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THE REGIONALITY OF THE NORDIC-BALTIC SIX: NAVIGATING BETWEEN BREXIT  
AND THE INCREASING RUSSIAN AGGRESSION

MA thesis

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## **Authorship Declaration**

I have prepared this thesis independently. All the views of other authors, as well as data from literary sources and elsewhere, have been cited.

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*Lara Löser, 15.05.2023*

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## Abstract

The thesis tackles the issue of regionalism from the perspective of regionality. Previously, there has been an "ontological disagreement over what constitutes a region" (Mansfield et al., 2010: 146) and how regions are scientifically analyzed. Therefore, the author adds a new way to the research puzzle of explaining the development and construction of a region as well as the norms and practices that accompany it (cp. Hopf, 1998: 192).

Using a constructivist approach and the theoretical framework by Ghica (2013), the author offers a multilevel explanation of the construction of one of the subregions in the European Union: The Nordic-Baltic Six.

The main findings consist of, first, the confirmation of a solid regional awareness among the six countries. Therefore, the research clarifies previously existing divisions in research. Second, the research determines policy areas where one can expect a coherent regional voice: *Foreign Affairs, Telecommunications, Internal Market and Consumer Affairs, Energy, Development, Institutional, Environment, Defense, and Security*. Third, the research determines the following policy areas where one can expect an incoherent regional voice: *Social Policy, Employment, and Enlargement*. Fourth, several country-specific tendencies and characteristics could be confirmed. For example, the research contradicts previous research by confirming that the Baltics are more coherent than the Nordics.

For developments after Brexit, the research confirmed the expected outcome by previous research that there was an increase in regional cohesiveness since 2019.

Besides the main findings, the research also offers other intriguing tendencies and characteristics of the region for future research. Furthermore, the research is the first study using the concept of regionality for the Nordic-Baltic Six, adding a glimpse of development after Brexit to the literature.

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## **List of abbreviations**

| <b>Abbreviations</b> | <b>Definition</b>  |
|----------------------|--|
| COREPER              | Committee of the Permanent Representatives of the Governments of the Member States to the European Union |
| Council of the       |  |
| EU                   | Council of the European Union  |
| DK                   | Denmark  |
| E3                   | The EU Three (France, Germany and Italy)   |
| EE                   | Estonia  |
| EU                   | European Union   |
| FI                   | Finland  |
| LT                   | Lithuania  |
| LV                   | Latvia   |
| NATO                 | The North Atlantic Treaty Organization   |
| NB6                  | Nordic-Baltic Six  |
| NB8                  | Nordic-Baltic Eight  |
| SE                   | Sweden   |
| UK                   | United Kingdom   |
| UN                   | The United Nations   |

## **Introduction**

*"Being together, and doing things together makes us stronger." (Interview 5)*

In times of change, one looks at one's allies and partners. As the quote above illustrates, togetherness and united cooperation have also become crucial within the European Union (EU) in currently turbulent times. Nevertheless, with the focus mainly on the significant EU region, "limited attention [has been] paid to subregions by the scholarly community" (Braun, 2021: 1). Nevertheless, to say it with the words by Vincent Van Gogh: "Great things are done by a series of small things brought together" (Vincent van Gogh...). In the author's eyes, those small things represent the considerable value of regions within the European Union.

Consequently, the research attempts to close the literature gap by focusing on one of those regions: The Nordic-Baltic Six (NB6). The latter consists of the following countries: Sweden (SE), Finland (FI), Denmark (DK), Estonia (EE), Latvia (LV), and Lithuania (LT). Unfortunately, there is a lack of research on the actual characteristics and tendencies of the region. Nevertheless, since 2019, "the relative importance of NB6 has increased in light of the withdrawal of the UK from the EU" (Kleinberga, 2019: 27). Additionally, with the current geopolitical situation of the subregion, having Russia as its neighbor, the author sees urgency in understanding the Nordic-Baltic Six and giving a more comprehensive prediction about the region's future. Therefore, the research solves the puzzle of explaining the development and construction of a region as well as the norms and practices that accompany it (cp. Hopf, 1998: 192).

The research objectives are as follows: First, the research aims to contribute to regionalism studies. *Regionalism* primarily refers to a political project by purposive actors trying to realize a region (cp. Artatrana, 2014: 12). Intriguingly, there is not only an "ontological disagreement over what constitutes a region" (Mansfield et al., 2010: 146) but also over how regions are scientifically analyzed. Most research has yet to see the opportunity to define and include layers constructing regions after their establishment. In contrast, most studies focus on how regions come about and the processes involved, treating them as end-game products. As a result, explanations regarding what to expect in the future based on the dynamics and characteristics are omitted.

Therefore, the second objective is to add a different way of systematizing existing knowledge to the research puzzle, concentrating on constructing a region after its establishment. In doing so, the research uses a constructivist approach and the theoretical framework by Ghica (2013).

There, *regions* are not only "notions of space but also of time" (Ghica, 2013: 738). Consequently, the political concept of *regionalism* highlights the dynamic process of building a *region* through time. In order to identify characteristics and tendencies, the author builds on the concept of *regionality*. The latter refers to the political concept describing all existing features of a region, so-called elements. The elements are categorized into two groups. The first group includes materially measurable elements, such as foreign investment. The second group includes normative-representational elements emphasizing political representation in, for example, public speeches or statements.

The framework offers three layers that can be used to analyze the *regionality* of a region. The first layer is *potential regionality*, which refers to materially measurable elements showing a region's potential characteristics and tendencies. The second layer is *actual regionality*, which describes the process of a *potential regionality* becoming a part of the *actual regionality*. That happens when the normative-representational level coincides with the materially measurable element, a process known as *regionizing*. In other words, regional actors become aware of and acknowledge a certain regionality. Finally, the third layer is *regional identity*, which involves several regional actors accepting a *regionized* element. Those three layers clarify the construction of a region by identifying certain tendencies and characteristics.

The third objective is to display a region's cohesiveness before and after a change occurs. The concept of *regional cohesiveness* "assesses the consistency of a regional group in a *longue durée* perspective" (Ghica, 2013: 750). This analysis provides two levels of examination: one that measures specific changes, such as regional arrangements, and another that focuses on the reactions and responses of regional actors to those changes. The purpose is to determine whether a region remains cohesive before and after a shift in the political or international sphere occurs.

Based on this framework, the author presents the following theoretical arguments:

1. If there is *regionalism*, one should find elements of potential and actual regionality as well as regional identity.
  - 1.1 If there is *actual regionality*, the empirical analysis should show coherence between the material and the normative-representational level.
  - 1.2 If there is a *regional identity*, several group members acknowledge and accept a representation of a particular element.
2. The author expects a change in *regional cohesiveness* in dependence on (in)security requisites and the socio-political context.

As pointed out above, the research concentrates on one specific region as a qualitative case study: the Nordic-Baltic Six (NB6). The regionality of that region is of interest because there is an academic division about the framework's future. On the one hand, scholars predict that the ability to find common grounds should be limited because the NB6 has "vastly different historical experiences and policy traditions" (Kuusik et al., 2018a: 7). Coherently, Kocsis points out that the NB6 is a "loose group of like-minded countries more akin to a family than an organized group" (Kocsis, 2021: 79).

In contrast, the Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs points out that the Baltic and Nordic countries "are linked by common cultural-historical, political and economic ties" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs...). Similarly, Ilze Rūse acknowledges that the NB6 network "offers a strong potential in exerting a 'regional voice'" (Rūse, 2014: 243). Additionally, Kleinberga states that the NB6 cooperation has become more evident in "energy, employment, and finance" as ministers evolved their coordination possibilities (Kleinberga, 2019: 19).

Secondly, the NB6 consists of a composition of small and middle-sized countries in the European Union. The voting power of the six countries entails only 5,4% of the total EU population (cp. Kocsis, 2021). Therefore, the region does not meet the required 35% to form a blocking minority. The latter dismantles theoretical arguments of regions and coalitions based on power maximization. Third, to analyze the development and construction of regional cohesiveness before and after a change on the material level, the NB6 offers an intriguing case study. The latter is based on the argument that the group of six has lost one of the most important allies in the European Union: The United Kingdom. Therefore, it is predicted that the empirical case has been crucially influenced by the developments of Brexit (cp. Kleinberga, 2019; Kocsis, 2021; Kuusik et al., 2018a, b).

Fourth, there is a need for more research. The author would like to emphasize that most literature tackling the Nordic-Baltic region emphasizes the Nordic-Baltic Eight (NB8) as a format. Therefore, "the ways of cooperation within the framework of the EU are less frequently discussed" (Kocsis, 2021: 81). If the NB6 is discussed, it is mainly done through the perspective of effectiveness and functionality. Nevertheless, there is a gap in the literature focusing on regionality, highlighting characteristics and dynamics. As also emphasized by Molnár: "comprehensive research regarding the inner cohesion of minilateral groups [...] has not been conducted as of yet" (2021: 1).

For methodology, the author decided on qualitative mixed data research. As a result, the author combines qualitative and quantitative data collection. The quantitative data collection entails vote results of the six countries from 2016 until 2022 in the Council of the European Union. For that, a total of 677 votes were collected and analyzed. The vote results were obtained from the Council's Open Data portal (cp. Council of the European Union). Based on those results, the author gathered data on vote similarity and opposition behavior (see Appendix 1) and identified the *potential regionality*. The qualitative data collection entails twelve in-depth interviews conducted with ambassadors and diplomats from and in the region and with representatives in the Nordic Council of Ministers' Offices in the Baltics. For the analysis of the qualitative data, the author decided on qualitative content analysis because it "reduces data, is systematic, and flexible" (Schreier, 2012: 5). Further, the analysis is the basis for confirming the *actual regionality*.

Consequently, the thesis will answer the following research questions:

1. What is the Nordic-Baltic Six's potential regionality within the Council of the European Union?
2. Why and to what extent can one identify actual regionality among the Nordic-Baltic Six?
3. How has Brexit influenced regional cohesiveness?

The thesis will be organized into several chapters. The first chapter will provide a theoretical and conceptual framework based on Ghica's (2013) work. It will also present various theoretical and conceptual approaches to make the author's framework selection more understandable.

The second chapter will introduce the empirical case, divided into two subchapters. The first subchapter will provide an overview of the cooperation among the Nordic-Baltic Six. The second will give an overview of the existing research related to the empirical case and its assumptions.

In the third chapter, the author will discuss the methodology used for the research, focusing on qualitative and quantitative data collection.

The fourth chapter will analyze the empirical case. It will be divided into two parts. The first part will analyze the quantitative data from the voting results of the Nordic-Baltic Six in the Council of the European Union. This analysis will provide an overview of the potential regionality and answer the first research question. The second part will analyze the qualitative content of in-depth interviews. This analysis will help understand why countries engage in the framework, representing actual regionality and answering the second and third research questions. The chapter will also include a discussion of the empirical results.

The conclusion of the thesis will discuss the research problem and present detailed answers to the research questions. The author will also assess their research and provide an overview for potential future research.

# **1. Conceptual and theoretical framework**

The chapter introduces the research's theoretical framework. For that, the chapter is split up into subchapters. The first subchapter introduces alternative conceptual and theoretical frameworks. That allows a critical assessment of the approaches and demonstrates the author's justification for the chosen concept. Therefore, one gets an extensive overview of previous scientific research regarding the research problem. Ultimately, the author will argue for using the concept of region.

The second subchapter will shortly highlight research using the concept of regionalism, concluding with the argumentation for a constructivist conceptualization. Ultimately, the third subchapter introduces the constructivist approach and highlights the theoretical framework by Ghica (2013). In the end, one gains an overview of the used concepts and theoretical approaches for the empirical analysis. Finally, the last subchapter summarizes the theoretical expectations.

## **1.1. Literature review of different conceptual and theoretical approaches**

For researching the empirical phenomenon of the Nordic-Baltic Six, the primary conceptual division exists between the concepts of a region, minilateralism, and a coalition. Concentrating on the latter, a coalition "deals with conditions for coordination and cooperation in situations involving three or more actors" (Elgström et al., 2001: 113). In addition to multilateral interaction, Dupont defines coalitions as "cooperative efforts for the attainment of short-range, issue-specific objectives" (1994: 153). Importantly, coalition theory tackles the research problem of multilateral cooperation mainly through the angles of organizational processes, outcome-oriented actions, and group behavior (Rüse, 2012b: 322–323). Especially in IR literature, a particular emphasis is put on a coalition's impact on the outcomes and its stability and formation (cp. *ibid.*: 323).

In order to explain the formation, the primary goal is to be able to explain the motives for choosing coalition parties. These motives range from party ideologies (Tallberg et al., 2008; Hagemann et al., 2008), positions (Roosendaal et al., 2008; Reynaud et al., 2011), to cultural affinity (Elgström et al., 2001; Naurin et al., 2007). To explain a coalition's stability, the theoretical approach is split into two approaches. The first one views coalitions as interest-based, shifting "from issue to issue" (Spence, 1995: 380). The second approach focuses on shared preferences and conceptualizes coalitions as a "set of parties that explicitly coordinate among themselves and defend the same position" (Odell, 2010: 624). Here, coalitions are viewed as ideology-based, considering policy distance and basing their predictions on shared identities or culture-based affinity.

Whether the research is basing its arguments on interests or cultural affinity, coalition theory builds on the power-maximizing hypothesis. The latter is based on the argument that coalitions are power-based and "that actors will strive to maximize their utility" (Rüse, 2012b: 324). Therefore, coalitions aim to reach a blocking minority threshold (cp. *ibid.*).

Consequently, if one were to draw on coalition theory, the approach offers the following explanations for the construction of multilateral cooperation: First, member states build coalitions "*for power maximization*" (Rüse, 2012b: 323, emphasis in original), enabling the possibility to block decisions (Winkler, 1998; Hosli et al., 2009). Second, states build coalitions "*to influence the outcome*" by demonstrating common objectives and support for common preferences or a particular policy" (Rüse, 2012b: 323, emphasis in original).

Although coalition theory offers answers to questions regarding the formation and stability of coalitions, the approach ignores the problem of explaining further the construction and development of multilateral cooperation. Its power-maximizing hypothesis "cannot explain the widely practiced intergovernmental coordination in subgroups prior to negotiations" (*ibid.*). As the literature shows, member states of a particular territorial region still deliberately coordinate their positions or consult each other before EU negotiations (*ibid.*). Therefore, such an approach is unsuitable for the empirical case since the "aggregated number of votes is usually insufficient to reach the blocking minority thresholds" (*ibid.*: 324).

Nevertheless, out of the argument of being able to influence the outcome, extensive scientific literature drawing on territorial partnerships emerged (Kaeding et al., 2005; Naurin, 2008; Panke, 2010; Schild, 2010; Klemenčič, 2011). Nevertheless, the studies are divided into two empirical predictions. One prediction stresses that there seems to be no advantage of territorial cooperation, predicting a decline of the former (cp. Hosli, 1996). The other prediction sees territorial coalitions' potential to gain influence in decision-making (cp. Schild, 2010; Klemenčič, 2011). Belonging to the latter category of empirical predictions, Rüse (2012a) developed an intriguing concept of territorially institutionalized coalitions.

Territorially constituted coalitions consist of the same members who are "stable over time" (Rüse, 2012a: 87). In order to become part of a coalition, the conditions are not based "on what you want, but who you are" (Naurin, 2008: 2). Therefore, the concept builds on cultural affinity and common historical heritage.

The theoretical framework explains coalitions by concentrating on the "effects of geographic and preference proximity-based institutionalized coalitions on bargaining power" (Rüse, 2012b: 324). Additionally, institutionalized coalitions are conceptualized as a "set of actors that coordinate their behavior to reach the goals they have agreed upon" (Elgström et al. 2001:113). The theoretical approach draws on rational choice explanations for the coordination of behavior, constituting the final theoretical argument: "Through engaging in institutionalized cooperation, the member states take advantage of institutional preconditions while acting rationally" (Rüse, 2012b: 324).

Although the author agrees with the importance of a shared territory, the theoretical framework concentrates on explaining the member states' considerations within a coalition. The approach further adds to the considerable theoretical gap by treating coalitions as end-game products. Consequently, analyses of developments after forming an institutionalized coalition are left out. Therefore, determining tendencies, dynamics, and characteristics of territorially constituted coalitions is impossible.

Staying within conceptual frameworks considering geographic proximity, the author would like to point out the concept of *minilateralism*. *Minilateralism* surfaced after the Second World War when multilateralism and regional organizations started to spread. Moisés Naím greatly influenced the scientific debate by publishing an article titled "Minilateralism" in 2009, introducing the term into academic literature (cp. Molnár, 2021: 4). The approach shifts the focus away from the flawed multilateralism and, instead, sees the potential in minilateralism (cp. Naím, 2009). Consequently, the conceptual framework lays the fundament for an analysis of the impact of such cooperation among states in terms of voting results and pre-negotiation phases in the European Union (cp. Ugródsy, 2021: x–xi). Nevertheless, the approach does not allow a broader look at the outcome of such cooperation in terms of tendencies and preference proximity.

To sum up, the concepts mentioned above – coalition, territorially constituted coalition, and minilateralism – fail not to treat cooperation among countries as end-game products, ignoring the determination of the construction and development of an empirical phenomenon after its establishment. Therefore, the author proposes the introduction of the concept of region.

The word "region" derives etymologically from the Latin word *regio* and "refers to an administrative area or broad geographical area distinguished by similar features" (Artatrana, 2014: 12). Nevertheless, there is an "ontological disagreement over what constitutes a region" (Mansfield et al., 2010: 146). Most of the scientific literature touch upon the following four dimensions for defining a region: "1) geography, 2) regularity and intensity of interactions, 3) shared regional perceptions, and 4) agency" (Artatrana, 2014: 12). Therefore, a relatively homogenous agreement exists when it comes to "geographical proximity and contiguity" (Hurrell, 1995: 353). Further, Nye (1965) additionally stresses mutual interdependence. One of the most famous studies regarding regions by Russett (1967) emphasizes "a certain degree of cultural homogeneity" (Artatrana, 2014: 12). Thompson (1973) adds to the cultural homogeneity also "shared perceptions of various phenomena" (Mansfield et al., 2010: 146). Another feature mentioned concerning regions is the capacity to develop a sense of community (Deutsch et al., 1957) or a so-called "regionness" (Hettne et al., 2000).

There are also scholars viewing a region in nongeographic terms by, instead, emphasizing "political practice and interaction [that can] alter a region's composition" (Mansfield et al., 2010: 146). Therefore, "regions are politically made" (Katzenstein, 2005: 9). That approach bases their definition on the communal identities of states within a region (Risse-Kappen, 1995; Jepperson et al., 1997, Katzenstein, 2005).

The concept of a region is better suited for the research puzzle. First, it enables an analysis of an empirical phenomenon based on geographic proximity and territoriality by not concentrating on power-maximizing hypotheses or the ability to bargain power. Second, it enables the analysis of a multilateral construction as a whole, ignoring sublevels such as national interests. Moreover, regions are not treated as end-game products but as evolving and changing over time.

In order to enable discussions about the construction and developments of regions, one needs to use the concept of *regionalism*. The latter will be explained below by giving an overview of different conceptualizations.

