Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on the role of local and regional authorities within the new baltic sea strategy

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THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

— welcomes the European Council's request to the European Commission to draw up a strategy for the Baltic Sea Region. For a number of reasons the Baltic Sea Region is particularly well suited as a pilot for the introduction of an internal EU strategy for a macro-region and, as in the case of the Baltic Sea Strategy via the Northern Dimension, step up cooperation with third countries;

— stresses the need for the Baltic Sea Strategy to involve local and regional authorities and to include a citizen's perspective; points out that the Baltic Sea Strategy must involve Russia and Norway in all stages from preparation to implementation and be integrated with the Northern Dimension in order to be successful;

— proposes that the Council define common goals and activities within the strategy framework and take decisions regarding these. All decisions would be prepared by a working group led by the European Commission and comprising representatives of governments in the Baltic Sea Region, European Commission representatives, MEPs and representatives of the local and regional level chosen also from Committee of the Regions members;

— proposes that this work be supported by a Baltic Sea Forum which would meet once a year. The forum would bring together a broad range of stakeholders, chosen in accordance with the same principles applied for the stakeholder conference held in connection with drawing up the Baltic Sea Strategy, to discuss the orientation of the strategy and the implementation of the action plans.

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I. **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

General comments

1. welcomes the European Council's request to the European Commission to draw up a strategy for the Baltic Sea Region. For a number of reasons the Baltic Sea Region is particularly well suited as a pilot for the introduction of an internal EU strategy for a macro-region and, as in the case of the Baltic Sea Strategy via the Northern Dimension, step up cooperation with third countries;

2. welcomes the intention to consider similar macro-regional initiatives and strategies for the Black Sea region, the Danube region and the North Sea region/English Channel with a view to putting forward a multilateral cooperation framework that would improve existing forms of cooperation. The Committee refers to its opinion adopted in 2007 on the Black Sea and to the opinion currently being drawn up on the Danube region. It is important that the Baltic Sea region, as a pilot region, should support the introduction of other strategies, as well as exchanging experience and contributing to the development of cooperation in the future;

3. would stress that local and regional authorities have an important role to play with respect to all the objectives which the Commission has identified for the strategy;

4. notes that of the nine countries which border the Baltic Sea, eight are EU Member States, which together account for almost the entire Baltic coastal area. The remaining country, Russia, is of particular importance for geopolitical and economic reasons. This is also true for Norway, which is a member of the EEA and a major, long-standing partner for the Baltic Sea Region. Belarus and Ukraine are also important for the Baltic Sea basin from the environmental point of view;

5. points out that the Baltic Sea Region has many different challenges which are well suited to being addressed on a regional basis. The Baltic is sensitive and shallow inland sea with brackish water. It is one of the world's busiest inland seas. For example, energy transport in the Gulf of Finland has increased seven-fold since 1995 and currently amounts to some 140 million tonnes per year. In addition, the economic differences between the countries around the Baltic Sea are large and the region has a marked economic dynamism;

6. recalls that the region is characterised by large territorial disparities. In northern Sweden and Finland there are regions which are very sparsely populated and located far from markets in central Europe. On the south coast of the Baltic Sea population density is more in line with European standards and distances to central European markets are shorter;

7. notes that the Baltic Sea Region is a source of key raw materials for the EU, for example ores and forest-based raw materials, and, if Russia and Norway are included, also oil and gas;

8. stresses the need for the Baltic Sea Strategy to involve local and regional authorities and to include a citizen's perspective;

9. points out that the Baltic Sea Strategy must involve Russia and Norway in all stages from preparation to implementation and be integrated with the Northern Dimension in order to be successful. Through the Northern Dimension, the Baltic Sea Strategy also includes the Barents region;

10. notes that the past twenty years have seen the emergence of a wide range of cooperative arrangements, not least within the framework of deeper relations between border regions and twinned towns. This is an important resource for a Baltic Sea Strategy. This applies particularly to the efforts to create a clearer common Baltic Sea identity, which is an important prerequisite for the strategy's successful implementation;

