Rikard Bengtsson*

An EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region: Good Intentions Meet Complex Challenges

Abstract

The European Union is about to adopt a strategy for the Baltic Sea region. In the face of severe problems – not least pertaining to the environment, maritime safety, and uneven economic development in the area – the strategy aims at functional coordination and more efficient use of financial resources and already existing cooperation schemes. Being the first macro-regional cooperation of its kind in the EU, if successful this new model may be applied to other areas in the years to come. While the need for a strategic vision for the Baltic Sea region appears obvious, the proposed strategy nonetheless faces a series of challenges. These range from various difficulties in improving efficiency to problems related to the intra-regionalization of the EU and the lack of an external perspective, more specifically by ignoring Russia as a key determinant for the potential success of the strategy.

1. Introduction

In the more or less constant evolution of functional cooperation in the European Union, it now appears to be the time to add yet another notion – that of 'macro-regional cooperation' – to the standard vocabulary of EU integration. The European Union is about to adopt a comprehensive strategy for the development of the Baltic Sea region, all with a view to potentially use this instrument also in other parts of the union. Following the 2004 enlargement, the Baltic Sea has become much of an EU-internal sea, plagued, however, by critical environmental problems as well as severe differences in infrastructural accessibility and economic development. Hence, for a number of reasons, ranging from alarming problems to a sense of unrealized economic potential, the

Baltic Sea seems to be a good test case for macro-regional cooperation. Being a Swedish priority for its fall 2009 Presidency of the EU, the strategy is currently high on the political agenda, with a possible adoption by the European Council already in October of this year.

While intuitively attractive, the idea of a Baltic Sea strategy nonetheless gives rise to a set of critical questions. How is the strategy assumed to work in practice? How is implementation to be assured and who is responsible for maintaining the momentum of the strategy? What value-added can really be expected? What are the main problems and challenges facing the strategy? This paper seeks to critically analyze the pre-conditions for a successful implementation of the strategy,

* Dr. Rikard Bengtsson is Assistant Professor in Political Science at Lund University, Sweden.

looking both at the set-up of the strategy itself and at constraining factors for macro-regional cooperation, generally and in the Baltic Sea case more specifically.

2. Developing a macro-regional strategy

Territorial and cross-border cooperation has a long history in the context of the European Union and its predecessors. There are currently thirteen areas for territorial cooperation, which together cover all areas of the EU (in addition there are some fifty cross-border cooperation schemes). The Baltic Sea area is already designated as one of the thirteen areas of territorial cooperation, receiving some € 55 billion in the period 2007-2013, primarily from Cohesion Funds. The novelty of the concept of macro-regional cooperation is to take a comprehensive approach to the area as one singular entity, rather than merely viewing it as an administrative area for various cooperation schemes pertaining to parts of the area. In this sense, while stimulated by a strive for what we could call rational functionalism, the concept in effect embraces the notion of 'region', in both assuming the existence of, and seeking to further develop the rationale for, a regional approach. Whether the success of such a macro-regional approach depends on efficient allocation of cooperation only, or whether it also needs a degree of regional identity (cultural homogeneity) remains an open question. In developing the Baltic Sea strategy, the point has often been made that the Baltic Sea would be a suitable test case, both because of the needs/problems faced in the region and because there is a favourable presence of high degree of interdependence, common institutions already in existence, and a common regional identity, or at least cultural affinity – all elements that are often singled out in research on regionalism as favourable conditions for the successful development of regional endeavours.

The early stages of the development of the strategy can be traced back to the European Parliament. Its Baltic Intergroup, under the leadership of MEP Christopher Beazley, already in 2005 made public calls for a comprehensive approach to the Baltic Sea within the EU context. This later led to the adoption of a Parliament resolution in November 2006, which explicitly called for a strategy to be outlined by the Commission and adopted by the European Council (European Parliament 2006). Largely upon the initiative of Sweden, the European Council in December 2007 indeed called upon the Commission to take such steps. In the Council Conclusions, it says:

> Without prejudice to the integrated maritime policy, the European Council invites the Commission to present an EU strategy for the Baltic Sea region at the latest by June 2009. This strategy should *inter alia* help to address the urgent environmental challenges related to the Baltic Sea. The Northern Dimension framework provides the basis for the external aspects of cooperation in the Baltic Sea region. (European Council 2007)

The Commission delivered its communication in June 2009, accompanied by an Action Plan consisting of desired objectives and concrete measures (Commission 2009a, 2009b, see further below). More specifically, the Directorate-General for Regional Policy has been responsible for developing the communication, a process in which some twenty directorates have been involved. As was noted above, Sweden has as one of its main priorities to get the strategy adopted during its Presidency this current fall (see for instance the Presidency work program (Swedish Government 2009) and speeches by Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt and Minister for EU Affairs Cecilia Malmström (Reinfeldt 2009, Malmström 2009)).

