

Baltic Sea Youth Dialogue 2021: Council of the Baltic Sea States

Regional Identity



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Introduction:

We are a group of three young people with a passion for the Baltic Sea Region who have written this paper as part of the Baltic Sea Youth Dialogue 2021. BSJD is a project hosted by the Council of the Baltic Sea States, an inter-governmental political forum for cooperation in the Baltic Sea Region. CBSS has 11 member states (Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Poland, Russia, and Sweden) as well as the European Union and 11 observer states.

The theme of this year's BSJD is ***'Looking forward, looking back – 30 Years of Collaboration in the Baltic Sea Region'***. It was inspiring to look back at some of the major changes in the region and to learn from regional experts on CBSS' long-term priorities: Regional Identity, Sustainable & Prosperous Region, and Safe & Secure Region. For our cross-cultural project, we focused on regional identity and cooperation.

Here's our team:

- **Lilybell Evergreen, United Kingdom** – I'm studying towards BA (Hons) International Studies and am passionate about international political cooperation and social transformation. I know a little German and am currently learning Finnish as I am working as a Junior Consultant for a think tank in Helsinki in Summer 2022.
- **Khira Strauß, Germany** – I'm studying BA Multilingual Communication in Cologne, Germany and I'm currently doing a year abroad in Edinburgh, United Kingdom. I grew up in the North of Germany – a few minutes away from the Baltic Sea. I always loved and will love the Sea with all my heart, while living far away from it for a few years now. I love to talk and work with people from around the area, because I always have the notion that the feeling towards the Sea unites us. I study English and French, and want to learn Finnish for my possible future degree.
- **Dayana Atazhanova, Russia/Finland** - I grew up in Kaliningrad in Russia by the Baltic Sea, spent my Erasmus in Poland, worked in Sweden and am now living in Finland. I feel like in my life I have just been moving across (or around) the Baltic Sea. I have a degree in Tourism and Event Management from Finnish Haaga-Helia UAS, and I speak Russian, German, Swedish, as well as some Polish and Finnish.

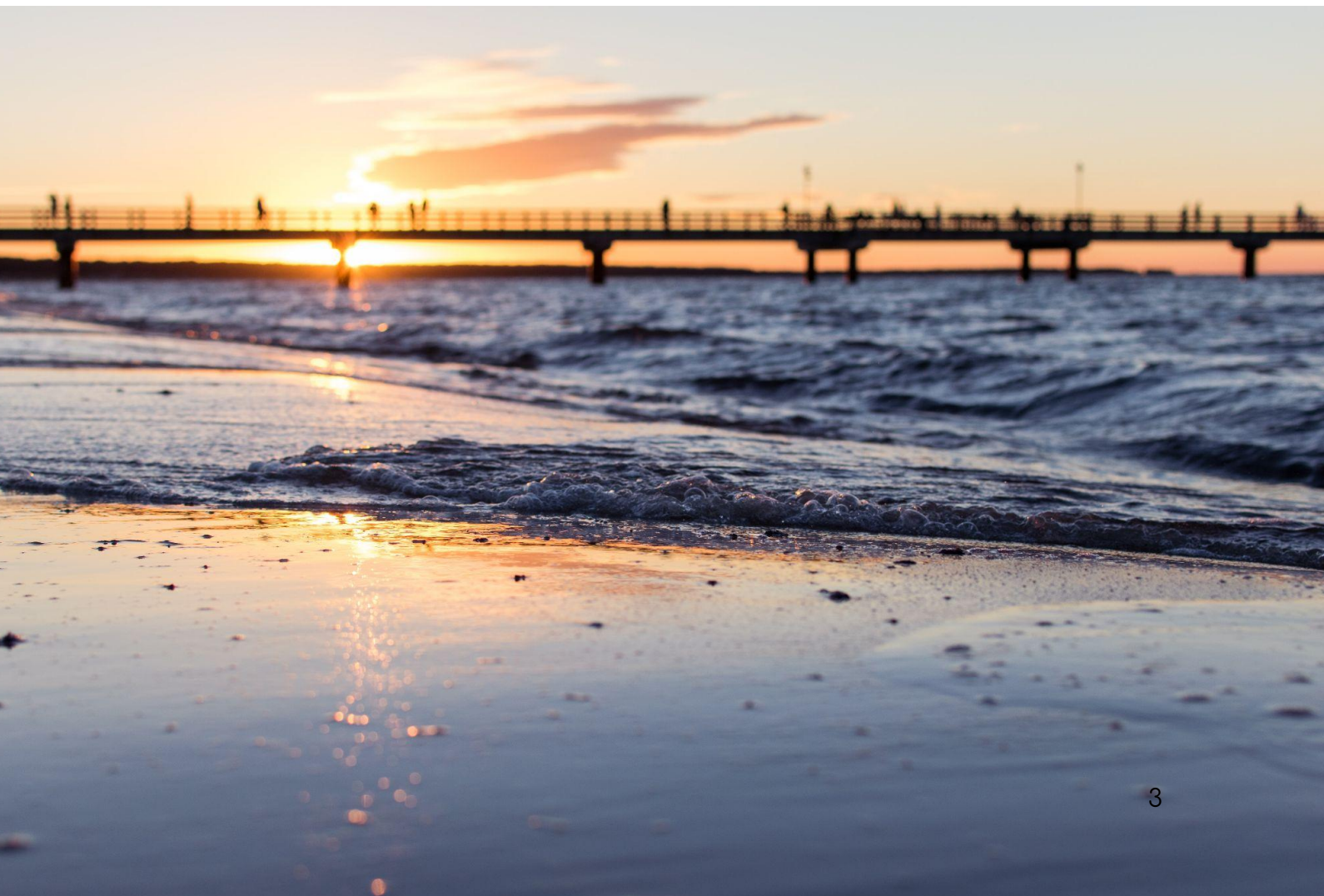
We'd like to thank the regional experts for sharing their knowledge and answering our questions, as well as the CBSS team for their help including Franziska Seufert and our mentor, Aline Mayr.