11. to sum up, the Baltic Sea Region offers special opportunities and challenges for introducing a macro-regional perspective in EU cooperation. This perspective is based on the belief that positive development in one part of the region does not take place at the expense of development in another part, in other words sustainable development is not a zero-sum game; However, this macro-regional perspective should as far as possible not encourage the creation of competing regulatory areas that challenge the Community *acquis*: Europe is not supposed to become a set of different, competing internal markets;

12. points out that the Baltic Sea Strategy can serve as one example of the implementation of a territorial cohesion policy;

13. also stresses that the direction which the European Commission has chosen for the strategy is an excellent illustration of how sustainable development rests on three pillars — environmental, economic and social sustainability. To this must be added the particular importance played by energy issues in the Baltic Sea Region, which must be adequately reflected in the strategy. Secure and environmentally sustainable access to energy is crucially important for an economically sustainable development in the region;

14. points out that the regional implementation of the European Maritime Policy should be an essential component of the Baltic Sea Strategy. With the Baltic Sea Strategy additional impetus should be given to the objective to develop the Baltic Sea region into Europe's maritime best practice region as claimed by several Baltic Sea organisations and also the Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference. The integrative approach of the European Maritime Policy ideally suits to the cross-sectoral approach of the Baltic Sea Strategy and should be implemented coherently;

15. supports the proposal of six Baltic Sea organisations (¹) for a Five-Point Action Plan 'Clean Baltic Shipping'. It is at the same time suitable to illustrate the integrative approach of the Baltic Sea Strategy and to tackle one of the most serious problems of the region which is the increase of harmful shipborne emissions. Accordingly it is recommended to promote the concept as a flagship project within the envisaged action-plan to the Strategy;

16. notes that there are many good examples of the importance of local partnerships for positive economic and social development. Therefore local and regional partnerships between the third sector, private companies and local and regional authorities should be encouraged as part of the Baltic Sea Strategy;

17. points out that the objectives which the Commission has set for the Baltic Sea Strategy — environmental sustainability, an economically prosperous region, an accessible and attractive region and a secure and safe region — are good, albeit very broad. This will impose particular demands as regards prioritisation and focus in the action plan. Cooperation with the competent administrative bodies will be crucial for a successful strategy, as to the ability to create systems of multi-level governance where the local and regional level re involved in implementation;

18. underlines that if the Baltic Sea Strategy is to be perceived by people of the region as a joint project and a joint responsibility, we need to further develop the ties that unite people around the Baltic Sea. This should be done in a transnational process involving citizens, in particular young people. One line of action should be to explore and improve our mutual understanding of history, e.g. by jointly developing a Baltic Sea History Book. The aim would be to establish and strengthen a common Baltic Sea identity.

Implementation and governance

19. recalls that that there are already many strategies in the Baltic Sea Region for various policy areas, both at the macro-regional and national level. In addition, there is a range of examples of successful projects within these areas. The great opportunity which the Baltic Sea Strategy offers to create added value lies in taking a comprehensive political and territorial approach and ensuring coordinated and vigorous implementation;

20. emphasises that, for the strategy to be successful, there must be input from a broad range of European, macro-regional, national, regional and local players, who must be involved in all stages from preparation to implementation;

21. therefore welcomes the broad consultation process on the Baltic Sea Strategy which the European Commission is conducting. A number of useful conferences and roundtable discussions have been held, and these have demonstrated that there is a broad and deep commitment to Baltic Sea issues, a commitment which is an important resource on which to build the implementation of the strategy. These events have also shown that local and regional authorities are key players with regard to all of the four strategic goals;

22. notes that for the Baltic Sea Strategy to succeed, resources will be needed for its implementation. In view of the decision that no new resources will be allocated, they will instead have to be made available by re-ordering priorities with regard to existing resources. Discussions on how this will be accomplished must be commenced as soon as possible, bearing in mind the goals and requirements of the Baltic Sea Strategy. Many policy areas are currently the subject of evaluation or reform discussions and there is a need to highlight the Baltic Sea Strategy perspective in this context;

23. points out that although there is a broad awareness of the challenges, and also of the measures needed to deal with them, the difficulties should not be underestimated. There seems to be an unwillingness to build new institutions and contribute new resources. Rather, it has been maintained that it is all about using existing structures and resources in a more effective way. This is a laudable approach but we would point out that this should not become an excuse for not making the necessary reprioritisations and efforts. Therefore the need for leadership and clear 'ownership' is particularly great;

