

# **The South-East Baltic - A new Region of Co-operating Polish Provinces**

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Abstract: The paper presents some examples of Polish coastal provinces' co-operation initiatives and activities in the Baltic Sea region. The authors pay attention to those aspects of co-operation which have been taken by local municipalities and communities. In addition to initiatives taken within the wider context, a substantial number of actions engage a limited numbers of participants, differ in kind, status and size. All the initiatives constitute a significant input to Baltic integration.

## **Introduction**

The political changes which took place in Europe at the beginning of the 1990s created favourable conditions for development of the economic and intellectual potential of all states in the Baltic region. Baltic co-operation may become a key link in integration processes in Europe.

Previous, current and planned co-operation activities have involved all the states in the Baltic Sea region. The dynamic developments taking place in Baltic Europe can be perceived as the most characteristic, reflecting the newly established formal and informal structures for integration and co-operation. However, it must be emphasised that institutionalised co-operation within the region is only a superstructure facilitating delimitation of an area comprising state bodies. Next in line there are regions, local communities and their projects which are the main entities of Baltic co-operation and the principal beneficiaries.

Baltic countries in Europe have a long, common history and are presently undergoing a revival of their identity. The history of these countries features both examples of co-operation and of conflict. The civilisation and cultural element consolidating Baltic European society are maritime traditions which establish specific values, as for centuries the sea brought people closer together, especially tradesmen and sailors, consolidating their awareness of a common fate and interest, teaching mutual respect for language, cultural and religious differences. A widespread and appropriately high level of knowledge about each other is a condition for the development of good co-operation. In the previous geopolitical environment in the region this was not possible. Certain difficulties in communication continue to pose a barrier. On the other hand there are certain similarities between some countries. Furthermore, the English language is used as an international language in these countries.

The central location of Poland in the southern strip of the Baltic and our people's common approval of integration with the European Union predestines us, in a sense, to initiate and

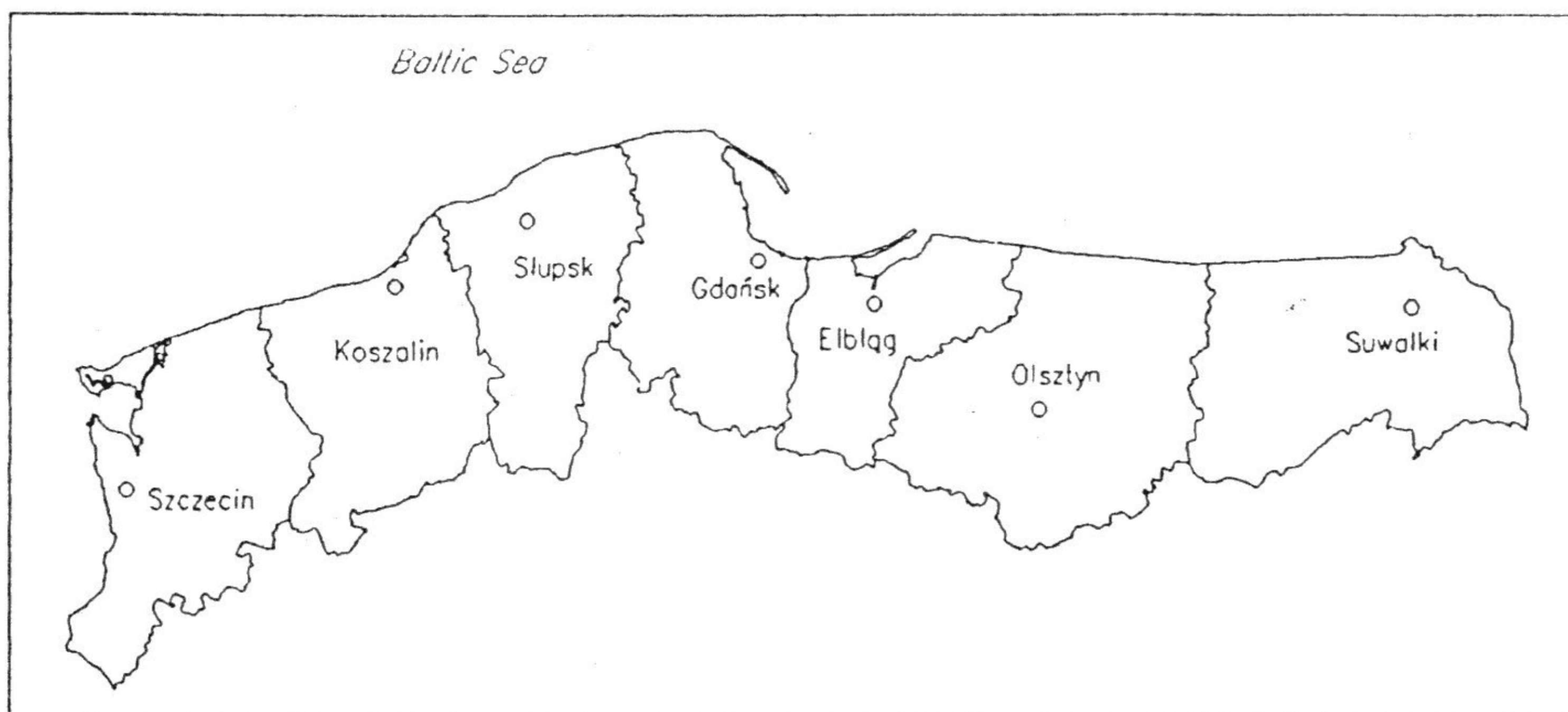
actively participate in various forms of international co-operation in the Baltic region to enhance integration.