## 1.2. The conceptualization of regionalism

*Regionalism* primarily refers to a political project by purposive actors trying to realize a region (cp. Artatrana, 2014: 12). Therefore, the concept offers answers and definitions on how regions come about and what they consist of. In order to reflect on different approaches, the author will highlight four approaches to emphasize her choice of approach at the end.

First, neo-functionalism believes high interdependence starts in one sector and creates sectoral integration. That process is called "spill-over" and requires supranational institutions. Second, neoliberal institutionalism argues that the role of institutions consists of lowering the cost of increased cooperation, which leads to the demand for increased interconnectedness at the regional level. Third, neorealism argues that regionalism depends on state security and the existence of hegemonic power. (Artatrana, 2014: 13–14). Lastly, the post-structuralist approach concerns region-building by applying Benedicts Andersson's concept of "imagined communities" to regions (Neumann, 1994: 58). Furthermore, the approach stresses that regions are historically contingent (cp. *ibid.*).

To summarize the approaches, the author agrees with Fofanova et al. (2016) regarding rationalist accounts in the neo-functionalist, neoliberal institutionalist, and neorealist approaches. Building one's argument on rationality tends to reproduce uncritically sets of assumptions, which one can rarely falsify (cp. Fofanova et al., 2016: 17). Furthermore, the approaches do not enable further research on the characteristics and tendencies of a region since they focus on how regions come about and the determination of the processes involved. The fourth approach exposes a historically contingent character, which contrasts with the aim of this research and methodology to expose specific dynamics and elements of regionalism.

Consequently, the author chose a constructivist approach. The latter is the most valuable approach in solving the research puzzle of explaining the development and construction of a region as well as the norms and practices that accompany it (cp. Hopf, 1998: 192). This argument is proved below.

### **1.3. Constructivist approach to regionalism**

As argued, constructivism is the most practical approach to solving the research puzzle. It is based on the belief that "international actors, like humans, develop in a socially constructed world" (Ghica, 2013: 734). To say it with Emanuel Adler's words: "[constructivism] is the view that the manner in which the material world shapes and is shaped by human action and interaction depends on dynamic normative and epistemic interpretations of the material world" (Adler, 1997: 322, emphasis in original). That argument is important because it highlights the existence of the material world embedded in socially constructed meaning. Therefore, a constructivist approach always consists of two dimensions co-existing beside each other: the normative-representational field and the material world. Importantly, the material world can only exist when the normative-representational field attributes a particular meaning or identity to it.

In order to achieve a collective meaning, constructivists believe that social interaction leads to the creation of necessary structures for a collective meaning. This collective meaning is formed through a sense of "self", which is the fundamental element for interest formation (cp. Ghica, 2013: 735). Unlike neoliberalism and neorealism, constructivism includes the "self" and the "other" in forming identity (*ibid.*: 735–736). Hence, if there is a collective identity, collective interest formation is possible. However, collective interest is not just a "similarity of self-interest" (*ibid.*: 736) but rather a "contest for control over the power necessary to produce meaning in a social group" (Hopf, 1998: 184). Therefore, differences in meaning are acknowledged and may lead to a change in collective interests (cp. Ghica, 2013: 736).

For regionalism, constructivist theories emphasize regional awareness and integrity (cp. Aratrana, 2014: 14). Therefore, a shared sense of belonging to a particular regional community is of importance which is often called "cognitive regionalism" (cp. *ibid.*). Consequently, the approach stresses the importance of learning, knowledge, ideational forces, normative and institutional structures instead of focusing on material incentives (*ibid.*). Additionally, understanding a regional structure involves examining how interests and identities have evolved over time, leading to the formation of new communities and types of cooperation (cp. Hurrell, 1995: 353). Therefore, interests and identities are not exogenous to international interactions but rather change within the dynamic process.

### 1.3.1. The theoretical framework by Ghica (2013)

The author decided to draw on the theoretical framework by Ghica (2013). In her framework, a *region* is "a group of elements that (1) are represented as situated in a particular area; and (2) are represented as different from the rest of the neighboring space" (Ghica, 2013: 738). The definition highlights the mentioned geographic proximity. The second part highlights the theoretical argument that all regions are arbitrary constructs only existing at a conceptual level. To say it differently, there can never be a "natural or organically developed region" (*ibid.*).

Moreover, the concept does not just see regions as simple "notions of space but also of time" (*ibid.*). The reason is that regions indicate "a spatial situation placed in a particular time framework, as well as the spatial dynamics within this framework" (*ibid.*). Consequently, the framework allows an analysis of dynamics and tendencies since a region is conceptualized as not exogenous to change.

The political concept of *regionalism* highlights the dynamic process of building a *region*. The approach offers the following three definitions: "(1) the belief that politically distinguishing a region from the rest of the world is a desirable means for achieving certain purposes; (2) any action that makes such distinctions; or (3) the political results of such actions or beliefs" (Ghica, 2013: 741). The first builds on the understanding that the concept expresses an ideology. In the second one, the conceptualization sees regionalism as a process or a project. Moreover, the third refers to regionalism as a product. In order to not participate in research treating coalitions, unilateralism, and regions as "end-game products" (Rüse, 2012b: 324), the author opted for the second definition, seeing *regionalism* as a process.

To be able to analyze the process, the author builds on the concept of *regionality*. The latter refers to the political concept describing all existing features of a region, so-called elements. In coherence with the constructivist approach, the elements are divided into two groups: On the one hand, one can observe materially measurable elements like the amount of foreign investment. On the other hand, one has the normative-representational elements that highlight the political representation in the public space, as in speeches or statements. (cp. Ghica, 2013).

As pointed out, a region is not just a "notion of space but also of time" (*ibid.*: 738). In order to assess the development of such elements through time, the author will divide regionality into three layers.

The first layer reflects materially measurable elements, where one should recognize an emergence of a hierarchy. That reflects what the author calls *potential regionality*. The latter includes all the potential features one can attribute to a region.

Nevertheless, the elements remain politically irrelevant and regionality latent until "one becomes politically aware of certain elements" (*ibid.*). Transforming a *potential regionality* into an *actual regionality* is called *regionizing* and reflects the second layer. In line with the constructivist approach, *actual regionality* exists where the normative-representative nature coincides with the materially measurable elements. The consequence of such coherence is that one can prove "an increased awareness of that area's specific regionality" (*ibid.*). From this perspective, *regionizing* elements represent areas where a distinct regionality is acknowledged. For further illustration of the interrelations of the concepts, the author would like to draw on an example inspired by the theoretical framework by Ghica (2013: 739–740):

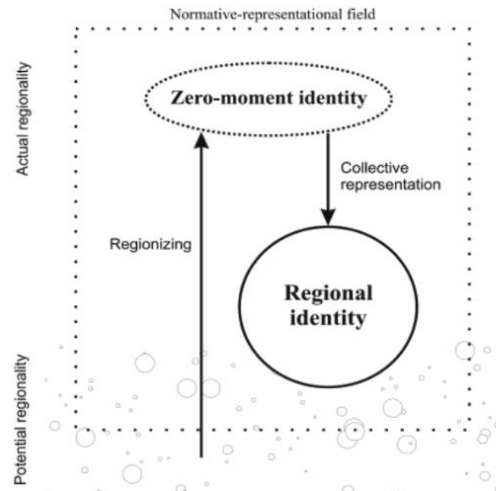
*Region A has the potential regionality like being dependent on the fishery, and consisting to 60% out of the woods. These are the materially measurable elements. However, these two elements are equally politically irrelevant for the region until an observer notices them. "The fact that at the moment t0, that [dependence on the fishery is] perceived as more [persistent] in a certain area than in the neighboring space grants that area the character of actual regionality" (ibid.: 739–740). Therefore, the observer becomes aware of a particular element of regionality.*

After an area has been differentiated from other spatial areas, the theoretical framework calls that moment of a human, political, or international actor's awareness a "zero-moment identity". Notably, while detecting *regionizing* elements, one should presume an existing normative-representational framework. Therefore, a region is not only a notion "of space and time but also [...] of culture" (*ibid.*: 740). Consequently, *regionizing* identifies elements of *actual regionality* and the values and knowledge of those that "regionize" (*ibid.*).

Once an element is *regionized* and a zero-moment identity has been developed, the latter can evolve into a *regional identity*. That reflects the third layer. Identity in constructivism contains the "mutually constructed and evolving images of self and other" (Jepperson et al., 1997: 59). Accordingly, regional identity entails the increasingly shared zero-moment identity and a palimpsest of collective representation. Therefore, for a *regionized* element to become part of a region's identity, the representation of such an element and its relevance must be accepted by other members of the spatial area.

In order to offer a more visual description of the theoretical framework, one can find an explanatory illustration here below:

**Figure 3**  
*Regional Identity Formation*



*Figure 1: Regional Identity Formation by Ghica, 2013: 741.*

### *Regional Cohesiveness*

In order to identify cohesiveness within a region, the author uses the concept of *regional cohesiveness*. The latter entails "the degree to which a group of actors inhabiting a limited contiguous space act and represent themselves as a group" (Ghica, 2013: 748, emphasis in original). Coherently with the conceptualization of regionality, regional cohesiveness can be assessed on two dimensions: normative-representational and material dimension. Again, a region's material dimension is how goals or programs are implemented, while the normative-representational dimension is how they present themselves to the world through statements or speeches (cp. *ibid.*: 749).

In contrast to regionality, *regional cohesiveness* "assesses the consistency of a regional group in a *longue durée* perspective" (*ibid.*: 750). To comprehend how cohesiveness develops, it is crucial to consider the political circumstances surrounding it. These circumstances include (in)security requisites and the broader socio-political context. The former pertains to alterations in the material dimension, such as regional arrangements. At the same time, the latter refers to the normative-representational reactions and responses of the region's members to the changes in the material dimension. Therefore, this theoretical framework enables the examination of a region's cohesiveness in relation to transformations in the political and international sphere.

#### 1.4. Conclusion and theoretical expectations

The author analyzes *regionalism* using the concept of *regionality*, which is broken down into two dimensions: materially measurable and normative-representational. There are three layers of *regionality* in total – potential and actual regionality, as well as regional identity. *Potential regionality* includes all materially measurable elements, while *actual regionality* is confirmed through the normative-representational dimension. *Regional identity* develops from zero-moment identity to group representation. Last, the concept of *regional cohesiveness* explains the emergence of a specific regionality by looking at changes on the material level and the socio-political context.

Therefore, based on this framework, the author presents the following fundamental theoretical arguments, whose suitability are tested by the empirical analysis:

1. If there is *regionalism*, one should find elements of potential and actual regionality as well as regional identity.
  - 1.1 If there is *actual regionality*, the empirical analysis should show coherence between the material and the normative-representational level.
  - 1.2 If there is a *regional identity*, other group members acknowledge and accept a representation of a particular element.
2. Further, the author expects a change in *regional cohesiveness* in dependence on (in)security requisites and the socio-political context.

In summary, the constructivist framework analyzes different layers of regionality, viewing regions as ongoing processes rather than "end-game products" (Rüse, 2012b: 324). While constructivist approaches have faced criticism, the author's approach suggests that it is not based on the notion that member states take part "for the sake of supporting a collective identity" (ibid.: 321). Further, regional identity is only one layer. Therefore, the author doubts engaging in regionalism where "international relations would be desecuritized and a new Europe would emerge from the North based on shared values and bottom-up cooperation between various 'post-national' units" (Fofanova et al., 2016: 18). In contrast, the author incorporates both positive and negative tendencies to move beyond the idea of regionalism as the "end of history" (cp. *ibid.*). Hence, the theoretical approach offers a convincing fundament for an in-depth analysis of a region's construction through time, basing its arguments on regional cohesiveness and three layers of regionality.

## **2. Literature review**

For this chapter, the author aims to clarify her presentation of the empirical case. Therefore, the chapter is split into two subchapters. The first one gives an overview of the cooperation among the Nordic-Baltic Six. The aim is to define the NB6 cooperation and showcase the region's involvement in various cooperation frameworks. The second subchapter highlights existing research about the empirical case and its assumptions.

In the end, one gains an in-depth overview of the current activities of the Nordic-Baltic Six, offering a fundament for the empirical analysis by pinpointing similarities and differences among the six countries.

### **2.1. The Nordic-Baltic Six: who they are and what they do**

#### *Definition and historical background of the Nordic-Baltic Six*

The Nordic-Baltic Six is a group of six EU member states which includes three Nordic countries – Sweden, Denmark, and Finland – and three Baltic countries – Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. The intergovernmental collaboration involves regular information sharing (cp. Kocsis, 2021: 79), consultative cooperation (cp. Kuusik et al., 2018a), and discussions about their shared commitment to specific values (cp. Kuusik et al., 2018b). The idea of cooperation originated from the affinity towards one geographical region (Rūse, 2014: 236). Although sharing a geographical space does not imply that the countries start thinking and acting the same (cp. *ibid.*), European subgroups tend to see the benefits of regional interaction. All six countries are situated along the Baltic Sea. Moreover, the region comprises an intriguing geopolitical space with Finland (1271.8 km), Estonia (294 km), Latvia (270.5 km), and Lithuania (266 km) sharing a border with Russia (WorldAtlas, 2023).

However, the Nordic-Baltic Six is an informal framework with no formalized agreement or rotating group presidency. Instead, it follows leaderless conduct with a "rotating chair" for administrative responsibilities (cp. Kuusik et al., 2018b: 2). The regional cooperation began formally in 2004, following the Baltic states' accession to the European Union. The framework was established based on a Swedish initiative to help the Baltics settle in EU decision-making processes (Rūse, 2014: 235). One Baltic practitioner affirmatively commented: "The Nordics were the first to treat us equally" (as cited in Kuusik et al., 2018a: 4).

The Nordic countries had already established the Nordic Council in 1952 and the Nordic Council of Ministers in 1971, which allowed them to develop an internationally distinct "Nordic voice" (Rūse, 2014: 35). Nevertheless, the Baltic states had no opportunity "to conduct their own foreign policies or be represented abroad other than via centrally controlled organs" (Knudsen, 1993: 55) due to their Soviet re-occupation from 1944 until 1990.

With the end of the Cold War, the cooperation between the Baltics and the Nordics became more evident. Finland, Sweden, and Denmark tried to support the newly independent states getting into various international organizations like the World Bank and the United Nations (UN). This support led to the Baltic states joining the EU and NATO in 2004. Since then, the shift to Nordic-Baltic cooperation has made the region "one of the most integrated regions in Europe" (Kuusik et al., 2018b: 2) and led to a broader focus on the whole Baltic Sea region.

#### *The Nordic-Baltic Six in the Council of the European Union*

The most crucial cooperation framework of the empirical case occurs in the Council of the European Union. The Council of the EU is the supreme political body in the European Union, consisting of the president of the Commission and the heads of the government of the Member States (Tallberg, 2008: 685–686).

Interestingly, the NB6 consists of small and medium-sized countries. Since their voting power entails only 5,4% of the total EU population and does not meet the required 35% to form a blocking minority, the NB6 has to use "political and diplomatic skill" (Kuusik et al., 2018b: 3). Coming to the presentation of such skills among the Nordic-Baltic Six, one has to stress that the primary forms of cooperation exist in terms of meetings between the heads of states and state governments prior to the Council of the EU. The meeting with the heads of state is known for comprising a so-called NB6-breakfast (Kuusik et al., 2018a: 10). Furthermore, there are also meetings between the Ministers of Foreign Affairs preceding the General Affairs Council and Foreign Affairs Council. The countries "consult colleagues on new initiatives and topics that are high on the EU's agenda and identify the other countries' positions and red lines" (ibid.: 4). As is characterized by several authors, the socializing level of Permanent Representatives is high (Kuusik et al., 2018a, b; Rūse, 2014), "with Political and Security Committee ambassadors holding coordination meetings weekly" (Kleinberga, 2019: 19). Besides the coordination of high-level meetings, also civil servants and experts do meet in capitals depending on the necessity (cp. Kuusik et al., 2018a).

Because of those multi-level consulting, discussions, and coordination, "the NB6 cooperation is sometimes perceived as a bloc" (Kuusik et al., 2018b: 3). In contrast, NB6 diplomats themselves have stressed the informality and the non-existent of a bloc (cp. *ibid.*). Still, the perception from outside prevails and leads to articles, for example, by the Financial Times calling the NB6 in cooperation with the Netherlands and Ireland the new "Hanseatic League 2.0" (Brunsdon et al., 2017).

### Cooperation frameworks of the Nordic-Baltic Six outside the Council of the European Union

In this section, the author will discuss cooperation frameworks involving all six countries, focusing on those essential for understanding the empirical results later. Firstly, before the Nordic-Baltic Six (NB6) participated in the EU framework, they were part of the Nordic-Baltic Eight (NB8), an informal framework that also includes Norway and Iceland. The NB8 was established in 1992 to facilitate discussions on important matters in an informal setting (cp. Kocsis, 2021: 80). It was instrumental in helping the Baltic states join international organizations. The NB6 format "grew out of the NB8" (Kuusik et al., 2018b: 2), and the "NB8 Wise Men Report" completed in 2010 is one of the primary documents defining cooperation and setting guidelines for the eight countries (cp. Ministry of Foreign Affairs...).

The "Northern Future Forum" (cp. Kleinberga, 2019) is a cooperation format that includes the United Kingdom (UK) and the NB8 countries. It was established in 2011 by the Prime Ministers of the participating countries, entrepreneurs, and innovation leaders to promote cooperation and innovation (cp. Kleinberga, 2019: 28). After being suspended due to the Brexit referendum, it was relaunched in 2018. Before Brexit, the countries used to meet annually "under the leadership of Prime Minister David Cameron" (Kuusik et al., 2018b: 3). The UK is a crucial ally for regional security and has shared economic interests (cp. *ibid.*), making developments after Brexit of academic interest.

### Conclusion

After presenting the empirical case, the historical background highlights the exciting combination of the six countries. This illustration provides a strong foundation for both the author and the reader to evaluate the empirical analysis of the NB6 better. The next chapter will further expand upon the definition and presentation of the Nordic-Baltic Six.

## **2.2. The NB6 in Research: What we already know**

That chapter explores the study of subgroups within the European Union. That is a "novel field of research where little empirical knowledge exists" (Elgström, 2017: 225). Furthermore, the field lacks a "commonly accepted name for these groups" (Cooper et al., 2023: 309). As pointed out by Rüse, one can call them in various ways like "partnerships, alignments, blocs, alliances or groupings" (2014: 230). Therefore, the aim is to gain an overview of different approaches for that field of research and the outcomes for the empirical case at hand: The Nordic-Baltic Six. In the end, the reader will have a precise image of where the current research is fitting and where it closes certain lacks in previous literature.

### **2.2.1. Assumptions about the Nordic-Baltic Six and their future post-Brexit**

As Keukeleine (2007) pointed out in her analysis: "An analysis of the foreign policy of the European Union (EU) points to the rising importance of small groups of member states" (2007: 4). That reflects the essence of that study and the studies pointed out below. Smaller groups within the European Union are "indispensable to cope with the major differences in the member states' foreign policy capabilities and interests" (*ibid.*).

