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1. Conclusions of the Task Force for the EUSBSR Revision and recommendations

The revision process of the EUSBSR Action Plan is almost finished. At the time of writing the present report, the final draft of the revised Action Plan is in the process of being approved in the European Commission.

From an overall perspective, the revision has led to a more streamlined and more focused Action Plan. With the exception of Spatial Planning, which is converted into a “Policy Area”, the Horizontal Actions have been “mainstreamed”, which means that they have to be implemented by each of the remaining Policy Areas. Thus, they do not appear anymore as separate actions in the Action Plan. The role of the Steering Groups was strengthened, and the number of Actions in the Policy Areas limited.

At the operational level, the role of Flagships has become unclear. Possible formats of activities can be projects, processes, networks or platforms. Policy Areas decide which format suits them best. They may continue to use the flagship concept, but no explanation is provided what this concept entails. According to the new Action Plan, the strategy should remain “open also for activities outside of established structures”, leaving open what this could mean in practice. Apparently, also the National Coordinators Group sees some need to further develop the framework and detailed guidance about the modes of operation.

It has to be acknowledged that the agreement on the revised Action Plan in the National Coordinators Group is the result of a long process which was marked by compromise and a strong top-down approach. Accordingly, it has to be stated that two aspects of importance for local and regional stakeholders were not incorporated in the new Action Plan:

- The role of pan-Baltic organisations as support structures and facilitators in the implementation process was not acknowledged. In general, the new Action Plan also lacks a systematic multi-level governance concept;
- The role of Flagships and their qualities which have been fundamental for the regional level in the implementation process so far, has weakened. A further process to clarify the rules of operation needs will be one task of the German Chairmanship of the National Coordinators Group.

For the further EUSBSR implementation process, the Task Force would like to give the following recommendations to the Baltic Sea Commission and its Member Regions:

- Given the lack of a multi-level governance concept for the EUSBSR, the cooperation should be focused on the individual Policy Area of interest. Notwithstanding contacts with the National Coordinators and the national Focal Points, namely the national line ministries that are in charge of a specific Policy Area, should be maintained or intensified;
- According to the findings of the Task Force, different approaches have been developed in the Policy Areas to involve regional authorities and other stakeholders. They range from the openness to involve a regional representative in the work of the Steering Group of a Policy Area to the establishment of a stakeholder platform, e.g. the Baltic Sea Bioeconomy Council in Policy Area Bioeconomy.
It is recommended to clarify the format and rules for a structured cooperation with the respective Policy Area Coordinator. Agreement should be reached on tangible objectives, on the involvement in the work of the Steering Group, on mutual obligations and the capitalisation of the expected results;

- The question of embedding remains open. As shown in the Input Paper of the Task Force, this question is closely linked to the added value that is attributed to the EUSBSR against the background of the regional development strategies. The BSC and its Member Regions should continue to exchange with the Managing Authority Network (ERDF, ESF) and Policy Area Innovation in order to find ways to make “embedding work in practice”.

Building on the results of the joint pilot actions that were carried out in the past years, solutions should be found to have joint Calls for cooperative projects funded by the so called mainstream programmes;

- The point of departure for such cooperative projects is the know-how, the resources and opportunities at local and regional level. In order to put this local and regional cooperation potential into a macro-regional framework, the Task Force recommends the Baltic Sea Commission to explore the possibility of developing a systematic approach to make the cooperation potential among Member Regions visible and accessible. Such an approach could help to prepare the matchmaking of regional actors for macro-regional cooperative projects. This “stakeholder first” approach could be an important step to make embedding work in concrete terms.

2. Milestones in the work of the Task Force

The work of the Task Force may be best characterised through the following milestones.

2.1 Baseline Report (January 2019)

Based on an enquiry among the BSC Member Regions, the Baseline Report provides an analysis of the involvement of these regions in the EUSBSR implementation process. It covers both aspects, the involvement in the governance structures - like working with the National EUSBSR Coordinators and the Policy Areas – and the operational involvement in the Flagship format. In addition, it stated the timeline of the revision process and the state of play regarding the preparation of the next EU Programming Period 2021 – 2027. The Baseline Report was submitted to the BSC Executive Committee at its meeting at 31 January 2019 in Lahti.

2.2 Input Paper the BSC Policy Decision (May 2019)

Based on the findings of the Baseline Report, the Input Paper was elaborated to provide a timely contribution to the revision process. It gave recommendations for a holistic approach to the process and how to better involve regions on the coordination and operational levels
in the future implementation process of the strategy. In addition, it described four parameters of regional involvement for consideration.

