

**Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on Macro-regional cooperation 'Rolling out the Baltic Sea Strategy to other macro-regions in Europe' (Exploratory opinion)**

(2009/C 318/02)

Rapporteur: **Mr SMYTH**

On 18 December 2008, Ms Cecilia MALMSTRÖM, Minister for European Union Affairs, asked the European Economic and Social Committee, on behalf of the Swedish Presidency, to draw up an exploratory opinion on

*'Macro-regional cooperation - Rolling out the Baltic Sea Strategy to other macro-regions in Europe.'*

The Section for Economic and Monetary Union and Economic and Social Cohesion, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 11 September 2009. The rapporteur was Mr SMYTH.

At its 456th plenary session, held on 30 September and 1st October 2009 (meeting of 30 September 2009), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion unanimously.

## 1. Conclusions

1.1 The EESC supports the aims embodied in the four pillars of the Baltic Sea Region strategy, to make the region a prosperous place, a safe and secure place, an environmentally sustainable place and an attractive and accessible place.

1.2 The EESC recognises the comprehensive consultation process that preceded the finalisation of the strategy and the role played in the process by the social partners and stakeholders. The EESC re-emphasises the crucial role of organised civil society in the implementation of the Baltic Sea Region strategy and reaffirms its support for the establishment of a Baltic Sea Civil Society Forum that would help to embed civil society in the evolution of the strategy.

1.3 The EESC welcomes the strategy's Action Plan which comprises 15 priority actions each of which will be the responsibility of a Baltic Member State to implement.

1.4 The Baltic Sea Region strategy has both strengths and weaknesses. Its major strengths are that it is comprehensive in its intended coverage and that it will be reviewed regularly by the Commission and the European Council. Its weaknesses stem from its complexity and from governance issues surrounding its implementation. The strategy encompasses the remit of 21 Directorates General as well as 8 Member States plus Russia. Taken with the 4 pillars, 15 priority actions and numerous horizontal actions, there is a complex 'variable geometry' at the heart of the strategy which might make it unworkable. The EESC believes that every effort should be made to simplify the governance arrangements for the implementation of the strategy.

1.5 The EESC has an important role to play in ensuring a spirit of cooperation during the development and implemen-

tation of the strategy. The creation of a Baltic Sea Civil Society Forum goes some way towards giving organised civil society a stake in the future evolution of the strategy.

1.6 The Baltic Sea Region strategy poses a major challenge to the EESC in general and in particular to those committee members from the Baltic region. It obliges them to take the initiative in representing organised civil society in the evolution of the strategy through the operation of the Civil Society Forum. In view of the fact that the Baltic Sea Region strategy will operate for several years there is a compelling case for setting up a permanent group within the EESC to ensure that the committee can participate effectively in what may become the template for macro-regional cooperation across the European Union.

## 2. Introduction

2.1 The issue of macro-regional cooperation has grown in importance in recent years. Within the EU macro-regions are now seen as having the potential to make a significant contribution to cohesion policy and the achievement of comparable levels of development across Member States. Europe already embraces forms of macro-regional cooperation. The Visegrad Group, for instance, which comprises the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia, represents the efforts of the countries of the Central European region to work together in several fields of common interest in the spirit of European integration<sup>(1)</sup>. More recently in 2008 the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, formerly known as the Barcelona Process, was re-launched at the Paris Summit for the Mediterranean. This Partnership comprises all 27 Member States of the European Union together with 16 partner states across the southern Mediterranean and the Middle East and it aims to tackle common problems such as maritime pollution and maritime safety, energy issues and business development<sup>(2)</sup>.