According to Elgström (2017), like-mindedness is crucial for cooperation. His research identifies the Nordics, specifically Sweden, Finland, and Denmark, as the driving force behind EU development policy (cp. Elgström, 2017: 225). The study highlights "Nordic plus" and suggests a trend toward *Nordification*. However, the research lacks emphasis on like-mindedness among the six Nordic-Baltic countries (NB6). Therefore, the author plans to fill this gap by analyzing the compatibility of the NB6.

Tamás Levente Molnár (2021) conducted significant research on six subgroups within the Council of the European Union: The Benelux, The EU Three (E3), The Mediterranean Seven, the Visegrad Group, the Weimar Triangle, and the Nordic-Baltic Six. The study analyzed voting results in the Council of the EU from 2009 to 2019. Also, it included interviews with officials from each subgroup's COREPER I and II committees (Committee of the Permanent Representatives of the Governments of the Member States to the European Union). The project aimed to examine and compare the functionality and effectiveness of each group. Finally, as the Nordic-Baltic Six was also included in the research, the author summarizes the key findings, which will be used in her analysis.

First, the analysis suggests "cohesion to be strongest among Sweden, Denmark, and Finland, with the latter having stronger ties to the Baltic states" (Kocsis, 2021: 85). Further, the results show a relatively clear division within the NB6 between the Baltics and the Nordics. Nevertheless, solid ties exist between Finland and Estonia. Denmark and Sweden, on the other hand, were found to be "more reserved" (*ibid.*: 81). Additionally, the research suggests rather diverse policy positions, making it hard to detect any "potential increase in bargaining power" (*ibid.*: 86). Overall, the research concludes that the NB6 is "a loose, informal cooperation" (*ibid.*: 89) where the emphasis lies on sharing information and exchanging views. Regarding Brexit, the research predicted that the cooperation might get better after Brexit since the countries see it as a necessity after losing the UK (*ibid.*: 87).

The author will consider the voting analysis between 2009–2019 since it allows the author to compare her findings. Nevertheless, the comprehensive study lacks certain aspects the author views as essential. First, the study does compare the six countries not only exclusively among themselves but with all countries from the European Union. That diffuses the focus and does not allow a focused analysis based on the region. Secondly, the analysis of policy areas is not given. Therefore, one cannot conclude any tendencies regarding conflictual and coherent areas. Thirdly, the research aim concentrates on functionality and how much cooperation one can calculate from synchronous opposition. Such an approach does not allow us to analyze the regionality of the region or, in more broad terms, the region's characteristics. Fourthly, the research lacks a comprehensive analysis of the aftermath of Brexit.

Therefore, the current research will fill the following gaps: First, the research concentrates exclusively on the NB6 in the analysis, offering the first empirical analysis solely based on the six countries. Second, a considerable amount of the analysis consists of identifying coherent and conflictual policy areas, finally clarifying when and why one can expect a coherent regional voice. Third, the analysis results will give a clear overview of the current regional characteristics and future tendencies. Last but not least, the current research offers a first glimpse of developments post-Brexit.

As highlighted by the research above, the Nordic-Baltic Six is mainly regarded as informal and do not offer a solid basis to expect a bloc formation. Coherently, Kuusik et al. (2018a) also argue that the Nordic-Baltic Six is a loose Club of Friends in the EU.

Still, the authors stress that the Nordic-Baltic Six feel a sense of belonging based on cultural and historical ties. With the UK's departure and the strengthening of the Franco-German partnership, they predict that the NB6 seeks closer cooperation within the EU framework (Kuusik et al., 2018a: 1). The researchers also predict potential for a "northern coalition" to become a formidable force (*ibid.*: 4). Furthermore, the research stresses that the six countries tend to be more vocal about their shared interests after Brexit (*ibid.*: 9).

In contrast, the research by Rūse considers the Nordic-Baltic cooperation "one of the most institutionalized groupings in EU negotiations" (Rūse, 2012b: 332). Therefore, it suggests a high degree of cooperation and cohesiveness. Nevertheless, the research concludes that the group is "highly informal and rests on 'in-group' socialization culture and a duty to consult' the partners" (as cited in *ibid.*: 333).

Another research by Kleinberga (2019) assumes that the Nordic-Baltic countries have a shared understanding and trust, which forms the basis for "deepening cooperation at the EU level" (Kleinberga, 2019: 17) in specific sectors. The article suggests that the NB6 has the potential to counterbalance Franco-German influence and advocate for the UK's continued involvement in EU-related affairs after Brexit (*ibid.*: 24). This argument is supported by the suggestion that the relative importance of the NB6 has increased since the UK's withdrawal from the EU (*ibid.*: 27). However, cooperation among the countries is issue-based rather than based on geographical position, and there is no permanent coalition or bloc. That emphasizes the openness and informality of the cooperation already pointed out above.

### **2.2.2. Assumptions about the Nordic-Baltic Six regarding policy areas**

The research on the NB6 countries suggests that they share a common interest in an "open economy, free trade, a transparent public sector, and digitalization" (Kuusik et al., 2018b: 7–8) as well as energy (Kleinberga, 2019). They are also united on matters concerning EU economic development and have been frontrunners in transportation and infrastructure projects like "Rail Baltica" (cp. Kleinberga, 2019: 22). Digitalization is the most prominent policy area where they share a coherent vision, focusing on "cybersecurity, countering hybrid threats, and disinformation" (Kuusik et al., 2018a: 9). However, while they have "a shared commitment" (*ibid.*: 7) to fiscal conservatism, innovation, digitization, and liberal economic policies, they also have some crucial differences (*ibid.*).

First, differences regarding financial issues are assumed, with Nordic countries being net payers to the EU budget and Baltic states being net receivers (cp. Kuusik et al., 2018a: 6). Second, the Nordic-Baltic Six (NB6) have varying attitudes towards European integration, with Denmark being hesitant and possessing opt-out possibilities. At the same time, Finland is considered the "most pro-integrationist country" in the group (*ibid.*: 3). However, despite these differences, the NB6 shares a vision for Europe that rejects domination by larger players and prioritizes intergovernmental cooperation (*ibid.*: 4). Furthermore, this vision supports small countries within the EU, intending to achieve a union that does not discriminate based on size. Lastly, Kleinberg (2019) points to the tendency that, although climate change is a shared interest partly because of the Baltic Sea, "the Baltic States are less eager to follow the more climate-oriented Nordic countries" (Kleinberga, 2019: 24). Further there are also tendencies of differences concerning social policy (cp. *ibid.*: 20).

Discussing the security issue, one has to mention the countries' different historical experiences and policy traditions. In their research, Kuusik et al. point out three dividing lines between the countries' security and defense motivations: NATO, defense cooperation within the European Union, and relations with Russia (2018a: 7). Nevertheless, the last nine to ten years have shown that historical differences become more and more distant, giving space for a security push towards closer cooperation. There is coherence in the literature that the countries increased their similarity in evaluating Russia and the security status of the region (cp. Kuusik et al., 2018b; Kleinberga, 2019).

Interestingly, the author observed differing opinions among scholars about whether the NB6 countries can find common ground in policy areas. Some scholars believe that the NB6 may struggle to find common ground with its "vastly different historical experiences and policy traditions" (Kuusik et al., 2018a: 7). Others, like Kocsis, argue that the NB6 is more like a loose family than an organized group (2021: 79), while Ilze Rūse sees the potential for the NB6 to exert a strong regional voice (2014: 243). Kleinberga notes that the NB6 countries have made progress in cooperation in areas like "energy, employment, and finance" (2019: 19). Despite these differing opinions, the future potential of the NB6 remains uncertain, making it an intriguing topic for further study.

### 2.2.3. Conclusion

Concluding this chapter, the academic literature about the Nordic-Baltic Six is coherent regarding their characterization of the group as informal, not allowing an assessment of a bloc or a permanent coalition. Furthermore, there is consensus regarding the effect of Brexit on cooperation, emphasizing the need for better cooperation (cp. Kleinberga, 2019; Molnár, 2021: 10).

Nevertheless, most literature tackling the Nordic-Baltic region emphasizes the Nordic-Baltic Eight as a format. Therefore, "the ways of cooperation within the framework of the EU are less frequently discussed" (Kocsis, 2021: 81). If the NB6 is discussed as highlighted above, it is mainly done through the perspective of effectiveness and functionality. Nevertheless, there is a gap in literature focusing on regionality, highlighting characteristics and dynamics through time. As also emphasized by Molnár: "Comprehensive research regarding the inner cohesion of minilateral groups [...] has not been conducted as of yet" (2021: 1). Therefore, the research at hand plans on filling that gap by contributing a comprehensive analysis of the different layers of regionality. Furthermore, the research also offers the first analysis conducted post-Brexit, testing the predicted effects of Brexit on regional cooperation in the European Union.

Concluding the literature review on policy preferences among the NB6, there is coherence that one can expect cohesion in an "open economy, free trade, a transparent public sector, and digitalization" (Kuusik et al., 2018b: 7–8) as well as energy (Kleinberga, 2019). Furthermore, there is a strong suggestion that security will become a policy area of shared values and perceptions. Nevertheless, the literature expects differences among the countries regarding financial distribution and European integration. Further, a suspected gap between Baltics and Nordics regarding climate and environmental issues exists. Still, the literature lacks a comprehensive analysis of actual preferences through time. As pointed out by Rūse: "One of the most interesting and essential questions in studying the territorially constituted coalitions is related to the policy preferences of the grouping's members" (Rūse, 2012b: 333–334). Moreover, as mentioned above, there is a division in the literature regarding the future cohesion of the region. Consequently, the research can fill that gap by offering tendencies regarding future cooperation.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1. Research design**

The research concentrates on the Nordic-Baltic Six within the European Union as a single case study. In order to answer the three research questions, the author decided on qualitative mixed data research. As a result, the author will combine qualitative and quantitative data collection. The qualitative data collection entails in-depth interviews conducted with ambassadors and diplomats from and in the region and with representatives in the Nordic Council of Ministers' Offices in the Baltics. The quantitative data collection entails vote results of the six countries from 2016 until 2022 in the Council of the European Union.

The following rationale stands behind choosing mixed data research:

1. The approach enhances the ability to generalize. The former builds on the argument made in the theoretical framework that overlaps between the quantitative and the qualitative data, reflecting a solid foundation for actual regionality. Therefore, the author gains a multilevel confirmation of certain tendencies and dynamics among the Nordic-Baltic Six.
2. Coherent with the first argument, a mixed data approach also enhances credibility. Besides being able to generalize and having a solid foundation for detecting actual regionality, the findings that overlap between the two analyses also gain validity.
3. The mixed data approach contextualizes findings. Since the "same empirical phenomenon may be interpreted in various ways" (Elgström et al., 2001: 121), the quantitative data is contextualized by the qualitative data, giving the former a foundation for interpretation.

The author utilizes the explanatory sequential research design with a mixed data approach in this research. This approach involves collecting and analyzing quantitative data first. The purpose of this is to provide a foundation for qualitative inquiry. Furthermore, by basing one analysis on the other, the author ensures that the two analyses remain thematically connected. Therefore, for trends or tendencies to be confirmed by the qualitative analysis, the author builds on the triangulation process. The latter is a research strategy that the author uses to detect overlaps between the two analyses. Consequently, the author avoids any research biases in her work and enhances the findings' validity and credibility.

### **3.2. Selection of case study**

As pointed out by Mats Braun, "there has been limited attention paid to subregions by the scholarly community" (2021:1). Therefore, the main research object of the thesis concentrates on the regionality of regions within the European Union. The research chose one specific region as a single case study: the Nordic-Baltic Six (NB6).

First, the NB6 is of interest due to the academic division surrounding its future, with some scholars predicting limited common ground (cp. Kuusik et al., 2018a, b; Kocsis, 2021) and others seeing the potential for a coherent regional voice (cp. Ministry of Foreign Affairs...; Rūse, 2014; Kleinberga, 2019). Secondly, the six countries' cooperation is extraordinary due to their ability to find common ground despite historical, linguistic, and cultural differences. That makes the NB6 a unique case of regional cooperation compared to other frameworks like the Benelux countries. Furthermore, the Nordic-Baltic Six is also significant because their cooperation is entirely based on group dynamics without guidance from a country's group presidency. That allows for enhanced analysis of the region's current constructive development.

Third, their voting power only entails 5,4% of the total EU population and does not meet the required 35% to form a blocking minority. Therefore, the composition of small and middle-sized countries is intriguing due to the contradicting theoretical arguments based on power maximization. Additionally, there needs to be more research on the actual dynamics behind the region over time and what characteristics constitute the region currently and in the future. This case study would fill the gap by researching potential and actual regionality. Furthermore, the analysis allows for expected tendencies in the future.

Fourth, comparing the region's development before and after Brexit is also essential. The loss of "one of the two leading member states (alongside France) in terms of defense capability and international weight" (Kleinberga, 2019: 21–22) will have a significant impact on the regionality of the region.

Last, another characteristic missing in other regional cooperation frameworks in the EU is the immediate contact with Russia. While Russia was previously seen as a barrier to Nordic-Baltic cooperation, the countries now share a similar view (cp. Kleinberga, 2019). Therefore, identifying trends and characteristics within the region is becoming more essential for the EU and other international frameworks due to the geopolitical situation in the Nordic-Baltic area.

### **3.3. Methodology of the quantitative data**

The quantitative data analysis entails the vote results of the six countries in the Council of the European Union from 2016 until 2022. Therefore, a total of 677 votes were collected and analyzed. The Council of the European Union was established in 1958 and is an institutional framework. It is the supreme political body in the European Union, consisting of the president of the Commission and the heads of the government of the Member States (Tallberg, 2008: 685–686). Because of its importance in shaping and defining the European Union, it offers a well-qualified platform to analyze specific dynamics, priorities, and discourses among a particular group of countries as well as countries individually.

In the following, the author will explain in detail how she conducted the analysis and what kind of data set was used.

#### **3.3.1. Data set**

In order to analyze tendencies and dynamics among the Nordic-Baltic Six, 677 votes in the Council of the EU were collected from the Council's Open Data portal (cp. Council of the European Union). The database was chosen because it is easily accessible and reflects the results of the Council's voting sessions. Based on those results, the author collected information about vote similarity and opposition behavior (cp. Appendix 1). That was possible due to the distinction of the data set between five types of votes: in favor, against, abstention, non-vote, and missing. The difference between the last two votes is "purely technical" (Kocsis et al., 2021: 15). The dataset also contains other points of interest, such as the policy area and the date of each vote.

The votes were collected from the 15<sup>th</sup> of January 2016 until the 19<sup>th</sup> of December 2022. The period was chosen because it reflects the starting point for Brexit, as the UK referendum was held in 2016. Besides the Brexit referendum, there were two other crucial developments worth mentioning. First, in 2016, the NB6 Ministers of Foreign Affairs gave a joint declaration to stress that "Crimea is not forgotten" and reconfirm their "unwavering support for Ukraine's territorial integrity and its sovereignty over its entire territory" (as cited in Kleinberga, 2019: 21). The second development entails the election of Donald Trump as the president of the United States, resulting in debates about America's role in Europe and globally. Therefore, 2016 marks a year of change for the Nordic-Baltic Six.

Another argument for choosing 2016 as starting point is the possibility of an almost equal share of votes before and after Brexit: The period before Brexit starts from the 15<sup>th</sup> of January 2016 until the 19<sup>th</sup> of December 2019—the period after Brexit is reflected from the 18<sup>th</sup> of February 2020 until the 19<sup>th</sup> of December 2022. As a result, the author collected 404 votes before and 272 votes after Brexit.

### **3.3.2. Data collection and analysis**

The quantitative data analysis is based on previous research on the Nordic-Baltic Six by Tamás Levente Molnár (2021), which concentrated on vote results from 2009 until 2019. Therefore, the methodology for collecting and analyzing the vote results is almost identical. The latter allows the author to compare the earlier done research and her results directly. Nevertheless, as already pointed out in the literature review, the research has some deficits that the author tries to avoid (cp. Chapter 2.2.1.).

Still, like the research from 2021, the thesis also differentiates between two categories for the analysis: vote similarities and synchronous oppositions. However, in contrast to the research from 2021, the author solely concentrates on the six EU countries in the Nordic-Baltic region. For vote similarities, the author differentiated four types: in favor, against, abstained, and did not vote (cp. Kocsis et al., 2021: 15). That means that a vote is only counted as similar if two or more countries vote in the same category. Therefore, if one country votes in abstention and the other votes against it, it is not counted as similar. In the end, the author calculated the shared votes in percentages (see Appendix 1).

In contrast, synchronous opposition differentiates only between two categories: "support (in favor) and opposition (against, or abstentions during qualified majority votes) " (*ibid.*: 16). Therefore, non-votes are not counted. That means that if one country voted against and another voted in abstention, it is counted as a shared opposition. Further, synchronous oppositions are calculated in numbers (see Appendix 1).

Both categories are divided into different policy areas, which helps identify the most conflicting and consistent issues among the six countries. Additionally, there is a division between vote similarity and synchronous opposition before and after Brexit. That helps analyze the changes since Brexit and forms the basis for examining the regional cohesiveness among the Nordic-Baltic Six.

The author collected vote results in three Excel tables to analyze the data. The first table showed 407 votes, with all countries in the Council of the EU in favor. The second table showed 174 votes, with the NB6 in favor but other countries disagreeing. Finally, the last table showed 96 votes with voting differences among the six Nordic-Baltic countries.

By using the first two tables, the author was able to identify policy areas that did not have conflicting agendas during the given period. Additionally, the second table was particularly useful for comparing the voting behavior of a regional country with another country in the European Union, allowing the author to identify similarities and differences between them. This also helped the author to analyze countries' voting behavior outside the region and their potential similarities with the region.

The three tables had a consistent format for their headers, including the name of the decision, document number, interinstitutional number, date, council, policy area, legislative procedure/co-decision, voting rule, the action of the legislative act, and the number of votes in favor. The last two tables also included categories for votes against, abstentions, and non-participation. This table structure is based on the information available on the Council's Open Data Portal.

The author would like to acknowledge a limitation in her research to ensure transparency. During the quantitative data analysis, 43 votes were missing information about policy areas due to a problem with the data portal. Among these votes, seven reflected significant differences among the NB6-countries. Despite this issue, the author proceeded with calculating the votes and analyzing the voting behavior and oppositions, despite being unable to confirm the policy area for these votes.

### **3.4. Qualitative methodology**

To better understand the quantitative data gathered earlier, the author conducts semi-structured interviews. Most of these interviews are conducted with ambassadors from four countries of the NB6. To be eligible for the research, ambassadors have to meet two criteria. Firstly, they have to be active ambassadors currently based in one country of the region. Secondly, all Nordic ambassadors have to be stationed in the Baltics, while all Baltic ambassadors have to be stationed in the Nordics. These criteria ensure the interviewees have the best knowledge of regional priorities and developments, particularly in Nordic-Baltic cooperation.

Further, three interviews are held with the Nordic Council of Ministers' Offices in all three Baltic states. Those interviews are fruitful since they fulfill the purpose of overcoming state-centric priorities by assessing regional cooperation as a whole. Furthermore, they represent the interests of Nordic cooperation in the Baltics (cp. Nordic Council of Ministers).