Three main themes should be further commented in this context. First, the framing of the strategy by the Council is relevant for the future character of the development of the strategy. Two principal implications can be found in the Council text referred above. One concerns the focus on environmental issues and, by implication, maritime issues, which in effect impacts on how the Baltic Sea is to be perceived in the continued policy process. The other concerns the reference to the Baltic Sea as an EU-internal sea, with external relations to be dealt with through the existing framework of the Northern Dimension. The Council conclusion effectively calls for a decoupling of internal and external policy spheres. Such a perspective is interesting against the background that many of the pressing issues in the Baltic Sea – not least environmental and maritime issues – are of transboundary and transnational character, by definition then involving relations with non-EU members.

Second, and related to the Council perspective, there are principal differences to be found between the European Parliament resolution and the Commission communication. Perhaps most significantly, whereas the Commission communication embraces the EU-internal perspective of the Council, the Parliament resolution explicitly refers to a "Baltic Sea Region Strategy for the Northern Dimension" and states that one of the aims of the resolution is to "support the Northern Dimension policy by defining the Baltic Sea region as one of the main priority areas" and thus urges the Commission to present a proposal for a strategy "in order to

reinforce the internal pillar of the Northern Dimension" (European Parliament 2006). As can be seen, the Parliament in various ways links the Baltic Sea strategy to the Northern Dimension framework, whereas the Council and the Commission entertain a distinction between the strategy and the external aspects of cooperation. Also of principal significance is the difference regarding governance structure. The Commission proposes a strategy that mainly is about co-ordinating existing initiatives and continually reviewing progress, needs and problems, in effect attempting to maintain a dynamic Action Plan. It moreover argues that institutional mechanisms are to be kept at a minimum and no additional funding is to be directed towards the Baltic Sea strategy. In its resolution, the Parliament calls for a drastically different solution, in part through its proposal to hold an annual Baltic Sea summit before the summer European Council and expanding regional organizational bodies inside and outside the EU system, in part by proposing an own budget line for the strategy. Interestingly enough, the Parliament notes that this budget line could possibly be placed under the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument, effectively then treating the strategy as an external relations policy (Parliament 2006). Taken together, this means that the Parliament envisages a more ambitious policy development – with links to external policy – than the Commission proposal renders.

A third issue of principal relevance concerns the character of policy development, here specifically the public consultation process that took place between August 2008 and February 2009, intended to gain substantial input for the direction and structure of the strategy, in turn yielding increased legitimacy once adopted (and also smoothing the adoption process itself). In addition to input by member states and regions, a number of non-governmental organizations and international governmental organizations, and also individuals, have contributed propositions, views etc regarding the strategy. A total of 109 interventions have been made, in the form of position papers, opinions at two stakeholder conferences (Stockholm August 2008 and Rostock February 2009) and four round-tables (in Kaunas, Gdansk, Copenhagen and Helsinki), at a youth conference in Hamburg, and through an on-line consultation forum open during November and December of 2008. The consultation process rendered a number of principal conclusions shared by a large majority of the stakeholders (Commission 2009c, Hübner 2009):

- The absolute need for a strategy for the Baltic Sea region
- The need for an integrated approach to ensure impact
- An important role for the Commission in the actual working of the strategy
- A focus on concrete projects to gain impact on the ground
- No need to develop new institutions, against the background of the many organizations already in existence
- An ambition to move beyond empty declaration and rather work with designated lead countries and specific targets and deadlines.

3. The strategy in focus: Issues, actors, methods

Against this background, it seems worthwhile to take a look at what the Commission proposal ended up containing. What are the main contents of the strategy and how is it supposed to work? It should be noted already at the outset that much in line with the public response referred above, the strategy is concerned with better coordination of already existing co-operative frameworks in the region. As such, then, the strategy does not hold any new schemes of collaboration (although there is, of course, an underlying assumption that the better allocation of funding and initiatives would spur further activities in a regional context). The key point, rather, is that an integrated approach is necessary to ensure sustainable development in the region – issues are interrelated while existing cooperation schemes are not effectively coordinated. There is thus room for functional improvement, it is argued, also within the current set-up of institutions, policies and financial commitments (Commission 2009a: 4).