## Baltic links of Polish maritime regions

Most of the pan-Baltic contacts established are of a regional character (rather than a national one) with local authorities in coastal regions playing a significant role.

1. Among the maritime provinces in Poland Szczecin maintains the most animated international co-operation (see Figure 1). Local authorities in the region maintain relations with 48 communities round the Baltic basin, among them 33 German towns and communities, six Swedish towns and communities, three Danish towns and communities, two in Latvia and one in Lithuania. The principal fields of co-operation include tourism, culture, education, public transport, health care, economic development and protection of the environment. Foreign co-operation of the state administration of the Szczecin province includes 39 agreements and understandings on co-operation, 30 of which concern Baltic states. Because of the location of the province, contacts focus on Germany but also include Denmark, Southwest Skania, Lithuania and the Kaliningrad district.

Figure 1. The northern provinces of Poland



One of the results of co-operation with Germany, in particular in scope of spatial development in the border region, is the International Park in the Lower Oder Valley. Communities express their opinions on local plans for land use and projects in the border area. This concerns subterranean fresh water resources which criss-cross the border line. The Szczecin province features 21 border crossings (all types). Ferry connections join Świnoujście and Copenhagen, Ystad, Malmö and, in season, Rönne. There are air connections from Goleniow, which lies close to Szczecin, to Copenhagen. In 1995 the Euroregion *Pomerania* was established comprising: on the Polish side 45 communities from three provinces, mainly however from Szczecin province, on the German side six counties and three independent towns. As late as the beginning of

1998, the Community Union of Skania (association of local authorities), one of the most economically and culturally animated regions in Sweden, joined Pomerania, giving it its Polish-German-Swedish tri-dimensional character. The main area of life and work of its inhabitants covers the maritime economy, tourism and agriculture. All these areas will remain the domains of cross-border co-operation.

2. The foreign contacts of Koszalin province are decidedly more moderate in comparison with other coastal provinces in Poland. Local authorities in this province signed an agreement on co-operation with Skania and the Governor of Koszalin signed one with the Kaliningrad District and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern. These agreements concern economic and cultural co-operation.
3. Local authorities of Słupsk province and the province governor co-operate with six partners in Sweden and five in Denmark. The fields of co-operation include agriculture, protection of the natural environment, education and culture as well as manufacturing industries. The province's most animated relations have been maintained since 1990 with the province of Bornholm in Denmark. In 1993 an agreement on co-operation was concluded between the town of Słupsk and Bornholm County which covers two agreed projects on environmental protection and housing. The agreement and understanding of 1994 between the Słupsk and Bornholm provinces (signed in Rönne) covers the following Heds:
  - protection of the natural environment and power resources;
  - agriculture and fishing;
  - building;
  - an inter-regional communication network:
  - infrastructure;
  - development of tourism;
  - education and cultural exchange;
  - assistance in economic initiatives.

This formal co-operation framework gave grounds for regular working meetings of regional and local administration staff and non-governmental institutions and company employees. For example over 350 public administrators from the province of Słupsk participated in several specialist training courses. One of the results of this was the pilot bio-refinery plant built in Czarna Dabrowka near Słupsk, realised through co-operation between the Bioraf Foundation on Bornholm and Słupsk province.