Project Summary:

When considering what form our project could take, we began by discussing what we found most inspiring and interesting from the expert lectures. We were particularly interested in regional changes over the past three decades and how changes may have affected the views of people who live in the Baltic Sea Region.

We were keen to understand the current perception of regional cooperation and how people may want to collaborate looking forward. Due to a shared passion for language learning and the diverse, beautiful languages of the Baltic Sea Region, we also decided to explore the impact of multilingualism on a sense of regional connectivity.

We decided to create a survey to gain insight into people's views and develop ideas for future actions and projects based on responses. This was a great way for us to collaborate yet also explore personal interests when suggesting methods of future collaboration. We hope this also presents a more comprehensive approach to the complex idea of regional cooperation.



Looking Back - The Survey:

We designed our survey to learn about the perspective of people living in the Baltic Sea Region, including how we could show unity in our area and to the feelings that evolve around the Baltic Sea. Our hypothesis was that everyone has a similar feeling when looking at the sea. This was inspired by the lecturers for the BSYD themselves. Even though the topics covered were vastly different, they evoked the feeling that, no matter what topic, the Baltic Sea unites us. We included questions about how our participants feel about the Baltic Sea and how this may have been shared over time through phrases or sayings in Baltic Sea languages.

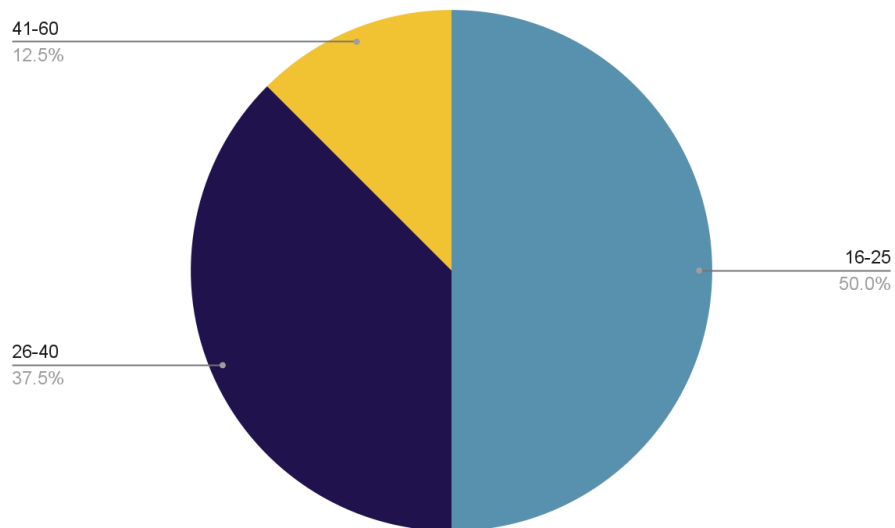
Moreover, we wanted to figure out the opinions regarding regional cooperation in this area, and how different cultural settings might affect the perception of said regional cooperation. We wanted to use this variety of cultural diversity of participants in our survey to evaluate possible settings and topics where cultural and regional cooperation could set place in the future.



Survey Summary:

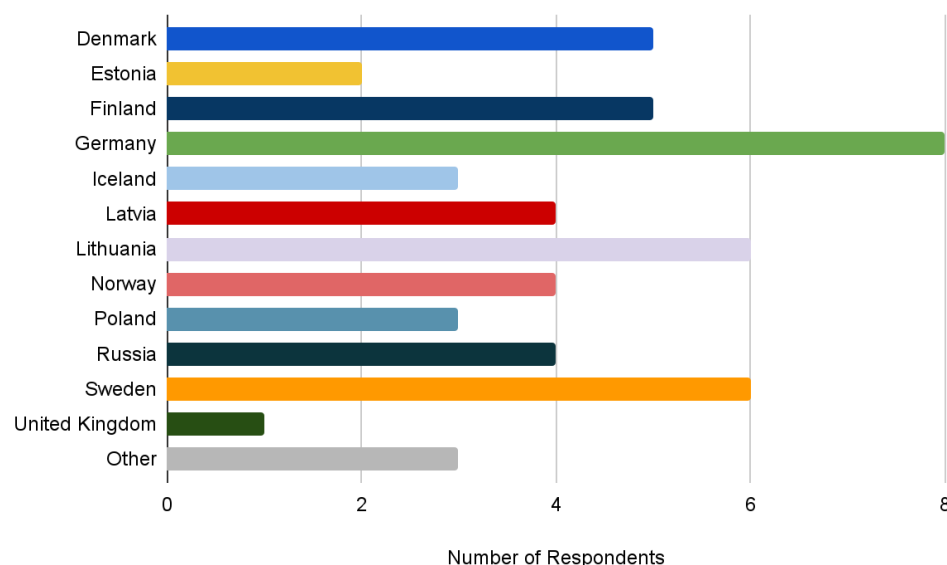
Our survey only had 16 respondents so if we continue research on this topic, we would aim for a larger number of participants. **Question 1** asked the respondent's name.