<sup>(1)</sup> <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/>

<sup>(2)</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/external\\_relations/euromed/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/external_relations/euromed/index_en.htm)

2.2 In November 2006, the European Parliament adopted a resolution to draw up a Baltic Sea Strategy. This strategy for the designated Baltic Sea macro-region was adopted by the Commission on 10 June 2009 and was submitted to the European Council on 19 June 2009. The Swedish Presidency will take it forward for further discussion ahead of adoption by the Council in late October 2009. This exploratory opinion has been requested by the Swedish Presidency as it forms an important element of its work programme. The purpose of this opinion is to assess the proposed Baltic Sea Strategy, its preparation, its structure and its Action Plan from the perspective of organised civil society. The opinion builds upon the analysis set out in the recently adopted EESC opinion 'Baltic Sea Region: the role of organised civil society in improving regional cooperation and identifying a regional strategy' <sup>(1)</sup>.

2.3 The call for a Baltic Sea Strategy stems from the view that there is a need to achieve greater and more effective coordination between the European Commission, Member States, regions, local authorities and other stakeholders in order to bring about a more efficient use of programmes and policies. The Baltic Sea is one of the busiest and most congested maritime regions in the world as can be seen from the mapping of daily ship movements set out in the Appendix to this opinion. The Baltic Sea region comprises eight Member States which border the Baltic (Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Germany, Poland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania) along with Russia. The European Council, when it asked the Commission to undertake the production of the strategy, determined that the external relations aspects of the strategy should be linked to the existing Northern Dimension framework <sup>(2)</sup>. The EESC supports the move to produce a macro-regional development strategy that includes all the Baltic Sea states.

2.4 The process that led to the development of the strategy is unprecedented. The Commission's view is that, if the Baltic Sea Strategy is valid and workable in the Baltic, a similar approach may be applicable to other macro-regions such as Danube Region <sup>(3)</sup>, the Alpine region and the Mediterranean:

- the Commission undertook a comprehensive set of consultations throughout 2008. These consultative conferences were spread geographically across the macro-region and culminated in February 2009 in Rostock. They were themed around the four pillars upon which the Baltic Sea Strategy is built to make the Baltic Sea Region an environmentally sustainable place;

- a prosperous place;

- an accessible and attractive place;

<sup>(1)</sup> EESC Opinion 888/2009 adopted on 13 May 2009 (not yet published in the OJ).

<sup>(2)</sup> The Northern Dimension is an arrangement under which the EU, Russia, Norway and Iceland can implement policies in agreed areas of cooperation.

<sup>(3)</sup> This point has been made by Commissioner Hübner in Towards a Strategy for the Danube Region [http://ec.europa.eu/commission\\_barroso/hubner/speeches/pdf/2009/07052009\\_u1m.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/commission_barroso/hubner/speeches/pdf/2009/07052009_u1m.pdf)

- a safe and secure place.

2.5 The strategy is accompanied by an Action Plan which comprises 15 priority areas across the four pillars. Each priority area is to be coordinated by a Baltic Member State and they are expected to work on its implementation together with all relevant stakeholders <sup>(4)</sup>.

2.6 The Baltic Sea Strategy and its proposed actions are to be funded from existing sources of funding, namely the EU Structural Funds (EUR 55 billion between 2007-13), funding from each Baltic Sea state, NGOs, private sourcing as well as funding from financial institutions such as the EIB, NIB and the EBRD.

2.7 In addition to the four pillars, the strategy also contains horizontal actions designed to develop territorial cohesion. These include:

- measures to align existing funding and policies to the priorities and actions of the Baltic Sea Strategy;

- measures to coordinate the implementation of EU Directives and to avoid unnecessary bureaucratic barriers;

- measures to encourage the use of maritime spatial planning in Member States as a common approach in cross-border cooperation;

- the development of land-based spatial planning in Baltic Member States;

- the translation of successful pilot projects within the strategy into full-scale actions;

- the expansion of research as a base for policy decisions;

- measures to improve and coordinate the collection of maritime and socio-economic data in the Baltic macro-region;

- the building of a regional identity.

