

Raising Germany's awareness of the Baltic Sea region

By Andreas Klein and Catja Gaebel

Germany has always been an integral part of the Baltic Sea region, not only geographically, but also culturally, economically and politically. At its northern federal states Schleswig-Holstein and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern Germany has a 2247km long coastline to the Baltic Sea, thus making it an abutting nation on one of the most dynamic economic regions within the European Union. Currently, about 10 per cent of the German exports go to the countries of the Baltic Sea region.

Since the glorious times of the Hanseatic League, Hamburg is the central port of Germany - reloading point for goods from the North Sea to the Baltic Sea and vice versa. Today, the port of Hamburg has grown beyond its role as Germany's gateway to the world; moreover, it forms the world's gateway to mainland Europe, and above all to Central and Southeastern Europe, Scandinavia, and the Baltic region. All this underlines the significance of the Baltic Sea region to Germany's foreign and economic relations, for business, trade and cultural exchange.

A variety of Baltic Sea multilateral agreements have been made which the Federal Republic of Germany has joined directly or as a member state of the EU. Marine environmental protection is the most regulated area, while co-operation in the area of science is currently in its development still expandable. Furthermore, there are numerous bilateral agreements between Germany and the other Baltic Sea states. These agreements do not reflect the actual intensity of cooperation exactly since the cooperation is often regulated through multilateral agreements, particularly EU agreements.

Nevertheless, one should have in mind that only a small part of Germany is actually bordering the Baltic Sea. The western German federal states North Rhine Westphalia and Rhineland Palatine or the southern federal states Baden-Württemberg and Bavaria see their political and economic interests rather in the Rhine or the Danube region. Moreover, the federal government in Berlin was always skeptical towards an intermediate level between the national and European level, thus opposing the institutionalization of regionalization.

Since the EU enlargement in 2004 with the Baltic Sea states Poland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania joining the EU, thus making the Baltic Sea EU's inland sea, this skepticism gave way to a rather pragmatic approach concerning this region. In a joint declaration of the CDU/CSU and the SPD Parliamentary fraction in May 2009 both parties supported the Baltic Sea Strategy of the EU. The German Bundestag welcomed this European initiative bringing the Baltic Sea region into the focus of the EU. Furthermore, Germany is expecting from the strategy a better coordination and concentration of already existing initiatives in the region on governmental and non-governmental level as well as within the European commission and between the national Parliaments. Having in mind the geographic borders of Germany, the German government as well as the German Bundestag are expecting the Baltic Sea region to become a model for similar initiatives in other regions in Europe, like the Danube region or the Adriatic region where Germany also has political and economic interests.

A particular challenge for a successful Baltic Sea policy is the cooperation with the Russian Federation. Currently, Russia is a member at the Baltic Sea Council, in the Helsinki Commission and other intergovernmental institutions of the region like the Northern dimension. The Northern dimension in particular- including the Barents Sea, the Arctic Sea, Iceland, Norway, the oblast Kaliningrad and north western Russia - offers a platform for cooperation between the EU, its member states and the Northern European non-EU countries. The Baltic Sea marks the connecting centre of those regional approaches and political strategies.

Above all, the German Bundestag supports the successful implementation of the EU Baltic Sea strategy especially in the improvement of the environmental situation of the highly polluted Baltic Sea, as well as in the development of transportation and energy routes between the abutting countries. Norway and Russia should be included in this dialogue as well in order to reach the highest level of coordination and cooperation in the region.

In a report commissioned by the German Konrad Adenauer Foundation professor Esko Antola from the University of Turku comes to the conclusion that Germany's (and Poland's) commitment to the region is indispensable for the successful implementation of the Baltic Sea strategy. According to Antola enhancing the attraction of the Baltic Sea to Germany's political decision makers is a key issue for the region, its integration and its having a strong voice in Europe. Therefore, despite the joint declaration of the two biggest groups in the German Bundestag, CDU/CSU and SPD, raising Germany's awareness of the region and strengthening the commitment of Germany beyond the already involved northern federal states Schleswig-Holstein, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern and the city of Hamburg remain paramount for the promotion of the region. The May 2009 declaration of the German Bundestag to engage more actively with the region as well as the recent visits of the newly appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs, Guido Westerwelle and Secretary of State Cornelia Pieper to the Baltic States give reason to expect a greater attention to the region within German politics in the years to come.

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