24. note that although the approach has been that it is not necessary to build new structures and organisations, there is a need for new arenas and fora where the design and implementation of the strategy can be discussed and the relevant decisions taken;

25. proposes that the Council define common goals and activities within the strategy framework and take decisions regarding these. All decisions would be prepared by a working group led by the European Commission and comprising representatives of governments in the Baltic Sea Region, European Commission representatives, MEPs and representatives of the local and regional level chosen also from Committee of the Regions members;

26. proposes that this work be supported by a Baltic Sea Forum which would meet once a year. The forum would bring together a broad range of stakeholders, chosen in accordance with the same principles applied for the stakeholder conference held in connection with drawing up the Baltic Sea Strategy, to discuss the orientation of the strategy and the implementation of the action plans. At the annual meeting a follow-up report would be presented together with results based on regional indicators and examples. Where necessary, the relevant bodies would report on specific policy areas; for example, HELCOM would be responsible for reporting on environmental matters. Russia and Norway would also be represented on the forum;

27. notes that the Committee of the Regions would be represented on the Baltic Sea Forum. The existing CoR interregional group on Baltic Sea policy covers satisfactorily the Baltic Sea Strategy and continues its work;

(¹) Baltic Sea States Subregional Cooperation — BSSSC, CPMR Baltic Sea Commission, Baltic Development Forum, Euroregion Baltic, Union of the Baltic Cities, B7 Baltic Islands Network.

28. emphasises that even though the Baltic Sea Strategy is intended for the Member States in the Baltic region, Russia will play an important role in ensuring its effective implementation in most of the policy areas covered. On specific issues in the framework of the strategy there must therefore be dialogue with Russia based on an equal relationship, to complement the overarching formal dialogue under the Northern Dimension;

29. points out that in each of the countries covered by the Baltic Sea Strategy, a leading government representative would be given specific responsibility for implementation of the strategy. This person could also act as a contact point. It could be modelled on the arrangements for implementation of the Lisbon Strategy applied since 2005;

30. notes that projects included in the Baltic Sea Strategy would be managed within existing Structural Funds structures. Baltic Sea Strategy priorities would be incorporated into authorisation procedures and the decision-making body would follow up results. A specific responsibility would be to promote a number of 'flagship' projects. These projects would highlight the Baltic Sea perspective in questions of particular importance for the strategy's successful implementation. They should also have high visibility and underscore the aim to make the Baltic Sea Region a best practice region;

31. points out that as these projects will be of key importance for implementation, this will impose special requirements for result-oriented and effective learning among project promoters and the parties involved, based on experience gained from successful projects. This could be organised, for example, along the lines of the learning arrangements set out in the connection with the Swedish national strategy for the implementation of structural funds 2007-2013;

32. recommends that existing partner organisations in the Baltic Sea Region be accorded a special role, by, for example, participating in the Baltic Sea Forum. These organisations are a good illustration of the cooperation that has been built up in the region over almost 20 years. They offer many good examples of how countries in the Baltic Sea Region that border on the EU can make a constructive and successful contribution to efforts in this area;

33. notes that cooperation is also evident in the numerous twinning arrangements that exist in the Baltic Sea Region. Some of them have served as a basis for closer cooperation in core activities at local and regional level, others as an arena for meetings between people from different parts of the region. These meetings have helped to build bridges and establish a common knowledge base and understanding. A common outlook has been created on history and the challenges and problems at hand;

34. recommends that the participants in the Baltic Sea Forum be given a special responsibility for disseminating knowledge and informing members of the public about the Baltic Sea Strategy, without whose active involvement and contribution we cannot create the necessary common awareness.

