New Commission Communication on the Strategy

A new Communication on the Strategy will be published by the Commission this spring. It will respond to the broad list of recommendations offered by the implementation report of 22 June 2011 and the General Affairs Council Conclusions on the review of the EUSBSR on 15 November 2011. The Communication sets out an improved strategic framework for cooperation, placing the Strategy firmly within the Europe 2020 objectives of smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, and evolving EU policy developments, including the proposed multi-annual financial framework.

Specifically, it proposes:

- Objectives, indicators and targets to give the Strategy more focus and direction,
- Better alignment of policies and funding,
- Clarification of responsibilities of different actors,
- Better communication.

We expect to be able to publish the Communication on the Strategy website by end-March.

3rd Annual Forum on the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region - Save the date!

The 3rd Annual forum on the EUSBSR will be held together with the 14th Summit of the Baltic Development Forum in Copenhagen on 17-19 June, in close cooperation with the Danish Presidency of the Council of the European Union. The working title for this year's event is “Connecting Europe. Smart and Green Partnerships in the Baltic Sea Region”. Like last year in Gdansk, we hope to provide a unique platform for all the Strategy's stakeholders, from government, local and regional administration, political parties, business, academia and civil society, to discuss cooperation possibilities and growth initiatives in the Baltic Sea Region.

We look forward to seeing you in Copenhagen!

Targets and indicators at Priority Area level

The Commission Communication suggests a set of strategy-level targets and indicators (discussed at length with National Contact Points) aimed at making the Strategy's overall objectives operational. They will find an echo in a second series of targets and indicators designed at priority and horizontal action level. After a first round of reflection and proposals sent by almost all Priority Area Coordinators and Horizontal Actions Leaders, a back-to-back meeting with the third working meeting in Vilnius (see elsewhere in this newsletter) will be organised on 20 March, in order to progress on this issue. The final outcome will be part of the review of the Action Plan.

Early thoughts on the upcoming review of the Action Plan

The Council Conclusions adopted in November 2011, the recommendations in the Commission Communication to be adopted at the end of March, as well as the experience drawn after more than two years of implementation on the ground call for an in-depth review of the Action Plan to better reflect the evolution of the Strategy. Its updated structure and content will be first discussed with National Contact Points, before a consultation phase with other main stakeholders of the Strategy. The objective is to have a reviewed document agreed upon before Summer break, and then formally adopted as a Commission Staff working document after Summer.
Meeting in Moscow on joint Russia-EU projects in the Baltic Sea Region

On 22 February the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the European Commission arranged a meeting in Moscow to discuss joint Russia-EU projects in the Baltic Sea Region. The meeting was attended by representatives from different services of the Commission and the External Action Service as well as by around 40 participants from the Russian ministries, agencies and regions concerned by the project proposals. The agenda was focused on discussing the list of 18 projects previously agreed upon by both parties. The outcome of the meeting was that a number of working groups should be set up to take the work forward on the individual project proposals. Optimal use should be made of existing structures and networks.

Third working meeting on the alignment of funding for the EUSBSR

In Vilnius on 21-22 March, Interact will organise the third working meeting on the alignment of funding for the Strategy. The target audience is both the Priority Area Coordinators and the National Contact Points, as well as the Managing Authorities and ministries responsible for Structural Funds. The first day will focus on the implementation of the Strategy in 2012 and 2013 and the second day on the programming period 2014-2020 and the future generation of programmes. A number of back-to-back meetings will be held to capitalise on the fact that so many key stakeholders are in the same place.

Communicating the Strategy

Further to the Council Conclusions of 15 November last year, the need for "a communication system and visibility" for the Strategy is a high priority for all actors in this macro-region. To this end, in collaboration with INTERACT Point Turku, the European Commission and Member States concerned are now exploring ways to develop a successful communication initiative in the framework of the Strategy.

This has been taken up by the task force on communication that was recently established by INTERACT Point Turku, discussing, for instance, the visual identity for the Strategy and a dedicated website. The first results will be presented at the 3rd EUSBSR Working Meeting in Vilnius in March (see elsewhere in this newsletter). The communication initiative will also be addressed in the Commission's Communication to be adopted by the end of March.

Important contribution by the Balthazar project

In early February, the EU co-financed BALTHAZAR project found major phosphorus loads coming down the Luga river into the Gulf of Finland. Phosphorus is the biggest problem, with nitrates, in causing eutrophication and "dead areas" in the Baltic Sea. The project has pinpointed the likely source, and brought it into discussions with the Helsinki Commission (HELCOM), Finland and Russia to find ways to sort it out.

Phase II of the BALTHAZAR project is co-funded from the allocation of EUR 20 million made available by the European Parliament in 2010 to support the external activities of the EUSBSR. It is a good example of how the political attention surrounding the Strategy, leading in this case to funding being targeted agreed goals, has contributed to cleaning up the sea.

Report from the Coordinators of Priority Area 15 "To decrease the volume of, and harm done by, cross-border crime"

As part of the implementation of the Strategy, Europol and the Member States concerned have published the first "Threat Assessment for the Baltic Sea Region" on the most important cross-border crime areas (BOCTA). This has made it easier for EU Member States together with Russia to combat cross-border crime in the Region.

The Finnish and Lithuanian Priority Area Coordinators, Mr Kari Rantama and Mr Tomas Zilinskas, are very pleased with the outcome of this cooperation: "This has turned out to be a good platform for law enforcement operations organised by the Baltic Sea Task Force (BSTF). It will help us catch the criminals and dismantle the criminal organisations causing harm in the Region". This cooperation is today truly multilateral, including all eight EU Member States in the Baltic Sea Region as well as Norway and Russia.

Assisted by EU co-funding, BSTF Operative Committee has recently initiated new joint cross-border law enforcement operations based on BOCTA findings. This new project will focus on drugs trafficking, smuggling, and hit-and-run crimes.
Agenda

This agenda is for the convenience of readers. Events listed here are not necessarily endorsed by the European Commission and are the responsibility of the respective organisers.

21-22 March 2012
3rd EUSBSR Working Meeting (Vilnius, Lithuania)

17-19 June 2012
3rd Annual Forum of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region and 14th BDF Summit (Copenhagen, Denmark)