There are four areas – pillars – that are singled out as fundamentally important, either against the background of alarming problems or in terms of unrealized potential – (1) to improve the environmental state of the Baltic Sea (indeed, the region as a whole), (2) to promote more balanced economic development in the region, (3) to make the region more accessible and attractive, and, finally, (4) make it a safer and more secure place. These four areas are further developed into fifteen different challenges, so-called priority areas. The idea is to set specific targets/goals and allocate different member states to be responsible for the implementation of these different tasks. All in all 76 actions are listed in the Commission communication (see table on page 5). These in turn contain concrete projects which include designated lead partners, specific targets and review dates. As regards the work method, it should be noted that the Commission envisages the priority list to be a

dynamic document under constant review – for the macro-regional policy to be effective, the logic goes, it must be possible to flexibly adapt it to new circumstances. Let us here take a brief look at each of the four pillars.

3.1 An environmentally sustainable region

This pillar is repeatedly underlined as the most important one – as we have seen, this framing goes back to the call by the Council for a Commission communication, and is continually making its imprint on the strategy. The key logic in this area is that the Baltic Sea is very vulnerable to environmental pressures. The combination of the very shallow and almost completely enclosed character of the sea (only 3% of the water is exchanged every year), that rivers drain an area four times that of the sea, and that some 100 million people inhabit the region have resulted in severe environmental degradation for a long time; to reverse the trend, it is argued, increased coordination among sectoral policies and institutions active in the area are needed. The pillar consists of five priority areas: (1) reducing nutrient inputs to the sea to acceptable levels, (2) preserving natural zones and biodiversity including fisheries, (3) reducing the use and impact of hazardous substances, (4) becoming a model region for clean shipping, and (5) mitigating and adapting to climate change (Commission 2009a: 6-7; 2009b: 6-22).

3.2 A prosperous region

The second pillar in effect concerns the economic development of the region. The key issue is about achieving a more balanced development in the region, against the background of a prosperous and innovative north and west and a developing south and east of the region – it is significant in this context to note that the region holds 23% of the EU population, but aggregated GDP only amounts to 16% of the total EU value (Hübner 2008). The Commission argues that there are ample opportunities for mutual development if thewell-educated in the developing areas can collaborate with prosperous and innovative centres in the Nordic countries and Germany. In consequence, this calls for further reducing barriers to trade and increasing productivity through highly competent and adaptable labour force, fostering innovation and promoting greater integration of labour markets. This pillar thus contains four priority areas: (1) removing hindrances to the internal market in the Baltic Sea Region, (2) exploiting the full potential of the region in research and innovation, (3) implementing the so-called Small Business Act, and (4) reinforcing sustainable agriculture, forestry and fishing (Commission 2009a: 7-8; 2009b: 23-42).

3.3 An accessible and attractive region

As a third pillar, the Commission communication focuses on various aspects of infrastructure of the region. In parallel to the second pillar, there is great variation in the region, which hampers sustainable development as well as the development of a common Baltic identity. Problems can be found both regarding the quality of existing infrastructure and regarding the lack of appropriate infrastructure (accessibility). Two questions receive primary attention within this pillar: transport and energy. Regarding transport, the northern and especially the eastern parts of the Baltic Sea region are generally the least accessible areas of the union, despite massive investment since the end of the Cold War. This means that transports are slow, environmentally unfriendly and quite costly, if compared to other areas. Of related interest is also the accessibility for tourists. Regarding energy, the main issue concerns the uneven distribution of indigenous supply and the quite heavy dependence on one single supplier – Russia – for some of the countries in the region. Also, energy markets are nationally oriented, which implies vulnerability as well as high costs to consumers. In consequence, the third pillar of the Action Plan holds the following three priority areas: (1) improving the access to, and efficiency and security of, energy markets, (2) improving internal and external transport links, and (3) maintaining and reinforcing the attractiveness of the region in particular through education, tourism and health (Commission 2009a: 8; 2009b: 43-57, see also Hübner 2009).

3.4 A safe and secure region

The fourth major area of the strategy concerns safety and security issues. In this field, two quite different issues receive most attention: maritime safety and cross-border crime. Regarding maritime safety, the background rationale concerns the intense traffic on the Baltic Sea (freight transport in the Baltic Sea is expected to rise between 60 and 80% in the next ten years, see Hübner 2008) in combination with the sensitive environmental situation of the sea. The ambition is here to become a front-runner in maritime safety and security by dealing with both deliberate and accidental marine pollution and minimizing the risks for accidents and collisions. As far as cross-border crime is concerned, the Commission argues, the existence of this kind of crime is related to differences in economic and social conditions as well as to

problems of permeable external borders. This in effect means that the issue is tied to various aspects of development in the area, but also to issues of border protection and internal security. The pillar contains three priority areas: (1) becoming a leading region in maritime safety and security, (2) reinforcing protection from major emergencies at sea and on land, and (3) decreasing the volume of, and harm done by, cross border crime (Commission 2009a: 8-9; 2009b: 58-67).