Environmental sustainability

35. stresses that the Baltic Sea Strategy must take as its starting point existing strategies and initiatives and carry/pursue them/out in a vigorous manner. This applies above all to the HELCOM Baltic Sea Action Plan and the framework directive on a Marine Strategy Framework Directive. HELCOM action plan has the additional advantage that it has been approved by Russia;

36. notes that the overarching goal must be sustainable development based on the three pillars of the Lisbon Strategy and the Gothenburg Agenda, namely economic, social and environmental sustainability. The strategy must also be clearly based on the understanding that sustainable development is not a zero-sum game where there can only be winners and losers. A holistic perspective must be applied on the assumption that the various policy areas are inter-related and together create the ground for sustainable development;

37. stresses that the recent dramatic deterioration in the economic situation in the Baltic Sea Region must not lead to the neglect of environmental aspects;

38. notes that the goal of environmental sustainability illustrates particularly well how important it is for the Baltic Sea Strategy to include not only Russia but the whole of the Baltic Sea drainage basin, i.e. also Belarus and Ukraine. It suffices here to recall issues relating to water treatment, transport, energy use, Kaliningrad and St. Petersburg;

39. points out that one of the environmental goals should be to make the Baltic Sea Region a leading ('best practice') region in the field of environmental sustainability;

40. notes that a particular problem of Baltic is that it is a shallow sea with limited connections with the open sea. The waters are relatively cold which means that chemicals are broken down slowly. Finally, it supports only a small number of species because of the brackish water and cold climatic conditions. The water renews itself over a long period of time. Taken together, this means that it takes a considerable time to reduce chemical levels or to cope with eutrophication;

41. highlights the need for developing spatial planning of coastal regions in line with the proposal put forward by the six organisations and networks based in the Baltic Sea Region (BSSSC, B7 Baltic Islands Network, Euroregion Baltic, Baltic Development Forum, CPMR's Baltic Sea Commission, UBC — Union of Baltic Cities). This must be built on existing planning capabilities and in full compliance with subsidiarity principle;

42. notes that emissions of greenhouse gases must be reduced by using renewable and more environmentally energy sources and effective treatment of emissions. Emissions from land transport, sea transport and air transport must be reduced to a level consistent with sustainability;

43. points out that one of the most serious environmental problems in the Baltic Sea Region is eutrophication. The aim of the HELCOM's Baltic Sea Action Plan is to restore the Baltic's good ecological status by 2021. Where eutrophication is concerned this is an ambitious goal. Initially, important results can be achieved at reasonable cost by focusing efforts on the major discharges. Gradually, however, the marginal cost of such efforts, and likewise the need for sustainability, will increase;

44. stresses the need, as part of the current review of the common agricultural policy, to identify and take into consideration the environmental consequences of agriculture; also recommends that the use of phosphates in cleaning agents be prohibited. Such a ban has already been introduced in Germany, Sweden and other Member States, in particular with regard to household laundry detergents. There is now a need to revise Directive 98/34/EC of 22 June 1998 and Regulation (EC) No 648/2004 of 31 March 2004 in order to ban the use of this substance at EU level in all detergents, including industrial detergents and detergents used in washing-up machines. Good results could also be obtained by more effective removal of phosphates from waste water;

45. notes that sea transport plays and will continue to play a key role for the economic integration of the Baltic Sea Region. However, there is need to deal with the growing environmental impact. Here the HELCOM action plan offers a good starting point and there are many cost-effective measures that could be taken. Above all, emissions of sulphur and nitrogen oxides must be reduced. At the round table conference in Gdansk last October, a number of proposals were put forward, including, for example, a ban on vessels which do not meet current maritime safety requirements (substandard ships). Another measure which could be taken is to introduce emission rights trading for sulphur and nitrogen oxides for ships along the lines of the arrangements applied for land-based activities. In addition, copper should be banned as part of an anti-fouling system for ships and boats. Opportunities for ships at berth to use shore-side electricity should be improved;

46. points out that water treatment is another important area for improvement, where the capabilities of local and regional authorities play a key role. Here mention can be made of the Water Users Partnership, highlighted by the Euroregion Baltic in its contribution to the consultations on the Baltic Sea Strategy, which promotes better management of water resources;

