

EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region

By José Manuel Durão Barroso

The European Commission is preparing a European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region, following the invitation made by the European Council.

The existing cooperation structures in the Baltic Sea Region have already produced numerous studies, reports and action plans. However, actual coordinated and concrete action has been limited to date. The Commission will therefore focus the Strategy on achievable actions built on relevant analysis, in order to address the major challenges the Region is facing.

Action is needed to meet four objectives:

1. To make the Baltic Sea Region a cleaner place. This relates to the environmental status of the Baltic Sea, which has the reputation as suffering heavily from pollution. The Sea is shallow, with very low salt levels, and its only connection to the oceans is the straits between Denmark and Sweden/Norway. This makes it very vulnerable to pollution whether from industry, agriculture or from ships crossing the sea. Untreated, or insufficiently treated, waste water reaches the Baltic from both urban and rural areas, adding to the problems.

2. To make the Baltic Sea Region more prosperous. At present economic development is decidedly unequal in the region. Full implementation of the freedoms and opportunities embodied in the EU internal market directives, active labour market and human resource development policies and harmonised rules on capital movements will stimulate investment both from within the Region and from the outside world. Moreover the area has not yet fully benefited from economic and monetary union (only two of the eight Member States surrounding the Baltic Sea are in the eurozone) so the need to change currency inhibits trade and tourism. Implementation of the Services Directive will also boost the area by reducing red tape both in trade relations and when establishing new enterprises across borders. On top of these passive benefits from membership of the European Union, the investments in business infrastructure, human resources and information technology financed through cohesion policy can have a synergistic effect in equipping the weaker, as well as the stronger economies of the region to succeed in the competitive global environment.

3. To make the Baltic Sea Region more attractive and accessible. This means improving internal and external communications not only within the Region, but also between the Region and the rest of the world – in terms of transport links and information technology. Currently, the population is falling in many parts of the Baltic Sea Region. The Region should be able to maintain its labour force, be attractive to encourage those who emigrated in recent years to return, and even attract skilled new labour from third countries. Regional cooperation in research, education and training and public services is required. Moreover, the resources of the Union, notably through cohesion policy, and the Member States for improving economic infrastructure are already having a transforming effect on the attractiveness of the region. This can only be enhanced through better co-ordination. People can already travel much more easily thanks to the extension of the Schengen area to all the Member States in the region.

4. To keep the Baltic Sea Region safe and secure. In comparison with many other regions of the world, the Baltic Sea Region is relatively safe. To maintain this, cooperation is needed to combat organised crime and also to develop civil protection systems in case of natural and man-made hazards. The improvement of maritime safety, where risks are multiplying due to the ever-increasing traffic flows is particularly urgent.

We do not need to create new financing instruments for the implementation of the Strategy but rather to make better use of existing financing sources. European Union structural funds, other EU financing sources, national funding and loans from international financing institutions are all available and should all contribute. By working together in the preparation of national and EU policies, the Commission, Member States and private partners can create synergies and avoid overlaps.

In the preparation of the Strategy, the Commission needs the expertise of all the concerned parties in the Baltic Sea Region. We are therefore organising stakeholder conferences and a series of roundtable discussions during the coming months, in cooperation with various organisations and local and regional bodies. The aim of these events is to gather information to help improve the Commission's approach and get feedback on the issues presented. The Commission services will participate actively in the discussions and take full account of the positions and results of these discussions as it prepares the Strategy.

The Strategy for the Baltic Sea¹ region shows the direction of European policy development. The territorial dimension of policy decisions is becoming increasingly more important as the added value of taking an integrated territorial approach towards fostering development opportunities becomes evident. In this context, the Baltic Sea Region could become a test case for wider-regional development policy. If the Commission and the regional actors can successfully work together to create the Strategy, and then implement it efficiently, the approach could serve as a source of inspiration for other EU macro-regions in the future.



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¹ To follow developments in the preparations of the Strategy, please see the webpage http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/cooperation/baltic