



Doc. 11678

02 July 2008

The socio-economic potential of the Baltic Sea region

Motion for a resolution¹

tabled by Ms Sinikka HURSKAINEN and other members of the Assembly

This motion has not been discussed in the Assembly and commits only those who have signed it

Multifarious co-operation across the Baltic Sea has centuries-old roots and traditions. Today, the Baltic Sea region (BSR), with a population of about 100 million in the catchment area of the sea, is the fastest-growing region in Europe, uniting eight European Union countries and Russia.

Since the end of the 1980s, the BSR has developed very fast, with the contribution of dozens of dynamic organisations, among them the Council of Baltic Sea States (CBSS), the Helsinki Commission (HELCOM) and the Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference. The role of NGOs in this co-operation has been and continues to be prominent, particularly as far as human rights and democracy are concerned. Fruitful and well-organised co-operation between the sub-regions, major cities, universities, islands, trade unions, etc., in the BSR might provide interesting examples of best practices and inspiration for other regions in Europe and its vicinity as well. The BSR possesses a wide experience in facilitating policy co-ordination, adjusting policy to local conditions and involving business and civil society in shaping policy measures. It is also the first region in the world that has adopted common regional goals for sustainable development.

The European Parliament adopted a strategy for the BSR in November 2006, and the European Commission is preparing a strategy that, most probably, will be adopted during the Swedish presidency of the EU in 2009. The CBSS, with Russia as a full member, is working on a similar project. A working group on labour market and social welfare has recently been established within the Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference (BSPC). It will deal with many of the issues on which the Council of Europe has long-standing experience.

The BSR is, according to the OECD, rapidly becoming one of the world's more competitive regions. Yet major challenges at the local level still remain for the eastern shores of the Baltic, where economic transition needs to be accompanied by more innovative strategic planning, new forms of governance and dynamic civic entrepreneurship. Policies will need to be made more adaptable and capacities will need to be strengthened if prosperity and living standards are to increase on the Baltic Rim.

Many of the countries in the BSR are faced with increasing migration flows inside the region as well as from further away, which implies that the relatively homogenous societies in the region are faced with new social challenges. Actions are needed to improve integration policies for migrants and to prevent xenophobic trends.

The BSR has a great potential for growth that has not yet been fully exploited. The differences in the level of development of national economies and structures of production across the sub-regions of the BSR are still considerable. The greatest differences in the standard of living in the Council of Europe area are still today to be found in the north-eastern part of Europe.

1. Referred to the Committee on Economic Affairs and Development, for report at the Standing Committee: Reference No. 3483 (29th Sitting, 29 September 2008).



The BSR is gaining increased strategic importance as a transit region as a result of the increasing trade flows between Russia and the EU. The major part of Russia's foreign trade, including a large part of Russian oil and chemical products, is shipped from ports along the Baltic Sea coast and more ports are established at the eastern end of the Gulf of Finland in the St Petersburg region. Although the growing traffic is a positive sign of intensified co-operation in the BSR and the prospering Russian economy, it also increases the potential for damaging and polluting shipping accidents. Even one large-scale accident would seriously threaten the already highly vulnerable marine environment.

The environmental problems plaguing the Baltic Sea have already been thoroughly researched and their main causes are well known and documented. The Baltic Sea Action Programme, adopted by the HELCOM in November 2007, provides a solid basis for action that obviously concerns the riparian states in the first place, although other countries are concerned as well, mainly through airborne pollution and rapidly increasing maritime transport.

An additional factor for the future of the region is the increasing importance of the Barents region, which will contribute to the development of northern Europe, including the BSR, as a whole.

Thus, the increased strategic and economic importance of the BSR has brought about the need for a pan-European strategy for the region and the need to examine, in the light of the main Council of Europe principles and values of democracy and individual rights, including social rights, the inter-linkage between, and the consequences of, the development trends in the field of economics, demography, the environment and the transport sector with a view to identifying the major challenges that these trends present to the economic activities and social policies, and to finding common approaches and solutions to these challenges.

Signed (see overleaf)

Signed²:

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2. ALDE: Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe
EDG: European Democrat Group
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SOC: Socialist Group
UEL: Group of the Unified European Left