It was recommended to apply a more holistic approach regarding, amongst others:

- the systematic development of a multi-level governance perspective of the Strategy in order to ensure alignment with agendas, strategies and political involvement at all levels of government;
- an enhanced cross-sector implementation of policy areas to ensure strategic planning strategies for sustainable development across the Baltic Sea Region as a whole;
- a better coherence of strategy and funding instruments;
- the strengthening of the external dimension of the EUSBSR implementation process.

Regarding a stronger involvement of regions at the coordination level of the EUSBSR, it was recommended to:

- develop meeting and communication formats as well as a contact point to address local and regional authorities in their national language with a specific focus on the added value of the Strategy;
- better use the resources of Pan-Baltic networks and organisations of regional or local authorities like the Baltic Sea Commission as they may organise input to processes, channel information and strengthen the commitment to the EUSBSR in the region.

Regarding a stronger involvement of regions at operational level, it was recommended to:

- develop a strategic development perspective for Flagships that goes beyond the duration of projects;
- involve Flagship partners in the overall activities of the Policy Area during the implementation phase and to offer a framework in which project results could be capitalised;
- connect thematic platforms, e.g. on Smart Specialisation, with a multi-level governance approach in the EUSBSR;
- support the creation of regional hubs connected to EUSBSR Policy Areas, based on regional needs and conditions.

In addition, it stated some parameters for regional involvement in the implementation process which are connected to the added value that the EUSBSR offers to regional actors.

It is assumed that the added value of macro-regional cooperation relates more or less directly to the benefit it might bring to regional development strategies and to the quality of life of the citizens. As a key condition, a targeted communication policy of the EUSBSR should be in place to raise the awareness amongst local and regional decision-makers, both from the public and private sector.

In this context, three parameters are essential for regional involvement even though they are non-exclusive:

1. Successful connection of the Actions in the EUSBSR Policy Areas Policy with regional development strategies are key to get a stronger political commitment, a higher visibility and a better embedding of the EUSBSR in regional funding schemes. The
transnational window in the new Smart Specialisation Strategies may offer a good interface for such a connection. Also beyond the S3 Strategies, the search for a higher coherence with regional development strategies should be intensified.

According to the findings of the Task Force, the following **Policy areas** are of key interest for the Member Regions:

- Innovation (S3);
- Renewable Energy;
- Bio-Economy;
- Energy Efficiency;
- Transport;
- Resource-efficient Blue Growth;
- Tourism;
- Education;
- Culture;
- Climate Change.

This demands both capacity and coordination in relation to new and emerging instruments, the utilisation of the ERDF in an interregional setting as well as strong coordination with Policy Areas connecting to relevant value chains. This may also relate to specific **territorial development issues**, which could be found for example in the Finnish Archipelago Sea, which is the most sensitive of these areas, or the connection with the integrated EU Policy for the Arctic in the fields of transport, innovation, sustainable tourism development or bio-economy.

2. **In operational terms**, Flagships, which may be projects or processes, are carried out by a consortium of partners from different parts of the Baltic Sea Region. As they are anchored in their local or regional base and operate at macro-regional level at the same time, they could be a kind of bridge builders or interfaces between these levels. It seems to be valuable to understand the regional context of a partner in a Flagship consortium.

   Local and regional structures may provide complementary know-how and offer access to additional resources. Therefore, a cross-cutting regional perspective may open up the possibility to better exploit the results of a Flagship and to **support the territorial reach-out of the implementation process**. Eventually, such combined efforts bring the added value needed for a successful strategy.

3. **Pan-Baltic Organisations** or networks serve the purpose to organise cooperation among regional authorities and to develop joint approaches. Cooperation may be focused on a specific issue in the framework of a project or relate to policy development in a broader sense. The CPMR Baltic Sea Commission, ScanBalt or Submariner are examples of such organisations.

   They are able to mobilise additional resources for the EUSBSR implementation process and should be involved where possible. In the case of the CPMR BSC, the Working Groups on Transport and Maritime Issues cooperate regularly with the Policy Area Coordinators of Transport or Tourism and related Flagships.

The Input Paper was adopted by the BSC Executive Committee at its meeting in Turku on 9 May 2019. It was shared with the National EUSBSR Coordinators and the Policy Area Coordinators in order to make a timely contribution to the process.

