

Speech at the informal Baltic Sea Group Brussels 24 June

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to start by thanking the organisers, the informal Baltic Sea Group, for arranging this event.

I would also like to thank those of you here today for the important work you have done in putting the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region on the political agenda. You were among the first to see the importance of the Strategy and also among the first to arrange seminars and discussions about the Strategy.

The unique role of the Brussels Regional Offices in linking the discussions taking place here and those taking place in the regions themselves makes it especially important that you are actively involved in the organisation and implementation of the Strategy.

The Baltic Sea Strategy – a progress report

On the 10th of June, the Commission adopted its Communication on the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region. It is accompanied by a detailed Action Plan. This means that the Commission has fulfilled the request from the Council made in December 2007 to produce such a Strategy by June 2009.

This short statement of fact conceals the huge amount of work that has been carried out in that intervening 18-month period. The finalisation of the Strategy and Action Plan has been very much a partnership effort.

The work has been carried out in close collaboration with you and your colleagues in the region – the people on the ground.

For those of us deeply involved in Cohesion Policy, this partnership approach may seem rather logical. However, in the macro-region context, it is still new, and I must emphasise that this constitutes, for me, one of the key elements of added value that has been generated by the whole preparation process. Before we even start the delivery of projects on the ground, we have taken great strides forward in developing and advancing co-ordination and co-operation among the many actors involved in the Baltic Sea Region.

The work with the actors in the region has been very intensive. There have been two full-sized stakeholders events, in Stockholm in September 2008 and in Rostock in February 2009. In addition, there have been four round tables, held across the region, focussed on the main priorities. There was also a Youth Conference in Hamburg in February this year to ensure that the youth dimension was not overlooked. And these are only the highest level events – we should also remember all the national and regional events, as well as the many bilateral meetings and discussions that have taken place since mid-2007.

Throughout this whole consultation process, there has been an impressive level of commitment from the regional partnership, demonstrated by your active and constructive participation in all the events and conferences. The numerous written contributions we received were further proof of this commitment. This gives us great confidence for the future work of implementing the Strategy.

The Adoption Process – next steps

Of course, the adoption of the Strategy by the Commission is just the first step. The Strategy has now been passed formally to the Council, and over the next three months, my services will be working closely with the Member States in Council. I understand that the Swedish Presidency is setting up a Friends of the Baltic Sea Group to co-ordinate these discussions. Given the cross-sectoral content of the Strategy, this seems to me to be a logical approach.

The intention is for the General Affairs Council to adopt conclusions on the Strategy in early autumn, which will be followed by European Council conclusions in October. That will constitute the formal green light for the Strategy. Of course, we will also continue dialogue with the Parliament, Committee of the Regions and the Economic and Social Committee to ensure that their views are fully taken into account during the implementation of the Strategy.

The content of the Strategy

In parallel to this on-going political process, we are now entering the implementation phase of the Strategy. We must be aware of this challenge and make sure that the level of commitment is sustained by all stakeholders, especially from the regions, and that a robust implementation process is in place. In short, we must now take the step from words to action.

This is why we have developed an action-oriented Strategy. It addresses, in a concrete way, the four key issues facing the Baltic Sea Region today:

- To deliver a sea which is less affected by eutrophication and which has sustained biodiversity.
- To develop a more prosperous region with increased trade and more innovative companies.
- To give rise to a region that is more connected both in terms of transport and electricity, and
- To assist the region to be better prepared to handle accidents and combat cross-border crime.

These four pillars provide the framework for the Strategy. The actions and projects to be delivered must be consistent with the pillars. Herein lies one of the underlying principles of the Strategy – the individual actions and projects being carried out will be co-ordinated with other on-going activities to provide a coherent, overall approach to development in the region. This addresses one of the weaknesses identified during the preparation of the Strategy – too often, activities were being implemented without sufficient co-ordination with other actions.

Evidently, defining the four main issues of the Strategy was only the first step towards delivering results on the ground. This is why the Strategy's Action Plan is central to the whole process. It provides the necessary detail by setting out 15 Priority Areas where co-operation is required to improve the economic and social development of the Baltic Sea Region.

The priority areas are implemented through detailed actions which are also described in the Action Plan. Some of these actions are "strategic" for the Baltic Sea Region as a whole. They are designed to address specific and important issues for its regions, citizens and enterprises. Other actions are "co-operative", meaning they are based on the benefits from improving co-operation on issues where Member States, regions and other actors are ready to do so.

In addition, each priority area includes examples of flagship projects. These are projects with a particularly high significance for that Priority Area. They will deliver beneficial, visible results to the Baltic Sea Region and its citizens.

