

Conference on the regional and local dimension of the Baltic Sea Strategy

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"Increase prosperity within the Baltic macro-region, its accessibility and attractiveness, caring for environmental protection and safety, all indicate new directions of activity for the states included in the Baltic Sea Strategy. However, the success of this initiative mainly depends on the extent to which regional and local partners are incorporated in the realisation of the Strategy. Implementation of innovations, exchanges of knowledge and experience, common scientific research, cooperation between enterprises, integrated activity for the benefit of environmental protection, transport and tourism development – these are indispensable tools in achieving our objectives, these are the areas within which the activities of local and regional authorities shall play a fundamental role", said Marek Woźniak on 8th, December during the opening of an international conference at the Committee of the Regions in Brussels. The conference was initiated by Marek Woźniak, Marshal of the Wielkopolska Region (Vice-President of the Committee of the Regions), and Bo Kållstrand, Governor of the County of Västernorrland, Sweden with which Wielkopolska has been cooperating for many years. The aim of the event was to emphasise the role of regions and local authorities in implementing the Baltic Sea Strategy. This initiative constitutes the first macro-regional strategy of the European Union, and the shape of future EU policies will depend on the success of this Strategy. If, within the framework of the Strategy, it is possible to create a coherent, economically strong and competitive macro-region around the Baltic Sea, and if it is possible to coordinate activities related to transport, environment protection, development of entrepreneurship and innovativeness, it will be possible to talk about the success of this enormous, long-lasting project. Hence, it is extremely important to incorporate local partners – the authorities of the region, provinces and communes, those having the best knowledge of their potential and the needs of their citizens, in its realisation.

Among the guests of the conference one can find, among others, Paweł Samecki – the European Commissioner for Regional Policy, Gerhard Stahl – Secretary General of the Committee of the Regions, Maria Benius – State Secretary for EU Affairs for the Swedish Prime Minister's Office, and Małgorzata Kałużyńska – Director of the Department of Analyses and Strategies in the Office of the Committee for European Integration. The speakers emphasised the extraordinary role of the participation of regional and local authorities in Strategy implementation. They also praised the initiators of the conference for inviting self-governmental partners from the whole area of the Baltic Sea to participate in the discussion and to exchange experiences. Commissioner Samecki said: "I would like to start by thanking the organisers (Wielkopolska and Vasternorrland) for this important event. These two regions are not among the "usual suspects" – if you will permit such an expression – in their respective countries when it comes to Baltic Sea matters. This is also 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. Today's event also shows that a central Polish region and a northern Swedish region can find joint priorities and common approaches, not just on individual issues but on a sustainable basis".

During the discussion panel, which constituted the main part of the conference, politicians and high-level experts from all countries covered by the Strategy presented their opinions and experience related with the Strategy. The discussion panel was moderated by Uno Aldegren, the Committee of the Regions' rapporteur on the Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region. Speakers emphasised the great role Strategy plays in regional development, but they also stressed the problems related with a lack of separate funds for its realisation and lack of precision as far as the Strategy management process is concerned. 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. 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.

The last of the panellists, Anders Lindholm from the DG Regio, Unit for Territorial Cooperation, who is responsible within the European Commission for the realisation of Baltic Sea Strategy, indicated the need to engage regional and local authorities in the implementation of the Strategy. Simultaneously, he emphasised the fact that the Strategy has a changeable character and that feedback is necessary during its implementation. This is why he has encouraged regional and local partners to continue sending their positions and to continue the ongoing dialogue with the European Commission, aiming to improve the Strategy realisation process.

The necessity of regional cooperation and with finding partners in implementing the Strategy was also emphasised by Bo Källstrand, Governor of the County of Västernorrland, who summed up the conference.

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