Last, the author conducts one interview with the Danish Permanent Representation in Brussels. The latter is crucial and essential since the quantitative analysis showed that Denmark is the most distant country in the region. In order to thoroughly clarify that tendency and to get a sufficient foundation for analyzing such a potential regionality, the author assumes that the COREPER will add aspects of the ongoing decision-making process in Denmark.

Nevertheless, the author is convinced that interviewing regional ambassadors and the Nordic Council of Ministers' Offices in the Baltics is more fruitful than interviewing Brussels Permanent Representatives. The latter is grounded on the following rationale: First, interviews with COREPER only enable "access to an overall picture of how minilateral groups are created and utilized within the decision-making process of the EU" (Kocsis et al., 2021: 20). Neither the decision-making process in the EU nor the creation of the NB6 are part of the research questions. In contrast, the research focuses on current regional developments and tendencies. Therefore, regional actors active in the region have to be a priority.

Secondly, "the COREPER covers all the policy areas" (*ibid.*); therefore, ensuring particular priorities for the region's policy areas is impossible. In contrast, the interviews with the ambassadors allow discussions about specific policy areas, depending on the priorities of the ambassador in his or her current work.

Thirdly, the COREPER is often unavailable "due to their high workload" (*ibid.*). Therefore, the author had to be pragmatic. Finally, as reality shows, the author could only ensure one interview with COREPER I. In contrast, she got interviews with four countries and all three representatives of the Nordic Council of Ministers' Offices in the Baltics.

For the sample size, "qualitative research often involves large amounts of material" (Schreier, 2014: 175). Nevertheless, to put quality over quantity, the author always codes and transcribes interviews before the following interview to ensure purposeful data collection.

The author must also be realistic about the sampling rationale and the sample size. Since elite interviews are difficult to conduct, the research will be as flexible as possible. Therefore, the format of the interview can be decided by the respondents. Before the interviews are conducted, the author provides all participants with preliminary questions (see Appendices 2 and 3) and a comprehensive introduction to the research (Appendix 4).

In the end, the author conducted twelve interviews: Eight with ambassadors from four countries, three with all Nordic Council of Ministers' Offices in the Baltics, and one with the Danish Permanent Representation in Brussels. Nine interviews happened online, two interviews were conducted on the phone, and one happened in person. The interviewing process started from the beginning until the end of March 2023. The interviews have been transcribed and analyzed using MAXQDA qualitative data analysis software.

To be transparent, the author must disclose that her research did not involve ambassadors from Lithuania or Sweden. Instead, she conducted interviews with three Estonian and two Latvian ambassadors in the Nordic region, as well as one Danish and two Finnish ambassadors in the Baltic region. Despite this, the author assures that there is sufficient information as Sweden and Lithuania were still well covered in all interviews. Firstly, she interviewed the Nordic Council of Ministers' Office in Lithuania, which nicely explained the Lithuanian perspectives and priorities. Secondly, she spoke with the three Nordic Council of Ministers' Offices in the Baltics to also cover the Swedish narrative. Overall, the author managed to interview ambassadors stationed in all six regional countries, providing a comprehensive view of the cooperation between the Baltics and the Nordics from the perspectives of all three Nordic and Baltic countries.

#### **3.4.1. Qualitative content analysis**

The author opted for a qualitative approach because the research focuses on qualities, processes, and meanings that cannot be solely measured in quantity, amount, or intensity (cp. Denzin et al., 2000: 8). Further, the author chose qualitative content analysis because it has several advantages. Firstly, it helps to condense data and make it more manageable, which is particularly useful when dealing with semi-structured interviews. Secondly, the author can use a coding frame to identify patterns that emerge during the research process. Thirdly, the approach is flexible, allowing for an analysis depending on the respondents' answers.

Fourthly, it emphasizes the frequency of ideas, which helps the author analyze the material based on the three levels of regionality in the theoretical framework. Finally, the qualitative approach enables the author to identify patterns that reveal more profound underlying interpretations.

In analyzing the interviews, the author follows a multi-step process. Firstly, she conducts an initial coding by reading through the data to get an overview and identify codes that best describe phrases concisely. The author uses a hybrid approach to coding by developing a coding frame deductively and inductively. As mentioned above, the qualitative analysis is based on the results of the quantitative analysis to avoid losing focus on overlaps and make it easier to identify patterns and tendencies. Therefore, the deductive coding is based on the results of the quantitative data.

However, as such an approach may be too narrow, the author also uses inductive coding, which involves developing codes while reading and coding data. Descriptive coding is used in the first phase, where phrases or parts of the data are summarized in a maximum of two words. The line-by-line coding in the second phase refines the codes by coding as much data as possible and helps reconsider the coding.

To categorize the code, the author will sort them into categories based on "who, what, when or where?" (Erlingsson et al., 2017: 94). This categorization helps to organize the data by grouping similar or related codes. It also enables the author to uncover new connections between the codes. After categorizing, the fourth step is identifying themes. A theme is a "patterned response or meaning" (Braun et al., 2006: 82). In contrast to a category, a theme "involves a greater degree of interpretation and integration of data" (Kiger et al., 2020: 3). Lastly, the author analyzes the results and concludes the research.

Following the theoretical framework, the regionality is assessed on three levels: At the first level, *potential regionality* is identified through quantitative data analysis. The second level is *actual regionality*, established by the coherence between quantitative and qualitative data analysis. If the qualitative analysis confirms a tendency or an element identified in the quantitative data analysis, it is considered *actual regionality*. However, the opposite is considered *actual regionality* if the qualitative analysis does not support an element. Finally, the third level is *regional identity*, which is based on other group members' acceptance of a particular element. The author will use frequency analysis to identify elements that are confirmed or rejected multiple times, which become part of the *regional identity*.

### **3.4.2. Principles of data analysis**

To ensure the credibility and reliability of the research, the author will take steps to avoid bias. That includes double-coding at least parts of the material to test the quality of category definitions (cp. Schreier, 2014: 171) and consciously searching for evidence that challenges her own assumptions (cp. Schwartz-Shea et al., 2012: 105).

The author will also practice transparency through member checking, where participants can review their interview transcripts before the analysis. Additionally, the author will practice reflexivity to consider how her own biases may have affected the research. As pointed out by Blakely, that is especially important for in-depth interviews since the respondents "have to be able to trust the researcher is going to listen carefully to the things they say, [...] and the material be used in a manner that accurately reflects the perspective of the interviewee" (2013: 164).

The ethical principle of *primum non nocere* (first, do no harm) will be upheld, and participants' privacy, anonymity, and right to free consent will be respected (cp. Marshall et al., 2016: 52). That is also pointed out in the informed consent form (cp. Appendix 5). Overall, ethics will be an integral part of the research process.

## **4. Voting patterns of the region in the Council of the European Union**

The quantitative data analysis is the first part of the empirical analysis, offering a strong fundament for the qualitative analysis. Therefore, it is the basis for the potential regionality, answering the first research question. The analysis highlights the analytical results from the votes of the six Nordic-Baltic countries within the Council of the EU from 2016 until 2022. Within those years, the author analyzed 677 votes.

The analysis focuses on the overall vote similarity, the preferences in various policy areas, and the opposition behavior of the NB6. The former and the latter will also be divided into before and after Brexit, examining 404 results from 2016 until 2019 and 272 votes from 2020 until 2022.

For the structure, the analysis first highlights trends and tendencies of the Nordic-Baltic countries as a group. Second, the region's cohesiveness before and after Brexit is compared. Third, various policy areas are highlighted, where the analysis either shows homogeneity or discrepancies among the countries. Fourth, country-specific regionality emphasizes the characteristics and tendencies of a single country or a group of countries. Ultimately, the analysis will be summed up with crucial implications for the qualitative analysis.

### **4.1. The Nordic-Baltic region**

The data from 2016 until 2022 indicates a high coherence in preferences among the NB6, as there is an 85,8% vote similarity. When dividing the NB6 into the Baltic and Nordic groups, the Baltics show greater coherency with an overall vote similarity of 97,5%, which is 9,5% higher than the Nordics with 88%. Regarding opposition voting from 2016 until 2022, Denmark has the most oppositions, with 67 oppositions, followed by Sweden (15) and Latvia (14) (Table 4).

Nevertheless, one needs to highlight that the analysis also shows that the NB6 is one of many formats for the six countries. For example, Denmark shares the highest vote similarity with Ireland (95%). That highlights a potentially broader geopolitical orientation of Denmark outside the region. Further, the Baltic countries share a vote similarity with Poland of over 95%. Therefore, the analysis confirms the reflected openness of the group and a potential extension of the region to other countries.

For the potential regionality, the author takes the following tendencies:

1. There is a potential regionality of close cooperation due to the high vote similarity among the countries.
2. The potential regionality also shows tendencies of the group being open to other countries like Poland and Ireland.

#### **4.2. Regional cohesiveness after Brexit**

As highlighted above, the data shows an 85,8% vote similarity among the NB6 from 2016 until 2022. If one looks at the developments of regional cohesiveness before and after Brexit, the analysis highlights two tendencies:

On the one hand, the Nordic-Baltic Six are getting closer together after Brexit. Looking at the vote similarity of the six countries, they increased their cohesiveness after Brexit from 84,4% to 88,2%. Furthermore, significant for all countries is the increase in synchronous opposition after Brexit (Tables 8 and 9). Only Denmark and Finland decreased their number of synchronous oppositions. Nevertheless, it reflects a possible improvement in coordination among the NB6-countries and the enhancement of its voice within the European Union, taking more significantly a standpoint on issues.

On the other hand, if one divides the NB6 into Baltics and Nordics, both groups share the tendency to increase their vote similarity among them. For example, the Baltics had a vote similarity of 97% before Brexit, which increased to 98,5% after the UK left the European Union. For the Nordics, vote similarity was 86,6% before and increased to 90,4% after Brexit.

Denmark especially highlights both trends: First, Brexit has brought Denmark closer to all the Nordic-Baltic countries in the EU. That is highlighted by Denmark having a vote similarity of under 90% with each country before Brexit and sharing a vote similarity of over 90% after Brexit (Tables 8 and 9). Second, if one compares the vote similarity of Denmark before and after Brexit, Estonia and Lithuania are in first place with 88,1% before Brexit. They are followed by Finland (87,9%) and Sweden (87,4%). (Table 8). Therefore, we have a stronger orientation towards the Baltics than the Nordics as a tendency before Brexit.

However, after Brexit, there is a swap in vote similarity among the countries. The data shows that after Brexit, Finland is in first place with 92,6%, followed by Sweden with 91,5% (Table 9). Therefore, one can see the tendency to orientate oneself more towards the Nordics again. Remaining with Denmark, the UK is an essential ally, with 95,5% of vote similarity before Brexit. That makes Denmark the closest country to the UK out of all six Nordic-Baltic countries.

For the potential regionality, the author takes the following tendencies:

1. On the one hand, the region becomes closer after Brexit and continues to do so in the future, enhancing its regional voice.
2. On the other hand, the region also has the potential to develop a more robust division among the Baltics and Nordics since both groups tend to get closer together.
3. Denmark is the closest country to the United Kingdom.

### **4.3. Policy areas**

#### **4.3.1. Homogenous policy areas**

The author detected the following homogenous policy areas where there was little evidence of differences among the countries:

##### *Foreign Affairs and Telecommunications*

Both policy areas show significant coherence, with 3,2% of disagreements in *Foreign Affairs* and 6,25% in *Telecommunications* (Table 1). Despite that, Sweden stands out with one opposition in each policy area. For *Foreign Affairs*, Sweden opposed the "MFF Neighbourhood, Development, and International Cooperation Instrument" (Council of the European Union, 2018b). For *Telecommunications*, Swedish political preferences depart once on the issue of "the promotion of internet connectivity in local communities" (Council of the European Union, 2017a). That seems to go against the digitalization agenda of the region mentioned in the literature review (cp. Kuusik et al., 2018b: 7–8). Nevertheless, these policy areas seem coherent and offer a solid basis for a *regionized* element of the NB6.

For the potential regionality, the author takes the following tendencies:

1. First, in the policy areas of *Foreign Affairs* and *Telecommunications*, the NB6 is coherent.
2. Nevertheless, the Baltics have a slightly higher coherence than the Nordics in *Foreign Affairs* and *Telecommunications*.

### Internal Market and Consumer Affairs

The two policy areas signify the attitude of the NB6 towards an open and liberal market. As came out in the literature review, the Nordics and Baltics share a deep understanding of open and liberal markets (cp. Kuusik et al., 2018a, b). Surprisingly, the NB6 is relatively coherent with the EU policies.

For *Consumer Affairs*, the NB6 agreed eight out of nine times with the EU policy. Only once Sweden disagreed on "cooperation between national authorities responsible for the enforcement of consumer protection laws" (Council of the European Union, 2017b). The latter might signify an attempt to restrict a too strong European control within the market.

For *Internal Market*, the NB6 were 51 times out of 56 in agreement with the EU policy. Therefore, there is significant coherence among the six countries. Interestingly, the Nordics seem more coherent in that topic than the Baltics, having a percentage of 1,8% in differences (Table 3). Conversely, the Baltics share a percentage of 5,4% disagreeing with one another (Table 2).

The same tendency is also reflected in the opposition behavior. Denmark and Sweden shared a synchronous opposition once on "the supplementary protection certificate for medicinal products" (Council of the European Union, 2019a). Importantly, they were together with the UK, signifying the latter as an essential partner in the policy area.

For the Baltics, each country has been one time alone in opposition without any other NB6-country. Therefore, the Baltics are slightly more vocal but still have to develop a coherent voice. Estonia shared one synchronous opposition with the United Kingdom on "cross-border conversions, mergers, and divisions" (Council of the European Union, 2019d). Therefore, the UK is, again, signified as an essential partner in that policy area.

For the potential regionality, the author suggests the following tendencies:

1. The policy areas of *Internal Market* and *Consumer Affairs* are coherent, showing a similar understanding among the countries regarding the market and trade.
2. There is a slight tendency for the Baltics to be more vocal in the field of the *Internal Market*. Therefore, the analysis suggests the tendency of the Baltics to be more vigorous advocates of an open and liberal market, restricting too much influence from the European Union.

## Energy

For *Energy*, the NB6 voted all twelve times in favor of the issue on, for example, "European statistics on natural gas and electricity prices" (Council of the European Union, 2016b). Since they did not disagree once within the period, energy policies among the six countries show a strong coherence. For the potential regionality, the author suggests the following tendencies:

1. The NB6 is a coherent regional group for the policy area of *Energy*.

## Development and Institutional

As for *Energy*, the analysis shows no disagreements among the countries in the following policy areas (Table 1): *Institutional, Education, Space, Youth, and Research*. The first policy area is primarily concerned with internal issues of institutions within the European Union, like "the transfer to the General Court of jurisdiction at first instance in disputes between the European Union and its servants" (Council of the European Union, 2016a). The fact that the NB6-countries were in all thirteen cases in favor of the proposed European policies implicates a strong pro-European attitude shared within the NB6. *Education, Youth, and Research* reflect the future-oriented attitude of the NB6 with a high emphasis on good education and research.

For the potential regionality, the author suggests the following tendencies:

1. The NB6 is a coherent regional group regarding *Education, Research, and Youth*. That reflects the potential of stressing innovation and future-oriented projects.
2. The NB6 is a pro-European group of countries that share a high coherence regarding the future of the EU's institutions.

### 4.3.2. Conflictual policy areas

In the analysis, the author detected the following conflicting policy areas, where little evidence could be found of a coherent regional group:

#### Environment

Among the NB6, *Environment* is the second most contentious issue, accounting for 31,4% of disagreements (Table 1). That is intriguing because, despite the sustainability narrative given to the region by previous research, the countries shared different preferences on, for example, the following issues: "the reduction of national emissions of certain atmospheric pollutants" (Council of the European Union, 2016c) or "the inclusion of greenhouse gas emissions and removals from land use, land use change and forestry in the 2030 climate and energy framework" (Council of the European Union, 2018a). Consequently, the quantitative data currently reflects the potential to question the region's sustainability agenda.

It is also worth noting that environmental issues have caused conflicts among the Nordic countries. In fact, it is the fourth most disputed policy area, according to Table 3. Finland and Sweden are more inclined towards European environmental policies, with only one opposition vote each. For instance, Finland opposed together with Lithuania on "organic production and labeling of organic products" (Council of the European Union, 2018c). On the other hand, Denmark voted against it twice and did not participate three times, making it the most opposing country among the NB6, with five oppositions. That raises concerns about the sustainability agenda of the Nordics and the region as a whole, especially since all three Nordic countries opposed the issue.

For the Baltics, *Environment* is the most conflictual policy area, according to Table 2. Latvia had the highest number of opposition votes, with a total of four, followed by Lithuania with three opposition votes. In addition, Estonia abstained from voting along with Latvia on one occasion. Therefore, the Baltics show less coherence than the Nordics and a slightly higher number of opposition votes on the topic.

Since the analysis does not give any basis for interpreting such voting behavior, the potential regionality suggests the following tendencies for testing:

1. The NB6 is not a coherent regional group in the field of *Environment*, reflecting a contradiction with the region's sustainability agenda.
2. The NB6 is very outspoken on the topic due to the most opposition votes in the policy area of *Environment*. Therefore, the region wants to enhance its regional voice by challenging the EU policies to advance its environmental concern further.
3. The Nordics are more coherent with one another than the Baltics, reflecting a potentially better-shared understanding.

### *Social Policy and Employment*

*Social Policy* was in fourth place for the most conflictual policy areas in the region (Table 1) and is among the first three of the highest disagreements between the Nordics and the Baltics (Tables 2 and 3). Therefore, the Nordics and the Baltics show a significant disagreement in *Social Policy*.

The Nordics share a high percentage of 18,2% disagreements among them (Table 3). Especially Sweden is the country with the most oppositions, having had three in total. For example, Sweden once voted against "establishing a European Labour Authority" (Council of the European Union, 2019c). That could reflect a specific type of protectionism over its welfare system. Denmark also participated in one opposition vote alone in *Social Policy*. The latter comprised the "work-life balance for parents and carers" (Council of the European Union, 2019b).

*Employment* comes right after *Social Policy*, with 16,7% of disagreements among the NB6. Denmark and Sweden are, again, significant opponents out of the six countries. Together, they opposed a decision on "adequate minimum wages in the European Union" (Council of the European Union, 2022a). In the analysis by Kocsis et al., the authors also conclude that "[Denmark and Sweden] stand out" (2021: 83).

For the Baltics, *Social Policy* is the second highest conflictual policy area (Table 2). Nevertheless, there seems to be more coherence within the Baltics, having shared oppositions. For example, Lithuania and Latvia shared an opposition in abstention on "the posting of workers in the framework of the provision of services" (Council of the European Union, 2018e). Another time, Latvia and Estonia shared an opposition with Sweden. For *Employment*, no disagreement was detected among the Baltics.

Nevertheless, since the analysis does not allow insight into the concrete discussion and implications of such a decision, one can also interpret that Denmark and Sweden wanted more minimum wage or work-life balance for parents than the EU policy allowed. In that case, the voting behavior would favor the social welfare agenda.

For the potential regionality, the author takes the following tendencies:

1. There is a division between the NB6 regarding *Social Policy* and *Employment*, with Denmark and Sweden taking more assertive positions. Consequently, there is a tendency for social differences among the countries.