47. stresses that fish stocks must not simply be maintained at current levels but rebuilt. Management of fish stocks must take place in accordance with principles the Baltic's fragile eco-system. Welcomes, in this context, the fact that the specific characteristics of fishery resources in the Baltic Sea are recognised in Regulation (EC) No 2187/2005 of 21 December 2005 on the conservation of fishery resources through technical measures in the Baltic Sea, the Belts and the Sound; would point out, in particular, that this regulation, which was adopted after a wide-ranging consultation with stakeholders, has, since 1 January 2006, considerably simplified management of fishery resources in the Baltic Sea and made it possible to replace multilateral management of fishery resources between the states bordering the Baltic Sea within the International Baltic Sea Fishery Commission (IBSFC) by bilateral management (the European Union and the Russian Federation);

48. recalls that, whilst tourism is considered to be an important element of an economically prosperous Baltic Sea Region, it must be environmentally sustainable. A clean and unspoilt environment is key trademark which must be used to attract tourism to the region but at the same time tourism poses a threat to the environment and undermines the region's attractiveness.

An economically prosperous region

49. notes that following a long period of strong economic growth, the Baltic Sea Region has now entered a major economic downturn. Swift action is required, but at the same time we should not lose sight of the strategic perspective, which forms the basis of the Baltic Sea Strategy. Economic development is inextricably linked to change, and even if acute problems overshadow the strategic perspective, the overall challenges remain — namely demographic development and international competition as part of globalisation;

50. stresses the need for further efforts to implement the internal market in the Baltic Sea Region effectively and in a coordinated fashion. This is an important factor in the economic prosperity of the Baltic Sea Region. In the main, it is small and medium-sized enterprises which are affected by trade barriers and difficulties resulting from bureaucracy. The different interpretation of rules threatens to create new regional trade barriers. Knowledge of the internal market must be improved in the administrations and judicial systems of each country. Also important are fora where coordination and exchanges of experience can take place. In that connection, attention is drawn to the SOLVIT online network (http://ec.europa.eu/solvit/) designed to help resolve problems in the implementation of internal market legislation;

51. stresses that business activity, above all that of small and medium-sized enterprises, is a prerequisite for a flourishing economy in the Baltic Sea Region. Entrepreneurial spirit and business activity must therefore be promoted. The access to risk capital for SMEs should be improved;

52. recommends that efforts be undertaken to improve access to risk capital for business start-ups, above all seed money. Furthermore, measures should be taken to boost entrepreneurship, particularly among young entrepreneurs;

53. notes that in business start-ups emphasis is often placed on economic use of innovation, regardless of how technically demanding this innovation is; recommends therefore making matters such as the coordinated cluster policy, coordinated innovation systems, innovation programmes and flagship projects central themes of the Baltic Sea Strategy. Stakeholders' scope for requesting resources for research and development in Baltic Sea countries other than their own should be improved;

54. further notes that attitudes to entrepreneurship are formed at a very young age. It is therefore essential that people are introduced to entrepreneurship and taught about it at school, university and college;

55. suggests that those countries included in the Baltic Sea Strategy draw up a common programme to promote sustainable tourism in the region. Particular emphasis should be placed on the value of nature and the environment as well as the region's rich cultural and historical heritage;

56. points out that the Baltic Sea region possesses rich resources of raw materials, especially minerals and wood. Consideration should be given to drawing up a mineral strategy specifically for the Baltic region taking into account the proposal for a directive establishing a framework for the protection of soil (COM(2006) 232 final) (see CoR opinion CdR 321/2006), which, whilst setting common objectives for soil protection, allows Member States a large degree of flexibility in choosing how to achieve these objectives (obligation to achieve results, but choice of instruments). In order for an economy to flourish it is important that these raw materials can be produced and managed sustainably and efficiently. This places high demands on infrastructure for sustainable transport;

57. notes that energy matters are and will be of crucial importance for the economic development of the Baltic Sea Region. Efforts to promote greater energy efficiency are important here, but secure and stable supplies of energy and electricity remain of vital importance. For historical reasons, the Baltic States are still connected to the Russian electricity network. They must be integrated into a Nordic and European electricity network and become part of an energy market for the EU and the Baltic Sea Region. This will require connections, changes to the rules and investment in infrastructure;

58. stresses that the freedom of movement of workers is an important part of integration in the Baltic Sea Region. Consistent implementation of peoples' freedom of movement is important;