3.5 Horizontal action and governance

In addition to these four pillars, the Commission proposal contains a number of horizontal actions and a few points on implementation and governance. The horizontal actions are among other things concerned with the maritime sphere, as this issue effectively encompasses all pillars of the strategy – for instance, maritime governance structures and maritime (and land-based) spatial planning are included. Horizontal actions however also include ideas about using research as basis for policy decisions, cooperation on the transposition of EU directives and building a regional identity (Commission 2009b: 68-71).

Regarding implementation and governance, the communi-cation from the Commission proposes a division of labour along the lines that the EU-level – in effect the Commission – is responsible for co-ordination, monitoring, reporting, facilitation of implementation and follow-up. In parallel to other policy spheres, the Commission plans to prepare progress reports and make use of its power of initiative, and periodically report to the Council. Moreover, the Commission proposes a review of the "European value-added" of the strategy in 2011. Implementation of actions on the ground is to be conducted by "partners already active in the region" (Commission 2009a: 10); hence the strategy does not hold additional funding or concrete actions on its own, but seeks to better coordinate and make more efficient use of resources already allocated in various areas and projects. This means that the Commission will work with a whole array of governmental and non-governmental actors, in effect occupying a potentially very influential position.

Interestingly enough, the Commission also proposes that an annual forum for stakeholders should be held in order to secure the continued involvement by partners and stakeholders evident in the consultation process described above (Commission 2009a: 10-11).

Table 1: Pillars and priority areas of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region.

Pillar/priority area	Coordinating country/-ies	Number of actions
Pillar I: To make the Baltic Sea an environmentally sustainable place		
1. To reduce nutrient inputs to the sea to acceptable levels	Poland/Finland	5
2. To preserve natural zones and biodiversity, including fisheries	Germany	2
3. To reduce the use and impact hazardous substances	Sweden	3
4. To become a model region for clean shipping	Denmark	2
5. To mitigate and adapt to climate change	Denmark	3
Pillar II: To make the Baltic Sea region a prosperous place		
6. To remove hindrances to the internal market in the Baltic Sea	Estonia	6
7. To exploit the full potential of the region in research and innovation	Sweden/Poland	2
8. Implementing the Small Business Act: to promote entrepreneurship, strengthen SMEs and increase the efficient use of human resources	Denmark	9
9. To reinforce sustainability of agriculture, forestry and fisheries	Finland	7
Pillar III: To make the Baltic Sea region an accessible and attractive place		
10. To improve the access to, and efficiency and security of the energy markets	Latvia/Denmark	3
11. To improve internal and external transport links	Lithuania/Sweden	5
12. To maintain and reinforce attractiveness of the Baltic Sea region in particular through education, tourism and health	Tourism: Germany (Mecklenburg–Vorpommern) Health: Northern Dimension Partnership on Public Health Education: Germany	10
Pillar IV: To make the Baltic sea region a safe and secure place		
13. To become a leading region in maritime safety and security	Finland/Denmark	4
14. To reinforce protection from major emergencies at sea and on land	Denmark	2
15. To decrease the volume of, and harm done by, cross border crime	Finland	3
Horizontal Actions	European Commission	10

Note:
Adapted from the Action Plan accompanying the Commission communication (Commission 2009b).

4. Challenges

The proposal for an EU strategy for the Baltic Sea has been called for and welcomed by many parties. The rationale for the original European Parliament resolution, for instance, was in part that the existing frameworks of cooperation in the region are not working properly. If proving to be a valuable tool, this first attempt at macro-regional policy may well show the way for other such actions in the EU in the years to come – in the words of Commissioner Danuta Hübner: "If this approach works in the Baltic, we see its potential for other sea areas, and also for mountain areas like the Alps or river basins like the Danube. Cooperation can no longer be a sideshow" (Hübner 2008).

Despite the obvious desirability of improved cooperation in the Baltic Sea, and the promising logic of EU strategic action at the macro-regional level, the strategy nonetheless faces a number of challenges or policy dilemmas that have to be dealt with in the years to come for the strategy to prove fruitful. Challenges stem both from the specific logic of the strategy per se, and from general features of the EU integration dynamics. In the following, four partly inter-related challenges are addressed.

