



## **Executive summary**

In order to generate momentum, the European Commission has recently prepared a strategy for the Baltic Sea Region, this being the first of its kind with regard to the various European macro-regional formations. The strategy stands out as a goal-oriented and visionary document and clearly exceeds the scope of the Union's traditional policies vis-à-vis regional formations.

But does it really stand for a strategy in the proper sense of the word in aspiring for a fresh start, choosing between different priorities and providing guidance in a programmatic manner for the Baltic Sea Region to gain the status of a 'model' and a forerunner among the various macro-regions in the EU?

In probing the issue, the brief suggests a conditional 'yes'. It argues that there are many indications that the document should indeed be regarded a strategy. In addition to providing insight into the aspirations of the EU with regard to the Baltic Sea Region, the brief also argues that regionalization is enjoying increased legitimacy and standing in EU policies in general.

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# **The EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region: A Catalyst for What?**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Recently, the European Commission adopted a Communication on the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region.<sup>1</sup> It was assigned to draft such a document by the European Council in December 2007, for a special strategy to be finally approved during the Swedish Presidency at the 2009 autumn summit of the Council. Pending endorsement, implementation will begin in 2010. It may be noted that this is the first time that a comprehensive Strategy, covering several Community policies, has been targeted on a ‘macro-region’, i.e. a single zone of intense regional cooperation.

But why call it a ‘strategy’, rather than apply more modest concepts along the lines of a ‘program’ or ‘policy paper’? Is it really a strategy in a proper sense of the word in being explicitly visionary, goal-oriented and programmatic in choosing between different priorities and in providing guidance as to various institutional and resource-related ways of reaching the targets set and aspired for? Is the strategy concise, unambiguous in focus and informative in offering insight into the policies of the EU itself *vis-à-vis* the Baltic Sea Region? Is it geared towards something instrumental, functional and structural, or is it rather about branding the region as a coherent sphere of cooperation in the European consciousness and in the minds of the EU member states themselves in the region?

Probing these questions is of importance, among other reasons because the concept of a strategy carries connotations of something out of the ordinary. It is embedded in power because it raises specific issues higher on the agenda. Use of the concept conveys the notion that something of exceptional importance is being addressed and sorted out. Once employed, stakes are raised and

issues become deliberately politicized as ordinary approaches do not appear to suffice. Furthermore, there is the implicit recognition that things could and should take a different turn. This is, then, to say that changes are being called for and borders broken, particularly in a temporal sense. ‘Progress’ is a word frequently used in the context of devising a strategy, implying that there is both a need and the potential for the prevailing state of affairs to be altered. As Carsten Schymik and Peer Krümrey ask (2009, 5) in their analysis of the EU strategy, has the Baltic Sea Region become such a victim of its own initial success that is it now seeking for a new mission? Progress may be warranted in the form of a re-start, with regional integration having stalled or having experienced an outright backlash such as that caused by the recent economic downturn, or, from a more positive perspective, it may be justified because the success already achieved provides the basis for the region to take further steps on the path of regionalization and European integration. A strategy in the latter sense is not about remedying stagnation, but about providing stimulus and direction for further progress.

It may be safely assumed that the use of the word ‘strategy’ is deliberate and well considered in the document put forward by the Commission. Clearly, the Baltic Sea Strategy is meant to steer matters away from the current and ordinary state of affairs and for the region to steam ahead towards further change. The use of the concept is, in this sense, openly performative. It testifies to an interest in providing regionalization with a further push and, to an extent, in singling out a particular European region as a target for strategic thinking and quite distinct policies. Moreover, the EU itself has been allocated a key position in the process of formulating a strategy, although at the same time it is bound to do so by engaging itself in a dialogue with various other relevant actors such as the states of the region, certain sub-national units (Ländern, voivodeships [provinces], committees of the region etc.) and a variety of region-specific organizations. In essence,

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<sup>1</sup> Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of Regions concerning the European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region. COM (2009) 248 final (Brussels, 10.6.2009).

formulating and applying an EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region stands for something groundbreaking. As an EU policy, the exercise is clearly experimental in nature and may over time turn into a blueprint for strategies to be developed and pursued in relation to certain other EU regions. There are hence good reasons to probe the meaning given to the concept of a strategy in the context of the Baltic Sea macro-region.