59. endorses the position of the Baltic Sea Trade Union Network (BASTUN) that the social dimension should be incorporated in the Baltic Sea Strategy. The Strategy should be used to ensure fair and well-functioning labour markets in the region. Decent working conditions should be seen as an important aspect of the competitiveness of the region. They are an increasingly important advantage in the competition for well qualified workforce;

60. emphasises that knowledge and with it the so-called 'fifth freedom', i.e. free movement of knowledge, will play a central role in future competitiveness and economic development. An important aspect of this is the mobility of students in the Baltic Sea Region. However, this form of mobility has largely bypassed the region. The number of young people wishing to study in the Baltic Sea Region is small. However, this is important for deeper economic integration. Studying in the Baltic Sea Region is obviously not seen as a factor in a successful career. An important task for the Baltic Sea Strategy is to analyse why this is the case and what can be done in order to make studying in another Baltic Sea country seem like a more attractive alternative. It is a question of the quality of the courses provided and presumably language skills as well;

61. views mobility of researchers and research findings as an important factor in the successful development of the Baltic Sea Region. Promoting mobility of researchers depends to a large extent on availability of interesting projects and funding. Cooperation between the various stakeholders must be developed, partly between universities and colleges, but also between academia, business and the public sector within the framework of a triple helix model.

An accessible and attractive region

62. is of the view that efforts to make the Baltic Sea Region accessible and attractive must be based on the assumption that it is a question of both physical infrastructure, e.g. transport systems, as well as knowledge-based infrastructure for transmitting knowledge, information, and providing services, among other things. In particular, it is also a question of linking up national structures and systems to form a regional network. The current trend is to stop infrastructure planning at borders. The goal here must be to create an integrated Baltic Sea Region, which involves the east-west perspective being taken just as seriously as the north-south one. The east-west transport corridors also create an opening to the markets east and south-east of the Baltic Sea region;

63. points out that structurally the Baltic Sea Region is hallmarked by major imbalances between the very thinly populated areas in the north and the more heavily populated areas in the south. The distances between population centres in the north are considerable and the transport network is loose-knit; the connectivity of the Baltic countries and the most northern regions to the core areas of BSA should be enhanced and taken into TEN-T. The need to make better railway capacity is immediate;

64. recommends far greater joint planning of cross-border traffic flows in order to push ahead with integration. For example, a better transport flow can be achieved if rail transport is considered from a more comprehensive viewpoint and EU directives on railway traffic are interpreted using a more coordinated approach;

65. points out that a characteristic of a regional transport system in the Baltic Sea Region is that all modes of transport will have equal importance. Transport will take place on land and at sea, e.g. freight transport on rail and short sea routes, but also by air. Therefore transport corridors should be designed in such a way as to enable a smooth transition between modes of transport, i.e. inter-modality. This presents major logistical challenges, and the sustainability aspect is no less important;

66.　　stresses that an important task is to make better use of available systems. Capacity bottlenecks must be identified and removed. Transnational, national, regional and local transport systems must be interconnected;

67.　　is of the view that the cross-border sections of the TEN-T must be expanded swiftly; improving modality as well as cooperation within competitive logistical networks must be borne in mind here;

68.　　stresses that even if land and sea transport form the backbone of freight transport and, to a large extent, passenger transport too, the significance of air travel for the mobility of people in the region should not be overlooked. It is vital that infrastructure for air transport also be developed, not least at regional airports;

69.　　recalls the importance which the bridge over the Sound has acquired as an infrastructure investment for the region's economic life and for removing a capacity bottleneck. A bridge over the Fehmarn belt would also be of crucial importance and this idea should be taken up immediately;

70.　　points out that alongside investment in physical infrastructure, there should be further efforts to expand a functioning and integrated knowledge-based infrastructure, i.e. ICT must take priority. This type of investment will be especially important for future competitiveness and development and requires investment both in software and hardware. This last category includes the further expansion of broadband connections in the region, which could become a flagship project. Regional oversight should be established in order to ensure transparency and coordination. Provider neutrality is important so that the expansion of broadband is not linked to the provider and does not lead to local and regional monopolies. 'Soft infrastructure' consists for example of common standards, e.g. for electronic identification throughout the Baltic Sea Region. This is a prerequisite for trade with IT-based services.