A presentation of economic and cultural achievements took place during the *Days of Bornholm* and *Days of Słupsk* events organised in Słupsk in 1992 and on Bornholm in 1994. A tangible result of these meetings was a new water treatment plant built thanks to Danish resources in a fish processing plant in Ustka. Within the framework of cross-border co-operation with Denmark, the construction of a yacht marina in Leba is under-

way, as is an information programme on tourism and economy INFOTUR-BIN, waste management in the Słupsk region and upgrading of a boiler plant in Ustka. The animator of co-operation between Bornholm and the Słupsk province was the Mayor of Bornholm County, Mr Knud Andersen. In 1996 he was awarded a medal from the Słupsk province authorities for his contribution to integration.

Słupsk province also maintains intense relations with the Swedish province Kronoberg. These focus mainly on environmental protection, privatisation, tourism and spatial planning. The SALABITS program, initiated in 1990, gave excellent grounds for using the experience of a local authority with traditions and achievements in Sweden here in Polish communities. The effect of the programme has been to initiate co-operation between several communities.

Since 1987 the town of Słupsk has been co-operating with the town of Vantaa in Finland, particularly in the fields of health care, welfare services, building, schools, culture and sport.

4. Another province, Gdansk, signed its first co-operative agreement in 1990 with the County of Storström in Denmark. The region actively participated in establishing the Agency for Gdansk-Pomeranian Development. Presently, Baltic co-operation includes agreements with 13 communities and towns in Denmark, 12 with Sweden, four with the Kaliningrad district and one with Lithuania.

In the Baltic part of Germany Gdansk maintains tight relations with Schleswig-Holstein, the independent Hanseatic town of Bremen and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern. Kiel provided assistance in establishing the Gdansk Economic Chamber. Thanks to the activity of the Bremen Commercial Bureau many companies have begun international co-operation. Contacts have been maintained relating to environmental protection, youth exchange programmes and co-operation among museums, schools and self-governing bodies.

The city of Gdansk is an important partner in international co-operation and the integration of Poland with Baltic Europe. In Gdansk, the Union of Baltic Cities, established in 1991, has its seat in the Green Gate. The secretariat of VASAB 2010 has also been located there since 1996 as has the Baltic Bureau for Tourism Co-operation. The Gdansk Economic Chamber belongs to the Baltic Sea Chamber of Commerce Association (BCCA), the port of Gdansk belongs to the Baltic Ports Organisation and Gdansk University co-operates with the Baltic University at Uppsala in Sweden. These few examples indicate that the initiatives in Gdansk, undertaken by the city and region in many fields (e.g. economy, science, culture, society and communication) constitute a significant input to Baltic integration, and that Gdansk today is an open, European Baltic city.

5. The Polish province stretching furthest east on the Polish coast is the Elbląg province. Its geographical location has affected the direction and types of cross-border co-

