European Union strategy for the Baltic Sea region and the role of macro-regions in the future cohesion policy

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The European Parliament adopted a resolution on the European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region and the role of macro-regions in the future cohesion policy.

Members welcome the approval of the European Commission and the support of the Council for the Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region, which Parliament has been calling for since 2006. They welcome the fact that the Strategy is the result of broad consultation with interested parties in the Member States, including not only national, regional and local authorities but also the academic and business communities as well as NGOs.

Whilst welcoming the establishment of a civil society forum in the region, the resolution recommends, in this context, increasing the local communities' involvement by setting up wider and more focused communication and consultation tools. The Commission is called upon to create a special web portal devoted to the Baltic Sea Strategy, which would act as a forum for the exchange of experiences regarding current and future projects.

Pilot project: Members consider that the Strategy should be used as a pilot project future macro-regional strategies and the Strategy's success can be a model for the way in which future strategies can be implemented. It emphasises the idea of creating functional regions, focused around joint objectives and development problems, can lead to an increase in the effectiveness of EU regional policy.

The resolution states that the **overriding goal is to find optimal mechanisms that can be transferred to future macro-regional strategies**.

Parliament believes that the Strategy's territorial dimension will lead to the concrete development of the idea of territorial cohesion, which the Treaty of Lisbon places on an equal footing with economic and social cohesion, and with this in mind calls on the Commission to **engage in active dialogue on the role and impact of EU macro-regional policies after 2013**.

The use of Structural Funds: the resolution calls on the Member States and regions to **take advantage of the Structural Funds available for 2007-2013** in order to ensure maximum support for the Strategy, in particular to promote job creation and economic growth in areas most affected by the economic crisis. It notes that implementation of the Baltic Sea Strategy has as yet been very slow. It considers that the **appropriations earmarked in the 2010 EU budget may be used to improve implementation** and reminds the Commission of the importance of this money being allocated as soon as possible for purposes in line with the targets of the Baltic Sea Strategy.

External dimension: Parliament calls for improvement, in the context of the Strategy for Baltic Sea Region as well as of the future macro-regional strategies, of the **relations between the European Union and the non-EU states**, particularly in the implementation of large-scale projects with significant environmental impact. Furthermore, they call for cooperation between the EU and non-EU states to strengthen security within the region and support the fight against cross-border crime.

The resolution draws attention to the need to seek **greater cooperation particularly between Russia and Belarus, and the Baltic States** when constructing the energy network, and to take greater advantage of the energy dialogue between the EU and Russia for this purpose, which would at the same time open up opportunities for involving Russia in the Baltic Sea Strategy.

Stressing the need to **reduce the region's dependence on Russian energy**, Members welcome the European Commission's statement on the need for more interconnections between Member States in the region and greater diversification of energy supplies. They call in this regard for increased support for the creation of LNG ports.

Members believe that the **new Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with Russia** should take account of the cooperation in the Baltic Sea Area. They believe that the EU-Russia common spaces will provide a valuable framework in this regard, and call on Russia to play an equal part in such cooperation. The resolution also considers that Baltic Sea Region Cooperation should be prioritised and should take place at the highest political level of Heads of State and Government, since it is crucial in driving forward cooperation between the Baltic Sea countries and ensuring that political ambitions are realised.

Environmental and energy aspects: the resolution emphasises the need for an environmental impact assessment of energy infrastructure projects (currently under construction and in the future), taking into account, in particular international conventions. It calls on the Commission to design an **adequate reaction plan** for technical accidents and any other possible catastrophes, providing also for ways of dealing with these events from an economic point of view.

Parliament emphasises the need to establish a **Baltic Sea Environmental Monitoring Centre**, an early-warning system for accidents and serious cross-border pollution, and a joint action force to deal with such situations.

The resolution draws attention to the strategic significance of the Baltic Sea region for the development of **joint projects on energy infrastructure** that improve diversification of energy production and supply. It also emphasises that, in view of the intended expansion of nuclear energy in the Baltic Sea region, EU countries have to follow the strictest safety and environmental standards and the European Commission has to watch and monitor whether the same approach and international conventions are followed in the neighbouring countries, especially in those which are planning to build nuclear power plants near external EU borders.

Recalling that the Baltic Sea is one of the most polluted sea areas in the world, Parliament emphasises the need for the EU and its Member States surrounding the Baltic Sea Region urgently to **address the serious environmental problems affecting the Region**, principal among which are eutrophication, the impact of hazardous substances deposited on the seabed and threats to aquatic biodiversity, with particular regard to endangered fish populations.

Transport and tourism aspects: Parliament emphasises that it is a priority to create an **effective and environmentally friendly sea, land and inland transport and communication network**, taking account of the provisions of the updated version of the Natura 2000 document and paying particular attention to links between the Baltic Sea region and other European regions through the Baltic-Adriatic Corridor and the Central European Transport Corridor.

The resolution highlights the following issues:

- this strategy should, inter alia, help to address the lack of appropriate infrastructure and accessibility, as well as low interoperability between various national transport networks owing to different technical systems and administrative barriers, in order to develop a comprehensive multimodal transport system across the Baltic Sea Region;
- the importance of **integrating the Baltic Sea Region more closely into the TEN-T priority axes**, in particular with regard to the Motorways of the Sea, extending the rail axis from Berlin to the Baltic coast, improving the rail axis from Berlin to the Baltic coast in combination with the Rostock-Denmark Seaway connection, and making more rapid progress in upgrading and using the Rail Baltica axis;
- the need to **complete the interconnections** between the Baltic Sea Region and other European regions via the Baltic-Adriatic corridor;
- it is important to enhance the Baltic Sea Region's transport capacity towards the east, in particular in order to promote transport interoperability, especially for railways, and to **speed up freight transit** at the borders of the European Union;
- themes such as **water sports**, wellness and spa tourism, the cultural heritage and landscapes to offer great potential for developing the region's profile as a tourist destination. Members stress, therefore, the need to protect natural coastal areas, landscapes and the cultural heritage as a resource for ensuring a sustainable economy in the Baltic Sea Region in the future;
- improvements in transport links and the **elimination of bottlenecks** should be of no less importance (border-crossing difficulties at checkpoints on the EU's eastern border with the Russian Federation) could be solved via this strategy in order to ensure the smooth flow of goods through the Baltic Sea Region.

Lastly, Parliament welcomes the inclusion in the Commission's action plan of the objective of making the Baltic Sea a model region for clean shipping and a world leader in maritime safety and security.