Question 2: What is your age?



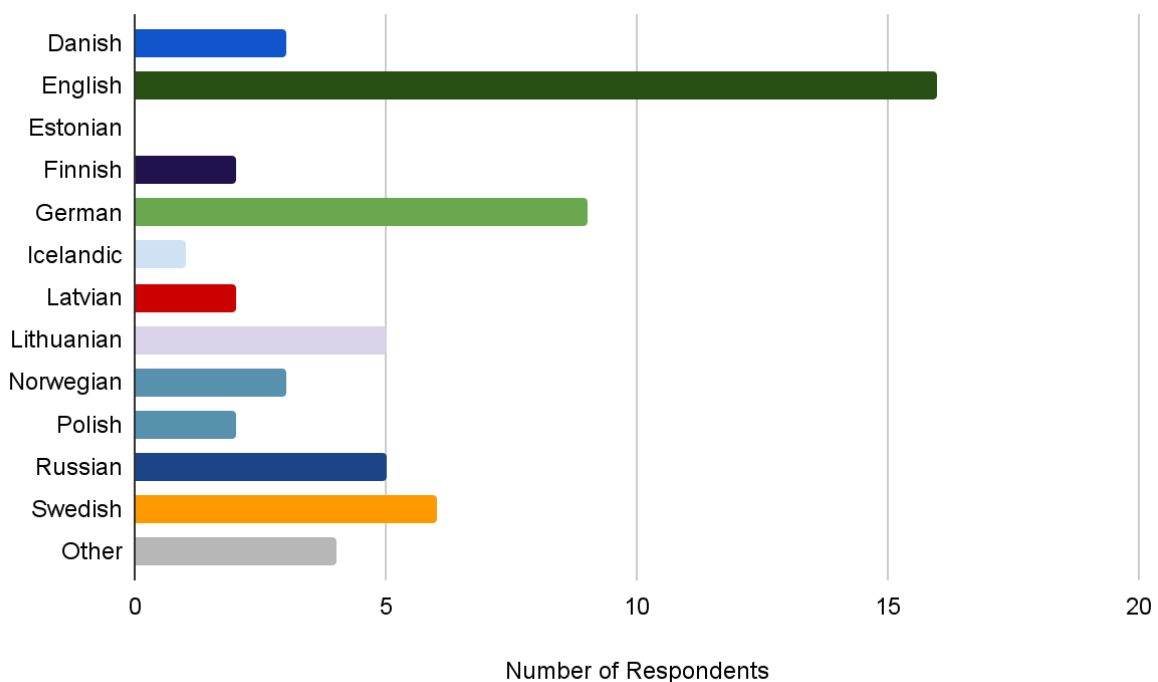
We were delighted to see the participation of people aged 16 to 60, with half of them in the range of 16-25. As the theme of BSYD 2021 was looking forward and backwards, it was important to us to have multiple age groups represented for a diversity of opinion.

Question 3: To which countries do you have a relation/connection to?



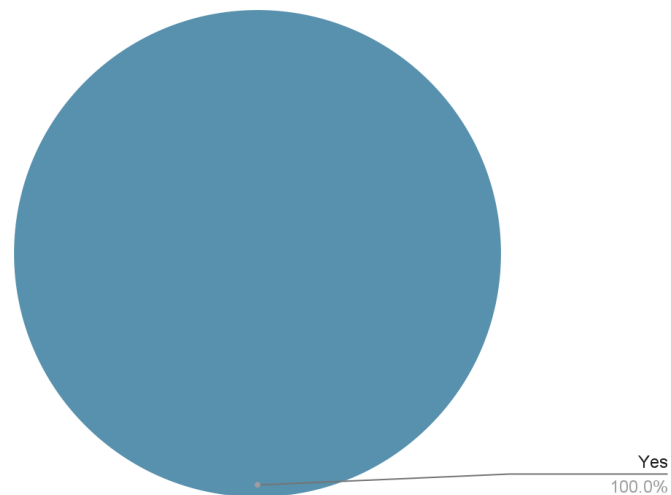
This was a multiple choice question and the majority of respondents had a connection to more than one country in the Baltic Sea Region. We anticipated that, like us, respondents would have connections to multiple countries but we were surprised at how many had connections to more than a few countries. This is a positive sign for the idea of cooperation and taking a shared response to shared problems.

