The Baltic Sea environment and the European Union: Analysis of governance barriers

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ABSTRACT

The EU enlargement brought the Baltic Sea into the sphere of EU environmental policymaking, making the sea, with the exception of Russia, an EU inland sea. Yet, the state of the Baltic Sea environment is deteriorating at an alarming pace. This paper describes the evolution of the EU governance of the Baltic Sea environment, focussing on governance barriers. The findings demonstrate how the choice of analytical lens influences the construction of governance barriers and the respective intervention strategies. Such understanding can help policy practitioners in their search for successful measures to improve the governance situation in the Baltic Sea region.

1. Introduction

By the early 2000s, the main features of the governing system of the Baltic Sea environment seemed to be in place, built up as a multi-level system [1,2]. The Helsinki Commission (HELCOM), established in the late 1970s to govern the Helsinki Convention on the Protection of the Marine Environment of the Baltic Sea Area, was a pioneering institution but since 2004 all coastal states except Russia are members of the European Union and thus tied by the EU regulation. Traditionally, countries such as Sweden, Finland, Denmark and Germany are regarded as environmental forerunners, whereas the former Soviet block is considered to lag behind (see Fig. 1 for the map of the catchment). But the situation has somewhat changed during recent years as a result of the EU-induced policy harmonisation [3,4].

The Baltic Sea is particularly sensitive to pollution because it is fairly shallow, has poor water exchange with the North Sea via the Danish Straits and some parts of it are covered by ice in wintertime. Currently, eutrophication is considered the most serious environmental problem; biodiversity decline, risks originating from maritime activities and hazardous substances are other major problems, as some studies indicate [5,6]. Human pressure on the marine environment from the large catchment area, which inhabits over 85 million people, is significant, especially via agriculture, urban wastewater and industry. Russia is a major polluter of the Baltic Sea even if it covers only two per cent of the drainage area [7].

Accordingly, there is a stark contrast between the formally full-fledged governance system and the actual state of the Baltic Sea

environment [4]. This contrast has been explained by poor implementation of international, regional and national norms [8] and, more fundamentally, by various social-ecological dimensions of the problematique [9,10]. These include e.g. the historical division of the Baltic Sea region into two competing ideological influence spheres during the Cold War, namely the state socialist countries in the eastern part of the region, and the western democracies, and the following differences in socio-economic and politico-administrative circumstances that still echo today [11]. The eastern enlargement of the EU played a dual role in alleviating these differences: on the one hand, it harmonised environmental regulation across the region, but on the other hand, the exclusion of Russia from the sphere of this regulation became a serious challenge. As noted by Koch [12], the region-building process in the Baltic Sea area has created new borders, which define the level of political participation of the states in the region.

This paper describes the evolution of the EU governance of the Baltic Sea environment, focussing on the barriers of governance. The barriers are studied by using an analytical framework that builds on the works of Biesbroek et al. [13] and Bovens and t'Hart [14]. The framework scrutinises governance through four lenses, as: 1) problem-solving, 2) competing values and interests, 3) institutional interaction, and 4) dealing with structural constraints. Each lens has its own underlying ontological and epistemological assumptions about governance. Looking at governance processes through the four lenses enables the study of complex governance arrangements and demonstrates how the choice of the analytical lens influences the construction of barriers and the respective intervention strategies [13 p. 1012].

Fig. 1. The catchment of the Baltic Sea. (Reprinted with permission from the Finnish Environment Institute SYKE and National Land Survey of Finland 2004).

The overall aim of the paper is to shed light on the challenges of marine governance in regional entities such as the Baltic Sea, a "fuzzy borderland" of the European Union [15] in which the European East and West come together. Such understanding may help policy practitioners in their search for successful measures to improve the governance situation. Moreover, the paper contributes to the analysis of the development of European marine (environmental) governance, which is highly relevant, as the EU has recently entered a new policy domain and introduced a number of new policies and regulations which aim to protect the sustainability of the European seas [16].

The empirical material consists of policy documents of the EU and regional institutions, further explicated in chapter 3.2., 64 interviews conducted in two research projects in 2009–2014,[2] and secondary literature. The analysis leans on a qualitative method, which can be labelled as theory-oriented thematic analysis, triangulating qualitatively from various sources of data. In qualitative research, the thematic method is often used to analyse and identify patterns – themes – within research data and thus works as a foundation providing detailed and complex analysis of the data [17]. In this paper, the thematic categories of the analysis were deduced from the analytical framework elaborated in the following part of this paper and the research material was coded by hand according to these categories.

After introducing the theoretical background and the analytical framework of the study, the paper outlines the governing system of the Baltic Sea environment, distinguishing between regional HELCOM cooperation and EU governance. This section functions as an empirical background for the analysis, the results of which are presented in the Section 4 by explicating the barriers of EU governance through the four analytical lenses. In the concluding part of the paper, the barriers and the prospects for their removal are discussed vis-à-vis the underlying philosophies of governance.

2. Analysing governance and its barriers

Since the 1980s, the term "governance" has become popular in academic disciplines from economics [19] to international relations [20]. In the field of political science, the term refers to the shift from

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[2] Interviews were conducted within projects PROBALT (Bonus+ programme/EU's 7th framework programme, 2008–2011) and Knowledge management for the Baltic Sea protection (grant no. 131901, Academy of Finland, 2010–2014). In the latter project, interviews were conducted solely by the author, whereas in the first project, interviews were conducted also by other members of the project, see [18]. Interviewees were officials, policymakers, scientists and NGO activists in Russia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Finland, Sweden, Germany, and the EU parliament and administration. Some of the interviews were about the Baltic Sea environmental governance in general, some of them about the role of the EU in particular.