### Finances

In cohesion with the analysis by Kocsis, "financial issues – budgets included – stand out as a policy area where preferences diverge" (2021: 83) among the NB6-countries. Together, Sweden and Denmark opposed a decision "on the general budget of the European Union for the financial year 2020 Approval" (Council of the European Union, 2019e). Further, both countries opposed the issue three times, making them the most vocal countries of the NB6. That could reflect the differences in financial attitudes within the European Union between the Baltics and the Nordics, mentioned in the literature review (cp. Kuusik et al., 2018a: 6). If so, the latter could also be connected to Baltics being considered net receivers and Nordics net payers. Nevertheless, the policy area Finances, with 4,3% of disagreements among the NB6, is not as conflictual as one might suggest (Table 1).

Therefore, the potential regionality suggests either coherence or divergence among the countries:

1. There is a division between the NB6. Denmark and Sweden take more substantial positions on the issues of *Finances*. Consequently, there is a tendency for financial differences among the countries.
2. There is coherence among the NB6 countries regarding the European budget and financial distribution.

#### 4.4. Country-specific regionality

In this subchapter, the author will point out specific characteristics or tendencies concerning a specific country or a group of countries. Therefore, the author gains insight into potential regionality regarding relations and behavior patterns among the countries.

##### *The Baltics – a coherent regional voice*

For the Baltics, there is a high vote similarity of 97,5%. The latter even shows an increase of 97% before and 98,5% after Brexit. Therefore, the overall tendency is that the Baltics move closer to one another. In addition, the following policy areas have no disagreements among the Baltics: *Space, Education, Youth, Industry, Employment, Research, Culture, Consumer Affairs, Energy, Institutional, Telecommunications, Health, Foreign Affairs, Economy, and Transport* (Table 2). Furthermore, one has to say that all three show the same pattern regarding vote similarity from 2016 until 2022. Hence, for all three states, the other two Baltic states are the closest countries compared to the Nordics (Table 7). That shows the tendency of the Baltics to be more homogenous. Further, all three Baltics have Finland as the third closest country, followed by Sweden in the fourth place, and Denmark being the furthest.

Additionally, all three countries have increased their vote similarities since Brexit (Tables 8 and 9). That could mean a more substantial development of a Baltic group within the region. If one looks at the tendencies and developments regarding synchronous oppositions, all three Baltic countries increased their synchronous oppositions significantly after Brexit (Tables 11 and 12). That does not only mean a possible improvement in coordination among the Baltics but also the enhancement of its voice within the European Union, taking more significantly a standpoint on issues. With that said, most synchronous oppositions of the Baltics were among themselves, reflecting a higher level of coordination among the Baltic countries than with the Nordic countries.

Moreover, all three shared synchronous oppositions with Poland on the *Transport* issue three times after Brexit. Further, there was also a simultaneous nonparticipation with Poland and Denmark two times on the issue of *Justice and Home Affairs*. Therefore, five votes were done with a specific pattern of being a bloc.

Regarding opposition partners for the Baltics, one needs to mention Poland. The data shows a high percentage of vote similarity, with Latvia being the closest (96%), followed by Estonia and Lithuania with 95,6%. Consequently, Poland is a closer partner than Denmark. For Latvia, Poland surpasses Sweden with 95,1% (Table 7). Therefore, Finland is the only Nordic country with a higher vote similarity than Poland for all Baltic countries.

For synchronous oppositions, Latvia has the most oppositions or nonparticipation with Poland (9), followed by Estonia and Lithuania with eight oppositions or nonparticipation. Therefore, the Baltics have been in opposition with Poland more often than with any Nordic country.

Consequently, the author recognizes the following aspects of potential regionality:

1. The Baltic group is more coherent than the Nordics, contradicting the analysis by Kocsis, suggesting "cohesion to be strongest among Sweden, Denmark, and Finland" (2021: 85).
2. The Baltics are more outspoken, taking the stand against European policies more frequently.
3. The Baltics show tendencies of appearing as a bloc, having shared five synchronous oppositions with all three countries.
4. Poland is a close coalition partner for the Baltics. Therefore, there is a potential to develop a stronger allegiance between the Baltics and Poland.

#### *The Nordics – a more heterogenous group*

When examining Finland, Denmark, and Sweden, it is noteworthy that their voting patterns have been 88% similar from 2016 to 2022. Additionally, the Nordics have increased their similarity from 86,6% before Brexit to 90,4% after it. However, there are still policy areas with differing views, with only Space, Education, Youth, Research, Energy, Institutional, and Transport being without disagreement among the three countries in the last six years. Despite this, there has not been a synchronous opposition from all three countries during this period, indicating no consistent Nordic bloc.

Therefore, the following tendency exists for the potential regionality:

1. There is not a consistent Nordic group among the NB6.

### *A Northern group + Estonia*

The author detects an exciting tendency of Finland, Sweden, and Estonia to have a high preference for similarity and symbolizing a new manifestation of a Northern group, with Estonia being part instead of Denmark.

First, in Sweden, all vote similarities with the NB6-countries are over 95%, besides Denmark, which has 88,9% (Table 7). Therefore, more coherence between Sweden, the Baltics, and Finland can be detected. Such a high similarity also means Sweden's high prioritization and geographical orientation towards these countries. Second, the closest country is Finland with 97,3%, followed by Estonia with 96,5%. Those two remain the closest countries also after Brexit (Tables 8 and 9). Second, for Finland, Estonia is in first place in vote similarity, and Sweden is in third place with Latvia (Table 7). Again, the close relationship between the three countries is confirmed. Third, Estonia has, in comparison to the other two Baltic states, the closest vote similarity with Finland and Sweden, reflecting a stronger relationship between the three countries (Table 7).

Fourth, Estonia is the closest country to Finland, reflecting a deeper connection between the two countries (Table 7). Before Brexit, Estonia is in first place, and after Brexit, it is in second place (Tables 8 and 9). Therefore, the relationship between those countries remains close, as suggested in the literature review.

Fifth, all three countries shared a synchronous opposition. Unfortunately, the author could not determine the policy area or issue. Nevertheless, the fact that the three countries shared a synchronous opposition, with Estonia being the only Baltic country in opposition with two Nordic countries simultaneously, emphasizes the strong ties between the three countries. Additionally, all three countries opposed the policy area of Environment the least, with one opposition each. Therefore, the policy area's evaluation is more similar.

Last, the above-mentioned close relationship between Estonia, Finland, and Sweden also gives room for the tendency to regard Estonia as the closest Baltic country to the Nordics. First, Estonia shares a synchronous opposition as the only Baltic country with two Nordic countries simultaneously, emphasizing solid ties. Second, Estonia has, in comparison to the other two Baltic states, the closest vote similarity with Finland and Sweden, reflecting a stronger relationship between the three countries (Table 7).

For the potential regionality, the author takes the following tendencies:

1. First, there is a close relationship between Finland and Sweden.
2. A new Nordic voice is emerging between Finland, Sweden, and Estonia.
3. Estonian-Finnish relations are incredibly close and continue to be so.
4. Estonia is the closest Baltic country to the Nordic countries.

#### *Finland – the bridge between the Nordics and the Baltics*

Finland stands out because it seems closer to the Baltic group than the Nordic one, with Estonia being the closest country with 97,9%, Lithuania (97,8%), Latvia, and Sweden (97,3%) (Table 7). The pattern shows a strong Finnish tendency to orient oneself alongside the Baltics while being close to its Nordic neighbor, Sweden. Therefore, Finland also functions as a bridge, as suggested in the literature (cp. Kocsis, 2021). Further, Finland is the third closest country to all three Baltic states and, therefore, the closest Nordic country to them.

Therefore, the author suggests the following potential regionality:

1. Finland acts like a bridge between the Baltics and the Nordics, often being in the middle of the two groups.

#### *Denmark – a particular case*

Out of the six Nordic-Baltic countries, Denmark stands out the most. It has the second-highest number of oppositions in the European Union, with 67 oppositional stands, just behind the UK. For example, on the *Justice and Home Affairs* issue, Denmark was in the opposition 48 times, which explains the high percentage of disagreement in that policy area. Additionally, the UK is a crucial ally for Denmark, with a 95,5% vote similarity rate before Brexit, making it the closest NB6-country to the UK.

When looking at the Nordic-Baltic countries, it is clear that none have a vote similarity rate above 90% with Denmark (according to Table 7). That indicates that Denmark's voting preferences differ significantly from the other countries. However, Ireland has the highest vote similarity rate of 95%, as confirmed by Kocsis (2021). Even after Brexit, Denmark's voting similarity with Ireland remains at 96%.

In addition to the points mentioned above, there is also a possibility of a different geographical orientation outside the Nordic-Baltic region. That is supported by the fact that the UK and Ireland share a high degree of voting similarity with Denmark. The author also noticed a similar trend in the area of *Fisheries*. For example, Denmark opposed a decision on "a multiannual plan for demersal stocks in the North Sea and the fisheries exploiting those stocks" (Council of the European Union, 2018d). That further confirms the argument of a differing geographical inclination, as Denmark is the only Nordic-Baltic nation bordering the North Sea.

As mentioned, Denmark has the second-highest opposition standing in the European Union. Out of the twelve times being in abstentions or voting against (Table 4), it shared most oppositions with Sweden (3), which could mean more advanced coordination among the countries (Table 10). Nevertheless, Denmark only shared five synchronous oppositions with the Nordic-Baltic Six, which shows, again, the outstanding agenda of Denmark.

Nevertheless, the analysis also shows a tendency to go in the other direction, showing a close relationship with the region and the potential to grow. First, Denmark shares simultaneous nonparticipation twice with the three Baltic states on the issue of *Justice and Home Affairs*. Therefore, Denmark is the only Nordic country that simultaneously voted together in opposition or nonparticipation with the Baltic group.

Second, Brexit has brought Denmark closer to all the Nordic-Baltic countries in the EU, having a vote similarity of over 90% (Table 9) compared to under 90% before Brexit (Table 8). Therefore, although the lower level of vote similarity and synchronous oppositions suggest a somewhat distant relation, the data also makes room for another tendency.

For those reasons, the author recognizes two tendencies for the potential regionality:

1. Denmark is the most distant country in its preferences and less engaged than others due to its different geographic orientation and high like-mindedness with countries outside the region.
2. Denmark's geopolitical orientation also goes beyond the Nordic-Baltic region.
3. Denmark has become more involved in the Nordic-Baltic cooperation since Brexit and is increasing its engagement in the region, identifying itself more strongly with it.

#### **4.5. Conclusion of the quantitative data analysis and implications for actual regionality and regional cohesiveness**

The chapter summarizes the potential tendencies and developments for the Nordic-Baltic region's regionality and cohesiveness. After that, the qualitative analysis will either prove or discard the mentioned tendencies and developments as a part of the actual regionality.

First, the analysis suggests potential characteristics of close cooperation, openness to other countries in the region, as well as potential developments of a regional voice. These findings are significant because they illuminate whether the NB6 can form a cohesive regional voice. Additionally, the results confirm that Nordic-Baltic cooperation is not exclusive and identify potential partners such as Ireland and Poland.

Furthermore, the Baltics show the potential to be more coherent than the Nordics. The latter is interesting because it contradicts the previous literature about the region, stressing the Nordics to be more coherent (cp. Kocsis, 2021: 85).

For policy areas, the NB6 is potentially coherent in *Foreign Affairs*, *Telecommunications*, *Internal Market* and *Consumer Affairs*, *Energy*, *Development*, and *Institutional*. Consequently, the results confirm the literature characterizing the region as a coherent advocate of an open and liberal market in the EU (cp. Kuusik et al., 2018b: 7–8). Nevertheless, the Baltics seem more vocal advocates of an open and liberal market. For *Telecommunications* and *Foreign Affairs*, the Baltics have a slightly higher coherence than the Nordics. Overall, the region can be viewed as a pro-European group with a shared coherence regarding the future of EU institutions and similar attitudes towards foreign and energy policies within the region and the EU.

However, the NB6 is potentially not coherent in *Social Policy* and *Employment*. The latter confirms the literature pointing to differences in wealth among the countries (cp. Kuusik et al., 2018b; Kleinberga, 2019: 20). Another intriguing policy area is *Environment*. Here, the results show two tendencies: First, the region is incoherent in the policy area, with the Nordics having a more similar understanding of the EU policies than the Baltics. The latter would confirm previous literature (cp. Kleinberga, 2019: 24). Second; the region is especially vocal about the issue since it shares a common understanding of its importance. The latter tendency would add a new interpretation and development to previous research. The policy area of *Finances* also shows potential for both coherence and division.

The analysis also suggests country-specific tendencies, including the Baltics being more coherent and outspoken and Estonia having close relations with Finland and Sweden. Furthermore, Denmark is stressed as a fascinating country in the region. Finally, for coherence after and before Brexit, the results confirm the research stressing that Brexit will bring the countries closer together (cp. Kuusik et al., 2018a: 9; Kleinberga, 2019: 17). Nevertheless, there is also room for suggesting that the Baltics and the Nordics will further depart from each other. Both arguments regarding cohesiveness are intriguing since they reflect the literature's division toward the framework's future.

As said above, the qualitative analysis will further explore these tendencies and highlight other developments not shown in the quantitative data.

## **5. The construction of the region's actual regionality**

This chapter will present the findings of the qualitative analysis of interviews. The author conducted eight semi-structured interviews with ambassadors from four NB6-countries for qualitative data collection. Additionally, three interviews were conducted with the Nordic Council of Ministers' Offices in all three Baltic states, and one interview was held with the Danish Permanent Representation in Brussels. A total of twelve interviews were conducted and analyzed through qualitative content analysis.

### **5.1. The Nordic-Baltic region**

In this subchapter, the author looked at the overall acknowledgment of the region and how it has been characterized in the interviews. The goal is to illustrate the cooperation thoroughly and either discard or confirm the characteristics given to the NB6 in the literature review and the potential regionality. For that, the author divided this subchapter into the following categories: the acknowledgment of the region, the characteristics of the cooperation, reasons to work together, and regional identity.

#### *The acknowledgment of the region*

The qualitative analysis showed an acknowledgment of the region in all twelve interviews. Therefore, one can state an existence of a Nordic-Baltic region. Interviewees stressed, for example, that "there is, of course, a regional dimension" (Interview 1). Furthermore, there are signs that the region is acknowledged not only from the inside but also from the outside as "a region" (Interview 8) and "already a brand" (Interview 9).

Nevertheless, the qualitative analysis also shows that the Nordic-Baltic region includes more than just countries in the European Union. When asked the first of the preliminary questions, all participants answered that the NB6 is a somehow an "incomplete picture" (Interview 4) of the region. Furthermore, everyone stressed that "the natural formation of a regional geographic grouping" (Interview 9) consists of the Nordic-Baltic Eight. Therefore, "the region is broader" (Interview 5).

As a result of the first category, the analysis strongly confirms the existence and the consciousness of the countries about the existence of a Nordic-Baltic region. Still, the analysis also gave room for future research regarding the regionality of the Nordic-Baltic Eight.

### *The characteristics of the cooperation*

In all interviews, participants emphasized the "very tight cooperation between those countries" (Interview 7), especially "within the EU" (Interview 1). Regarding the cooperation inside the European Union, two participants even called the cooperation a family, stressing that in the EU, "Norway and Iceland will stay outside this family when it comes to the European Union" (Interview 4).

Therefore, the analysis shows a high level of cooperation, emphasizing the strong regionality between the countries. In order to understand the different layers of the close cooperation among the six countries, the author found the following characteristics:

#### *Coordination and exchange of information*

That code consists of descriptions regarding the need to discuss and exchange views and coordinate their actions in the European Union. The characteristic was mentioned in nine interviews and is, therefore, the most mentioned characteristic for the Nordic-Baltic cooperation in the EU. That is also reflected in the interviews with statements like "we do our most to align our positions and to understand each other" (Interview 1) and "the main idea is to discuss" (Interview 3). Consequently, the strong emphasis of the code reflects the expectations in the literature review. Furthermore, the code also entails statements showing that the goal of coordinating and exchanging views is "to gang up" (Interviews 1, 4).

#### *Extending their influence*

Hand in hand with the code mentioned above goes the code "Extending their influence". Here, the qualitative analysis showed mentions in five interviews regarding the need "to maximize the influence" (Interview 4). As is mentioned in one interview: "Being together and doing things together makes us stronger. In this way, one plus one is not two; it is three, figuratively speaking" (Interview 5). Furthermore, the code also entails a significant description of bargaining power by being able to count on at least six signatures for an initiative of the region in the European Union: "Actually, six signatures on the paper, and then you get a few more, it gets really impressive" (Interview 3). Therefore, a strong emphasis is on influencing the European Union from within. That also makes the Nordic-Baltic cooperation a highly regarded cooperation for the future.

### *Like-mindedness and Trust*

The following codes also provide valuable insights into the regionality of the six countries. Like-mindedness was mentioned in four interviews: "Well, because we are like-minded" (Interview 3). Furthermore, the code also entails statements that show a significantly deep level of like-mindedness, where it "does not really even matter who the government is" (Interview 3). Moreover, there are tendencies of an inner circle for cooperation: "[...] if we cannot agree amongst ourselves then who can we agree with?" (Interview 3).

Another characteristic of the cooperation among the NB6 is trust. That characteristic was mentioned in five interviews. The code entails descriptions of the countries having "a level of trust" (Interview 1), where the cooperation among them is "horizontal" (Interview 3). Interestingly, three participants mention that trust is primarily something that the Nordics bring to the table, emphasizing it as "Nordic gold" (Interview 11). Nevertheless, the qualitative analysis shows that trust is generally characteristic for the whole region: "And if we do not compare the Baltics with the Nordics, but we compare the region with the big world, we have big trust also in the Baltics" (Interview 12).

### *Issue-based cooperation*

As was mentioned in several research papers, Nordic-Baltic cooperation is mainly characterized by an issue-based coalition within the European Union (cp. Kleinberga, 2019; Kuusik et al., 2018a, b). In contrast, the qualitative analysis shows only four participants mentioning such a characteristic. Still, the code also highlights the openness of the group of countries, which is also emphasized in the literature. Consequently, one cannot regard the Nordic-Baltic cooperation as a bloc since "permanent blocs do not exist" (Interview 6).

### *Responsibility*

Last but not least, the analysis shows one more characteristic of the region: responsibility. The latter is a rather complex code, which entails statements about the countries' shared responsibility. When asked how to describe the six countries as a group, 50% of the participants chose the keyword "responsibility" (Interviews 1, 5, 6, 8, 10, 12). The concern of shared responsibility was used in their cooperation, where the countries are described as "responsible partners" (Interview 8).

The region was also portrayed as standing out due to that particular characteristic: "one word which characterizes the whole region, especially in comparison maybe to other EU countries and partners, would be responsibility" (Interview 5). Further, responsibility was also used in the context of military and energy cooperation and keeping the region stable and safe: "We handle these things with great responsibility. Moreover, you just discuss and decide within the region what is the best? What is the best for the security of the region? How shall we become energy-wise independent? Shall we become self-sufficient?" (Interview 8). In another context, responsibility was also used for the "common Baltic Sea" (Interview 1).

Consequently, the analysis shows that the regionality of the region consists of a great awareness of one another and the shared space.

