



European Economic and Social Committee

The Baltic Sea Region – The Best Place to Work and Do Business

Joint conference organised by the European Economic and Social Committee and the European Commission Representation in Finland, Helsinki, 22 and 23 October 2009

OPENING ADDRESS

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Minister, Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Baltic Sea and its surrounding states is a true jewel of the North. The region has a colourful history, albeit one which has unfortunately often been marred by war. Luckily we have enjoyed a period of peace since the Second World War. Another major event occurred at the beginning of the 1990s when the Baltic States and Poland were freed from the clutches of communism. Since then European integration has advanced at a furious pace also here in the area around the free Baltic. The subject of this conference, which is jointly organised by the European Commission and the European Economic and Social Committee European, is the economy of the Baltic Sea Region and what we can do to strengthen it.

Clearly, the coming of freedom offered a completely new economic environment for the states bordering the Baltic Sea. The last fifteen years have been a period of robust growth as evidenced by the extraordinary rapid progress that has taken place in the various sectors of the economy. Growth has come about as a result of a freer economy and integration policy, underpinned by a prolonged period of global economic growth.

Major uncertainties attach to world developments, as shown by the events of the last twelve months. The Baltic Sea Region is also in the midst of a crisis. The scale of the problems varies from country to country and from region to region, but the recession is an unpleasant fact of life which we now need to put behind us by embarking on a recovery. The way forward is not easy, but the prospects are good, if the Baltic Sea Region and the EU can find better ways of working together to promote development and business activity. The EU Baltic Sea Strategy has been built up at the right time. Now is the moment to put it into practice.

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It is of the utmost importance at this time that the EU has a common view on the need for developing the Baltic Sea Region. Several reports and studies confirm that, despite the positive performance of the growth years, there are many political and economic actions that could be implemented more effectively and by harnessing new technologies. Areas where cooperation and economic activity need to be improved have been identified in all sectors.

The EU has several regional development programmes, which have achieved good results. The Baltic Sea Region has pursued a timid and cautious approach in EU circles. Is this because of the focus on protecting the Baltic Sea or the painfully slow progress made in formulating a policy on Russia, or a combination of both? It is welcome and encouraging that there now seems to be a strong political commitment in the EU Baltic Sea Strategy. Here Sweden could make history during its EU presidency by completing the launch of joint programming.

Resources are a prerequisite for the implementation of all programmes. Budgetary funding should be made available for the project so as to ensure continuity. At the same time the current financial instruments should be used more effectively. Objectives can be achieved by encouraging civil society – organisations, firms and political decision-makers – to become involved in making the Baltic Sea Region a better place in which to work and do business.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I believe I am right when I stress the desire for and commitment to wider, long-term cooperation that exists among the various players in society. Organisations and political decision-makers are looking for solutions which will create conditions that are more conducive to production, processing, trade and other services. Drawing on our skills and innovative capacity we can also create the basic preconditions for increasing jobs in the Baltic Sea Region. We have every chance of succeeding if we believe in ourselves and in what we are doing.

I hope that this conference – The Baltic Sea Region: The Best Place to Work and Do Business – will offer new solutions and ideas for the practical implementation of the Baltic Sea Strategy. Secondly, each of us has a duty to pass on the message about the opportunities that exist here through our respective organisations.

I take this opportunity to thank you for your contributions towards making the conference a success. I would like to cordially welcome all participants – EU colleagues, speakers and government and EU presidency representatives – to Finland's capital, Helsinki, and to this EU conference.