## **A MODEST START**

The initial move of the European Council in asking for the strategy to be drawn up was to some extent disappointing.<sup>2</sup> As to substance, the Council merely stated that ‘the strategy should inter alia help to address the environmental challenges related to the Baltic Sea’. It talked about a strategy for the Baltic Sea Region as a whole, while at the same time narrowing it down to the Baltic Sea itself. Moreover, the idea of a strategy was provided with a functional and to some extent non-political twist by turning environmental problems into a core issue to be remedied. The change envisaged and the goal set pertained above all to a non-polluted sea, in contrast to the current situation of a sea in danger.

It may nonetheless be noted that, although modest in substance, the Council’s tasking of the Commission broke some new ground in accepting the idea of an EU strategy to be prepared for a specific region. The idea of devising such a strategy for the Baltic Sea region had emerged already in 2005 in the context of the European Parliament. An informal group of MEPs set itself the task of bringing about such a strategy in order

to exploit the potential inherent in the post-2004 situation, with the Baltic Sea having increasingly turned into a ‘European Union lake’, in the words of Toomas Henrik Ilves, one of the group.<sup>3</sup> The idea was then endorsed in a resolution adopted by the Parliament in 2006.<sup>4</sup> It is to be noted, however, that neither Finland nor Germany was willing to take the idea further during their presidencies of the EU in 2006 and 2007 respectively, perhaps judging that the idea did not enjoy sufficiently broad support or even that it was explicitly being contested. A breakthrough only came when Sweden embraced the initiative when preparing its own EU presidency in the second half of 2009. Accordingly, in 2007 Sweden took up the issue and successfully invited the European Council to mandate the drawing up of a strategy.

It also seems obvious – despite the Council’s rather brief wording – that ‘strategy’ is the proper word to be used in view of the preceding discussions. Christopher Beazley, a British conservative MEP and chairman of the ‘Baltic Europe Inter-group’ within the European Parliament, spoke in his foreword to a Baltic Strategy Paper produced by the group about the need to ‘draw the necessary conclusions in a wholly changed situation’ after the successful EU enlargement in 2004. For him the formative moment consisted of enlargement with the Baltic Sea being ‘bordered by nine countries, eight of them EU Member States, the enclave of Kaliningrad and the St. Petersburg region in Russia’. Arguably, a milestone had been reached and it was time to define the contours of a new mission. The strategy outlined should, in his view, ‘serve as a substantial contribution to the reappraisal of the scope and activities of the

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<sup>2</sup> Point 59 of the European Council Conclusions of 14 December 2007 (16616/1/07, REV1) states: “Without prejudice to the integrated maritime policy, the European Council invites the Commission to present an EU strategy for the Baltic Sea region at the latest by June 2009. This strategy should inter alia help to address the urgent environmental challenges related to the Baltic Sea. The Northern Dimension framework provides the basis for the external aspects of cooperation in the Baltic Sea region”.

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<sup>3</sup> “Europe’s Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region”. A paper written by Baltic Strategy Working Group of seven MEPs: Christopher Beazley, Michael Gahler, Satu Hassi, Toomas Henrik Ilves, Girts Valdis Kristivskis, Henrik Lax and Alexander Stubb. November 2005.

<sup>4</sup> European Parliament resolution on a Baltic Sea Strategy for the Northern Dimension (2006/217(INI)).

Northern Dimension to reflect the changes since the enlargement of the EU’.