Question 4: Which language(s) do you speak? (Not just fluent but simple communication)



Every one of our participants could speak English, at least suitable for simple communication, although just 1 of 16 had an actual connection to the UK. This means 93% of our participants are bilingual to some extent. However, as the language of our survey was English, this may have limited contributions to English speakers. For future research, we could translate the survey to get more responses from non-English speakers. What was really interesting was the number of people who could speak four, five or even up to seven languages! 10 of the 16 participants speak more than two languages.

Question 5: Do you think knowing multiple languages promotes regional cooperation? (Yes/No)



We were interested to see whether there could be a link between multilingualism and increased regional cooperation. 100% of respondents believed knowing multiple languages aids regional cooperation. Often projects focus on the topic or context of cooperation but this result suggests the medium and language of communication could also be interesting to explore.

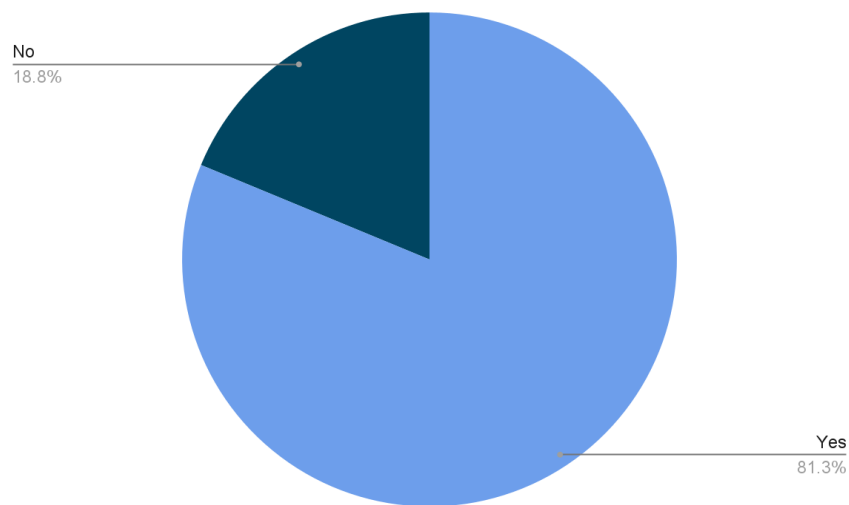
Question 6: How do you feel about the Baltic Sea?

Multiple respondents said they saw the Baltic Sea as a home. This was due to being born there, their family living there, or seeing it as a 'home from home'. Overall, respondents used very positive language, saying they loved the Baltic Sea and that it was one of the best places to live in the world. Some felt connected to its nature and climate (despite 'mediocre temperatures') and felt a connection to others on its shores.

However, there were some respondents that didn't feel such a close relation to the Baltic Sea. For example, one said they felt more connected to the North Sea, although working in the region had built some kind of link. This was a minority viewpoint but is important to note when trying to encourage cooperation.

A positive theme in the responses was a sense of unity. Multiple respondents said we needed to work together, especially as everyone's actions have a shared impact on the Baltic Sea.

Question 7: Do you think there is a feeling of cooperation in this area?



This question gave us a more empirical insight into the answers of Question 7. It highlights the positive result that the large majority of respondents believe there is a feeling of cooperation in the Baltic Sea Region. However, it also shows that some don't feel this. This could be linked to whether they feel connected to the region or other factors.

Question 8: What are things or areas relating to regional cooperation you'd like to see changes in?

Overall, respondents believed greater communication would help people to understand the need for cooperation. They said that the public often doesn't know what is being done so they don't care. Furthermore, some respondents suggested there should be greater links between local communities and institutions, including schools and higher education institutions. Youth participation is seen as key to building cooperation and solving collective problems; this is positive for BSYD and our project!

There was also a common sense that competition damages attempts at cooperation. Protectionism and competition between organisations or states was viewed negatively as it goes against the need for everyone to come together to solve collective problems. Also, it was expressed that cooperation should not be solely for economic benefit.

Another theme of the results was the idea of exchange. This was primarily concerning promoting youth exchanges, especially for rural groups and low-income demographics. However, there were also suggestions to improve travel links and knowledge exchanges to facilitate cooperation.

Question 9: Can you think of a channel or setting where cooperation could take place?