A secure region

71.　　points out that the Baltic Sea is and will continue to be one of the world's busiest seas. It is currently used by more than 2 000 ships every day. Even if the economic downturn leaves its mark here, there will continue to be an upward trend in shipping. Furthermore, the Baltic Sea, independent of Russia's territorial waters, has been designated by the United Nations International Maritime Organisation (IMO) as a Particularly Sensitive Sea Area (PSSA), which opens up the possibility of taking protection measures as regards transport in the Baltic Sea;

72.　　draws attention to the fact that the larger amount of traffic will increase demands for joint preparedness and capacity for action. In stark terms, the question is not whether but when a more serious accident will occur on the Baltic Sea. The effects of such an event would be felt across borders and thus the call for cross-border preparedness and capacity for action;

73.　　supports coordinated preparation measures and a coordinated structure for effective action. The local and regional perspective must be integrated from the very beginning. The CoR recommends implementing the Baltic Master Project Action Plan through preventive preparation planning, developing and improving coastal area planning throughout the Baltic Sea Region as well as improving supervision of shipping movements in the Baltic Sea; draws attention in this context to the Regulation on single hull oil tankers (¹) and welcomes the adoption by the European Parliament on 11 March 2009 of the third legislative package on maritime safety — the so-called Erika III package. The package, which will enter into force by 2012, covers not only compensation to passengers, but also inspections, equipping fishing ships with automatic identification and tracking systems (AIS), port state control, ship insurance, accident investigations and the designation of the authority to decide on the place of refuge for ships in distress; However, the Committee emphasises the need to extend the capacity to monitor transport that exists in the Gulf of Finland should be extended, to cover the whole Baltic Sea. Furthermore, it is recommended that a joint mechanism for monitoring compliance is established;

74.　　stresses that an important area that requires consideration within the framework of the Baltic Sea Strategy is public heath. Problems can occur as a result of young people migrating from the land to cities as part of the process of rapid economic transformation. The major discrepancies between population groups, in which there is scope for even greater poverty, e.g. among children, are and will remain a major social problem. Marginalisation, which leads to alcohol and drug abuse, and lifestyle-related health problems are further social problems which must be tackled at regional level using a coordinated approach;

75.　　believes that it is especially important for health matters to be handled jointly with countries in the Baltic Sea Region that border the EU. In Russia, Belarus and Ukraine there are widespread public health problems. An important starting point in this case must be the Northern Dimension and its relevant platform — the Northern Dimension Partnership in Public Health and Social Well-Being (NDPHS). This partnership should be an important starting point and must be given greater consideration;

76.　　points out that the NDPHS's top priority must be to get the spread of infectious diseases under control. These include HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and the problem of antibiotic-resistant micro-organisms. A further priority should be to improve social well-being;

(¹) Regulation (EC) No 417/2002 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 February 2002 on the accelerated phasing-in of double hull or equivalent design requirements for single hull oil tankers.

77.　points out that organised crime poses a serious threat to security in the Baltic Sea Region. Criminal organisations are adopting more and more sophisticated means and increasingly are operating across borders. States bordering the Baltic Sea must therefore continue to adopt a unified approach in the fight against organised crime, drugs smuggling and human trafficking in the region. This should be emphasised in the Baltic Sea Strategy. There is already regional police cooperation within the framework of the Task Force on Organised Crime in the Baltic Sea Region (BSTF). Norway, Iceland and Russia participate in this cooperation, as do Europol and Interpol. This cooperation should be strengthened within the framework of the Baltic Sea Strategy to complement the cooperation which also takes place within the EU set-up;

78.　stresses the need to protect critical infrastructure, i.e. facilities or systems which are necessary in order to guarantee key societal functions, health care, security and economic or social welfare. Disruptions in the operation or destruction of these facilities can have serious consequences. Transport, energy provision and the exchange of information are examples of key activities which require a functioning infrastructure.

Brussels, 22 April 2009

The President
of the Committee of the Regions
Luc VAN DEN BRANDE