### 3. Comments on the Baltic Sea Strategy

3.1 The EESC welcomes the approach taken by the Council and Commission to the development of the Baltic Sea Strategy and in particular the comprehensive set of consultations of stakeholders in the macro-region. The Strategy is innovative as it will operate on a transnational governance structure and hence it goes beyond the scope of traditional EU regional policies. This new governance structure sits between the nation state and the supranational community.

<sup>(4)</sup> The Baltic Sea Strategy and Action Plan can be found at: [http://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/cooperation/baltic/documents\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/cooperation/baltic/documents_en.htm)

3.2 The four pillars of the strategy and the ensuing action plan represent a serious attempt to produce a better coordinated development framework for such a diverse area as the Baltic and thus to try to promote territorial cohesion.

3.3 The concept of Baltic Sea Region Strategy is described by the Commission as 'a work in progress'. Defining individual aspects of the Baltic Sea Region is necessarily imprecise because the geographies change depending on the question being addressed. For example the issue of the environment gives rise to a different geography from the economic geography or the transport geography. The approach taken in designing the Baltic Sea Region strategy is to start by defining the problems and issues and letting these define the geography of the macro-region. The EESC believes that the complexity of the challenges facing the Baltic Sea Region necessitates greater emphasis on the effective governance of the strategy.

3.4 The EESC recognises the high level of political 'buy in' to the strategy achieved through the consultation phase. BASTUN the Baltic Sea Trade Union Network which represents trade union members in all the Baltic Member States plus Russia has played a prominent role in the consultation process which has shaped the Baltic Sea Region strategy to date. The momentum created must be maintained during the implementation of the strategy. To this end, the EESC welcomes the commitment to raise the strategy to the level of the European Council every two years under the Polish (2011) Latvian (2013) and Lithuanian (2015) presidencies.

3.5 The completion of Annual Progress Reports on this strategy coupled with a Bi-annual Review is also an important mechanism for ensuring that stakeholders remain committed. During consultations with the Commission it emerged that while the Baltic Sea Strategy will be formally launched on 19 June, it remains in essence a work in progress. The EESC supports this and is pleased to note that there will be a top level conference and ministerial meeting on the strategy in September and October 2009 under the Swedish presidency. Bearing in mind the prominence given to stakeholder consultation in the preparation of the strategy, it is important that the EESC takes an active part in its development, implementation and dissemination.

3.6 While there appeared to be consensus emerging from the consultations on the implementation of the strategy, there was less general agreement about whether or not the existing institutional frameworks were appropriate for this implementation. This and other related issues will no doubt be the subject of further discussions between stakeholders and the Commission <sup>(1)</sup>.

<sup>(1)</sup> For a good general discussion of these institutional and governance issues see C. Schymik and P. Krümrey: *EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region: Core Europe in the Northern Periphery?*, Working Paper FG1 2009, SWP Berlin.

3.6.1 In the meantime, however, the strategy should make use of the opportunities provided by existing European initiatives such as the Joint Programming in Research, which has received strong support from the EESC. This initiative will contribute to the Commission's recommendation contained in the Baltic Sea Strategy, namely to exploit the full potential of the Baltic Sea Region in research and innovation in order to make it a prosperous place.

3.7 In terms of the funding of the strategy, the EESC wishes to underline its support for the more effective use of the existing multivariable EU funding channels. This may be made more transparent by the creation and presentation of budgets for the priority areas of the strategy. Unless it is made possible to pledge appropriate funding resources to the Baltic Sea Region Strategy initiatives, there is a risk that the entire strategy will become incoherent, diffuse and that it will lose the commitment of stakeholders in Member States. To this end, the EESC reiterates its view that the effective implementation of the Baltic Sea Strategy requires the establishment of its own separate budget, in order to avoid the risk that the strategy becomes merely a political statement with its aims unfulfilled <sup>(2)</sup>.

3.8 There are tensions clearly evident in the Action Plan. It represents an attempt to ensure the continued 'buy-in' of stakeholders by proposing a very wide range of high profile actions. This approach runs the risk of trying to be all things to all men. The strategy's complexity is also one of its main weaknesses.

