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**THE EU STRATEGY
FOR THE BALTIC REGION:
WHERE ARE WE NOW?**



This article is dedicated to the EU strategy for the Baltic Sea region approved by the European Commission in October 2009. The Strategy expresses the intention to strengthen regionalisation in the framework of the EU. It distinguishes the Baltic region as an independent priority target of the complex strategy for the EU development and gives an additional incentive to the resolution of the problems related to the formation of this macroregion.

Key words: Baltic Sea region, EU, European Commission, strategy, regionalisation.

A milestone has been reached with the EU Commission having approved a Baltic Sea Strategy in June and the Council then endorsing it in October 2009. Within the European Parliament an informal group of MEPs did a considerable part of the preparatory work, the Parliament passed a resolution on the theme, the top leadership of the Commission was eventually able to convince the somewhat skeptical Brussel's machinery that preparing a strategy was a good idea, a broad preparatory process involving public consultation was set in motion for the work then to amount in June 2009 to a communication from the Commission, accompanied by an action plan consisting of desired objectives and concrete measures.

Pawel Samescki, Commissioner for Regional Policy, rightly called the strategy a "new animal". It presents something entirely different, he argued, in allowing the EU to coordinate its policies in the region "in a "new modern way". And more generally, whereas the Union has for some time been occupied by developing policies and approaches vis-à-vis its exterior, it now seems that this direction of development has been complemented by an increase in the emphasis on intra-EU forms of integration.

In order to give regionalization on a broad, mega-regional level a further push the issue has also landed on the Commission's agenda. The devising of a comprehensive strategy thus represents endeavours common to the EU at large with the Baltic Sea area singled out as an initial test case. The region was quick to react to the openness provided the demise of the Cold War, has experienced considerable progress in region-wide integration but it also clearly needs a push both because of the needs and problems to proceed further on the road towards a European macro-region. If the endeavour to provide it with a specific strategy of its own on the European agenda proves to be a success, the argument goes, it might be followed by other sea areas but also by mountain areas such as the Alps or river basins like the Danube. They could be similarly targeted.

In being embraced as a 'macro-region' and elevated into a 'model', addressed as a 'test case' or characterized as a 'pioneer', the future of the Baltic Sea area has inevitably turned into an issue of considerable concern not only for the Commission and other potential candidates but also for the Union at large.

Thus, regionalization appears to have been provided with a more pronounced, legitimate and instrumental standing within the Union. It is in fact assigned with considerable priority as macro-regions are being viewed as important instruments for the EU to achieve its own internal grand objectives. The strategy is, in this sense, not just about the Baltic Sea region per se and macro-regions are not merely depicted as something that the Commission has to relate to and digest because of bottom-up pressure from the region itself. Instead, they are purported as an integral aspect of the essence of the Union. Moreover, the strategy does not just offer insight into the policies of the EU in relation to a particular region but it also provides crucial information on how regionalization and macro-regions such as the Baltic Sea-related one are viewed and approached in the context of EU-developments at large. Already the use of labels such as ‘pilot’ or ‘experimental’ testifies to this. It indicates that something beyond the ordinary is aspired for. The target set is not just one of intensifying the pursuance of established policies but one of embarking upon something new. Thus, the vocabularies used points to efforts of achieving a temporal change and progress beyond the ordinary.

The turn is then also quite concretely to be evidenced in the role assigned to the Commission. Whilst development in the Baltic Sea area has previously been shouldered by the countries of the region with the Commission mainly being present as an observer, the aspiring for an integrated approach in the context of the new strategy grants the Commission as far more central role. It has been allotted with a coordinating of the proposed initiatives, tasked with the reviewing of eventual progress and made responsible for the maintenance of the dynamics inherent in the Action Plan part of the strategy. The Commission is thus far from an observer once the implementation of the strategy starts this year as one of the key tasks faced by the new EU Commission.