4.1 The efficiency challenge

A principal challenge upon launching the strategy is naturally to achieve readily recognizable value-added compared to the current situation. There are a number of interlinked aspects of this challenge. First, the Baltic Sea area is highly institutionalized and a substantial number of intergovernmental, transnational and non-governmental organizations exist in the area – the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS), the Nordic Council, the Nordic Council of Ministers, the Helsinki Commission (HELCOM), the Baltic Sea States Sub-regional Co-operation (BSSSC) and the Union of Baltic Cities (UBC), just to mention a few specifically dealing with the Baltic. One of the main problems hitherto – indeed, one aspect of the rationale for the strategy – concerns the lack of a functional division of labour among these actors. Although the EU – often in the form of the Commission – is a member or observer of many of these organizations, the EU cannot determine such a division of labour on its own. Rather, at least up to this point in time and in the absence of a legally binding framework, the member states of these organizations are the drivers of Baltic Sea cooperation. Through adopting the EU strategy, these countries are indeed committing themselves to increased attention to the problems and prospects of the Baltic Sea, but there remains an uneasy question about

why the very same countries have not pursued the division of labour problem already in the past. The Baltic Sea region thus seems to confirm the general picture in international relations that it is much easier to set up institutions than to get them working properly. In part, this problem has to do with the lack of political will. This issue is addressed by various proponents of the strategy, notably the Commission and the Parliament but also leading member states, but then again those very actors are those already committed to solving the problem.

In part, the problem also stems from unclear agendas and mandates of some – certainly not all – of the various cooperation schemes. Such a picture is the natural consequence of the intergovernmental format of the institutions – to get everyone on board, issues get added to the agenda, while the exact mandate of the organization erodes. Taken together, this means that the EU strategy for the region is not only benefitting from, but is also challenged by, the density and character of the institutional map of the Baltic. It seems, then, that the very ambitious list of actions – covering an absolute majority of stakeholder proposals as seen in the public consultation – is an attempt to please many, but may in the end be frustrating to many. There is an argument, from an efficiency point of view, to keep the scope of the strategy more narrow, and focus available political energy on a set of specific tasks. At the same time, the most pressing problem, most would argue – environmental degradation – is already well covered by HELCOM's Baltic Sea Action Plan, an ambitious plan for environmental improvement embraced by the nine littoral states (Russia included) and the European Commission in 2007 (Commission 2009b: 6). Ironically, then, in an area where the need for international cooperation generally may be the greatest, the value-added of the strategy may actually be the least.

4.2 The governance challenge

A related challenge concerns the governance of the strategy once adopted. Also this challenge contains various aspects. A key topic has to do with the absence of specific budget allocations for the strategy. A number of stakeholders called for an own budget line for the strategy in the consultation process, as did the Parliament earlier on, but the Commission (and others) remains distinctly negative to the idea. Such a position is probably necessary in order to get the strategy adopted by the European Council, but it nonetheless creates a problem that the Commission has no designated funding for its coordination efforts. Of related relevance is the two-tier

construction of coordination – the Commission seeks an overall responsibility, while different member states are responsible for the various priority areas. Not only does this create a complex web of institutional relations, it also implies the vulnerability of the Commission. As Hübner noted earlier this year: "the Commission is ideally placed to take on a coordinating role – if – the necessary resources can be found" (Hübner 2009).

Moreover, this method implies that some countries in the region become more centrally involved in the strategy than others. It is in a sense paradoxical that especially those countries in most need of a well-functioning strategy – the Baltic states – are the ones least involved in its coordination (see table 1). This need not be a problem, especially if it is by their own choosing, but if – as can be expected – it also reflects the patterns of concrete projects, there is potentially a significant problem, both in terms of functional problem solving and the creation – or better, promotion – of a Baltic Sea identity. In part, this problem could be alleviated had there been a singular entity responsible for the strategy, but on that point most, if not all, major stakeholders seem to agree that against the background of the many organizations already in place in the Baltic Sea, there should not be yet another one. That logic is arguably flawed; at the very least, it will contribute to governance problems. For the task of aligning policies and funding at various levels of governance (EU, national, and sub-national) and promoting fair, transparent and operational implementation of EU rules (Hübner 2008), the Commission toolbox is worryingly empty – it remains a key challenge to make the visions of the strategy operational. In addition, questions remain as to how the Commission is to monitor implementation and assure the future direction of the strategy, for instance in a situation where the political priorities on the union's agenda are different from today. For a number of reasons, then, governance of the strategy will be difficult in the format now chosen.