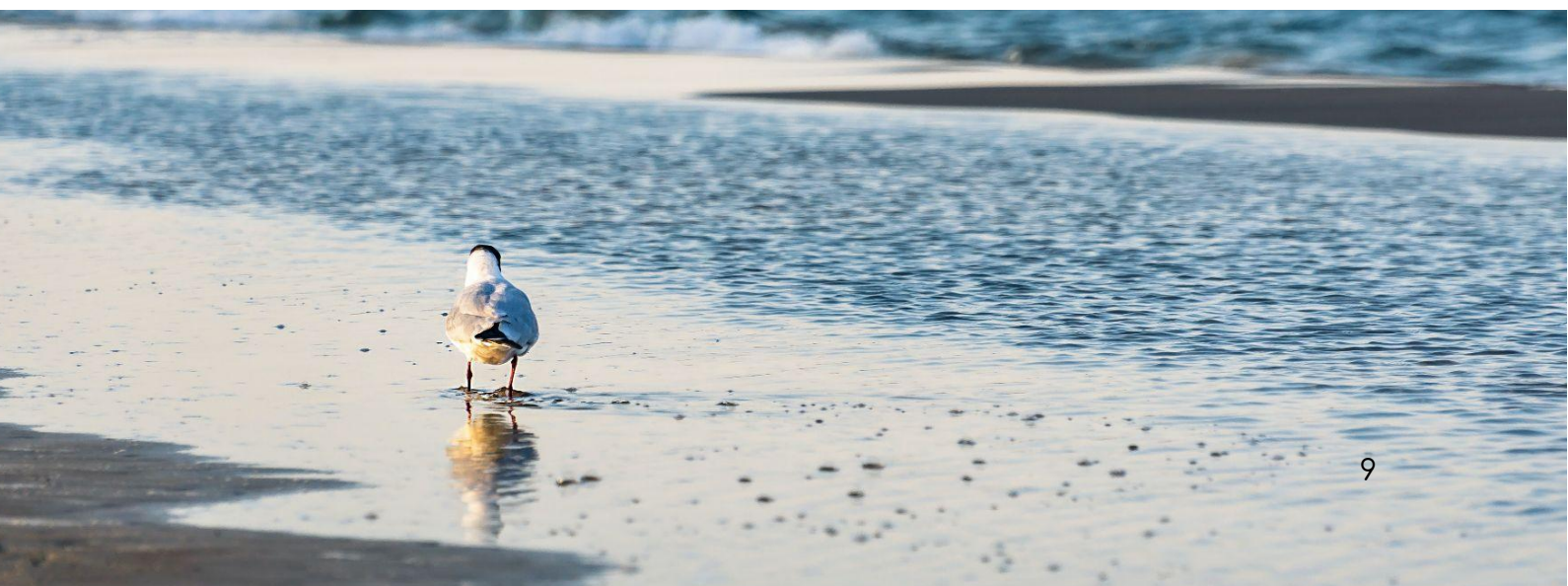
This question was intentionally very open and allowed respondents to suggest modes of communication as well as problems cooperation could address. Many responses recognised the complexity of organising cooperation across the geographic scale of the Baltic Sea Region. Some suggested there were additional organisational methods needed to address this. One respondent suggested a 'level' was needed between sub-national, national, and European cooperation. Many respondents suggested online modes of communication (including social media) were key, although visiting other countries is important for cultural understanding. However, others suggested we just needed to use existing institutions and networks better.

Multiple respondents also saw educational institutions, like universities and schools, as key to fostering cooperation. This would link to some of the answers in Question 8 which suggested targeting youth.

Question 10: Can you think of a saying/proverb in your language to describe the Baltic Sea?

We were very inspired by some of the beautiful responses to this question. It was interesting to think about how a connection to the Baltic Sea could have been passed down through language. Below is a selection of some of the responses:

- Küstenkind - literally 'coast child' in German
- Wasser in den Adern und den Wind um beide Ohren - 'Water in the veins and the wind around one's head/ears' in German
- žmonių kalbos kaip marių bangos - 'Peoples languages are just like the Seas waves' in Lithuanian
- Baltija - 'Baltic' in Latvian
- (From Polish) 'On St. Gregory day [12 March] winter goes to sea'



Looking Forward - Actions and Projects:

We were inspired by the responses to our survey and decided to develop individual suggestions for actions and projects that 'look forward' to how we could promote regional cooperation in the Baltic Sea Region. These projects also relate closely to the three subtopics of CBSS' priority of Regional Identity: culture, higher education, and youth. Here are our three ideas!



Project 1: Kerätä - Lilybell Evergreen

Inspiration from the Survey:

One of the results of the survey that I found most inspiring was how optimistic many respondents were. Although there are problems in the Baltic Sea Region, there was a shared sense of the potential for change and that this should be achieved together. However, multiple respondents noted that cooperative efforts needed a wider reach and that it was hard to know what was already being done in the region. I saw addressing this lack of awareness and scale as key to building a greater sense of unity and regional cooperation.

My Project Proposal:

My proposed project is a 'hub' website that gathers and promotes cooperative initiatives in the Baltic Sea Region. I named this project 'Kerätä', meaning gather or collect in Finnish, to symbolise gathering resources but also gathering together to make change. I used Finnish as I am currently learning it as I am working in Helsinki in Summer 2022.

Kerätä would begin as a gathering point for projects being carried out by NGOs, national governments, and the EU. A blog section could detail overarching projects and initiatives that citizens can't ordinarily participate in but may wish to learn about; for example, those of the EU and EUSBSR, as well as organisations like CBSS.

However, a key function of the platform would be to promote ways the public can get involved. For example, if organisations were hosting a webinar or wanted public participation (e.g. survey, citizen assembly). This could extend the reach of projects by providing the public with one location to look for them instead of having to follow each organisation's projects separately. Also, it could publicise university events and lectures (physical and recorded) about cooperation.