In addition to the Input Paper, the BSC adopted a Policy Position at its 24th General Assembly in Gdańsk on 11 June 2019, back-to-back with the EUSBSR Annual Forum. Next to that, a
Stakeholder Seminar on the involvement of regions and municipalities in the EUSBSR was jointly organised by the BSC together with the UBC and the BSSSC the same day.

2.3 The final session of the Task Force on 9 September 2020

The Task Force had its final session on 9 September 2020 in an online format together with the Chairs of the BSC Working Groups on Maritime Issues and Transport. From the EUSBSR side, the German Chair of the Group of National Coordinators and the Policy Area Coordinators for Bioeconomy, Innovation, Tourism, and Transport attended the meeting which served the purpose to develop a perspective on regional involvement with a view of the revised EUSBSR Action Plan.

The German Chairperson of the National Coordinators Group presented the priorities for the months ahead:

- Establishment of the Baltic Sea Strategy Point as a service facility to the EUSBSR and support for the National Coordinators Group;
- Increase the involvement of a variety of stakeholders, like NGOs, the civil society, youth organisations or the business community;
- Establish guidance and procedures for Flagships;
- Exchange with the Managing Authorities Networks in order to promote the alignment of funding (“embedding”) with the EUSBSR;
- Promotion of the EUSBSR communication strategy.

The involvement of regional actors in the further implementation process of the EUSBSR was discussed by using the cases of four Policy Areas where a big interest from the regional side is given. As a result of the session, it can be stated that there is a great openness among the Policy Area Coordinators to involve (regional) stakeholders. Different approaches have been developed like the establishment of a stakeholder platform in Policy Area Bioeconomy, the more or less targeted exchange of the BSC Working Groups of Transport and Maritime Issues with the Policy Areas Transport respectively Tourism. For Policy Area Innovation, the coordinator expressed his readiness to admit a regional representative to the Steering Group.

The statements of the regional representatives showed a high level of commitment to cooperation based on the mutual benefit of the partners. The necessary resources for cooperation either come from EU funded projects like BSR S3 Ecosystem in the field of Innovation or the named BSC Working Groups. In the field of Bioeconomy, there is no specific cooperation framework for regional actors as the Baltic Sea Bioeconomy Council serves the general exchange with stakeholders. Currently, a Bioeconomy Working Group is planned under the umbrella of the ScanBalt network, while individual regions like the Oulu Region apparently disposes of a big potential in this sector, which so far has been barely connected, to macroregional cooperation.

1 Agenda and Presentations of the final session of the Task Force can be found on the BSC Website: https://cpmr-baltic.org/event/bsc-task-force-on-the-eusbsr-revision-final-session.
Summing up, in order to have regional actors involved in the implementation process of the EUSBSR, the situation differs from one Policy Area to another. Pan-Baltic Organisations like the BSC can make a difference by offering a platform for cooperation and exchange for their Member Regions. At the same time, they are an appropriate interface to work with the EUSBSR Policy Areas, either on the project or a policy level. Individual regions like Västerbotten may find a priority access though their leading role in EU funded projects. They may also show ways for interested Member Regions to get involved.

It appears to be useful to increase the visibility of the potential interest and capacities for cooperation at the level of the BSC Member Regions in order to enable the BSC to serve as a platform and interface to the EUSBSR Policy Areas of regional interest.

3. Information on the Task Force for the EUSBSR Revision

The revision of the EUSBSR Action Plan represented one focus area in the work of the BSC during 2019/2020. In order to support this process, the Executive Committee decided at its meeting in Białystok on 25 September 2018 to set up a corresponding Task Force under the Chairmanship of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern (TF EUSBSR).

The objective of the Task Force was to develop a local and regional perspective for the revision of the objectives and scope of the EUSBSR Action Plan and its governance structures, with the aim of promoting a stronger involvement of local and regional stakeholders in the EUSBSR implementation process.

Based on an enquiry among the BSC Member Regions, seven regions declared their readiness to work together in the TF EUSBSR alongside Mecklenburg-Vorpommern:

1. Helsinki-Uusimaa
2. Norrbotten
3. Ostrobothnia
4. Päijät-Häme
5. Southwest Finland
6. Stockholm
7. Västerbotten

The Member Regions of Skåne: and Podlaskie: (which has left the CPMR in the course of 2020) declared their support of the work of the TF EUSBSR.

With the approval of the present report by the BSC Executive Committee, expected on 6 October 2020, the work of the Task Force will end.
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