4.3 The community challenge

Yet another challenge concerns what can be called intra-regionalization of the EU, of which the strategy is a clear example. In the words of Swedish Minister for EU Affairs Cecilia Malmström, it represents "a new, innovative way to handle an increasingly diverse EU" (Malmström 2009). The basic logic of the strategy is to single out a limited part of the EU and treat it in special ways against the background of acute needs for protection and development. Such an effort however requires the solidarity of all EU members, not only those that are littoral states of the Baltic Sea. This situation regarding regional projects within the EU is of course not new but is to be expected by the very character of the EU, especially in the light of an expanding membership. While many statements and communications on the strategy point to the positive effects of regional processes – the Swedish government, for one, is convinced in its work program that the "EU and its regions mutually strengthen one another" (Swedish Government 2009) – there may simultaneously be a challenge to cohesion and solidarity, and a built-in risk for fragmentation if different regional projects get launched and are agreed to by EU partners on a *quid pro quo* basis. From this perspective, it becomes a challenge for the Commission and the Baltic Sea EU members to explain the severity of the situation to the rest of the EU circle. To be true, the format of the strategy as far as finances go – no additional funding – effectively reduces any major obstacle to the adoption of the strategy. Nonetheless, there is a challenge in convincing the entire EU that the Baltic is a special case to be dealt with in a new way. Expressed in other words, the commitment of the entire EU needs to be secured. The way chosen thus far by the Commission – framing the strategy as a macro-regional attempt that could be applied elsewhere – seems a plausible way forward. It is, however, dependent on the strategy delivering added value that corresponds to the rhetoric. At any rate, there is a delicate balance to strike in the years to come – what may be needed for increased efficiency of the strategy regionally may be inversely related to the commitment of the rest of the member states.

A related matter concerns the close linkage between the Baltic Sea strategy and the Integrated Maritime Policy of the EU. This connection was made clear already in the European Council conclusion in 2007. As Commissioner for Fisheries and Maritime Affairs Joe Borg has argued: "There is a maritime dimension to every major issue facing the Baltic Sea region" (Borg 2009). The integrated maritime policy, Borg continues, deals with these issues through a cross-cutting approach, and hence, the maritime policy will be key to the success of the Baltic Sea Strategy. At the same time, the strategy will be central to the concrete actions within the integrated maritime policy: "We therefore believe that the Baltic Sea strategy is thus not only the most appropriate vehicle for the implementation of the EU maritime policy in the Baltic. It also constitutes an innovative approach to having integrated development strategies at a regional level. It would, in fact, constitute a first example of an integrated maritime strategy at a sea-basin level, providing valuable experience

and serving as a model for other maritime regions" (Borg 2009, see also Commission 2009a on regional possibilities within the Integrated Maritime Policy). Again, it is a potentially difficult logic at play – regional dimensions of an EU-wide policy may indeed be both necessary and fruitful, but at the same time pose a challenge to the cohesion and solidarity of the union.

4.4 The external challenge

The fourth and final challenge to be addressed here relates to the intrinsic external dimension of EU Baltic Sea cooperation and more specifically the lack of a perspective on how to work with Russia in the years to come. On a general level, it seems quite problematic to develop an EU-internal strategy for the Baltic Sea when the most important issues to be addressed so clearly hold an external dimension. The Swedish Presidency work program argues in this context: "Since eight of the nine Baltic Sea states are members of the EU, EU regulations can be used to meet these challenges." (Swedish Government 2009). It could however be argued that it is the ninth partner – beyond the reach of EU regulations – that holds the key to long-term success. Three out of the four pillars of the strategy – environmental protection, attractiveness and accessibility, and safety and security – are fundamentally transnational in character. All the same, a perspective linking internal and external dynamics is sorely lacking in the strategy. This means that the EU as an institution and the member states individually are dependent on political developments elsewhere and hence vulnerable to decision making outside of the EU context. This fact of life cannot be ignored, but ought – for the very same reason – to be a central parameter of the strategy. As has been shown above, already the Council mandate explicitly stipulates that the Northern Dimension is to be the format for external aspects of the strategy. But against the background that the need for the strategy in large part stems from the problems of efficiency and legitimacy attached to the Northern Dimension (and other frameworks in the area), it seems troublesome to rely on those very mechanisms. In short, the combination of a lack of external perspective and the character of prominent issue-areas exacerbates the challenges discussed above.