Yet another sign of change consists of the employment of the concept of a strategy in naming the document approved. It unavoidably carries connotations of something out of the ordinary. The usage of the concept conveys the meaning that something of exceptional importance is being addressed and sorted out. Once employed, stakes are raised and issues get deliberately politicized as ordinary approaches do not appear to suffice. Furthermore, there is the implicit recognition that things could and should take a different turn. This is then to say that changes are called for and borderlines broken particularly in a temporal sense. Hence ‘progress’ is a word frequently used in the context of devising a strategy, this then implying that there is assumedly both a need and potential for the prevailing state of affairs to be altered. Progress may be warranted in the form of a re-start with regional integration having stalled or having experienced an outright backlash such as the one caused by the recent economic downturn or, to include a more positive perspective, because the success already achieved provides the ground for the region to take further steps on the path of regionalization and European integration. A strategy in the latter sense is not about remedying stagnation but providing stimulus and direction for further progress.

It may be safely assumed that the use of the terms strategy is deliberate and well considered in the document put forward by the Commission. Clearly, the Baltic Sea Strategy is meant to steer away from the current and ordinary state of affairs for the region to steam towards further change. The use of the concept is, in this sense, openly performative. It testifies to an interest of providing regionalization with additional strength within the internal sphere of the Union and to single out, to a degree, a particular European region as a target for strategic thinking and quite distinct policies. Moreover, the EU itself has been allotted — as noted above — with a key position in the process of formulating a strategy, although it has at the same time been bound to do so by engaging itself in a dialogue with various other relevant actors such as the states of the region, some subnational units (Ländern, voivodeships, committees of the region etc.) and a variety of region-specific organizations.

Although the approving of an EU strategy for the Baltic Sea Region stands for something ground-breaking as such, it is also to be noted that the very process of coining and formulating the document has yielded important insight into the state of affairs in the Baltic Sea area. Of particular value is the critical insight including the recognition that the Baltic Sea area appears to be too densely organized. There has been a considerable proliferation of region-specific bodies and yet it appears difficult to get them to work in a coherent and target-specific manner. In short, the high degree of institutionalization has sometimes hampered rather than advanced the pursuance of effective and successful policies. This is to be remedied, the strategy proposes, by improving the coordination of the various initiatives, by singling out priority areas, designating lead partners each responsible for their specific areas as well as by the introduction of specific targets and review dates. Above all the aim is one of moving beyond the tradition of empty declarations, a tradition that has to some extent been discernible also in the sphere of Baltic Sea cooperation.

It is quite logical in this light that the strategy does not propose the establishment of new institutions. However, it also refrains from passing recommendations that aim at a bolstering of regional developments through the allocation of additional financial means — with the caveat that this reservation and policy applies “at this time”. Thus, in some sense the strategy is left hanging in the air. It is profoundly in the interest of the other regions within the EU as well as the Union at large that the Baltic Sea area really succeeds as a ‘pioneer’, and yet this insight does not seem to have sufficiently dawned upon the other regions part of the Union. Obviously, a competitive approach prevails and has to be challenged and revised for a further break-through to be achieved.

At the same time it is to be noted, though, that the Commission refers in no uncertain term to a process which is merely at its infancy. Only the first step has been taken so far and it may well be expected that once the visions are outlined and priorities set as well as agreed upon, the more practical and instrumental aspects of the strategy will fall in place with the Commission also taking upon itself the responsibility for coordination, monitoring, report-

ing, facilitation of the implementation and the follow-up. Moreover, in order for a really integrated approach to be achieved, the strategy does not just consist of a ‘Christmas-three’ in the sense of listing numerous projects. The strategy also entails specific target and review dates and, importantly, it provides a list of lead partners with concrete responsibility for specific target areas. Among other things a review of “the European added-value of the strategy” and further implementation of the Action Plan is foreseen in 2011.

An open and crucial question consists of cooperation with Russia. It is quite obvious, as also noted by the Commission, that Russia’s contribution is required in order for the Baltic Sea region to be able to develop in a ‘model’ region. Hence Russia was informed about the process, and it also seems that Russia contributed at least indirectly to the devising of a strategy and accepted at least initially that it is logical for the EU to develop a strategy of its own in view of the challenges faced in the Baltic Sea region. Achieving a prosperous and stable Baltic Sea region is also in the interests of Russia. The new Northern Dimension has frequently been mentioned as the strategy’s ‘external dimension’, although no concrete steps have thus far been taken to specify the way Russia and the EU are expected to cooperate in the context of implementing the Union’s regional strategy.