### Reasons to work together

The analysis showed three main reasons to work together: nature and the Baltic Sea, history, and geopolitics. As was mentioned in the code of responsibility, the analysis showed a high awareness of their shared space and the joint responsibility for the "common Baltic Sea" (Interview 1). In total, 50% of the participants used the Sea to justify their cooperation as they recognized it as a similarity since they are "all bordering the Baltic Sea" (Interview 1). Furthermore, there is a strong tendency that the importance of the Baltic Sea is growing for the region: "With NATO membership, the Baltic Sea will become an internal Sea" (Interview 9). Interestingly, the strong emphasis on the Baltic Sea contradicts previous research, which finds that more than sharing a geographical space is needed to create an awareness of the region (cp. Rūse, 2014). The shared space, especially the Baltic Sea, is also mentioned for the second reason to work together: history. Although the literature often refers to it as a dividing characteristic among the Nordic and Baltic countries, three participants mentioned it as a unifying factor since they share "a similar history" (Interview 3).

The last reason highlighted is geopolitics. Besides the shared geographic space regarding the Baltic Sea, 50% of the participants also mentioned the "geopolitical concern we share" (Interview 1). The latter is primarily concerned with having "similar problems of having a big neighbor" (Interview 1). Due to the current political situation of having an extension in NATO and the Russian aggression in Ukraine, the participants were naturally influenced by these events and developments: "Russia affects everything what we are doing here at the moment" (Interview 7).

### Regional identity

The last category for that theme entails the overall discourse of the participants concerning regional identity. Seven participants said they recognize a regional identity among the six countries. The reasoning behind that is based on, for example, the Baltic Sea: "It would be peculiar if there would not be regional entities somehow and then that is around the Baltic Sea" (Interview 10). Furthermore, geopolitics also plays a role: "Regional identity in the sense that we are neighbors, and we are affected by the issues that are happening around us and especially, of course, Russia" (Interview 7). Nevertheless, the response was often combined with statements that stress that expecting "a full-fledged regional identity [...] in such a short period [...] is too optimistic" (Interview 11). Therefore, most responses were rather careful by stating that a regional identity exists "to an extent" (Interview 5).

On the other hand, five participants said that identity is "a strong word" (Interview 1) or clearly stated: "No, there is no identity. For sure not" (Interview 9). For reasoning the complexity of having a regional identity, the analysis showed the existence of several identities. As has been stressed in one interview: "[...] we have a national identity; we have a European identity, and the question is how strong the regional identity coming in-between is" (Interview 1). The author came across such statements in three interviews.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, the potential regionality showed a tendency for close cooperation between the countries due to a high vote similarity and an openness of the region towards other countries. Consequently, both tendencies could be confirmed in the qualitative analysis.

The following characteristics of the Nordic-Baltic cooperation within the European Union are part of the actual regionality: coordination and exchange of information, extending their influence, like-mindedness, trust, issue-based cooperation, and responsibility. One can find the highest level of regionality in *coordinating and exchanging information*, with nine participants mentioning it. On the other hand, one can find the lowest level of regionality regarding *issue-based cooperation* with four participants. The latter is surprising and might underline the tendency for closer cooperation in the future, regardless of the issue at hand. In addition, seven participants see the formation of a regional identity, while five disagree with this suggestion.

## 5.2. Regional Cohesiveness after Brexit

As highlighted before, regional cohesiveness is used to highlight the change and the effect of Brexit on the Nordic-Baltic cooperation in the European Union. As has been quantitatively shown, the potential regionality shows a tendency of an increase in the regional voice due to more opposition stands. Further, there is also the potential for a higher level of cohesiveness due to a higher percentage of vote similarity. Finally, the potential regionality also suggests Denmark is the closest country to the United Kingdom.

In order to justify the author's choice of Brexit, the analysis shows that seven participants identify the change as "quite a substantial change for this region" (Interview 1). On the other hand, five participants were hesitant and said that Brexit did not directly affect Nordic-Baltic cooperation. Nevertheless, all interviews highlighted that the region has lost "one of our natural allies in the European Union" (Interview 4), being also a "key ally" (Interview 5). Regarding the latter, the UK was mentioned as being a close partner for the NB6 in the following policy areas: *Internal Market* (3), *Security* (3), and *Foreign Affairs* (1). Therefore, the qualitative analysis does confirm the significance of Brexit already shown in the quantitative analysis.

Furthermore, the analysis also shows a strong tendency of the NB6 to continue their close work with the United Kingdom even after Brexit: "We see the cooperation in future to be kept as close as possible" (Interview 9). Additionally, there are tendencies that such aspirations are mutual: "You have to know, and I am sure it is the same in Tallinn, the UK embassy is bigger now than before Brexit" (Interview 12).

Regarding Denmark being the closest country to the UK, four participants confirm the potential regionality: "[...] to Denmark, the UK was clearly THE member state" (Interview 2). Therefore, the element becomes part of the regional identity.

Another potential regionality confirmed by the qualitative analysis is the increase in cohesiveness among the NB6. On the one hand, all twelve participants declare the need for closer cooperation: "If we say that we are a region, then it is like, you have to not only say so, but also act that way" (Interview 8). On the other hand, there is also confirmation of already being closer than before Brexit: "The cooperation is [...] more intensive than before" (Interview 8).

Nevertheless, the author would like to stress that the ability to be open for new partners and the need for new coalition partners due to Brexit is emphasized in all interviews: "We have to be more on our toes and also build coalitions with others" (Interview 1). Therefore, there are two tendencies for regional cohesiveness: First, an increase in cohesiveness among the Nordic-Baltic Six countries due to Brexit. Second, the need to reach out to new coalition partners and enhance the openness of the Nordic-Baltic cooperation.

Regarding the latter, it is stated explicitly in two interviews that "nobody wants to have a Nordic-Baltic bloc in any organization" (Interview 3). Therefore, the participants stress that there will be different extensions regarding Nordic-Baltic cooperation. As mentioned, "there is Nordic Baltic plus the UK" (Interview 9) outside the EU. Inside the EU, the participants mentioned the following countries: Germany (3), Netherlands (3), Ireland (2), Poland (2), and Portugal (1). Interestingly, the New Hanseatic League concerning Ireland and the Netherlands has also been mentioned.

### Conclusion

The potential regionality suggested the following: First, the region becomes closer after Brexit. Second, Denmark is the closest country to the United Kingdom. Third, a more robust division between the Baltics and the Nordics might be developed. Regarding the first, there has been an increase in cohesiveness since Brexit among the countries. Therefore, closer and more intense cooperation is part of the actual regionality. Nevertheless, there is a growing potential regionality regarding inevitable spin-offs of the Nordic-Baltic cooperation, including other countries like Germany or the Netherlands. Consequently, the format of the NB6 will prove to be a highly regarded cooperation in the future, highlighting the need to research it further. Secondly, the actual regionality does entail the closest relationship before Brexit between Denmark and the United Kingdom. Interestingly, the participants gave no ground to suggest an enhancement for developing a further division between the Baltics and the Nordics. Therefore, a more assertive regional voice is, once again, confirmed and can be expected in the future.

### 5.3. Policy areas

The analysis will now address specific policy areas where the participants mentioned cohesion or differences. In order to have a better understanding of the similarities and differences among the countries, the subchapter is divided into homogenous areas and conflictual areas. The former reflects areas where there is a similar understanding of issues at hand among the countries. The following areas could be detected: *Security and Defense, Foreign Affairs, Consumer Affairs and Internal Market, Energy and Environment, Telecommunications, Development and Institutional*. Although the analysis mostly showed cohesion in these areas, it does not exclude specific differences, which the author will also highlight. The author detected *Enlargement, Social Policy, Employment and Finances* for the conflictual policy areas. Here, the author mostly found disagreements among the countries.

#### 5.3.1. Homogenous policy areas

##### *Security and Defense*

The analysis showed a high degree of agreement for the *Security* policy area. However, the analysis is influenced by the current political developments, including the NATO enlargement and the Russian aggression in Ukraine.

Both developments play a crucial role in *Security*: "So, for policy issues, of course, nowadays, most of the attention is on how to increase the price of aggression for the Russian Federation" (Interview 4). Seven participants identified it as a homogenous policy area where all countries share the same understanding of the importance. It is crucial to mention that the analysis shows a homogenous politics and reaction toward the Russian aggression in Ukraine for all participants: "So, a very similar approach to the Ukraine war. That is very similar" (Interview 5). Furthermore, security in the region was mentioned in three interviews as priority number one: "I think the number one priority would be security because it affects the whole region" (Interview 5).

Further, the analysis showed that one could expect an increase in homogeneity regarding *Defense*. In four interviews, *Defense* was identified as having a "huge potential" (Interview 4) and being like-minded. The latter concerns the NATO enlargement regarding Finland and Sweden joining the international organization. In nine interviews, NATO was mentioned as the new future potential for tight cooperation: "So, this is an example where we can now participate, and we can all join forces in this field" (Interview 1).

After the completion of the NATO-membership, there may be a growing need for the Nordic-Baltic countries to collaborate as a collective. One expert suggests that while the Nordics and Baltics can work closely together separately, the most effective outcome would be a merger of resources and a joint Nordic-Baltic cooperation effort (Interview 9).

Consequently, the analysis shows the following actual regionality of the cooperation: First, *Security* and *Defense* are homogenous among the countries with a similar understanding of regional security and geopolitics. Second, the cooperation is getting closer in the future due to developments like the NATO membership of Finland and Sweden, as well as the influence of the Russian aggression in Ukraine. Third, one should watch for future developments inside NATO regarding the regional command structures. Fourth, the analysis now gives ground to dismiss analyses arguing that security is still a policy area of conflict among the Nordic-Baltic countries.

#### *Foreign Affairs*

Three participants identified the policy area of *Foreign Affairs* as homogenous, with no disagreements: "I think foreign policy in our area, to start with that, that is very similar, especially in the European and global context" (Interview 5). That confirms the quantitative data, where *Foreign Affairs* was also identified as a homogenous policy area. However, there was no evidence to suggest that the Baltics are more homogenous than the Nordics, so this is not part of the actual regionality.

#### *Telecommunications*

In the field of *Telecommunications*, the analysis found that nine participants mentioned a common regional characteristic of high similarity among the countries. Moreover, it is already acknowledged from the outside: "From the outside, we are recognized as a region where digitalization, ICT, cyber cybersecurity is at very high levels" (Interview 8).

Furthermore, two participants acknowledge it as an area that "has risen in importance" (Interview 12). Mainly since "Denmark got rid of its exception within the EU cooperation last year" (Interview 1). Therefore, one can expect stronger cooperation in that field. Nevertheless, three participants also identified a difference among the countries. The latter entails that "the Baltics, in some areas, are ahead" (Interview 1).

For actual regionality, *Telecommunications* is part of the regional identity with a high level of similarity in mindset and perspectives. Further, the regionality could get more robust in that area. Therefore, the qualitative analysis confirms the quantitative data. Still, the actual regionality also entails a higher development in the field for the Baltics. Consequently, the Baltics are recognized as more homogenous and developed than the Nordics.

### *Internal Market and Consumer Affairs*

Trade and the open market were crucial in analyzing these two policy areas. In seven interviews, the policy areas were identified as homogenous and a high priority for the cooperation: "Especially to be supporting the internal market and work for a deepening of the internal market and improve the competitiveness is an area where we are like-minded" (Interview 1). The reason for such homogeneity was, on the one hand, the similarity that all six countries are open economies and ambassadors for free trade. That was emphasized in three interviews: "But we also bring to the table the need to emphasize free trade" (Interview 1). On the other hand, the high dependence of the countries on other supply chains was mentioned in two interviews and emphasized as a reason to increase the cooperation: "So, more cooperation would increase that preparedness" (Interview 5). That already shows a future tendency mentioned by five participants: "We have to insist that trade and the internal market are a feature of our cooperation. They have to be at the heart of our cooperation" (Interview 1). Therefore, one can expect a high potential for "tighter cooperation" (Interview 7) in *Consumer Affairs* and *Internal Market*.

Nevertheless, the policy areas also came with a tendency to differ from one another. For example, in three interviews, the Baltic states were identified as more open economies than the Nordics: "[...] we are even more open markets" (Interview 4). Furthermore, the Nordics are identified as being "fairly protective of their markets" (Interview 5). In contrast, the Baltics are "true believer[s] and also accept[s] the possible negative sides of the free market" (Interview 5).

The analysis shows a substantial homogeneity in *Consumer Affairs* and *the Internal Market* for actual regionality, with seven participants identifying them as homogenous. Further, five participants point out that there is a strong tendency to increase cooperation in those areas. Last, regionality still consists of differences between the Baltics and the Nordics. The latter entails that the Baltics are confirmed to be more vigorous advocates of a free and open market. Therefore, the qualitative analysis confirms the tendencies detected in the quantitative data.

## Energy

For *Energy*, five participants identified it as homogenous and high on the priority list: "On energy policy, we are like-minded, and we work together" (Interview 9). For those policies, four participants mentioned the region's potential regarding the green transition and wind energy: "There is a focus on extending the wind potential in the Baltic Sea and also the need to have more interconnections" (Interview 1). The latter already highlights that the policy area also fosters closer cooperation in the future.

Nevertheless, four participants also mentioned differences among the countries: "[...] the energy policy of the countries is quite different, which means that at times our positions on those issues are quite different" (Interview 2). The difference stems from the tendency that the Baltics have been "quite slow for different reasons with introducing, for instance, wind energy" (Interview 11).

For the actual regionality, *Energy* is a homogenous policy area with the potential to increase its homogeneity. Therefore, the region thrives to become one with renewable energy and a sustainable energy supply, confirming the literature review. Nevertheless, part of the actual regionality is that the Baltics are behind the Nordics in fulfilling the energy goals.

## Environment

Coming to *Environment*, the policy area shows a high level of homogeneity, with ten participants identifying it as homogenous, despite the predictions in the literature review (cp. Kleinberga, 2019). Therefore, an incoherent environmental policy is not part of the actual regionality. Furthermore, the author asked four participants if they saw differences among the countries in the field. Only one identified a difference: "Nordics are on the climate side ahead of us. We have more to learn from them: clean energy and energy cooperation in the region" (Interview 5). Again, the comment is more related to energy concerns already established above. Despite that, three participants dismissed differences. Moreover, the analysis shows a need for closer cooperation in climate issues and sustainability to make the region "the most sustainable" (Interviews 11, 12). Therefore, one can also expect that "a clean environment could be another term that [...] is characteristic for the region" (Interview 5).

Concluding *Environment*, the actual regionality confirms the potential tendency that the region is very outspoken on the topic due to a high priority. Nevertheless, the tendency to contradict the region's sustainability agenda could not be confirmed and is not a *regionized* element. Furthermore, the Baltics and Nordics are on the same page regarding mindset and importance. Nevertheless, one participant still confirmed that Nordics are further developed than the Baltics in the topic. Therefore, a better-shared understanding of the Nordics concerning environmental issues is part of the actual regionality.

### *Development and Institutional*

For *Development*, the analysis includes descriptions of the region as a "highly developed region" (Interview 8), with "very well-educated people" (Interview 8), where "research is extremely important" (Interview 12) and "new technologies" (Interview 6) are developed. Therefore, the qualitative analysis confirms the quantitative data findings that the Nordic-Baltic region is future-oriented regarding research, education, and innovation.

Five participants also confirmed that "[...] this is the kind of branding for the region" (Interview 8). Furthermore, one also pointed out that for the future, "we have to work hard to keep our image of being sort of future technologies highly developed region" (Interview 8). Consequently, *Development* is part of the region's identity.

The same goes for the policy area *Institutional*. Three participants confirmed they "align on many institutional questions" (Interview 2). Therefore, the qualitative analysis confirms the similarity detected in the quantitative data that the NB6 are alike in that field.

### **5.3.2. Conflictual policy areas**

Until now, the following homogenous policy areas could be identified as part of the actual regionality: *Security, Defense, Foreign Affairs, Internal Market, Consumer Affairs, Energy, Environment, Development, and Institutional*. Nevertheless, there are also conflictual policy areas where more cooperation will be needed in the future. Those will be explained in detail below.

### Enlargement

Two participants identified an issue for the region in the future: EU enlargement. As part of the challenge for the future, they identify that the Nordics would like to have "some kind of reforms to make such a union workable" (Interview 2). However, they see a risk if the European Union "proceed[s] too speedily" (Interview 1). On the other side are the Baltics, which have a more "geopolitical approach to enlargement" (Interview 2) and have the viewpoint that the European Union "should speed up the enlargement" (Interview 1).

As a result, the actual regionality consists of a potential challenge regarding the enlargement process within the European Union. The analysis suggests a suspected division between the Baltics and the Nordics.

### Social Policy and Employment

*Social Policy* is an area identified by all participants as conflictual among the countries. These are the following differences mentioned: wealth (6), welfare system (4), values (3), taxation system (2), minimum wage (1), health system (1), and labor law (1).

Interestingly, history was mentioned in six interviews as one of the explanations for the differences among the countries: "It's not always that we have the same view when it comes to social matters, for obvious reasons, because we started to develop our countries back in 1991" (Interview 8). For example, when it comes to wealth, six participants pointed out that "Nordics are one of the wealthiest countries with a social welfare system" (Interview 6), whereas the Baltics are "not yet [...] rich" (Interview 5). The same goes for the welfare system: "The Nordic social welfare systems are considered some kind of model" (Interview 11). Therefore, the discrepancies detected in the quantitative data are confirmed in the policy area of *Social Policy*.

For the quantitative data, the point about labor law is essential. As pointed out, Sweden has been voting against it twice. In the interview, one participant confirmed that labor law is crucial for the Nordics because "one becomes like sending country and other becomes receiving country" (Interview 9). Therefore, perceptions and positions of the Nordics tend to be "more restrictive" (Interview 9). Therefore, the potential regionality in the quantitative data becomes a *regionized* element and part of the actual regionality. Consequently, a division among the NB6 in the policy areas of *Employment* and *Social Policy* is part of the actual regionality.

## Finances

Another conflictual policy area is *Finances*. Seven participants mentioned that it is "an area where we do not see completely eye-to-eye" (Interview 1). Three times, the difference between the Baltics being net receivers and the Nordics being net contributors is mentioned.

Nevertheless, regarding the EU budget, two participants mentioned agreement among the countries: "On financial, budgetary matters, we are often quite aligned" (Interview 2). The differences lie in the issue of distributing the EU budget, mentioned by six participants. The Baltics are "more prone to coherent funds" (Interview 6) and "cohesion policy" (Interview 9). On the other hand, the Nordics are "willing to keep our budget as low as possible" (Interview 9).

Consequently, the qualitative analysis confirms the expectations in the literature and the findings in the quantitative data. Nevertheless, the policy area of *Finances* remains a two-sided area, where the countries agree on the overall scope of the EU budget but disagree on the exact distribution.

### **5.4. Country-specific regionality**

The author has identified the following homogenous policy areas as part of the actual regionality: Security, Defense, Foreign Affairs, Internal Market, Consumer Affairs, Energy, Environment, Development, and Institutional. Further, the analysis has also identified the following conflictual policy areas as part of the actual regionality: Enlargement, Social Policy, Employment, and Finances. In this subchapter, the author will point out specific characteristics or tendencies of a specific country or a group of countries. Therefore, the author can confirm characteristics of the region gains regarding relations and behavior patterns among the countries.