These projects and events could be displayed on a calendar page but also on a map to highlight cooperation around the whole Baltic Sea Region. Filters could be used to see both physical and online events and projects, or just one form. This would be very useful if someone was looking for a physical event to attend or for someone who required online events due to personal circumstances (e.g. lack of resources) or as they live in a remote location. Further filters could include the subject matter of the cooperation, for example the environment, security, youth, education, migrant communities, minority communities, and so on.

Beyond the Baltic Sea Region, this would also be a valuable educational resource for students of all subjects. As a student in the United Kingdom, it can be difficult to find out about what is happening in another region. This hub would be an invaluable way for students around the world to learn more about the Baltic Sea Region which could also help to foster interest in studying or working in the region.

Extensions for my Project:

There are a number of ways this project could be extended. Firstly, it could be opened to submissions from the public which would be reviewed to ensure they were related to cooperation. For example, if someone wanted to add a series of beach clean-ups they are doing along the shores of the Baltic Sea. Another example is if an artist was hosting an exhibition related to cooperation between countries or multi-cultural identity. This would be a great way to publicise smaller initiatives and events to a wider audience.

Another way the website could be expanded is to add a historical archive page which could highlight previous historical events and projects related to cooperation. This could be shown in both a timeline and interactive map to provide an accessible education resource. Combining teaching about the past with gathering projects that will help the future would be a great way to make learners active and make sure those who are active have knowledge. This would be an opportunity to connect looking back and looking forward.

Another great extension to the project would be to make all of its resources available in all of the languages of the Baltic Sea Region, including those of indigenous groups like the Sámi. It could also be even more accessible if it was available in some of the most common languages of migrants to the region as this could help them learn and build their own sense of Baltic Sea identity.

Summary:

I believe Kerätä would enhance regional cooperation and the sense of a shared regional identity through raising awareness of existing projects and events. Although people may want to get involved, it can be very difficult and time-consuming to find information from many different sources. A hub which uses multiple display methods (calendar, map etc) and languages could make cooperation accessible for a wider audience.

Furthermore, I believe this would be a great connecting resource: between history and present, citizens and migrants, learners and 'doers', and across different themes of cooperation (environmental, youth etc), as well as being inclusive of minority and migrant communities. Blending sub-themes and demographics enables greater cooperation and recognition of diverse interests within the Baltic Sea Region. Mixing 'official' projects (of governments, NGOs, universities, and the EU) with 'unofficial' projects (of the public or smaller communities) is the future of creating change across societies and regions.

As a project, Kerätä would address the real, logistical problem of a lack of awareness about existing cooperative projects and ways to get involved. It can also become a wider hub that connects educational resources of historical cooperation and active ways to impact on the future. Through this, visitors could gain a sense of regional cooperation based on knowledge and ways to get involved, ultimately acting as a network facilitator which gathers resources and people to make change.

Next Steps:

- Develop clear criteria for what is meant by 'regional cooperation' to fairly and objectively assess whether an event or project relates to the aims of this project.
- Collect an initial sample of organisations to launch the project. These should be 'official' sources (governments, NGOs, and leading universities). Once working, the sources could be expanded.
- Find others to collaborate with that have the technical skills to help build the website and its features.
- Explore technical ways to automate gathering events and projects from chosen organisations' websites. This would make gathering content quicker and easier.



Project 2: Baltic Digital Film Festival - Dayana Atazhanova

Our group discussion made it clear that cooperation between the youth of Baltic Sea Region is important and needed. The survey results helped us reach more Baltic youth like us, and gain insight into their opinions on cooperation and regional identity.

I thought about what interested me in cooperation between the Baltic states and what would also make the youth that we questioned interested. For me, youth cooperation works best when it is natural, which combines being educational and fun. I developed this opinion from my previous Erasmus and Erasmus+ experiences; important topics were discussed and projects were implemented in a very simple way. This felt like you were having fun talking with your peers from across the world, while actually learning the best lessons of your life about the event's specific topic but also about cross-cultural communication.

In my opinion, the best way of perceiving new information is one that is done "naturally". There is scientific support and explanation of this phenomena. Information is absorbed into the subconscious while you don't even notice that you are learning. As it is widely known, memory and information stored in our subconscious mind stays for much longer than in our conscious mind. Most of the time, information that is stored in our subconscious stays there permanently. So for me, combining entertainment with education is the key for unlimited learning opportunities.

Therefore I decided that I would work on something that would have both qualities: educational and fun. I came up with the idea of a digital film festival with movies from the Baltic countries, for the Baltic audience.

Personally, I am a huge fan of international film festivals. I have visited such festivals in different countries and it's always an unforgettable experience. As COVID-19 currently decides how we act, I have noticed that many festivals switched to online instead of being cancelled completely. I have visited one virtually, and it's been awesome; I think it's a great way to still be present (while being safe) and participate regardless of the pandemic.