More specifically, Russia is a natural key actor in the Baltic Sea area, and although Russia has expressed interest in the strategy and would benefit from its success, the fact that it is not part of it jeopardizes many of the strong points and good intentions of the strategy. The Commission briefly notes: "Close cooperation between the EU and Russia is also necessary in order to tackle jointly many of the regional challenges" (Commission 2009a: 4). It refrains, however, from stating in any detail how this is to come about. Moreover, the position and relevance of Kaliningrad in the Baltic Sea is missing in most, if not all, statements and plans. This falls back on a general lack of coherent approach to Russia by the EU. There is no agreement in the EU circle about how to treat Russia, neither generally (as the negotiations on a new partnership agreement show) nor in terms of engagement in the Baltic (as the Nordstream project indicates). The implication of that is continued vulnerability vis-à-vis Russia in various areas, energy and environment being the most obvious ones.

5. Conclusions

There is no doubt that the Baltic Sea area is in need of more advanced cooperation among the littoral states for dealing with severe problems and unrealized potentials in the region. The EU strategy for the Baltic Sea region that was proposed by the Commission in June 2009 upon a call from the European Council indeed features a novel approach to the transnational issues of relevance in the region. It represents a serious effort to upgrade cooperation in Baltic Sea by better coordination and more efficient use of allocated resources. This attempt at developing a macro-regional policy is a test-case that if successful most likely will be applied to other areas as well (the Danube and the Alps have been frequently mentioned). The strategy holds a substantial list of priorities and desired actions and is comparably explicit in terms of responsibilities, targets, review dates etc.

There are some intrinsic problems attached to the strategy, however. These come in the form of challenges about (1) how to achieve more efficient cooperation on the basis of overlapping agendas and a clear lack of division of labour among current schemes of cooperation, (2) how to govern the strategy once adopted, and (3) how to assure true commitment of the EU as a whole and avoid fragmentation or the giving in to pressures for parallel schemes to be set up elsewhere simply for the sake of policy balance. In addition, and arguably most fundamentally, the strategy lacks an external perspective – a formula for dealing with the many transnational issues that feature prominently in the strategy. Three of the four pillars of the strategy are very dependent on especially Russian engagement; yet, Russia is not part of the strategy. This mirrors the more general problem of the lack of an EU policy towards Russia. When the union now opts for an EU-internal Baltic strategy and in effect downplays the Russian relevance rather than seeks an upgraded and coherent Russia

policy with a natural and deliberate focus on the Baltic Sea, it signals a policy hierarchy that embraces a distinction between the inside and the outside of the EU which may prove detrimental in the long term.

In conclusion, the strategy has the potential for success in the form of added value, both regarding concrete improvements of the current situation and development prospects of the Baltic Sea region and regarding the making of a new mechanism for functional cooperation elsewhere in the EU. Whether the strategy will yield added value also in the form of an enhanced Baltic Sea identity, as hoped by the Commission and other proponents, remains doubtful to this author – it may indeed be overestimating the impact of political engineering on complex cognitive processes. To increase prospects for success rather than risk failure, a set of key points need to be addressed:

- Making the strategy distinctly more concrete regarding what the division of labour among the various actors in the region should look like, and how to achieve such a desired outcome
- Assuring some degree of policy autonomy within the EU framework, possibly in the form of budgetary means or new institutional mechanisms, to avoid the strategy being compromised by other priorities
- Addressing the issue of policy responsibility, in order to settle the division of labour between the Commission and member states and assure the durability and direction of the strategy
- Explicitly settling the relationship between the Integrated Maritime Policy and the Baltic Sea Strategy
- Developing the framing and communication of the strategy as an all-European interest
- Rethinking the external logic of the strategy to achieve a comprehensive approach including non-members, notably Russia.

References

Borg, Joe (2009) "The EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region and the implementation of the Integrated Maritime Policy", speech at the 2nd Stakeholder Conference on Baltic Sea Region, Rostock, 5 February 2009, SPEECH/09/40

Commission (2009a) "European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region", Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, The Council, The European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, Brussels, 10 June 2009, COM(2009) 248 final, http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/docoffic/official/communic/baltic/com_baltic_en.pdf

Commission (2009b) "Action Plan" Commission staff working document, Brussels, 10 June 2009, SEC(2009) 712, http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/docoffic/official/communic/baltic/action2009.pdf

Commission (2009c) "EU strategy for the Baltic Sea region: Report on the public consultation", http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/consultation/baltic/doc/summary_baltic_consultation.pdf

European Council (2007) "Presidency Conclusions", Brussels, 14 December 2007, 16616/1/07 REV 1

European Parliament (2006) "Resolution on a Baltic Sea Strategy for the Northern Dimension", Strasbourg, 16 November 2006, A6-0367/2006

Hübner, Danuta (2008) "EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea region", speech at stakeholder conference, Stockholm 30 September 2008, SPEECH/08/474

Hübner, Danuta (2009) "The Sea of Opportunity", speech at the 2nd Stakeholder Conference on Baltic Sea Region, Rostock, 5 February 2009, SPEECH/09/37

