



EUROPEAN COMMISSION

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From Passengers to Captains of Europe's Baltic Sea Strategy

Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort

4th Annual Forum on the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region
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Madam President, Ministers, friends

It is a great honour for me to welcome you to the 4th Annual Forum of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region.

I would like to thank Lithuania for hosting and the Council of Baltic Sea States for co-organising this conference and INTERACT point Turku for its invaluable support.

Lithuania has played an important role in driving forward the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region, and I am particularly grateful for the prominence Lithuania has given the macro regions during its Presidency. The strategies are about deepening the integration of the EU, and Lithuania's work in achieving the recent Council Conclusions on the way forward is a very significant contribution.

Lithuania is also Coordinator in 3 Priority Areas. We are very grateful for your dedication and count on your continued support and commitment.

There are 700 of us gathered here in Vilnius to celebrate our successes so far – and strengthen efforts in the future.

I would particularly like to welcome the representatives here today from countries that are not EU members. Our environment, the theme of this forum, does not recognize borders, and there are many other areas where we all need to cooperate. I am glad that our dialogue with the Russian Federation has been very fruitful in the past year and look forward to working with you on a wide range of projects from innovation to transport, and from maritime security to protecting our heritage.

I said we have successes to celebrate. The use of phosphates in detergents is being phased out, as are the discarding of fish catches. The strategy is promoting serious action in shipping, particularly as we prepare for the new tougher environmental standards that will apply to shipping post 2015.

But the strategy is not all about the sea itself or even just the coastal areas. The recent renewed momentum behind Rail Baltic is a good example. The higher speed rail links that will connect the three Baltic States with Poland, Germany and the rest of Europe, as well as Finland and North Europe, will be the largest infrastructure project in the history of the independent Baltic States. AND it will dramatically influence the economic development of the region as a whole.

The justifications for working more closely together are clear: common interests overlap and cannot be tackled by any state or region alone. Take Liquefied Natural Gas. The advantages – in terms of reducing emissions, in terms of our energy independence – can only be realised if we work together. But the creation of an LNG supply chain can benefit the region as a whole, by building local know how, and stimulating local industries.

This summer the Commission published an evaluation of the Macro regional strategies, and the Council has recently confirmed our conclusion that the strategies are bringing added value.

I will be honest: we are achieving more, and more quickly, than I personally dared to hope. BUT we cannot be complacent.

The opportunities are great, and we must not let them pass us by. Since the theme of this year's forum is environment, I will make that my example:

The declaration from the Helcom ministerial in October underlined the need to intensify efforts on eutrophication, hazardous substances, and the protection of biodiversity. Why? Not least because saving the environment also has an important economic benefit. Creative, innovative people want to live in a high-quality environment. Inaction, therefore, has an important cost for our economy.

The work we do together on preventing pollution from agriculture, tackling discharges of dangerous substances, or cleaning up municipal waste water is an investment in the future of the region.

I have two main messages for you today.

Firstly, now is the time to ensure the Baltic Sea Region strategy is fully embedded into your plans for the next financial period. The funds are available, but it is up to your countries and regions to prioritise how they will be spent. Preparations are underway right now for the new Partnership Agreements and Operational Programmes, and it is essential that European funds are mobilised in coordination with national, regional, and private resources to achieve the goals we have set ourselves.

Frankly, now we have seen the draft Partnership Agreements from all the member states in the Baltic Sea Region, I have to say that I am concerned that the macro-regional objectives are not sufficiently reflected. We need to see more Baltic thinking in every single one of them.

The new Baltic Sea Region transnational programme, must be designed to support implementation, though its funds alone will never be enough to cover all our ambitions. National allocations **must** be brought into play.

Secondly, it is time to take real ownership of your macro region.

The Commission is there, and will continue to be there, to facilitate and provide strategic coordination.

The European funds will provide financing, but to ensure their most effective use, you need to coordinate your planning and your investments. The structures are there to being this process, but as our evaluation of the Macro regional strategies this summer suggested, there are questions still to answer about how this approach – that you have pioneered – should be led.

I do not have all the answers for you here today. The Council – under Lithuanian leadership – has asked the Commission to facilitate discussions on improving the governance of the macro regional strategies and report by the end of next year. So, we will be asking you to contribute to a reflection process on these issues in the run up to the 2014 Forum in June.

Our two current macro regions have different strengths – and in some ways different problems to tackle in this review. The Danube and the Baltic will each need to reflect on tailor-made solutions to their own specific situations.

Unlike the Danube, the Baltic Sea Region Strategy already has rather regular meetings of the National Contact Points. You have already a number of fora in which the political levels of the strategy can come together – for example, in the Council of Baltic Sea States and the Northern Dimension among others.

So it is not necessary that the review creates new structures. You should build on what already exists.

BUT, we do need to harness energies more effectively, and join up the political and operational levels to achieve greater impact.

Above all it is about how to travel as captains of the ship not as passengers. The Commission can help you maintain the vessel – but you have to be at the bridge steering.

The Baltic Sea Region Strategy has made an excellent start. But it will not continue to deliver if it goes on autopilot, or if it is assumed that the European commission will ship all the heavy cargo.

The Priority Area Coordinators and the National Contact Points are doing good work. But their political leaders in all parts of government, need to stay fully engaged in deciding the way forward.

That means every ministry, but also the ministers themselves. A couple of weeks ago at the Danube Forum in Bucharest it was good to see a large number of ministers present. It spoke for the importance the political level attaches to the Strategy in that region, and their commitment. The Baltic Sea region has a good strong record of coming together at operational level, which is extremely important. But, I hope that in Turku we can take discussions up to the political level as well.

Without prejudging the outcome of the governance review, let me share with you some of my own ideas on the subject. The macro-regions offer a chance to bring the EU closer to the citizen at a scale that is easier to grasp than our union of 28. They offer a chance too, for groups of member states to identify their common interests so that they can be better reflected in EU decision making.

I would like to see the transport ministers of the Baltic, the tourism ministers or the energy ministers come together in the margins of this forum – to seek consensus, and to give strategic guidance for the future.

A word before I close on the Priority Areas, Horizontal Actions and NCPs. I have said many times that they need the resources - the time, the staff – to do their jobs properly. I am sorry to have to say it again today. The problem is still not solved.

But, as the strategy matures, we can begin to see some differences between the priority areas. Some are doing better than others, which is natural. The Council has invited us to keep the structure of the priority areas under review. We should all be ready to reflect whether there are improvements to be made and have the courage to make changes if they are necessary.

This Forum is an opportunity to think about the future. Get involved, not only in the plenary sessions, but in the workshops, and the side events! We need to hear your views and we need every single person here, playing their part in building on the successes we have already achieved.