In the paper produced by this group of MEPs, enlargement is put forward as a moment of change. In fact, regional cooperation had emerged and developed quite well independently of the EU since the end of the Cold War. The group argues, however, that, due to the demise of the Soviet Union and the increase in the region’s strategic position, its importance has changed fundamentally. In their view the Baltic Sea has turned ‘into a showcase laboratory for integration processes in Europe’, with the emergence of a ‘Baltic corner of the European house’ containing a third of the EU’s population and a third of its GNP.

Furthermore, the report claims that ‘the strategic position and importance of the Baltic Sea has changed fundamentally over the past few years’, since the previous policies of dominance are no longer relevant in the region. Relations are no longer hampered by East-West antagonism. Overall, the paper argues that the region has acquired the potential to ‘become a core of Europe, not a marginal periphery as it was in the 20<sup>th</sup> century’. The change aspired for is thus structural in nature, with increased centrality being seen as the target.

Various measures are then proposed for a deepening of integration in the region and for various intra-regional problems such as pollution to be tackled more effectively. In general, the paper proposes actions and initiatives to form the substance of the Baltic Sea Strategy for the European Union. To tackle these worries adequately, the paper argues, ‘a new political framework must be established’ involving not only the eight member states in the region but also all the EU institutions and other organizations that are already working in the area.

According to the group, the pilot nature of the Baltic Sea region partly derives from the fact that the area has already turned into an arena for the ‘most active interaction between the EU and

Russia’. It could, if taken further, provide a playground for the unfolding of a common economic space between these two entities.

### **A BROAD PROCESS OF CONSULTATION**

Being tasked with the preparation of a strategy, the Commission organized its work by providing the Directorate-General for Regional Policy (DG REGIO) with the main responsibility for preparing a proposal. However, in practice the work entailed quite extensive consultation and cooperation within the Commission itself, as a total of nineteen directorates were ultimately involved in the drafting process.

However, a major aspect of the preparatory work consisted in intensive public consultation about the strategy. The process of gathering views and suggestions was officially opened by organizing a so-called ‘Stakeholder Conference’ in Stockholm in September 2008. In initiating this bottom-up approach, the Commission submitted a working paper in order to provide guidance to the process. In doing so, it also outlined in detail the various thematic areas that required ‘urgent attention’ as part of the strategy. They consisted first and foremost of environmental issues (to enable a sustainable environment), although economic issues (to enhance the region’s prosperity), as well as ones pertaining to infrastructure and security (to ensure safety and security in the region) were also mentioned; later themes pertaining to ‘governance’ and ‘institutional issues’ have been added to the list. In other words, the process was seen as predominantly functional. The process continued by means of round tables covering all the four main areas, the consultation process being concluded by a second Stakeholder Conference in Rostock in February 2009, at which the Commission presented its ‘preliminary list of possible actions’ for the strategy.

In all, the effort of consultation proved to be quite successful. The Commission received altogether some 110 written contributions from gov-

ernments and other official bodies in the region, as well as from a broad variety of other organizations and actors, 47 of which were made available to the general public. Schymik and Krumrey (2009, 6) found it possible to identify around 750 proposals in the material that the Commission placed in the public domain. They also noted that the Commission included quite a number of the proposals made in its preliminary action plan accompanying the communication to the Council and other relevant bodies.<sup>5</sup> As a result, they also argued that the action plan is quite broad, complex and not sufficiently focused. It captures the essence of the public opinion in the region and reflects broadly the special interests of various stakeholders. However, in trying to do justice to as many interests and actors as possible, the Commission has in fact created ‘another label for the already established cooperation’. Hence a more restrictive selection of proposals should, in their view, be made in order to achieve a ‘clear, coordinated and action-oriented strategy’.

### A MODEL REGION

The criticisms of Schymik and Krumrey are well grounded if they are viewed against the background of the indicative action plan presented by the Commission as a ‘Commission Staff Working Document’ for the Council to examine and eventually endorse. It is to be noted, however, that their analysis is merely directed towards the action plan itself: they do not address or scrutinize the ideas set forth in the communication itself. This latter move is in fact warranted as the communication provides a basis for quite different conclusions.

