



**European Forum Northern Sweden addressing the European Council
with opinions on the European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region.**

European Forum Northern Sweden (EFNS) is a network of politicians at local, regional, national and European level that represents the four northernmost regions in Sweden, Norrbotten, Västerbotten, Västernorrland and Jämtland. The region has 900.000 citizens and makes half the geographical area of Sweden. The forum is an arena for cooperation with the purpose to increase knowledge and awareness of European politics among political organizations, and to coordinate influence and design policy in areas that affects the northern regions of Sweden.

The EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR) was approved by the European Council in October 2009, following a Communication from the European Commission. The Strategy helps to coordinate action by the European Union, EU countries, regions, pan-Baltic organizations, financing institutions and non-governmental bodies to promote a more balanced development of the Baltic Sea Region. By mobilizing all relevant EU funding and policies, the Strategy aims to make the region more environmentally sustainable, more prosperous, more accessible and attractive, as well as more safe and secure. Fifteen priority areas with several flagship projects have been listed in an Action Plan, which is updated regularly. The last update of the Strategy was made by the Council of the European Union, 26 June 2012.

European Forum Northern Sweden (EFNS) welcomes the revision of EUSBSR and is pleased with several parts of the Council's conclusions, such as the reiteration of the sound principle to not create new funds, new structures or legislation. We agree with the Strategy's responsible way of aligning available resources, and to continue to rely on a coordinated approach, synergy effects and more effective use of EU and other financial instruments for implementation.

The new formulations of objectives, the establishment of a system of indicators and targets, as well as describing and delegating roles, are great improvements that make the Strategy more comprehensive. We hope that the Commission's upcoming assessment of the macro-regional strategies and the evaluations in mid-2013 will make the Strategy more effective and result oriented to further attain the objectives. Sharp measurable goals have been desired by the stakeholders as it facilitates the implementation process, and are one of many useful improvements made.

Another great conclusion adapted by the Council, is the recognition of the territorial dimension of the EU sectorial policies. It is positive for EUSBSR to include a territorial approach since the Europe 2020-strategy is also equipped with a territorial pillar to improve the coordination of EU policies within varying

territories and conditions. We believe that the approach to consider different geographical conditions and potentials should always be considered and included in policy design, as it does not only contribute to the development of the specific territories, but also to the entire European Union. Therefore, we welcome a strengthening of the territorial perspective in the Strategy's cohesion policy.

We also agree that an important way to promote awareness and cooperation for the Strategy's implementation is to invite the Commission to explore how concrete cooperation can further be intensified using the Northern Dimension Structures. We believe that the current work under the Northern Dimension can be coordinated with The Baltic Sea Strategy and could help both of the operations.

We have strongly emphasized the importance of multilevel governance and are very pleased that the Council now calls for the Commission and the Member States to intensify the political support for the Strategy at all levels, and to link it with other relevant EU policies. The involvement of regional and local levels is essential for designing and implementing effective policies and cannot be ignored.

Lastly, we would like to welcome the Council's recognition of the progress made in the relations with Russia and the need to further enhance the cooperation, especially regarding the urgent environmental challenges of the Baltic Sea. The northern regions have a long historical tradition of cross border cooperation of varying intensity with Russia, it is therefore important that the Strategy continue to emphasize these relations.

Despite these developments of the Strategy, there is **still room for improvement**. We would like to express our concern over a few important points and areas that we believe the EUSBSR should include.

The continuous focus on the southern part of the Baltic Sea Region is an issue. We still see a risk that the view of the Baltic Sea Region stops at the capital cities. It is vital that the Strategy includes the most sparsely populated areas in the north which European Forum North Sweden represents. Inclusive growth has a huge part in the Europe 2020 strategy, and we believe that the EUSBSR ought to follow the example to a greater extent.

The objective to connect people in the region is a step in the right direction and a way to involve citizens from the rural areas where long distances can be challenging. But we would still like to see an improved action plan that further develops the social dimension, which is an important aspect for the people in the northern regions considering the demographic challenges such as population decline and lack of human capital. We do not think that the Strategy is strong enough regarding these issues.

Neither do we believe that employment rates and Human Development Indexes are sufficient enough to indicate how well people are living, since full employment and economic growth does not necessarily guarantee an attractive society. There needs to be attractive environments, rich on culture, entertainment and social networks. The northern regions have a great need to develop these areas, and we believe the Strategy should aim to include and promote solutions to these social challenges as part of the objective to increase prosperity.

We are welcoming the Council's recognition of the issues regarding disparity, since there are still considerable challenges with economic inequality in the Baltic Sea Region. But we also think it is shameful that the Strategy does not include gender equality in its objectives. Gender equality is not only a question of wellbeing and equal opportunities, but also an important factor of growth, which further stresses the importance of gender equality as an essential priority. The differences in economic opportunities and the imbalance of representation between women and men need to be addressed. The action plan does not aim to reduce the gender gap and does not, with the exception of encouraging female entrepreneurship, even mention the issue. There are a lot more to do and a lot more to be achieved in this field.

We strongly believe that prostitution, human trafficking, smuggling and violence against women are severe threats to the quality of life for everyone in the Baltic Sea Region and needs to be addressed more seriously. Cooperation is necessary to cope with these problems, and we should explore our abilities to not only eliminate the problem, but to establish collective programs to support the victims. In the long run, we will have to change our attitudes, stereotypes and perception of women to stop any future development of trafficking and sexual exploitation. Joint information campaigns in schools could be a solution.

Finally, we would like to suggest that an annual conference for the EUSBSR is established in the Northern part of the Baltic Sea Region. It would not only be a nice way to promote awareness and cooperation for the Strategy's implementation, but also a great statement that the Strategy applies to the whole Region.



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