Baltic Sea strategy for the northern dimension

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The committee adopted the own-initiative report by Alexander STUBB (EPP-ED, FI) on a Baltic Sea Region Strategy for the Northern Dimension. The report pointed out that "the Baltic Sea has almost become an internal sea, a *mare nostrum*, of the European Union following the 2004 enlargement". The committee wanted to define the Baltic Sea Region as the priority area for the Northern Dimension, although it also underlined its ongoing support for the Arctic Policy, including cooperation with Norway and Iceland. I t wanted to "systematically create a brand" for the Baltic Sea region "as one of the most attractive and competitive areas in the world". And it wanted to help improve the ecological status of the Baltic Sea (currently one of the most polluted sea areas in the world), reduce pollution and eutrophication and prevent further releases of oil and other toxic and harmful substances.

Against this background, the report called on the Commission to come up with a proposal for an EU Baltic Sea Strategy in order to reinforce the internal pillar of the Northern Dimension, cover horizontally different aspects of regional cooperation, promote synergies and avoid overlapping between different regional bodies and organisations. The Strategy should include both measures to be implemented by the EU and its Member States alone and measures to be implemented in cooperation with Russia.

Among its recommendations, the committee stressed the need to reduce the Baltic Sea region's dependency on Russian energy and encouraged the Member States in the region to examine the possibility of a common energy market. The Commission, the Member States and the partners were urged to promote joint projects on energy efficiency and renewable energy resources, in the light of the region's potential as a source of bio-energy, and to encourage the usage of biomass, solar, wind and hydro energy. The report also suggested that the Trans-European Network Nordic Triangle be enlarged to cover the whole region and that the road and railway routes of the Barents Corridor and the Bothnian Corridor be included within the TEN system. Other recommendations included the realisation of the Rail Baltica project, with a high-speed train connection linking up the whole region, and the realisation of the Via Baltica highway by 2013 as a priority project, with European funding, linking the Baltic Sea region with Member States in central and western Europe.

The committee noted that the status of the Kaliningrad Oblast enclave surrounded by the European Union "calls for for genuine cooperation between the regional authorities, the Russian Federation and the European Union" and wanted it to be developed into a more open and less militarised pilot region with improved access to the internal market. It stressed that the enclave was plagued with many social, economic and ecological problems, such as the significant ecological risk posed by the presence of the military bases and weapons in the region, the substantial health risk and the high levels of organised crime and drug addiction.

Lastly, the report expressed concern that the Baltic Sea region's Eastern border is serving as "a conduit for a significant level of organised crime", such as trafficking in humans and drugs. It called for greater Europol involvement, reinforced cooperation at both EU and intergovernmental levels on these issues, and greater efforts to improve the efficiency of border controls on the Eastern border.