

## EU focuses on the Baltic Sea

By Jari Luoto

There is fresh interest towards the Baltic Sea. Governments, regional organisations and private actors have activated around the region. Benefits of EU enlargement are especially visible around the Baltic Sea where eight out of nine coastal states are Member States.

I often think that this interest is also driven by a great contradiction: the Baltic Sea region is one of the most prosperous one in Europe and the economy is growing rapidly even if put into a global perspective. Environmental awareness among the population is at a high level. Yet the Baltic Sea is one of the most polluted seas. It is plagued by eutrophication, depletion of fish stocks and the arrival of non-native species through ballast water. As a legacy of wars hazardous substances lie in the seabed.

On a typical day, already as many as 2000 vessels sail the Baltic Sea. This is obviously a sign of good economic growth in the region. The amount of oil tankers demonstrates the growing importance of the Baltic Sea as a route for transporting energy from Russia. It is also true that single hull tankers have vanished from the Gulf of Finland and the number of accidents has been in decline for many years. Unfortunately the continuing strong growth in traffic volume increases the risk of accidents.

Something needs to be done to try to correct the result of decades of neglect. At the same time the region needs to respond to new challenges.

At the initiative of the European Parliament and supported by the governments in the region the European Union is currently in a process of producing a strategy for the Baltic Sea. The mandate given to the European Commission by the European Council of December 2007 specifies a timeframe: the strategy should be presented to the June 2009 European Council, just prior the Swedish Presidency of the EU. Work is in good progress, with wide consultations with stakeholders producing proposals for the strategy.

But here is another contradiction: we have always been good in producing papers and organising ourselves in the Baltic Sea region. A plenty of research material is available on the key problems. What we lack is coordinated action with more ambitious goals than we have set so far in the region. Enlargement of the European Union, which has had an overwhelmingly positive impact for the region, has created new possibilities and potential for cooperation. We have yet to turn all that potential into action. Here the EU's Baltic Sea Strategy can be of great assistance.

What should be the focus of the strategy? I think that the value added from the European Union would come from using the legislative power, programmes and financing in a way that is more focused on the special features of the Baltic Sea region. The region could well use a strategy that is focused on a couple of priorities: the marine environment, maritime safety, energy- and transport networks and internal safety and security. The

implementation of the strategy could also mean that the Union has a stronger role in the numerous regional forums.

The strategy should come with an action plan specifying who is going to do what and in what timeframe. We have after all a good selection of tools available. Just think of HELCOM, CBSS, the Nordic Investment Bank, the Nordic Council of Ministers, the Task Force on Organised Crime, to name just a few. Non-EU states in the Baltic Sea region would have to be committed into joint problem solving efforts. This is precisely why the EU has the Northern Dimension with Russia, Norway and Iceland as equal partners.

It will easily take a decade or two before the ecological state of the Baltic Sea can be described as good. But immediate action is needed to attain this goal and prevent setbacks. HELCOM, with all the coastal states as members, has recently adopted an ambitious Baltic Sea Action Plan in order to step up the work for restoring a healthy state of the marine environment.

The steady growth of transport of oil and chemicals constitutes a risk that needs to be reduced by more stringent rules on maritime safety. Finland is putting forward proposals to develop further the Gulf of Finland Mandatory Ship Reporting System and to explore the possibility of extending the system to cover the whole Baltic Sea. At the same time maritime safety in the Baltic might benefit from the several initiatives aiming at creating a real time maritime traffic image for controlling vessel movements.

Economic development, enhanced energy security and the response to climate change go hand in hand in the Baltic Sea Region. Energy security and a better diversity of energy sources require more interconnections within the region and cooperation in building new capacity. The joint task of increasing the share of renewable energy means building sea based wind mill parks in the region. This requires a good amount of Marine Spatial Planning.

When you add the challenges of getting the maximum benefit from the investments in higher education, IT technology and R&D funding in the region, you have recipe for a forward leaning strategy with an ambitious action plan. The EU Baltic Sea Strategy should be seen as a catalyst and a tool for increased and more focused cooperation. The next couple of years will show whether the Baltic Sea States and indeed the whole European Union seize this opportunity and give a big boost for this macro-region.

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