Notably, in its communication the Commission approves of the view that the Baltic Sea is a model region. It is described as being rather diverse in a number of ways, but at the same time it notes that there are also a sufficient number of joint issues to justify adopting a single strategic approach. The region is outlined as an area of cooperation ‘where new ideas and approaches can be tested and developed over time as best practice examples’. On a more general note, the communication observes that there exist a number of areas that have begun to identify themselves as macro-regions, the Baltic Sea Region being recognized in this context as a good example. Interestingly, the Commission appears to endorse this trend by concluding that the strategy developed and outlined ‘will offer important lessons as to the potential of the macro-regional approach’. It notes that the range of issues encountered in the Baltic Sea Region makes it ‘an ideal case for the application of a territorial cohesion approach, as requested in the informal meeting of Ministers at Leipzig in 2007’.

On the whole, regionalization appears to enjoy a more legitimate and instrumental standing in the sphere of EU policies. It is in fact given considerable priority, as macro-regions are viewed as important instruments for the EU to achieve its own grand objectives. The strategy is, in this sense, not just about the Baltic Sea region *per se* but about EU-related developments in general. And in this broader perspective, macro-regions are not merely depicted as something that the Commission has to relate to and digest because of bottom-up pressure from within such regions themselves: they are instead put forward as an integral aspect of the essence of the Union. This is indeed a matter of strategy.

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<sup>5</sup> The Commission Staff Working Document. Accompanying the Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions concerning the Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region. Action Plan SEC(2009) 712, Brussels 10.6.2009.

In this broader vein, the communication points to the Commission’s proposals for territorial cohesion in its Green Paper of October 2008 in embedding issues pertaining to the Baltic Sea macro-region in its own strategic outlook. In this

document, the EU interventions are built around the needs of functional regions rather than ‘according to pre-determined financial and administrative criteria’. Furthermore, the communication notes that ‘this form of macro-regional approach also provides the EU with an innovative policy instrument, which could serve as a good example of efforts to achieve common EU objectives and a more effective coordination of territorial and sectoral policies based on shared territorial challenges’.

As to the region itself, in the view of the Commission it has ‘significant potential that can be better used’. A break is called for in temporal terms. The aim of the strategy in this context is to provide ‘an integrated framework that allows the European Union and Member States to identify needs and match them to the available resources through coordination of appropriate policies’. It is a strategy of providing further guidance in addressing adequately the challenges of the region – including the current economic recession – and making use of the existing options.

The communication does not, however, elaborate the idea of an ‘integrated framework’: it merely concludes, in this context, that there is neither a need for new institutions nor a proposal for additional funding or other resources ‘at this time’. Furthermore, no critical analysis is presented with regard to what has previously prevented a full identification of the needs of the region, and no specific proposals are advanced in order to remedy the situation, except for the conclusion that an annual forum is to take place in order to bring together partners concerned with the different aspects of the strategy, and ‘to maintain the high level of involvement of all the stakeholders in the region’.

Yet the Commission’s position appears to testify to a breakthrough. Whereas the Union’s view of macro-regional formations such as the Baltic Sea region used to be somewhat cautious because they were seen as increasing the diversity within the Union – that is, unwarranted diversity which

then had to be counteracted in the first place through the pursuit of a European neighborhood policy (ENP), i.e. a policy of increased homogeneity and standardization – perceptions and approaches appear to have changed. Rather than detracting from the Union’s key objectives, macro-regions are now seen as enhancing its ability to achieve common objectives. The creation and bolstering of macro-regions is the way forward, not despite the diversity that they bring about, but rather because of such pluralism and diversity.