For each priority area and for each flagship project a lead Member State or lead organisation is to be appointed. So far, we have identified lead partners for all 15 priority areas and 50 of the 78 flagship projects.

Implementing the strategy

This, then, is the structure of the Strategy: pillars; priority areas; and projects and actions. In order to deliver successful results based on this structure, it is important that the co-ordination process which has been so successful in creating the Strategy is continued.

The Member States involved are committed to implementing the Strategy and fulfilling the agreements made. This must be done in partnership with all other levels of governance, and especially with you in the regions.

We are therefore setting up a comprehensive implementation system in order to make sure that commitments are delivered on time and in the specified manner. This will involve putting in place a governance mechanism at three levels: the strategy itself, the priority areas, and the projects.

Firstly, the Commission plans to convene a High Level Working Group of Senior Officials from all Member States to consult with on the progress of the strategy. The intention is that the Group would meet regularly and provide input and advice on the overall state of play.

Secondly, the Commission foresees the creation of a Steering Group for each priority area, comprising of individual project and action leaders. Such Groups could meet a couple of times a year, with the aim of maintaining progress on that particular topic.

At the project level, steering groups, made up of the partners involved in each project, are also envisaged. This will help to keep projects on track and on schedule.

The Commission is responsible for the overall co-ordination, monitoring and follow up of the Strategy. This will require regular contact with the co-ordinators for the priority areas in particular. We already envisage, in addition to the Steering Groups I have just mentioned, the idea of co-ordinator seminars to assist the work of the Commission.

Keeping the stakeholders involved

We expect the regions to be actively involved at each stage of the implementation process. We foresee regions as key partners in many of the projects and actions of the Strategy. Projects such as "Anticipating regional and local impacts of climate change through research" and "Developing a Baltic Sea Region Programme for Innovation, Clusters and SME-Networks" will need the involvement of regional partners to be successful.

Equally, we will look to the regions to be active members of the Steering Groups, in order to ensure that regular progress is made on implementation. It will be important to avoid unnecessary delays and regular, active participation in Steering Groups will keep the implementation process moving forward.

Over the next few months, my services will be discussing the implementation of the Priority Areas and the flagship projects with the responsible bodies. There is a need to assess the state of play of each action. Where preparations are well advanced, we should ensure that projects move forward rapidly. Where projects are not so developed, the Commission will encourage further discussions to assess the state of readiness and the availability of finance.

Regional partners can help this process, by bringing their expertise to the process. Regions can also look at existing funding sources – such as the 50 Cohesion Policy programmes already active in the region – to see what funds are available and how they can be used to assist the implementation of the Strategy. My services have already started

discussions – through seminars and Monitoring Committee meetings – on these issues.

Your work here can be co-ordinated with the Commission's proposal to form a group of financial experts consisting of selected experts from the different EU funded programmes, the Banks and national institutions. Through this group more tailored financial solutions should be found for the different Flagship Projects.

Maintaining Visibility – the Regional Role

It will also be important to maintain the broad political visibility that the Strategy has already achieved. A key component of this information and publicity dimension is the idea of an Annual Forum on the Strategy, starting in 2010, to review and discuss the progress of the Strategy and to make recommendations on implementation. This would involve partners from all levels and we would expect the regional level to be particularly active in these annual events, both in examining progress thus far, and also by producing new ideas for the development of the Strategy.

Other Macro-regions

Before concluding, I would like to say a few words about the wider impact of the Strategy. I know that a number of you here today are not from the Baltic Sea Region, and your participation is indicative of the level of interest that the Strategy has generated across Europe.

Last week we saw the first direct results of this interest, when the European Council asked the Commission to prepare a strategy for the Danube region for the end of 2010. What has been particularly impressive during the preparatory work on the Danube has been the close co-operation between Member States and the regions. Baden-Württemberg, Upper Austria and Bavaria, to name but three, have all been extremely active in recent months.

We will certainly draw on the lessons we have learned from our Baltic Sea Region work, although it is clear that each macro-region is unique and each will need a specific approach. As part of this process, the Swedish Presidency is organising a major event in Stockholm in September to discuss the Baltic Sea Region Strategy and the macro-region approach in general. You may hear more of this later this afternoon.

Conclusions

To conclude, I hope I have informed you of how the work on the Baltic Sea Strategy is advancing, and how you have contributed so much to making it a success thus far.

I also hope I have made clear that we require your continued assistance, and that we have factored you in as key partners in our future work. The regions have a delivery role at the level of projects and actions; a co-ordinating role through their involvement in the Priority Areas; and a political role, by maintaining pressure on Member States to ensure that the momentum of the Strategy is sustained.

It is through the regions that we can keep the Strategy firmly anchored in the Baltic Sea Region itself, and through your help that we can together deliver the necessary results.

Thank you very much.