I did some research and was pleasantly surprised that Baltic film festivals already exist in several countries. Here is a list of them:

- [BIFF - Baltic Independent Film Festival](#) in Poland
- [Baltic Pearl](#) in Latvia
- [Blue Sea Film Festival](#) in Finland
- [International Baltic Herring Short Film Competition](#) in Finland, only open for filmmakers in Baltic Sea countries
- [Baltic Film weekend](#) in the Netherlands
- [Tallinn Black Nights Film Festival's Baltic Competition](#) in Estonia

The advantage of film festivals is that you have a great time but also learn more about the country/culture and understand topics deeper, especially if the festival has a specific theme. Possible cooperation partners are embassies of the Baltic states as I have noticed that embassies usually take part in such digital film festivals by providing support and films.

My educational background in event management and previous volunteering at film festivals could aid with implementing this idea. I would love to continue working on this with like-minded people and supporting parties. The arts and entertainment industries are blooming in the Baltics and we could use this to give back to Baltic society.

Here is a design I made that could be used as a logo of the film festival on the web, social media and other digital and non-digital platforms:



Blue represents the Baltic Sea and white represents the waves, or as we call it in Russia, “foam of the waves”.

Project 3: Baltica - Khira Strauß

Introduction and Inspiration from the survey

81.3% of our participants believed that there is cooperation in the Baltic Sea area. Many wanted to further strengthen this cooperation with a strong focus on youth and their ideas. There is a need for less competition and more togetherness, especially in the educational and economic sectors. This collaboration needs to be the norm and the first thing that comes to mind when thinking of the Baltic Sea Region.

There are still many existing stereotypes towards people from elsewhere – be it another continent or just a few countries away. The best way to get rid of stereotypes is to have contact with other people from other countries. This might not always be the easiest way but it is the only way to build a sustainable and prosperous future. Today's society moves, step by step, further away from national thinking towards a future we shape together. There are problems that go beyond what one single nation could overcome. A prominent example would be climate change. This is why I thought about another way of approaching the topic.

Baltica

“Baltica” is the geological term for what has become the North of the Baltic Sea region. I've chosen this name to describe a fictional country consisting of the catchment area of the Baltic Sea. This area has a population of 85 million people who all grew up with a similar feeling around the Sea - as our survey showed - that is in the middle of this beautiful region. Baltica consists of many independent cultural communities, which govern themselves independently. When considering national campaigns, there are concrete measures taken in each country for national problems, such as employability and higher education. Baltica would be no exception.



To include this in our way to see the area we would set the strategy of the SCORE-Identity in place.

SCORE Identity

<i>Supported</i>	Build a stronger economic and innovative force inside of Europe and use strong intra-regional trade to support young people's ideas for future generations.
<i>Cooperated</i>	Get intra-regional cooperation for new ideas and innovations into the mainstream.
<i>Overcoming</i>	Decrease cultural barriers while increasing regional identity and transcultural collaboration.
<i>Regional</i>	To create a regional identity regardless of national borders; not replacing countries but a new way of perceiving the area.
<i>Engaged</i>	Use existing platforms to connect young people and get them engaged (e.g. BSYD, BSYF) or build new platforms e.g. "Kerätö".

There are many cases of young people leaving the area – myself included. I moved to the West of Germany, because I feared I would not have the same opportunities I could have somewhere else. I am not the only one and I am now re-learning to love the region again. To keep young people in the area, there is a need for educational opportunities but also an economically promising and technically advanced business world. With my project, I want to build a network for the young people in the area and change the way of thinking about the area to help each other in education and economy.

The Baltica-Programme

In a perfect world, every one of us could work in a field we enjoy and work on something we are good at. Baltica's agenda would be to find young talents for science, education and business in their early years. Also, to support young people with innovative ideas regardless of their origin and cultural background.

