started to study Russian at the university because of that project. My own case was comparable, so I've seen how international youth exchange can shape the life of young people and give it an entirely unexpected direction.