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How to understand the Macro-regional strategies in the CSF?

Activity Information session about the Commission's thoughts about the writings in the CSF Staff Working Document concerning the EUSBSR for the iBSG
Date May 3, 2012
Organizer North Sweden European Office
Guest Anders Lindholm, DG Regional Policy E1

Aim

The aim for this information session was to give the participants an updated view on the Commission's thoughts about the writings in the CSF Staff Working Document concerning the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR), and to establish iBSG as a platform for short informative dialogue-meetings.

Summary

Guest-speaker at the meeting was Anders Lindholm, DG Regional Policy E1, who is responsible for the EUSBSR at the Commission. Lindholm began his presentation by reviewing the ongoing process on developing the EUSBSR:

The most recent event concerning the EUSBSR is the annual implementation report that the Commission presented in June 2011, which was followed up with a communication published in March 2012. During the fall of 2012, the Commission is going to publish an updated action plan, which aims at being a strategy update 2.0. Some important factors that must be modified for the strategy to be successful in the future have become clear throughout the process:

- There is a need for clearer objectives which preferably should be the goals presented by the Commission in March 2012.
- The responsibilities between different actors have been too complicated and have to be less complex and more accessible by stakeholders.
- The strategy has to be embedded into financial instruments.
- The relationship with Russia has to be strengthened and developed further.

Future programming period

For the future programming period, three articles in the regulations are very important:

- Common provisions, Article 14(a), about partnership contracts and how macro-regional strategies can be included.
- Common provisions, Article 87(c), how relevant operational programs can be implemented to support the strategy.
- ETC regulation, Article 6(b), allowing transnational progress to support implementation.

Lindholm pointed out that to get the most added value, regions have to know their own needs and what they are good at so they can specialize on those areas. It is also important that regions can share costs with other actors to get added value, even if it is outside the regional borders.

A problem so far with the strategy is that it has mainly been an issue for foreign ministers and prime ministers and not for other actors or political levels. The Commission has now initiated an action which aims at investigating how multi-level governance can be more integrated in the strategy to improve the outcome of the implementation.

Questions and answers

The meeting ended with a short question and answer session. One of the questions concerned the lack of incentives for cities to take part in the EUSBSR. When cities main goals are employment, school and training etc. the priorities of the EUSBSR comes in rather low on cities to do lists, especially to take part in transnational projects. Lindholm sees that cities do not have to include transnational partners in projects, but means that they can add an extra layer to their regular projects to align them with the priorities of the EUSBSR. There is nothing that excludes cities from taking part of the strategy.

Another question that was discussed was that both Macro-regional strategies and Sea basin strategies are mentioned together in the CSF but the differences between them are somewhat unclear. According to Lindholm Sea basin strategies and Macro-regional strategies are two different things and are treated differently, even if the Commission uses them in the same context. This led to another question regarding a possible decline in the Commission's interest for Macro-regional strategies. Lindholm did not fully agree, even though his unit had wished for clearer formulations about them in the regulations. However, the will to develop new Macro-regional strategies has suffered a decline due to the current economic crises that has forced many countries to focus on other objectives.

The last question to be discussed was whether there are any good tools to involve the national level in the EUSBSR. The partnership agreement is one tool to include both the national and the regional level in the work with the EUSBSR. But are there any tools that motivate the national level to take part in the EUSBSR from the beginning? Lindholm answered that the main tool to involve the national level in the EUSBSR is the political price that has to be paid for not taking part.

Conclusion

Lindholm concluded in coherence with the final question put forward at the Q/A-session, that even if the CSF and the cohesion regulations gives regions a tool to demand the national level to incorporate the EUSBSR in the partnership contract in the programming, the impact of the strategy will be decided by the wish and interest for the EUSBSR to be successful of the local and regional levels, as interest for the EUSBSR differs between countries.