

“How can the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region help boost regional development”

The conference held in Brussels on 8 December 2009 was initiated by Bo Källstrand, Governor of the County of Västernorrland (Sweden) and Marek Woźniak, Marshal of the Wielkopolska Region (Poland). The opening speech was also delivered by Gerhard Stahl, Secretary General of the Committee of the Regions. The purpose of the conference was to underline the regional and local dimension of the Baltic Sea Strategy and to determine the level of regions' responsibility of its implementation. The conference aimed to constitute a forum, enabling exchange of the first experiences and opinions of the Strategy among regional and local politicians as well as experts, EU Member States and EU institutions' policy makers. The event also provided an opportunity for the EU institutions to identify, through the dialogue with representatives of eight Baltic Sea regions, their specific needs, expectations and opinions. The conference was organized under the honourable patronage of the Swedish Presidency and the Committee of the Regions.

Keynote speakers: Mr Paweł Samecki, EU Commissioner for Regional Policy, Ms Maria Åsenius, State Secretary for European Affairs, Swedish Presidency and Ms Małgorzata Kałużyńska, Director of the Department for Analyses and Strategies Office of the Committee for European Integration, Poland, all agreed on that the local and regional authorities will play a key role in the implementation of the Strategy.

“The collaboration between the two regions organising this conference is an example of what makes this event especially important, as it shows that in a Swedish context the Baltic Sea does not end in Stockholm, and, for Poland, the Strategy does not just concern the coastal regions, said the EU Commissioner Paweł Samecki”.

Taking part in the panel discussion were representatives from eight regions of the countries around the Baltic Sea and from the European Commission.

A common opinion among the representatives from the regions was that the discussion about the implementation of the Strategy often concerns the cooperation at national level, whereas it is at local and regional level that the crucial efforts are to be made. Hence, regions should take an active role and demand to be included in the preparation of national guidelines for implementation. As the Strategy does not involve any additional funding, a shared definition and interpretation of the Strategy is needed in order for it to be effective.

Concerning whether regions are ready to allocate money to the realisation of Baltic Sea efforts it was pointed out that many regions are not in the coastal areas and for this reason do not feel included in the Strategy. Consequently the regions' willingness to contribute may be dependent on the location of the region.

Moderator Mr Uno Aldegren, Committee of the Regions Rapporteur for the Baltic Sea Region Strategy, pointed out that it is impressive that the whole of Poland seems to pay attention to the Strategy, not only the northern coastal regions, something which does not seem to be the case in a lot of the other countries.

A concern raised by the regions were whether there is, or will exist, projects that are not a part of the Strategy and what that would signify for the added value. Another concern raised was the lack of social aspects in the Strategy.



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Here are several reflections from the speakers themselves:

Denmark: **Anna Margrethe Kaalund**, Town Council Member in the Viborg Municipality, spokesperson of the local Danish authorities on the Baltic Sea Strategy, emphasised that she believes the two most important subjects are the environment and economic development. Simultaneously, she stated that the future of the states within the Baltic Sea Region lies in a green, ecological economy, which may be realised by creating environmentally friendly companies, for example.

Estonia: **Allan Alaküla**, Director of the Tallin Representation to the EU, focusing on media and promotion, mentioned an aspect related to the lack of proper communication between regions implementing the Strategy. He indicated the Polish-Russian pipeline project as an example of negative outcomes resulting from this phenomenon in the context of the Strategy, which despite its burden has not found a place within the Strategy.

Finland: **Christel Liljeström**, President of the Baltic Sea Commission (an organisation of coastal regions in Finland), emphasised that it is essential to place realisation of the Strategy above particular activities, which is possible only through strict cooperation between regions when making crucial decisions. During the discussion, Liljeström paid special attention to the elaboration of a trans-regional approach when implementing the Strategy.

Germany: **Merten Barnert**, from the State Chancellery of Mecklenburg Pomerania (member of a Task Force Baltic Sea Strategy), presented previous achievements and plans for the future concerning the realisation of Priority Area 12 – Tourism, as the Mecklenburg Pomerania is the coordinator of this priority. Barnert emphasised that cohesion policy should be continued, as funds related with the above will be essential to implementing the Strategy.

Latvia: **Maris Pukis**, Senior Advisor of the Latvian Association of Local and Regional Governments, pointed to the necessity of performing central reforms in relation to the deep economic crisis currently experienced in Latvia and causing the suspension of European funds.

Lithuania: **Arnoldas Abramavičius**, Mayor of Zarasai District Municipality, referred to the issue of the excessive centralisation of funds management. Moreover, he stated that records of the Baltic Sea Strategy should also consider neighbours from the East (e.g. Belarus), which could play an important role in the realisation of the priority for which Lithuania is held responsible (External and internal transport).

Poland: **Grzegorz Potrzebowski**, Director of the Regional Policy Department of the Wielkopolska Region Marshall Office, paid attention to the fact that priorities indicated in the Strategy had already been realised for two years in the regions within the framework of the regional operational programmes for the years 2007-2013. As the European Commission has not allocated any additional funds for the realisation of the Strategy, its implementation occurred as if ‘by way of’ execution related to regional projects. Therefore the search for added value within the Baltic Sea Strategy should better lie in creating an axis of cooperation within the scope of the Baltic Sea region and the realisation of common projects by the regions.

Sweden: **Mona-Lisa Norrman**, Member of the Jämtland County Council, emphasised that when implementing the Strategy it is essential to look horizontally – outside its own geographical region.

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Ms Norrman also indicates the need to focus on the social aspect of balanced development within the Strategy, and on the establishment of East-West communication connections.

Mr Anders Lindholm, Unit for Territorial Cooperation of Directorate General for Regional Policy of the **European Commission**, gave some practical advice and suggestions to the regions on how to go about when implementing the Strategy. The regions should reflect upon what areas they would like to take part in and whether the region has special competences to share. The next step is to contact the flagship project leaders and priority area leaders to share experiences and projects.

The debate showed that, given the fact that it is clearly up to the regions to continue to develop and implement the Strategy, there are expectations on the European Commission to clarify its policy and keep consistency, enabling the whole of the Baltic Sea Region to work towards a common goal and to avoid misunderstandings.



Gerhard Stahl, Secretary General, Committee of the Regions and Marek Woźniak, President, Wielkopolska Region



Paweł Samecki, EU Commissioner for Regional Policy and Bo Källstrand, Governor, County of Västernorrland



Speakers representing the Baltic Sea countries

Conference

"How can the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region help boost regional development"

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