## The Baltics – a coherent regional voice

Interestingly, the Baltic states were identified in six interviews as extremely homogenous: "[...] the Baltic states are very similar actually. What we are, we are doing and what we want" (Interview 3). Further, two participants mentioned that "the Baltic countries are received as a regional bloc" (Interview 2). Therefore, the qualitative analysis confirms the quantitative data by reinforcing the characteristic that the Baltics share a higher similarity.

Additionally, the quantitative data showed a tendency that the Baltics are more outspoken due to more synchronous oppositions. Interestingly, four participants confirmed "a difference in tone" (Interview 2) between the Nordics and the Baltics. The latter is described as "more outspoken" (Interview 7) and "more comfortable with diverging from a consensus and then trying to drive the European Union towards where we are" (Interview 4). Therefore, the actual regionality entails a more consistent Baltic group, which is more outspoken.

Last but not least, the quantitative data also showed a high affiliation of the Baltics with Poland. In the qualitative analysis, Poland is mentioned two times as being in alliance with the Baltics. Therefore, the actual regionality entails close cooperation of the Baltics with Poland.

#### *The Nordics – a more heterogenous group*

For the Nordic countries, a high level of similarity could be confirmed by statements like "I think that naturally, the Nordics are always first" (Interview 1). Nevertheless, four participants stress the differences between the Nordic countries: "In Northern Europe, every country wants to be slightly different and unique" (Interview 3). Therefore, the qualitative analysis confirms the quantitative data that there is no coherent Nordic group in the region. Intriguingly, the actual regionality dismisses studies mentioned in the literature review, where the most cohesion is stated to be among the Nordic countries (cp. Kocsis, 2021).

#### *A Northern group + Estonia*

Interestingly, the quantitative data developed the question after the most Nordic country among the Baltics. As confirmed by the qualitative analysis, seven participants stressed that "Estonia is the most Nordic country of the Baltics" (Interview 6). The most significant identification of such a *regionized* element has been found in one interview, where the participant answered the first question of the preliminary questions as follows: "Six, then it would be, of course, the five Nordic countries, and Estonia" (Interview 10).

Therefore, the actual regionality consists of Estonia being the closest Baltic country to the Nordics. Nevertheless, after Estonia, Latvia was also mentioned two times as being a Nordic country: "[...] Estonia is kind of quite often referred to also as a Nordic country, but also, of course, part of Latvia in that sense" (Interview 11). Therefore, also Latvia is confirmed to be close to the Nordics.

Regarding a new Nordic group in the region, the potential regionality showed a closeness between Finland, Estonia, and Sweden. The qualitative analysis shows several elements of confirmation. First, six participants confirmed Finnish-Estonian relations to be the closest: "[...] you can clearly see, of course, that ties between Estonia and Finland are very tight" (Interview 10). Furthermore, three participants confirmed that such closeness does not extend to Latvia or Lithuania: "But that link does not really extent to Lithuania and Latvia" (Interview 4). That means a significant exclusiveness.

Finnish and Swedish relations are also mentioned as the closest in four interviews: "A strong relationship exists between Finland and Sweden; they are like married together" (Interview 4). Therefore, actual regionality entails close cooperation between those two Nordic countries.

Last but not least, in two interviews, the triangle between Finland, Sweden, and Estonia is confirmed: "[...] you can clearly see, of course, that ties between Estonia and Finland are very tight. Then you can see the ties between Sweden and Estonia" (Interview 10).

Therefore, one can see confirmation of the potential regionality. Therefore, the triangle between the three countries has potential and is acknowledged to a certain degree.

#### *Finland – the bridge between the Nordics and the Baltics*

Remaining with Finland, the country is identified three times as being the bridge between the Baltics and the Nordics: "Finland stands somewhat more between Denmark and Sweden and the Baltic countries" (Interview 2). Nevertheless, there are also statements where the participants stated that Finland could only be a bridge "to some extent" (Interview 6). Therefore, the characteristic is part of the actual regionality and confirms the quantitative data, but not to such a great extent as one might expect.

#### *Denmark – a particular case*

Denmark has been identified as a particular case in the quantitative data. That is also confirmed in the qualitative analysis. First, three participants confirm the geographically different orientation of Denmark: "We are very transatlantic with the North Sea" (Interview 1). Furthermore, it is mentioned in two interviews that Denmark is "a bridge between central and Northern Europe" (Interview 6).

Therefore, the potential regionality of Denmark orientating oneself differently becomes part of the actual regionality. The latter is highlighted by statements that Denmark is very close with partners outside the region. The following countries were mentioned: Germany (2), Netherlands (1), Austria (1), and Portugal (1).

As the quantitative data showed, Denmark is also the most distant country. Regarding that, four participants also identified Denmark as the most distant country. However, interestingly, Danish participants themselves responded that they "would not be surprised. But on most issues, Netherlands would probably be a closer partner" (Interview 2).

On the other hand, eight participants denied such a tendency: "I do not see it like that" (Interview 7). The participants mostly regard their response to the currently close cooperation with Denmark due to the Russian aggression in Ukraine: "So, as I said, the Danes are fully on board." (Interview 10). One participant highlighted the latter by stating that Denmark is "returning more to the Baltic Sea area" (Interview 6). Therefore, the actual regionality confirms that Denmark has become closer to the region, as shown by developments after Brexit. Regarding identifying Denmark as the most distant country, the analysis shows uncertainty. Therefore, Denmark remains a compelling case that requires further investigation.

### **5.5. Discussion of the actual regionality**

In the following, the author will discuss the results of the qualitative analysis. As pointed out above, actual regionality exists if the materially measurable elements match the normative-representational elements. Therefore, the author could only confirm actual regionality if the interviews confirmed or discarded an element from the Council of the European Union voting results. The subchapter summarizes the actual regionality more compactly and emphasizes the importance of the results regarding previous research. Therefore, one gains an overview of when to expect a coherent regional voice and what tendencies or developments in research are confirmed or discarded.

First, the following characteristics of the Nordic-Baltic region in the European Union could be confirmed: First, all participants have a high recognition of the regional dimension. Second, all participants confirmed close cooperation, characterized by the following elements: coordination and exchange of information, extending their influence, like-mindedness, trust, issue-based cooperation, and responsibility. Thirdly, the qualitative data showed the following reasons for the countries' cooperation: nature and the Baltic Sea, history, and geopolitics.

Furthermore, seven participants confirmed at least a regional identity in the making. Still, the potential openness of the region to other countries could also be confirmed by mentions of countries like the Netherlands and Germany. Consequently, the results confirm previous research stressing the close cooperation between them. However, interestingly, the qualitative data suggest a new categorization of the NB6, distancing oneself from purely issue-based cooperation as assumed by previous research (cp. Kuusik et al., 2018b: 2). In contrast, only four participants mentioned the characteristic of issue-based cooperation. Therefore, more comprehensive cooperation on overarching issues is suggested in the analysis.

For policy areas, one can expect a coherent regional voice in the following: *Foreign Affairs*, *Telecommunications*, *Internal Market* and *Consumer Affairs*, *Energy*, *Development*, and *Institutional*, *Defense* and *Security*, and *Environment*. The results confirm previous research emphasizing that the region advocates within the European Union for an open and liberal market (cp. Kuusik et al., 2018b: 7–8). Moreover, digitalization remains a characteristic of the region (cp. Kuusik et al., 2018a, b). Nevertheless, regarding *Telecommunications*, the participants confirmed the tendency that the Baltics are more developed in the field than the Nordics. The latter is essential to emphasize since such a character has yet to be expressly confirmed by previous literature, seeing the region developed in the field as a whole. The same goes for *Internal Market* and *Consumer Affairs*. There, the Baltics are confirmed to be more vigorous advocates of a free and open market. That element of actual regionality also adds to previous research since such a character had yet to be mentioned. Nevertheless, the qualitative results showed that the Nordics are further developed than the Baltics in the policy area of *Energy*. That also adds a new aspect to previous literature. Overall, the region is also considered very future-oriented regarding development and education. It is also a region confirmed to share a high pro-European attitude regarding the EU's institutions.

Additionally, the qualitative data added that *Defense* and *Security* are homogenous policy areas. The result is significant because it confirms the notion in the literature to dismiss Security as a policy area of conflict among the Nordic-Baltic countries (cp. Kuusik et al., 2018b; Kleinberga, 2019). Nevertheless, part of the actual regionality is also a potential challenge in the future: the Enlargement process in the European Union. Interestingly, the process has been identified as being a factor of friction between the Baltics and the Nordics. That also adds to previous literature since it has yet to be explicitly mentioned.

Lastly, one of the potential regionalities could not be confirmed for *Environment*. The qualitative analysis showed a high coherence among the countries regarding environmental concerns. Therefore, the potential regionality of differences between the Nordics and the Baltics regarding *Environment* is not part of the actual regionality. That is highly relevant since it also discards previous research, emphasizing that "the Baltic States are less eager to follow the more climate-oriented Nordic countries" (Kleinberga, 2019: 24).

Therefore, these are the policy areas where one cannot expect a coherent regional voice: *Social Policy*, *Employment*, and *Finances*. For *Social Policy*, the analysis showed a high recognition of differences among the countries, confirming the potential regionality. Therefore, previous literature suggesting that the region is still divided because of historically different experiences and wealth differences could be confirmed (cp. Kuusik et al., 2018a, b; Kleinberga, 2019).

For *Finances*, the qualitative analysis showed confirmation for both potential regionalities. On the one hand, there is a division between the NB6 regarding the distribution of funds. However, on the other hand, there is coherence among the NB6 countries regarding the scope of the European budget. Consequently, the analysis confirms characteristics in research regarding differences in financial issues. Nevertheless, it allows a more diversified insight into the layers of the policy area.

For country-specific regionality, the analysis confirmed that part of the actual regionality is that the Baltics are more coherent than the Nordics and even regarded as a bloc. That result contradicts the analysis by Kocsis, suggesting "cohesion to be strongest among Sweden, Denmark, and Finland" (2021: 85). Moreover, the actual regionality also consists of very outspoken Baltics, taking a stand against European policies more frequently. On the other hand, the Nordics are not identified as a coherent group of countries. That is important because it adds new aspects regarding the region to the literature.

Furthermore, the actual regionality consists of a close triangle relationship between Finland, Estonia, and Sweden. As a result, Estonia could be confirmed as the closest Baltic country to the Nordics. That is important since, in previous research; close relations were primarily identified between Finland and Estonia (cp. Kocsis, 2021). However, the triangle relations and close relations between Finland and Sweden were not highlighted until now.

Regarding Finland, the country has been identified to function as a bridge between the Baltics and the Nordics. Nevertheless, Finland tends to remain close to Estonia, not extending the bond to Lithuania or Latvia. Therefore, Finland's role in the region remains interesting. The result is significant because it adds a more diversified picture of Finland's role in the region and does not superficially put Finland into a category.

More interesting has been the regionality of the Danish case in the region. On the one hand, four participants identified Denmark as the most distant country in the region. Additionally, its different geographical orientations could be confirmed. Nevertheless, eight participants confirmed that Denmark has been more involved in Nordic-Baltic cooperation since Brexit. Consequently, it is increasing its regional engagement, identifying itself more strongly with Nordic-Baltic cooperation. Therefore, identifying Denmark as the most distant country would only reflect part of the picture and development of the region. Again, the analysis adds a more diversified analysis to current regional developments and does not superficially put Denmark into a specific category as previous research did (cp. Kocsis, 2021).

Regarding Brexit, the analysis confirms the increasing regional cohesiveness. Therefore, the actual regionality consists of further developing cohesiveness and enhancing the regional voice. That is important because, first, the analysis confirms the notion in the literature that Brexit had a significant impact on the region (Kuusik et al., 2018a, b; Kleinberga, 2019). Further, it adds the first-ever analysis of future tendencies since Brexit to the literature. Nevertheless, the potential of the Baltics and Nordics developing a more robust division between them could not be confirmed. The participants gave no ground to suggest an enhancement for developing a further division between the Baltics and the Nordics. Therefore, a more assertive regional voice is, once again, confirmed and can be expected in the future. Consequently, the findings confirm the prediction in research stressing the potential of exerting a regional voice (cp. Rūse, 2014; Kleinberga, 2019). Further, the results dismiss suggestions in research that there is almost no potential to develop a regional voice further (cp. Kuusik et al. 2018a, b; Kocsis, 2021).

Finally, it is essential to note that most of the elements mentioned earlier represent the *actual regionality* and contribute significantly to the *regional identity*. However, there are a few exceptions that are not currently part of the regional identity but have the potential to be in the future or be discarded entirely.

For example, only one interview participant noted that the Nordics are more advanced than the Baltics regarding environmental policy, making it part of the *actual regionality* but not yet part of the *regional identity*. Similarly, discrepancies were mentioned only once in the area of *Employment*, so it could not be confirmed as part of the *regional identity*. Nonetheless, multiple interview participants confirmed or discarded all other elements mentioned earlier and are therefore considered part of the *regional identity*.

In general, the analysis offers a strong case for identifying a regional identity. As pointed out above, seven participants already recognize an identity today with the potential to grow stronger. That is also an implication which, so far, has been missing in previous research.

One should look at the next chapter for further implications regarding future research. Here, the author highlights the importance of the abovementioned results and the intriguing potential for future research discovered through the analysis.

## **Conclusion**

In order to shed more light on the subregions within the European Union, the research study focused on the Nordic-Baltic Six: Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. The author recognized the need for more research on the characteristics and tendencies of this region, which has become increasingly important since the UK's withdrawal from the EU in 2020 (cp. Kleinberga, 2019). The author also felt a sense of urgency due to the current geopolitical situation of the subregion, with Russia as a neighboring country. Therefore, the research aimed to comprehensively predict the region's future and solve the puzzle surrounding its development, construction, norms, and practices (cp. Hopf, 1998: 192).

The thesis pursued the following objectives: First, it aimed to contribute to regionalism studies. Unfortunately, most of the research tackling the abovementioned puzzle missed the opportunity to define the layers and characteristics of regions after their establishment. In contrast, they treated regions as end-game products, not focusing on tendencies and perspectives. Therefore, the second objective was to add a different way of systematizing existing knowledge to the research puzzle, concentrating on constructing a region after its establishment. In doing so, the researcher used a constructivist approach and the theoretical framework by Ghica (2013).

The theoretical framework offered a solid basis for analyzing the construction and development of regions. Furthermore, it builds on the *regionality* concept, which contains all the characteristics and tendencies of a region. The theory analyzed a region's construction on three layers: potential and actual regionality, as well as regional identity.

The *potential regionality* consisted of materially measurable elements, showing the region's potential. The *actual regionality* consisted of materially measurable elements confirmed by the normative-representational level. Therefore, the potential elements were *regionized*. Lastly, *regional identity* consisted of elements acknowledged as part of the *actual regionality* by several regional actors.

In order to also fulfill the third objective of the thesis by displaying a region's cohesiveness, the author used the concept of *regional cohesiveness*. The aim was to establish an analysis that could confirm or discard the cohesiveness of a region before and after a change in the political and international sphere occurred.

Following the theoretical framework, the thesis offered two theoretical expectations:

1. If there is *regionalism*, one should find elements of potential and actual regionality as well as regional identity.
  - 1.1 If there is *actual regionality*, the empirical analysis should show coherence between the material and the normative-representational level.
  - 1.2 If there is a *regional identity*, other group members acknowledge and accept a representation of a particular element.
2. The author expects a change in *regional cohesiveness* in dependence on (in)security requisites and the socio-political context.

In order to test them, a case study was conducted on the Nordic-Baltic Six. First, the study is interesting due to the academic division on the region's future, with some predicting division and others acknowledging potential. Second, the case study includes small and mid-sized countries, challenging theoretical arguments based on power maximization. Third, Brexit has also impacted the case study, as the UK was a significant ally for the six countries. Therefore, the Nordic-Baltic Six provides an excellent opportunity to analyze their cohesiveness before and after Brexit.

For the methodology, the author decided on qualitative mixed data research, combining qualitative and quantitative data collection. The qualitative data collection entailed twelve in-depth interviews with ambassadors and diplomats from and in the region, with representatives in the Nordic Council of Ministers' Offices in the Baltics and the Danish Permanent Representation in Brussels. Furthermore, the author chose qualitative content analysis to analyze the qualitative data. The quantitative data collection entailed vote results of the six countries from 2016 until 2022 in the Council of the European Union.

With the selection of the empirical case, the structure and expectations of the theoretical framework as well as the methodology, the thesis answered the following research questions:

1. What is the Nordic-Baltic Six's potential regionality within the Council of the European Union?
2. Why and to what extent can one identify actual regionality among the Nordic-Baltic Six?
3. How has Brexit influenced regional cohesiveness?

In order to answer the first question, the author analyzed quantitative data from the Council of the European Union between 2016 and 2022. This analysis revealed potential tendencies and characteristics within the Nordic-Baltic region, indicating a solid foundation for close cooperation between the interrelated countries. However, the analysis revealed that some policy areas and country-related tendencies may require improvement and even closer cooperation.

To answer the second question, the author compared the *potential regionality* results with statements from the twelve conducted interviews. If compatibility existed, the *potential regionality* became an actual one, providing the basis for establishing the reasoning behind the *actual regionality*. In addition to this compatibility, the author also supports the argument for an *actual Nordic-Baltic regionality* based on the following factors:

First, participants had a strong regional understanding and close working relationships characterized by coordination, information exchange, and responsibility. Second, cooperation is confirmed to be driven by nature, history, and geopolitics. Third, seven participants identified at least an identity in the making. Consequently, the results show regional awareness between countries. Further, they challenge assumptions about categorizing the NB6 based on issue-based cooperation. The latter is based on the qualitative data suggesting a more comprehensive approach to Nordic-Baltic cooperation.

In certain policy areas, a unified regional perspective can be expected. These policy areas include *Foreign Affairs*, *Telecommunications*, *Internal Market and Consumer Affairs*, *Energy*, *Development and Institutional*, *Security and Defense*, and *Environment*. These coherent policy areas align with existing research (Kuusik et al., 2018a, b; Kleinberga, 2019) while also highlighting new aspects.

For example, the Baltics lead in *Telecommunications* and promote a free market more vigorously, while the Nordics excel in *Energy*. In addition, both regions prioritize education and have a pro-European stance. Further, the cohesive policy areas of *Defense* and *Security* were recognized for the first time, contradicting previous research that claimed Security caused conflict among Nordic-Baltic countries. Regarding *Environment*, the qualitative analysis revealed high coherence among the countries regarding environmental concerns. As a result, the notion that there are regional differences between the Nordics and the Baltics in this policy area could not be confirmed. That adds a new perspective to previous research, which suggested that "the Baltic States are less inclined to follow the climate-oriented policies of the Nordic countries" (Kleinberga, 2019: 24).

The following are policy areas where one cannot expect a coherent regional voice: *Social Policy*, *Employment* and *Finances*. Those results confirm previous research (cp. Kuusik et al., 2018a, b; Kleinberga, 2019). For *Finances*, the analysis confirms regional differences in funding distribution among NB6 countries. However, there is coherence in their approach to the European budget, providing a more diverse perspective on the division. Additionally, the findings indicate that the expansion of the EU may create a possible rift between the Nordics and the Baltics.

