

Minutes of the EUSBSR High level group meeting

Monday 12 April 2010- Brussels

The European Council in its meeting on 26 October 2009 invited the Commission to establish a High Level Group for the European Strategy for the Baltic Sea region (EUSBSR), composed of representatives of the 27 member-States, in order to take note of the progress of the Strategy and to assist the Commission in the task of facilitating and coordinating its implementation.

The meeting organised by the Commission on 12 April 2010 was the first meeting in which this High level Group was formally established by Director-General of DG REGIO, Dirk Ahner.

1. Welcome and formal establishment of the EUSBSR High Level Group

After offering the Commission's condolences to the Polish authorities, and observing a minute's silence, Dirk Ahner gave an introductory speech outlining four areas where the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region could bring added value. First, the Strategy could serve to mobilise projects and funding opportunities across borders and across sectors; second, the Strategy could serve as a catalyst for strengthening cooperation mechanisms within Member States, and among countries in a region – something that we were already witnessing. Third, by presenting an integrated framework involving all relevant policy areas and countries, the Strategy could promote balanced regional development. Finally, the Strategy could contribute to channelling existing funding instruments so that their potential could be fully utilised to the benefit of all.

Dirk Ahner also emphasised that building a macro-regional strategy is a demanding task, requiring strong daily commitment from all partners involved. Considerable progress could already be noted; however, several challenges remained, including improvements in the relationship between line ministries and national contact points in some countries as well as with regard to the alignment of funding.

Other macro-regions were looking to the Baltic Sea Strategy with the aim of perhaps developing their own strategy. Sober reflection was crucial in this regard, and it was important to see convincing gains from the pioneering Baltic Sea and Danube Strategies.

Looking forward to the cooperation in the coming years with the High Level Group, Mr. Ahner concluded by setting out the main elements of the road ahead, including the upcoming reporting and Annual Forum, and by reminding the Group of the crucial responsibility of the countries, regions and stakeholders to now transform ambitions into facts.

Dirk Ahner subsequently invited the Member States to give their perspective on the early implementation phase.

2. Feedback from the Member States

The Danish representative summarised Denmark's active participation in the strategy, with engagement in six Priority Areas. Five of these areas have already held a kick-off meeting,

and the remaining area will hold one later this month. There was satisfaction with the process so far. The issue of technical assistance posed a challenge, but there was confidence that a solution could be found.

Finland thanked the Commission for the way the process of developing and updating the Action Plan had been conducted – there was a feeling both at regional and national level of having been heard. As a result of the Strategy we are now seeing more and better cooperation between the countries in the region. Finland is actively engaged in four areas. Now that we have come further into the Strategy, we are also seeing more clearly what the real challenges – the most important challenge will be with regard to identifying financing possibilities for the flagship projects.

Sweden informed that one of the first activities of the new SE minister for Europe was a tour of Baltic Sea countries, underlining the importance SE attaches to the EUSBSR. It was important that Member States took a domestic responsibility for the Strategy, and not expected the Commission to take care of running it. In SE, a report on coordinating the Strategy has recently been presented to Parliament.

Latvia thanked the Commission for organising the meeting on financing in Riga in March, and for facilitating an open process of updating the Action Plan. The representative agreed with her Finnish colleague that the Strategy represented the first time all activities in the Region were put under one helmet – this represented a great possibility, but also a challenge, as the process had no precedence. Latvia had since July 2009 established a special taskforce on the Strategy. A persisting challenge was on how to establish good links with the business community and establish how they could best use the opportunities created by the Strategy.

Lithuania also picked up on the importance of domestic responsibility. The Lithuanian parliament had published a report on the Strategy, and the government had established an independent commission on it. The Lithuanian representative also felt that cooperation in the region had increased as a product of the Strategy. Lithuania would host the CBSS summit in Vilnius on 1-2 June, where one central point on the agenda will be the implementation of the EUSBSR.

Germany pointed to the novelty of macro-regional cooperation and that it would be taking some time before everyone was well integrated into their roles. The Priority Areas coordinated by Germany were very different in nature – for PA 2, for instance, it was largely possible to rely on the structures provided by HELCOM, while for PA 12 tourism, and PA 12 education, many resources had to be used on finding the right networks and organising kick-off meetings. Germany requested more guidelines on cooperation with third countries in areas not covered by Northern Dimension activities.

Estonia explained how the Strategy was coordinated internally through an inter-ministerial group, and how the European affairs committee in the Estonian parliament took an active role in following the implementation. The importance of good cooperation between Managing Authorities, Priority Area Coordinators and National Contact Points was also stressed. It was hoped that Estonia's coordination of PA 6 on the Internal Market would also be able to contribute to discussions on the EU 2020 strategy.