3.9 The Commission attempts to deal with the complexity of implementation by making each member state responsible for one or more of the priority actions. In theory this is a clever approach; in practice it may be very difficult to achieve. Each member state will be required to co-ordinate actions across the macro-region and across multiple Directorates General. The full strategy embraces the competences of 21 Directorates General. The experience to date with some other intergovernmental policy cooperation has been mixed. The Leipzig Charter on Sustainable European Cities which adopted a similar approach to implementation has been somewhat disappointing and has made slow progress to date <sup>(3)</sup>. The Baltic Sea Region strategy is arguably even more complex than the Leipzig Charter and there is a risk that its governance may prove to be too unwieldy.

<sup>(2)</sup> See EESC Opinion on Baltic Sea Region: the role of organised civil society in improving regional cooperation and identifying a regional strategy, paragraphs 2.6 and 2.7. The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, for instance, has a budget which is both substantial and dedicated to EuroMed. Opinion adopted on 13 May 2009 (not yet published in the OJ).

<sup>(3)</sup> Charter signed on 24th May 2007 under the German Council Presidency during an informal meeting of EU Ministers responsible for Urban Development and Territorial Cohesion. This intergovernmental charter makes two main recommendations, namely to make greater use of an integrated urban development policy and to grant special attention to deprived neighbourhoods.

#### 4. Potential role for the EESC in Baltic Sea Region Strategy

4.1 The EESC has already put forward a proposal to establish a 'Baltic Sea Civil Society Forum' and has indicated its readiness to begin preparing the groundwork for such a Forum <sup>(1)</sup>. This Forum should run in parallel with the strategy and it should make an input into the Bi-annual strategy Review. The success of the consultation conferences leading to the preparation of the strategy lends further weight to the need for ongoing public discussion and awareness raising about the strategy's implementation.

4.2 The EESC together with the Economic and Social Committees of the Baltic Member States have important roles to play in ensuring an atmosphere of cooperation and working together during the implementation of the strategy. In order to strengthen institution building and participatory civil society structures especially in new member countries and in neighbouring states such as Russia, it might be useful to establish cross-border relations and cooperation between sister organisations such as trade unions, consumer bodies and community and voluntary sector organisations. The membership of the EESC from the eight Baltic Member States in particular should develop the roles of emissary, interlocutor and rapporteur to enable the Committee to maintain an informed position on the strategy's progress, successes and challenges and can therefore support the achievement of its objectives.

4.3 The EESC welcomes the serious attempt being made in the Baltic Sea Region Strategy to develop an integrated approach to macro-regional cooperation. The Committee has been an advocate of such an approach for some time, as has the European Parliament.

4.4 The EESC supports the broad approach to implementation advocated in the strategy whereby Member States take the lead in coordinating implementation of the 15 priority areas and the associated flagship projects.

4.5 It could be argued that the Baltic Sea Region strategy represents an important test of the role of the EESC. It challenges the Committee to play a full part in the evolution of the strategy, notwithstanding the difficult governance issues discussed earlier in this opinion. It throws down a challenge in particular to those members of the EESC from the 8 Baltic Member States covered by the strategy. It obliges them to take the initiative in representing organised civil society in the ongoing implementation of the strategy through the operation of the Baltic Sea Region Civil Society Forum. Given that the strategy is likely to operate for many years to come, there is a strong argument for the establishment within the EESC of an *ad hoc* Baltic Sea Region observatory or study group so that the entire EESC can participate effectively in what is sure to become a template for macro-regional cooperation across the Union.

Brussels, 30 September 2009.

*The President*  
*of the European Economic and Social Committee*  
Mario SEPI

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<sup>(1)</sup> See EESC Opinion on Baltic Sea Region: the role of organised civil society in improving regional cooperation and identifying a regional strategy, paragraph 3.4. Opinion adopted on 13 May 2009 (not yet published in the OJ).