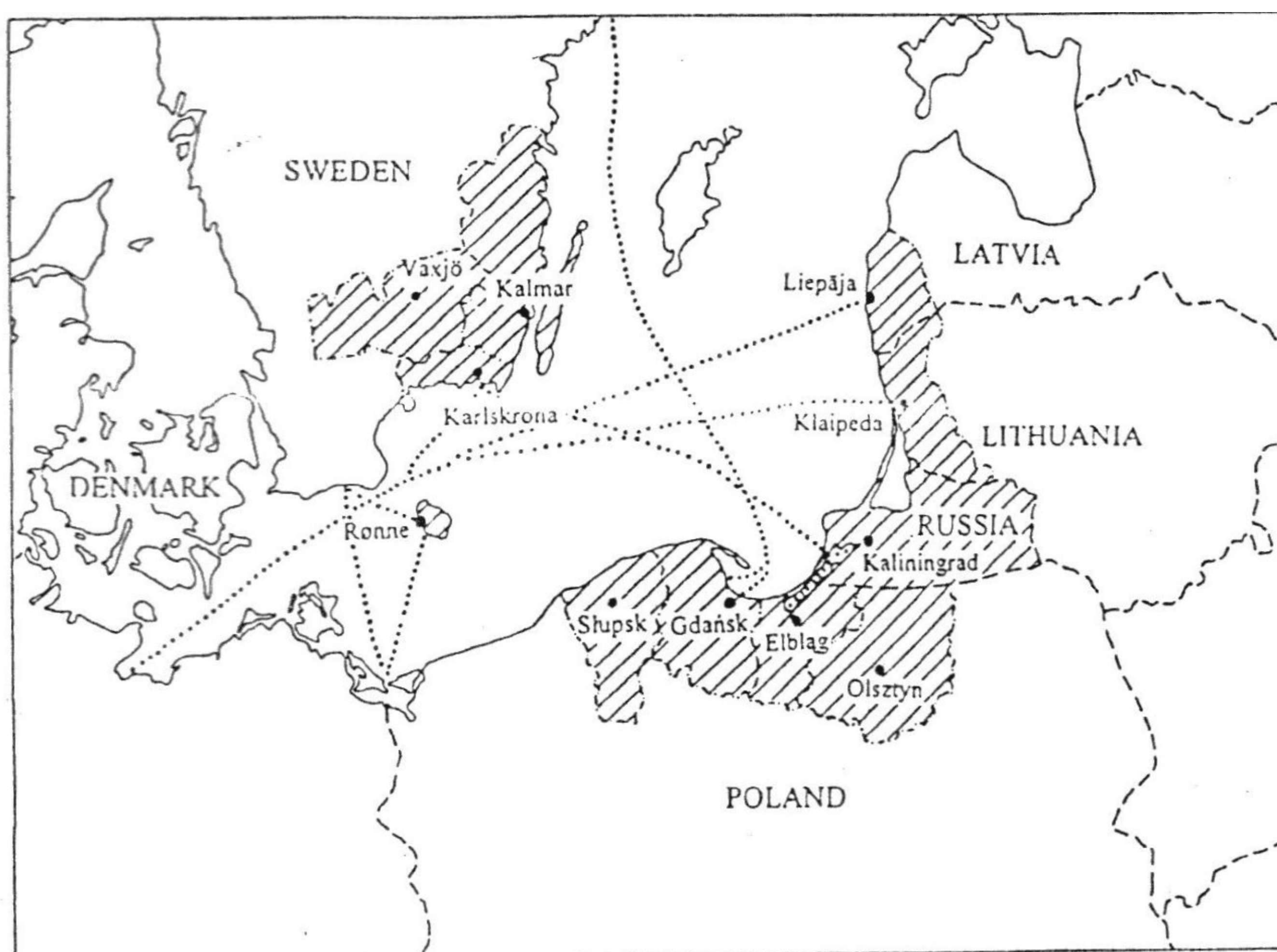


operation of this province. Four agreements signed with the Kaliningrad district refer to border crossings and co-operation over the scope of agriculture, and the food processing industry. Six agreements have been signed with Sweden, mainly covering the local governments of Blekinge, Karlskrona and Ronneby concerning environmental protection, local democracy, economic promotion, communication, tourism education and culture. Elblag province has also signed one agreement with Denmark and one with Latvia.

## The Baltic Euroregion as a new area of co-operation in the Baltic Sea region

The authorities of Elblag province initiated the establishment of the new Baltic Euroregion on 22 February 1998 (see Figure 2). Representatives of local governments of six countries - Denmark (Bornholm), Sweden (Kalmar, Kronoberg, Blekinge), Lithuania (Klaipeda), Latvia (Liepaja) and Russia (Kaliningrad district, Kaliningrad, Baltijsk) - and four northern Polish provinces (Słupsk, Gdansk, Elblag and Olsztyn) decided to develop closer economic and cultural ties. This Euroregion will favour equalised adjustments in the living standards of Baltic communities by taking advantage of European Union aid.

Figure 2. The Baltic Euroregion



The Euroregion, called by some the *Small European Union round the Baltic*, will facilitate contacts between people, will promote learning about the past and contemporary history of the countries involved, will draw young people together and help erase historical prejudices. The proposed spheres of co-operation include assistance in economic development and trade, development of a technical infrastructure, management of border

regions, improvement of environmental conditions, waste management and co-operation in the fields of culture, science and education. The establishment of the Baltic Euroregion formalises existing contacts between the local authorities and municipalities in the area. By giving this co-operation a formalised and institutional dimension the hope is to spread the competencies of each local authority and to create a friendly environment for reaching their goals.

The Baltic option is one strand of Polish foreign policy, and a very important one if national welfare is taken into consideration. It is not only the local authorities but also local businessmen who rely on the inspiring influence of Baltic co-operation for the economic development of the region. Polish ports also see the possibility of development in areas such as additional cargo and passenger ferry lines.

Co-operation in the Euroregion is to be governed by the principles and values confirmed in the program VASAB 2010:

1. to promote sustainable economic development with due consideration for the environment;
2. to lessen spatial disharmony, discrepancies between regions (economic, social, environmental) through the equal use of space and interregional solidarity;
3. to enable regional participation in the development of the whole country, by undertaking decisions at the national level based on the individual features of their identity - variety, democracy, subsidiarity;
4. to provide opportunities for inhabitants to choose their place of residence, profession and activity.

The first meeting of the Euroregion Council (on 23 February 1998) passed a resolution to establish three working groups for:

- spatial planning;
- social welfare, culture, sport, science and education;
- ecology and environmental protection.