The final country to take the floor during this agenda point was Poland. The Polish representative pointed to Polish involvement in two Priority Areas and a number of flagship

projects. She also referred to the upcoming Polish EU Presidency, where Poland is hoping to be able to show good results from the Strategy. Work is currently ongoing on preparing a report for the European committee in parliament, which had recently discussed the Strategy, and on encouraging line ministries to take an active involvement in the Strategy.

3. Update from the EIB

The EIB have identified that there is a need for Flagship Project to receive support in order for the to be fully implemented. The support given to prepare major projects through the JASPERS instrument does contribute to solve some of the issues but far from all. A part from what JASPERS can offer there is also a need to support the actual implementation of the Flagship Projects. The lack of resources and competences in the implementation stage often leads to serious delays in the projects being delivered. This is also a fact for the non-Structural funds projects being implemented in the Baltic Sea Region.

To be able to solve also these kinds of problems the EIB is willing to operate a Trust Fund for the EUSBSR. The Trust Fund idea would include a phone number top call when you as a Flagship Project leader is experiencing difficulties with the implementation of our project. The Trust fund would both contribute with funding and expert assistance, including hiring relevant expert consultants.

The Commission concluded that they will send out a questioner to get an overview of the perceived needs for technical assistance with the Priority Area Coordinators. Based on the result of this there will be a discussion on how to ensure that the needs are met through the different solutions that are proposed.

4. Progress in the implementation of the EUSBSR

Colin Wolfe, Head of territorial cooperation unit, presented the progress of the action plan of the Strategy since October 2009, stressing:

- the importance of establishing, six months into the implementation phase, the structures needed to implement the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region, and the role of the Priority Area who have already held most of the kick-off meetings, and who have had a great deal of discussions on the projects;
- the number of Projects clusters, networks, already up and running, some of them being accelerated thanks to the Strategy (for instance, in environment area);
- the involvement of third Countries like Russia through the Northern Dimension Steering Group and the Nordic Council of Ministers;
- the improvement of working methods with and within the Member States (e.g. meeting arranged in Riga on 11 March 2010 to discuss technical practicalities, with representatives from Structural Funds Programs Managing authorities and a number of Priority area Coordinators- work, notably with EIB, on financial options like loans to help the implementation of projects, etc.);

- the importance of upgrading the information on the strategy, through amongst others the Commission 's website. The Strategy generates a great deal of interest within the Region and outside, as well as from the academic world, because the idea seems very interesting and first results are emerging.

5. Reporting

The Commission introduced the basic elements in the reporting process. The first official report is due to the Council in 2011; however, the Commission will also draft an interim report for 2010 with the aim of getting an impression of progress and as a pilot case ahead of the official report.

The reporting will be based on two main sources of information: The reports from the Priority Area Coordinators, due on 30 June, including also information from the National Contact Points and the Flagship Project leaders; and the annual implementation reports from the Structural Funds programmes, also due on 30 June. DG Regio will make a draft report on this basis, in consultation with the relevant Commission services. The draft report will be discussed with the High Level Group, and presented at the Annual Forum in October, where participants will be encouraged to give feedback. The Commission will subsequently integrate the comments received and make the final consolidated report available.

DG Regio has prepared a reporting template for the Priority Area Coordinators. The Priority Area Coordinators will be asked to provide a comprehensive report of their entire area, including the various actions. It is, however, not requested that they go into depth with particular points.

6. Update of the EUBSR action plan

The Commission informed that the updates proposed are all in-line with European Commission policy and the proposals have been sent to all relevant DGs in an Inter-service Consultation. Most of the proposals for updates have come from the Priority Area Coordinators as a result of them now taking a more active ownership of their respective areas.

Some additional request for final changes had also been submitted to close to the meeting for them to be distributed in a written procedure, the Commission presented suggestions for how these should be handled which were accepted by the Member States.

DE, PL and SL discussed a proposal to change some wording in the Transport chapter but agreed to together with the Commission try to find a compromise solution.

7. Annual forum 2010

The first Annual Forum will be held back-to-back with the BSSSC on 14-15 October 2010 in Tallinn. DG Regio expects a conference with about 400 participants and hopes to be able to distribute a proposal for the agenda and registration process shortly. The aim is clearly to have a large and open forum, with also the corporate sector present.

Break-out sessions on each pillar in the Strategy, as well as possible on the horizontal actions, are foreseen. The idea is to give all Priority Area Coordinators an opportunity to present their area, and to encourage participants to sign up for making prepared interventions in order to have as constructive a dialogue as possible.

8. Any other business

DE pointed out that it is important that there is more consistency between the different initiatives and institutions in the Baltic Sea Region, like the northern dimension, EUSBSR, CBSS etc. It would also be a good idea to make sure that the different groups are invited to each others events.

DG Relex informed the meeting of the great number of initiatives and activities that are implemented or on the way within the northern Dimension also emphasising the importance of keeping the channels open between the EUSBSR and the Northern Dimension and make sure that all possible synergies are found.

AUT wanted to know how to make sure that the different Macro-regional strategies learn from each other in a systematic way.