

Johannes Hahn

Commissioner for Regional Policy

Baltic Sea Region practical cooperation underway, delivering results

Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort

1st Annual Forum for the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region

Tallinn, 14th October 2010

Mr. President,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to address you at this 1st Annual Forum for the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region here in Tallinn. We are very pleased to have the opportunity to organise this Forum back-to-back with the Annual Conference of the Baltic Sea States Sub-regional Cooperation (BSSSC). Your role in promoting the interests of the regions of the entire Sea area since 1993 has been an important driver for regional cooperation. It is thanks to organisations like yours that the added value of acting together has been put to the forefront and thus has paved the way for a commonly agreed EU strategy serving the interest of the whole region.

Equally, I would like to thank Estonia for its commitment and vision in this process, and in particular, President Toomas Hendrik Ilves, without whom this Strategy would never have been born. Let me say how good it is to be in today's Estonia: a country about to join the Eurozone, and taking a leading role in important EU affairs. This is the kind of Baltic Sea Region we all deserve: free of the divisions of the past, and enriched by experience that flows in all directions across the Baltic Sea.

Two weeks from today, it will be exactly one year since the European Council endorsed this Strategy. We have come a very long way since then. Thanks to the hard work of many of you present here in Tallinn, the Strategy is no longer a theoretical exercise: It is a daily reality that provides a common focus for anybody or any organisation who wants to engage in making this region a better and more attractive place to live and to work.

So, the strategy we are discussing in the coming two days is the result of your work. We can already see many tangible results and I can only congratulate all of you on these tremendous achievements which I trust the Commission has facilitated.

I would like to focus on three areas, where the Strategy has helped make enormous progress and has brought decisive added value:

Firstly, the Strategy brings about new projects to address targeted regional concerns. The Strategy's comprehensive Action Plan is focusing and galvanising work in the Region.

The Environment Pillar has seen the largest number of new projects created as a direct result of the Strategy. This is vital, since one of our biggest tasks is to clean up the Baltic Sea. A main threat to the Sea comes from eutrophication, which depletes oxygen and threatens marine life. We are tackling this challenge by combining our efforts. Farmers' organisations from across the region have now joined forces to reduce damaging nutrients reaching the Sea. Another project will focus specifically on animal waste management, and develop ways of using manure to produce renewable energy or organic fertilizers, tackling one of the key causes of eutrophication in the Baltic Sea.

Beyond this, we are promoting clean shipping to address pollution from ships. One project will establish a special flag for clean shipping, rather like the familiar system designating clean beaches.

We want this region to tap its full potential, especially in the aftermath of the global economic crisis. That's why we are promoting drivers for economic growth such as innovation. BSR Stars is an initiative that will create leading research and innovation hubs in the Baltic Sea Region to achieve stronger critical mass, and a competitive international position. But innovation is not an end in itself, and we need to spread its benefits. Breakthroughs in health care must not be held back by inadequate procurement practices or insufficient commercial exploitation. The BSHR Health Port project will address these challenges and help to make this region not only wealthy but healthy as well.

Secondly, the Strategy is facilitating more targeted cooperation in existing projects.

Big infrastructure projects in particular need a coherent framework for the Member States involved to mobilise efforts in a more coordinated way. Only in this way, can the region tackle major common challenges such as missing transport or energy links. The Strategy is now helping to intensify and speed up work.

We are integrating the energy market more rapidly now, through market liberalisation and investments in interconnectors. The Polish-Lithuanian gas link has recently received political support from both sides, and there is now dialogue between the companies involved. In addition, studies on the viability of the Baltic Connector linking Estonia and Finland are already being prepared. The Baltic Energy Market Interconnection Plan (BEMIP) is helping to secure a speedy integration of the three Baltic States into the European energy market.

We are also overcoming the transport bottlenecks that are still, 20 years after the reunification of Europe, hampering the flow of goods between the countries in the region. One example is the creation of Green Corridors to allow more efficient and sustainable goods transport. We are now seeing some very promising results in the southern part of the Baltic Sea Region along the so called East-West Transport corridor between Klaipeda and Karlshamn and on to the North Sea.

The Strategy is encouraging much more targeted cooperation to invest in our roads, our railways and our harbours. Through the Strategy there are renewed efforts to complete big infrastructure projects like the Via Baltica and to use the sea itself more in transporting goods across the region through better harbour facilities.

These initiatives will not only boost the economy but also help make it more resilient to external shocks.

Of course, there are many more good examples across all the Priority Areas, as you will be able to read in our interim report.

The third area where I believe the Strategy has brought important added value is inclusive political leadership and governance. The Strategy has led to the creation of new and inclusive macro-regional policy-discussions and networks. After all, the Strategy has only been able to bring about the results I have been describing, thanks to new and more efficient ways of working together across borders.

New forums for policy discussion have been established. In some areas such as Tourism, the Internal Market and Sea Surveillance there was little or no structured cooperation across region prior to the Strategy. Now, just one month ago my colleague Michel Barnier, who is the Commissioner for the Internal Market and Services, participated in a large-scale conference here in Tallinn on how the Strategy could best contribute to remove obstacles to trade in the region. Many constructive initiatives were discussed, and will now feed into our work.

The Strategy is also facilitating cooperation with third countries and enhancing the political dialogue.

We have recently had very constructive meetings with Russia on cooperation on Baltic Sea issues of common interest, and we now have an overall agreement on how the cooperation should be taken forward in the framework of the Northern Dimension. The process of identifying projects of common interest and the appropriate funding has already started.

It is through these important new transnational political forums and networks that the Strategy can provide focused and well-coordinated results that benefit the entire region. Now, it is important to ensure that political support at highest level filters down throughout the political system, from Member States to regions to project managers. Without continued efforts from all stakeholders, there will not be progress.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am aware that building a macro-regional Strategy from scratch is a demanding task. You are pioneers in this process and we are on uncharted territory. That's why I am looking forward to hearing your experiences. The report we have prepared for this forum is a draft, to be enriched by your comments. We want to know what you think has been working well and where there is room for improvement.

Let's discuss openly where we need to intensify or better co ordinate our efforts. And I hope you will tell us at the Commission how we can best support you.

One issue is clearly the alignment of existing funding with the Strategy, and the availability of Technical Assistance funds to cover running costs. Our efforts are already bearing fruit but much more can still be done.

Let us all remember that next year under the Polish presidency the European Commission is expected to provide a formal report to the Council on the progress of this first EU macro-regional strategy. The spotlight will be on all of us. Let's all work to ensure that that the progress we have to report then is impressive, and a testament to what can be achieved when Europeans work together.