Malmström, Cecilia (2009), speech on the EU Baltic Sea Strategy, Stockholm 23 June 2009, http://www.se2009.eu/en/meetings_news/2009/6/23/speech_by_minister_cecilia_malmstrom_on_the_eu_baltic_sea_strategy#

Reinfeldt, Fredrik (2009) "Taking on the challenge – the Swedish Presidency of the European Union", speech at CEPS, Brussles, 9 June 2009, http://www.se2009.eu/polopoly_fs/1.5450!menu/standard/file/Sw_PM_Presidency_090609.pdf

Swedish Government (2009) "Work programme for the Swedish Presidency of the EU", http://www.se2009.eu/polopoly_fs/1.6255!menu/standard/file/Arbetsprogram%20f%C3%B6r%20det%20svenska%20ordf%C3%B6randeskapet%20i%20EU%201%20juli-31%20dec%202009.pdf

European Policy Analysis

2009

What to Expect in the 2009-14 European Parliament:
Return of the Grand Coalition? (2009:8epa)
Author: Simon Hix

The 2009 Swedish EU Presidency: The Setting,
Priorities and Roles (2009:7epa)
Authors: Fredrik Langdal and Göran von Sydow

Varför ska Sverige gå med i EMU? (2009:6epa)
Author: Lars Calmfors

When Lab Results are not Sufficient: On the Limitations
of Science in Tackling
Modern Food Regulatory Concerns (2009:5epa)
Author: Karolina Zurek

EU alltmer accepterat (2009:4epa)
Author: Sören Holmberg

Stockholmsprogrammet – ett ambitiöst program för frihet,
säkerhet och rättvisa? (2009:3epa)
Author: Anna Södersten

Democracy Promotion in a Transatlantic Perspective:
Reflections from an expert working group (2009:2epa)
Author: Anna Michalski

Foreign Policy Challenges for the Obama Administration
(2009:1epa)
Author: John K.Glenn

2008

Nya regler om fri rörlighet för patienter (2008:15epa)
Author: Eva Edwardsson

The Swedish 2009 Presidency – Possible Policy Priorities
(2008:14epa)
Authors: Fredrik Langdal and Göran von Sydow

Lissabonfördraget och den svenska grundlagens reglering
av EU (2008:13epa)
Author: Carl Fredrik Bergström

Lissabonfördraget och "det irländska problemet"
– en snabbare lösning än väntat? (2008:12epa)
Author: Carl Fredrik Bergström

EU Energy Policy in a Supply – Constrained World
(2008:11epa)
Authors: Jacques de Jong and Coby van der Linde

Samstämmighet mellan inre och yttre politik (2008:10epa)
Author: Anna Michalski

Lissabonfördraget och straffrätten (2008:9epa)
Author: Ester Herlin-Karnell

The Potential Impact of the Lisbon Treaty on European
Union External Trade Policy (2008:8epa)
Author: Stephen Woolcock

Lissabonfördraget och maktbalansen mellan EU:s
institutioner (2008:7epa)
Author: Joakim Nergelius

Esse, non videri – företrädesprincipens vara eller icke vara
(2008:6epa)
Author: Ola Zetterquist

Ökat opinionsstöd för EU (2008:5epa)
Author: Sören Holmberg

The Lisbon Treaty and EMU (2008:4epa)
Author: Sideek Mohamed Seyad

The Lisbon Treaty and the Area of Criminal Law and
Justice (2008:3epa)
Author: Ester Herlin-Karnell

A Better Budget for Europe: Economically Efficient,
Politically Realistic (2008:2epa)
Author: Filipa Figueira

The Future of the Common European Asylum System:
In Need of a More Comprehensive Burden – Sharing
Approach (2008:1epa)
Author: Eiko Thielemann

2007

Flexicurity – An Answer or a Question? (2007:6epa)
Author: Lars Calmfors

Agenda 2014: A Zero-Base Approach (2007:5epa)
Author: Daniel Tarschys

Vad innebär reformfördraget? (2007:4epa)
Authors: Jörgen Hettne and Fredrik Langdal

A New Proposal for a Regulation on Mutual Recognition
of Goods – Towards a Harmonized
Administrative Order? (2007:3epa)
Author: Jane Reichel

Spillover or Activist Leapfrogging? Criminal Competence
and the Sensitiveness of the European Court of Justice
(2007:2epa)
Author: Maria Bergström

Better Regulation of Mobile Telecommunications
Authors: Johan Stennek and Thomas P. Tangerås
(2007:1epa)