The Commission further states, though without presenting any explicit comparisons, that the Baltic Sea region has significant potential that can be better used. This potential includes, in the view of the Commission, a well-educated workforce, expertise in innovation – especially in knowledge-based industries – a spacious and relatively unspoiled land environment rich in natural resources and a strong tradition of intra-regional cooperation. It is perhaps in particular this latter aspect, which has encouraged the Commission to single out the Baltic Sea region as a ‘model’ and ‘experimental area’ for the outlining of a special strategy.

In specifying the position of the Baltic Sea region in broader terms, the Commission notes that the area, in being generally too isolated in terms of land and sea routes in relation to the rest of the Union, ‘is also increasingly a gateway to Asia, notably through rail links’. The communication thus suggests that the Baltic Sea region could acquire a rather different structural position than simply being viewed as peripheral in relation to Europe’s core; in other words, the region could potentially escape its previous marginality through an altered structural position. Some elements are already in place, and the region could, by consciously pursuing further the vision opened up by the Commission, gain considerable importance by mediating and forming a bridge between Europe and Asia. The changing position is, however, simply mentioned as a fact proving that the region remains quite accessible. An interesting alternative

vision regarding the region's increasing centrality – a property that could also be important for the EU as well as just the Baltic Sea region – is left aside, leaving a potentially crucial strategic aspect without a more detailed elaboration.

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

Although, – as Schymik and Krumrey point out, the approach drawn up by the Commission is somewhat lacking in clarity and consistency, it nonetheless deserves to be called a strategy, as it is clearly visionary, goal-oriented and programmatic in nature. Moreover, it does not just offer insight into the policies of the EU in relation to a particular region, but also provides crucial information on how regionalization, and macro-regions such as the Baltic Sea, are viewed and dealt with in the context of EU developments in general. Already the use of labels such as 'pilot' or 'experimental' testifies to this, indicating that something beyond the ordinary is being aspired to. The target set is not just that of intensifying the pursuit of ordinary policies, but one of embarking upon something new. Thus, the vocabularies used, including plotting the area as a 'model', points to the efforts involved in achieving temporal change and progress beyond the ordinary.

It should also be noted that the strategy is not limited to the Baltic Sea region but addresses broader issues as well, thus confirming that the formation of macro-regions has become an integral part of the dynamics of the Union. Such formations seem to be acquiring considerable legitimacy, thus further warranting the outlining of a strategy in the case of the Baltic Sea region. In this context, the region has been singled out for particular attention and is seen as having the potential to lead the way in the sphere of macro-regions.

Being singled out as a 'model' naturally has its consequences in terms of standing and reputation. On the one hand the strategy outlined by

the Commission focuses on some theme-specific, instrumental, functional and structural goals, while on the other hand also contributing to branding the Baltic Sea region as something in need of special attention. The region is viewed as having considerable potential to develop further and may thus also show the way for other actors to follow in the sphere of the Union's territorial policies and regionalization as a form of European integration.

Yet, and these grand perspectives notwithstanding, it might also be argued that the setting of broader goals and the prioritization of the Baltic Sea Region are not being followed up by the Commission in a convincing manner because the strategy remains conspicuously silent regarding issues of institutional reform. Moreover, it also refrains from passing recommendations aimed at bolstering regional developments through the allocation of additional financial means – with the caveat that this reservation and policy applies 'at this time'. Thus, in a sense the strategy is left hanging in the air. At the same time, however, it is to be noted that the Commission refers in no uncertain term to a process which is merely in its infancy. It may well be expected that, once the visions have been outlined and the priorities set and agreed upon, the more practical and instrumental aspects of the strategy will fall into place, with the Commission also taking upon itself the responsibility for coordination, monitoring, reporting and facilitating both implementation and follow-up. Among other things, a review of 'the European added-value of the strategy' and implementation of the action plan is predicted for 2011.

### REFERENCES

Schymik, Carsten and Krumrey, Peer (2009), 'EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region. Core Europe in the Northern Periphery?'. Working Paper FG1. *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik*, Berlin.

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