For country-specific regionality, the analysis confirmed that part of the actual regionality is that the Baltics are more coherent than the Nordics. That result contradicts the analysis by Kocsis, suggesting "cohesion to be strongest among Sweden, Denmark, and Finland" (2021: 85). Moreover, the actual regionality also consists of very outspoken Baltics, taking a stand against European policies more frequently. On the other hand, the Nordics are not identified as a coherent group of countries. Additionally, it is essential to mention that Finland, Estonia, and Sweden have a close triangular relationship. Specifically, Estonia has the most substantial ties to the Nordics among the Baltic countries and is incredibly close to Finland. On the other hand, while Finland is a bridge between the Baltics and the Nordics, it has a stronger bond with Estonia than with Lithuania or Latvia. This dynamic is intriguing and warrants further research, as previous studies only focused on the Finnish-Estonian relationship.

Lastly, according to four participants, Denmark's unique geographical location makes it seem like the farthest country in the Nordic-Baltic region. However, eight others noted that Denmark had increased its regional involvement since Brexit, making the current situation more diverse. Thus, it cannot be considered the most distant country in the region.

To sum up, the answers to the first and second research questions provide a detailed understanding of the current state of construction in the region. Additionally, all probable elements, except for two, were either affirmed or rejected by multiple interviewees. Thus, the theoretical framework lays the foundation for proposing a regional identity. Finally, as mentioned earlier, seven participants acknowledge an identity that has the possibility of becoming more robust. That is a significant implication that previous research still needs to address.

The third research question's answer reveals that Brexit has positively impacted regional cohesiveness, resulting in more excellent compatibility between countries. As a result, the region has become closer, and its voice has been strengthened.

This finding confirms earlier research highlighting the significant impact of Brexit on the region (Kuusik et al., 2018a, b; Kleinberga, 2019). Furthermore, this study is the first to analyze future trends, providing evidence to support the idea that the region will become more coherent. Nevertheless, participants did not suggest a separate division between the Baltics and Nordics, but the region is expected to have a more confident voice in the future. That aligns with previous research predicting greater cooperation among the Nordic-Baltic Six.

The research findings indicate that the academic division on Nordic-Baltic cooperation has been resolved, with high coherence shown in the region. Closer cooperation among the Nordic-Baltic Six is necessary, and all participants agreed that the NB6 has become closer and will strengthen its regional voice. The research also provides insights into post-Brexit developments and their impact on the region's "regional voice" (Rūse, 2014: 243). The analysis suggests that defense is a field of high potential for close cooperation among countries, and future developments inside NATO regarding the region should be monitored. The analysis dismisses the argument that Security is still a policy area of conflict among the Nordic-Baltic countries. The study also highlights intriguing future developments regarding inevitable spin-offs of the Nordic-Baltic cooperation, including other countries like Germany or the Netherlands, making the NB6 a highly regarded cooperation in the future. Therefore, the research results provide a solid foundation for future studies focusing on regional developments.

For a more critical assessment of the research, it is essential to interview ambassadors from Lithuania and Sweden. Unfortunately, the author could not conduct interviews with representatives from these countries. It is also important to note that regionalism is a continuous phenomenon, as Ghica (2013) has noted, meaning that the study only reflects a specific region at a specific time. Therefore, while the findings provide a solid basis for making assumptions about trends and characteristics, it is crucial to consider the time frame in which they were obtained.

Nevertheless, the author believes the findings are valuable and provide an insightful understanding of the region's composition. Additionally, it provides a framework for analyzing the regionality of regions. However, as there is still a lack of research, the author believes she has presented a more effective way to solve the research puzzle, focusing on explaining regions' development, construction, and practices.

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## **Appendices**

### **Appendix 1: Results of the quantitative data analysis**

Table 1: The most conflictual policy areas among the Nordic-Baltic Six

| <b>Policy area</b>       | <b>Percentage of disagreement</b> |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Justice and Home Affairs | 59,7%                             |
| Environment              | 31,4%                             |
| Industry                 | 25,0%                             |
| Social policy            | 22,7%                             |
| Employment               | 16,7%                             |
| Culture                  | 14,3%                             |
| Consumer Affairs         | 11,1%                             |
| Internal market          | 8,9%                              |
| Agriculture              | 8,8%                              |
| Telecommunications       | 6,25%                             |
| Fisheries                | 6,9%                              |
| Health                   | 5,6%                              |
| Transport                | 5,0%                              |
| Finances                 | 4,3%                              |
| Foreign Affairs          | 3,2%                              |
| Economy                  | 1,8%                              |
| Institutional            | 0%                                |
| Energy                   | 0%                                |
| Education                | 0%                                |
| Space                    | 0%                                |
| Youth                    | 0%                                |
| Research                 | 0%                                |

Table 2: The most conflictual policy areas for the Baltic states

| <b>Policy area</b>       | <b>Votes in general within the Council of the EU</b> | <b>Differences among the Baltics</b> | <b>Percentage of the Differences</b> |
|--------------------------|--|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Environment              | 35   | 6                                    | 17,1%                                |
| Social policy            | 22   | 2                                    | 9,0%                                 |
| Internal market          | 56   | 3                                    | 5,4%                                 |
| Fisheries                | 29   | 1                                    | 3,4%                                 |
| Agriculture              | 34   | 1                                    | 2,9%                                 |
| Justice and Home Affairs | 77   | 1                                    | 1,3%                                 |
| Finances                 | 138  | 1                                    | 0,74%                                |

Table 3: The most conflictual policy areas for the Nordic states

| Policy area              | Votes in general within the Council of the EU | Differences among the Nordics | Percentage of the Differences |
|--------------------------|---|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Justice and Home Affairs | 77  | 45                            | 58,4%                         |
| Industry                 | 4   | 1                             | 25,0%                         |
| Social policy            | 22  | 4                             | 18,2%                         |
| Environment              | 35  | 6                             | 17,1%                         |
| Employment               | 6   | 1                             | 16,7%                         |
| Culture                  | 7   | 1                             | 14,3%                         |
| Consumer Affairs         | 9   | 1                             | 11,1%                         |
| Telecommunications       | 16  | 1                             | 6,25%                         |
| Health                   | 19  | 1                             | 5,26%                         |
| Agriculture              | 34  | 2                             | 5,9%                          |
| Finances                 | 138   | 5                             | 3,6%                          |
| Fisheries                | 29  | 1                             | 3,4%                          |
| Foreign Affairs          | 31  | 1                             | 3,2%                          |
| Economy                  | 55  | 1                             | 1,8%                          |
| Internal market          | 56  | 1                             | 1,8%                          |

Table 4: NB6 opposition voting, overall period, period 2016–2022

| NB6-country | Oppositions in total | Against | Abstention | Not participating |
|-------------|----------------------|---------|------------|-------------------|
| DK          | 67                   | 10      | 2          | 55                |
| SE          | 15                   | 12      | 2          | 1                 |
| LV          | 14                   | 3       | 9          | 2                 |
| LT          | 13                   | 6       | 5          | 2                 |
| EE          | 11                   | 3       | 6          | 2                 |
| FI          | 5                    | 5       | 0          | 0                 |

Table 5: NB6 opposition voting before Brexit

| NB6-country | Opposition in total | Against | Abstention | Not participating |
|-------------|---------------------|---------|------------|-------------------|
| DK          | 47                  | 7       | 2          | 38                |
| LV          | 9                   | 0       | 7          | 2                 |
| SE          | 8                   | 7       | 0          | 1                 |
| LT          | 7                   | 3       | 2          | 2                 |
| EE          | 5                   | 0       | 3          | 2                 |
| FI          | 4                   | 4       | 0          | 0                 |

Table 6: NB6 opposition voting after Brexit

| NB6-country | Opposition in total | Against | Abstention | Not participating |
|-------------|---------------------|---------|------------|-------------------|
| DK          | 20                  | 3       | 0          | 17                |
| SE          | 7                   | 5       | 2          | 0                 |
| EE          | 6                   | 3       | 3          | 0                 |
| LT          | 6                   | 3       | 3          | 0                 |
| LV          | 5                   | 3       | 2          | 0                 |
| FI          | 1                   | 1       | 0          | 0                 |

Table 7: Nordic-Baltic Six, voting similarity, overall period, period 2016–2022

|    | EE    | LV    | LT    | SE    | FI    | DK    |
|----|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| EE | /     | 97,9% | 98,2% | 96,5% | 97,9% | 89,1% |
| LV | 97,9% | /     | 97,9% | 95,1% | 97,3% | 88,6% |
| LT | 98,2% | 97,9% | /     | 96,0% | 97,8% | 89,1% |
| SE | 96,5% | 95,1% | 96,0% | /     | 97,3% | 88,9% |
| FI | 97,9% | 97,3% | 97,8% | 97,3% | /     | 89,7% |
| DK | 89,1% | 88,6% | 89,1% | 88,9% | 89,7% | /     |

Table 8: Nordic-Baltic Six, voting similarity, before Brexit, 2016–2019

|    | EE    | LV    | LT    | SE    | FI    | DK    |
|----|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| EE | /     | 97,8% | 98,0% | 97,0% | 98,3% | 88,1% |
| LV | 97,8% | /     | 97,8% | 96,0% | 97,0% | 87,1% |
| LT | 98,0% | 97,8% | /     | 96,5% | 98,0% | 88,1% |
| SE | 97,0% | 96,0% | 96,5% | /     | 97,5% | 87,4% |
| FI | 98,3% | 97,0% | 98,0% | 97,5% | /     | 87,9% |
| DK | 88,1% | 87,1% | 88,1% | 87,4% | 87,9% | /     |

Table 9: Nordic-Baltic Six, vote similarity, after Brexit, 2020–2022

|    | EE    | LV    | LT    | SE    | FI    | DK    |
|----|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| EE | /     | 98,5% | 98,9% | 96,0% | 97,8% | 90,8% |
| LV | 98,5% | /     | 98,5% | 96,0% | 98,2% | 91,2% |
| LT | 98,9% | 98,5% | /     | 95,6% | 97,8% | 90,8% |
| SE | 96,0% | 96,0% | 95,6% | /     | 97,4% | 91,5% |
| FI | 97,8% | 98,2% | 97,8% | 97,4% | /     | 92,6% |
| DK | 90,8% | 91,2% | 90,8% | 91,5% | 92,6% | /     |

Table 10: Nordic-Baltic Six, synchronous opposition, overall period, period 2016–2022

|    | EE | LV | LT | SE | FI | DK |
|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| EE | /  | 5  | 4  | 1  | 1  | 0  |
| LV | 5  | /  | 6  | 1  | 0  | 0  |
| LT | 4  | 6  | /  | 1  | 1  | 1  |
| SE | 1  | 1  | 1  | /  | 1  | 3  |
| FI | 1  | 0  | 1  | 1  | /  | 1  |
| DK | 0  | 0  | 1  | 3  | 1  | /  |

Table 11: Nordic-Baltic Six, synchronous opposition, before Brexit, 2016–2019

|    | EE | LV | LT | SE | FI | DK |
|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| EE | /  | 1  | 0  | 0  | 1  | 0  |
| LV | 1  | /  | 2  | 0  | 0  | 0  |
| LT | 0  | 2  | /  | 0  | 1  | 1  |
| SE | 0  | 0  | 0  | /  | 1  | 2  |
| FI | 1  | 0  | 1  | 1  | /  | 1  |
| DK | 0  | 0  | 1  | 2  | 1  | /  |

Table 12: Nordic-Baltic Six, synchronous opposition, after Brexit, 2020–2022

|    | EE | LV | LT | SE | FI | DK |
|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| EE | /  | 4  | 4  | 1  | 0  | 0  |
| LV | 3  | /  | 4  | 1  | 0  | 0  |
| LT | 4  | 4  | /  | 1  | 0  | 1  |
| SE | 1  | 1  | 1  | /  | 0  | 1  |
| FI | 0  | 0  | 0  | 0  | /  | 0  |
| DK | 0  | 0  | 0  | 1  | 0  | /  |

**Appendix 2: Preliminary interview questions for the ambassadors and diplomats of the NB6**

1. If one says Nordic-Baltic Six, what comes to mind first and why?
2. What are your Foreign Ministry's and your work's priorities regarding Nordic-Baltic cooperation within the European Union, and why?
3. Why or why not is the Nordic-Baltic cooperation essential within the European Union?
4. What does your country gain from Nordic-Baltic cooperation, if anything?
5. Where do you see the most substantial similarities, if any, among the six countries? And why?
6. Where do you see differences, if any, among the six countries? And why?
7. What does the Nordic-Baltic countries characterize as a group?
8. Which country has the most similar standpoints with your country and why do you think that is?
9. Which country has the most different standpoints from your country and why do you think that is? (Could one talk about a Baltic bloc and a Nordic bloc within the cooperation?)
10. How would you describe Nordic-Baltic cooperation? Moreover, has it changed since Brexit? If yes, how so? (Many predict a closer cooperation after Brexit, do you see that?)
11. Where do you see the potential for Nordic-Baltic cooperation in the future and why? Is there a regional identity in the making?
12. What could be some of the challenges for cooperation and why?

### **Appendix 3: Preliminary interview questions for the Nordic Council of Minister's Offices in the Baltic states**

1. If one says Nordic-Baltic Six, what comes to mind first and why?
2. What are your work's priorities regarding Nordic-Baltic cooperation within the European Union, and why?
3. Why or why not is the Nordic-Baltic cooperation essential within the European Union?
4. What do you think gain the Baltic countries and the Nordic countries from the Nordic-Baltic cooperation, if anything?
5. Where do you see the most substantial similarities, if any, among the six countries? And why?
6. Where do you see differences, if any, among the six countries? And why?
7. What does the Nordic-Baltic countries characterize as a group?
8. Which countries have the most similar standpoints and why do you think that is?
9. Which countries have the most different standpoints and why do you think that is? Could one talk about a Baltic bloc and a Nordic bloc within the cooperation?
10. How would you describe Nordic-Baltic cooperation? Moreover, has it changed since Brexit? If yes, how so? (Many predict a closer cooperation after Brexit, do you see that?)
11. Where do you see the potential for Nordic-Baltic cooperation in the future and why? Is there a regional identity in the making?
12. Which tendencies and trends do you see for the futures?
13. What could be some of the challenges for the cooperation and why?

## Appendix 4: Participant information sheet

### PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

(for participation in the academic research)

Project title: **The Regionality of the Nordic-Baltic Six: Navigating between Brexit and the Increasing Russian Aggression**

#### Dear Madam or Sir:

You are invited to participate in the research project "Nordic-Baltic cooperation: exploring regionalism" by the master's student Lara Löser of the University of Tartu's Johan Skytte Institute of Political Studies. You have been selected to participate in this study because you have been involved in, or possess knowledge of, the activities carried out in the work of the six Nordic-Baltic countries (EST, LV, LT, SE, FI, DK). The information provided in this form is to help you decide whether you would like to participate in this study. If you have any questions, please contact the researcher at [lara.loeser@gmail.com](mailto:lara.loeser@gmail.com).

**Aims and implications of the research:** This research is based on a quantitative analysis of the voting results of the Nordic-Baltic Six in the Council of the EU and a qualitative analysis of the current discourse of Nordic-Baltic cooperation among the six countries. The aim is to assess to what extent the voting results reflect the current discourse of cooperation. In addition, it will account for how ambassadors define the current cooperation and what might be future tendencies. Further, the research would also like to explore differences among the six countries and how future developments might evolve. Finally, the questions explored in this research are: What is the Nordic-Baltic Six's potential regionality within the Council of the European Union? Why and to what extent can one identify actual regionality among the Nordic-Baltic Six? How has Brexit influenced regional cohesiveness?

**Procedures of the research:** Should you agree to participate, it will take approximately 30–45 minutes to be interviewed by the master's student, Lara Löser. During the interview, you will be asked to answer questions about the experiences and standpoints of your Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The interview will be audio-recorded to ensure the researcher has an accurate record of the discussion. If you prefer not to be audio-recorded, please let the researcher know. The researcher will protect personal data and secure the processing and storage of the gathered empirical material as outlined below.

**Possible risks and benefits for participants:** This research involves minimal risk to participants. Measures will be taken to protect the confidentiality and privacy of research participants since the responses will be anonymized. Participants can withdraw from the project anytime and skip a question if they feel uncomfortable answering it. You are not expected to directly benefit from participating in this research study except for insight you might gain through answering the interview questions. Please let the researcher know if you want to obtain a summary of the research findings.

**Anonymity and confidentiality of personal data:** Reasonable steps will be taken to protect your privacy and the confidentiality of your study data. The subjects' identifiers (name, address, email address) will not be maintained in association with the research data. They will only be known to the researcher, except the embassy's country of origin and the regional location (whether Baltic countries or Nordic countries). The only person who can access the audio files and the interview transcription is the master's student, Lara Löser, University of Tartu, and any other person or agency required by law. Confidentiality will also be strictly observed in presenting findings: the interviewees will remain anonymous. Their answers, except the embassy's country of origin and the regional location (whether Baltic or Nordic countries), will not directly be tied to their identifiers in the paper. Audio recordings and transcripts will be destroyed after the completion of the analysis in cases if the interviewee does not give her/his consent to further usage of these materials. The information from this study is being published as a Master's Thesis.

**Rights of research participants:** You can choose not to participate in this study or withdraw your participation at any time during or after the research begins. Refusing to be in this study or deciding to discontinue participation will not affect your relationship with the researcher or the University of Tartu. Should you encounter problems directly resulting from being in this study, please contact the researcher at the end of this consent form.

**Informed consent:** You freely decide whether to participate in this research study. Agreeing to the interview means that you have read and understood this information sheet, had your questions answered, and decided to be part of the research study.

If you have any questions before or during the study, you should talk to the master's student Lara Löser. You will be given a copy of this document for your records.

Thank you for taking the time to consider participating in this study!

If you want to participate, please sign the attached informed consent form.

**This information sheet is for you to keep.**

**Study Personnel:**

Lara Löser, lara.loeser@gmail.com

## Appendix 5: Informed consent form

### INFORMED CONSENT FORM

(for participation in the academic research)

Project title:

**“The Regionality of the Nordic-Baltic Six: Navigating between Brexit and the Increasing Russian Aggression”**

I have read the attached Participant Information Sheet on the above-named study, and understand the purpose and procedures described within it.

I have been made aware of any known or expected inconvenience, risk, discomfort, or potential side effects and of their implications as far as the researcher currently knows them.

I understand that my participation in this study will involve me taking part in an audio-recorded discussion-interview and that the questions asked will relate to the Nordic-Baltic cooperation and your Foreign Ministries’ standpoints in the field.

I understand that the data and results gathered from the interview may be diffused through the communication channels of the University of Tartu.

I have had an opportunity to ask questions and I am satisfied with the answers I have received.

I freely agree to participate in this study and understand that I can withdraw at any time without affecting my current or future relationship with the University of Tartu.

I will respect the confidentiality of the interview.

**Name/Pseudonym:** (print name) \_\_\_\_\_

**Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date/Location:** \_\_\_\_\_

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