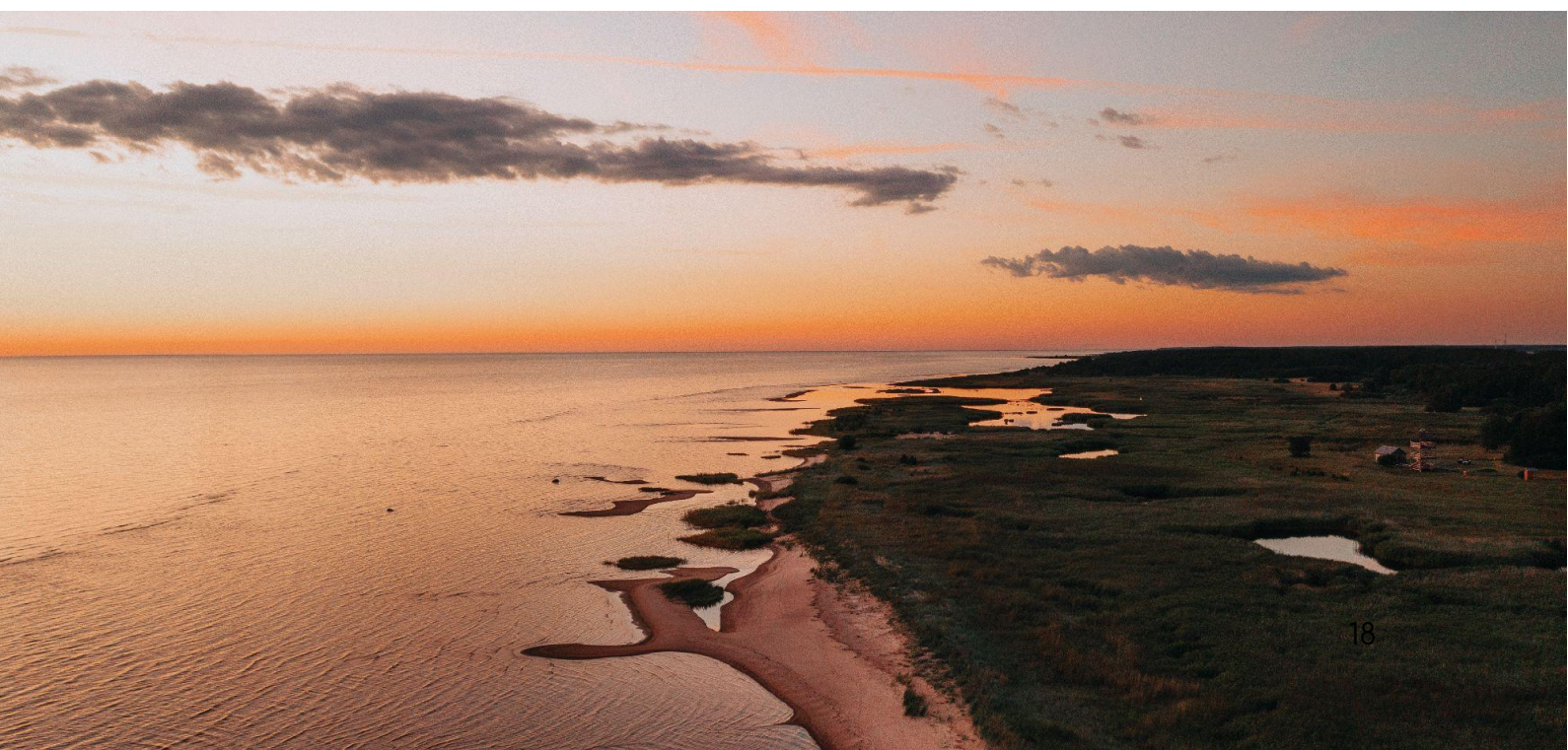
A good example of my inspiration for this project is the BELT project. The Baltic Entrepreneurship Laboratories created joint initiatives for young people and their Start-Up ideas between 2015 and 2018 in the Central

Baltic Region. Many new and innovative start-ups emerged from this project, showing diversity in the region. Inspired by this, the Baltica-Programme would gather participants once every two years in person, and other contacts could join via Internet platforms to avoid unnecessary travel. The focus would be to bring collaborative procedures in the Baltica Region into mainstream thinking in order to improve science and innovation. We would use existing structures of university networks and youth campaigning to create a network of young minds and ideas.

Summary

With my project, I want to challenge the way people think of the region and replace it with something new. Baltica is grounded in the common history of all the nations. If we work together, especially as young people in the region, we can change the future.

This paper will reach people who are already highly engaged in the problems we have spoken about. We have to keep up this work to further widen and normalise engaging young people. To build a stronger community, we need to use existing intra-regional structures and further build macro-national trade. We need to join forces and promote future economic changes to young people, even in rural areas. Our focus should not be on economic benefit, instead we need to focus on innovation, education and possibilities. We need to promote more intercultural cooperation to decrease stereotypes between communities. This increases the possibility to learn from each other's different ways of thinking and problem solving. We are different in many ways, but what should not be forgotten are all the things we have in common. The future starts with us – it starts with the youth.



Conclusion

We were greatly inspired by the work of CBSS and the lectures of regional experts. This encouraged us to think big when collaborating on our own cross-cultural project. We wanted to ensure our project was rooted in the perspectives of people around the Baltic Sea Region. Gathering a variety of opinions and experiences helped us to create project proposals that are relevant and would, hopefully, have a real impact on the region and its people.

Throughout working on this project it has been beautiful to see how deeply many people believe in the positive forces of cooperation and collaboration. No matter the problem, we were inspired by the widespread sense that we are better off approaching it together. This was a philosophy that we wove through our individual project ideas. Equally, our research into multilingualism was a reminder to celebrate our differences as much as our similarities. Approaches to making future change must involve a diversity of people and of thinking. We hope that our paper has helped to illustrate the complexities of regional cooperation, as well as propose some potential routes to increasing collaboration.

Aside from thanking each other for being wonderful human beings to work alongside, we would also like to thank those who have supported our project. This includes the CBSS team, especially our mentor Aline Mayr and Franziska Seufert. It also includes those who took our survey and inspired us. Additionally, we would like to thank the regional experts who increased our awareness and inspired the making of this paper. It has been a fantastic, positive project to be part of!

Østersøen

Baltijas jūra

Läänemeri

Itämeri

Ostsee

Eystrasaltshaf

Baltic Sea

Baltijos jūra

Det Baltiske hav

Morze Bałtyckie

Балтийское море

Östersjön

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