On 6 April 1998, during a meeting in Gdynia of spatial planners from the Euroregion, the first group started to work.

## Other examples of co-operative activities in the South-East Baltic

Representatives of regional authorities, chambers of commerce, cultural institutions and non-governmental youth organisations from all the coastal provinces in Poland have taken an active part in the Baltic Sea States Subregional Conference, organised thanks to the initiative of the Council of the Baltic States. Another example of endeavours is the establishment in Kotka, in 1996, of the Baltic Sea Commission to regenerate the Baltic Sea,

enhance proper economic development, relevant education, decentralisation and the procurement of financial means to develop the region.

Seven cities in the Polish coastal provinces (Elblag, Gdansk, Sopot, Gdynia, Leba, Szczecin and Świnoujście) are actively engaged in the work of the Union of Baltic Cities and its committees. Their activity aims to promote ecological, cultural and social benefits for the whole of society in the region of the Baltic Sea and especially the 77 cities of the Union.

Representatives of Polish institutions and organisations are active members co-operating with such Baltic organisations as the Baltic Sea Chamber of Commerce Association, Baltic Ports Organisation, Baltic Sea Alliance, Baltic Sea Tourism Commission, Baltic University Programme Helcom, Baltic Institute, Association of Baltic National Parks, Baltic Environmental Education network, Ars Baltica, Social Hansa, the Conference of Baltic University Rectors and the Association of Museums and Castles around the Baltic Sea.

Special attention should be paid to the VASAB 2010. Thanks to these programmes the region around the Baltic has an opportunity to become better integrated in Europe and to become an area with a healthy natural environment and balanced development. The achievement of a synergy effect is also intended by harmonising spatial development policies realised in the countries round the Baltic Sea.

The principal elements of development in VASAB 2010 take into consideration Polish interests associated with developing:

- A system of attractive and competitive towns which take advantage of their coastal location. An important role is to be played by Tri-city as Europol and Szczecin as a bridging city affected by Berlin, with the towns of Koszalin, Słupsk, Elbląg and Olsztyn - as important centres linked in the Baltic network;
- A multimedial transport centres network crowning the European A-1 links and TER links to Via Hanseatica and the A-3 in maritime co-operation, promoting pro-ecological transport (ferries and railways);
- The Green Baltic Ring incorporating the complex of Polish Green Lungs in Europe, a system of ecologically valuable areas. It creates an opportunity to practice yachting, cycling, water sports and other forms of environmental tourism and agritourism;
- Cross-border co-operation contributing to improvements in economic and social integrity. The development of the Pomerania and Baltic Euroregions should prove useful for this purpose.

Recently, a financial mechanism to encourage partners from the area of the Baltic Sea to undertake intensive co-operation as part of INTERREG IIC (a European Union programme for transnational co-operation on spatial planning) has been developed. During the conference in Karlskrona in December 1997 five projects from northern Poland were presented, along with a further 16 in which Poland had participated.

## Conclusions

The accession of Sweden and Finland to the European Union completely changed the spatial configuration of the European Union. The Baltic may constitute a way for Poland to become part of a united Europe. As of today, VASAB 2010 ensures the harmonisation of spatial development and close co-operation within the framework of specific projects among several European Union states.

The 21st century in Europe will be a Europe of regions. The transformation of the political and economic image of Baltic Europe will no doubt affect integration processes in Europe, to enhance or even alter its course. The future of Baltic Europe depends on many factors. Every region has individual characteristics, dominant traditions, ways of thinking and acting.

The evolving *Baltic identity* stems from the fact that, although the various states are aiming at differentiated targets, for all of them the route lies through a regional *commonwealth*. This is emphasised in all Baltic states and should constitute a point of departure for further decisions and actions. Decisions on selection of partners for co-operation should not derive solely from geographical proximity but above all from convictions regarding the significance and possibilities of development of the area.

A few years ago, Baltic Europe was perceived only as a concept, a vision for the far future. Facts have quickly followed the vision. Presently, the term refers to numerous activities of varying importance and to interactions and relations already underway in the area. Further development of the area depends on many factors, among them economic transformation in Poland and the Baltic Republics, as well as on whether the developed Baltic countries will be capable of providing the necessary assistance in the field of economy, finance and technology to neighbouring countries in order to eliminate the existing economic and social gaps between different Baltic sub-regions.

Closer co-operation by Poland with its Baltic partners may significantly affect the shape and fate of the Baltic *community*, which for Poland is a scheduled challenge.



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