

Estonian Chairmanship of the EUSBSR National Coordinators group 2017/18

Chair Completion Report

Summary

Estonia Chairmanship in the group of EUSBSR National Coordinators of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR) lasted from 1 July 2017 to 30 June 2018. Estonia chaired five meetings of the group and also organised the 9th Annual Forum of the EUSBSR. Estonian chairmanship was the first to work on the basis of Rules of procedure for the NC-group approved in the end of the Swedish Chairmanship in 2017.

The main result of the work of the NC-group during 12 months was leading the Strategy into the phase of changes related to the preparations for the next period Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF). The group decided to start review of the Action Plan of the EUSBSR. Renewal of the Communication Strategy of the EUSBSR started. On several occasions the NC-group discussed issues related to the future, including the financing matters. 9th Annual Forum of the Strategy in Tallinn 4-5 June was future-oriented and its main theme was EU cohesion policy and EUSBSR after 2020.

During the Chairmanship the cooperation between NC-group and the Interreg Baltic Sea Monitoring Committee (MC) continued to develop. The second joint meeting of two institutions was held 5 June 2018. The Chair of the MC-group regularly participated at the NC-group meetings.

The NC-group paid a lot of attention to different reports about the Macro-regional Strategies and in particular EUSBSR, especially to the European Commission's report from December 2016, COWI report about the Macro-regional Strategies from 2017 and Spatial Foresight report about the EUSBSR presented to the Annual Forum in June 2018.

1. Meetings of the National Coordinators group of the EUSBSR

During the Estonian Chairmanship the NC-group held five meetings: 26 September 2017, 2 November 2017, 6 February 2018, 17 April 2018 and 6 June 2018. The work of the NC-group was organised on the basis of new Rules of procedure, adopted in the end of the previous, Swedish Chairmanship.

The group continued its open and transparent policy. Representatives from InterACT Turku, Project Let's Communicate, Interreg Baltic JC/MA were present on most occasions. Chair of the Interreg Baltic MC was also involved. Reflecting its special responsibilities Horizontal Area Capacity of the Strategy was also regularly present. The reports of the meetings were published on the EUSBSR website.

There were also informal exchanges of views between the National Coordinators during several events they participated, including High-Level Group of Macro-regional Strategies meeting in Brussels 1 March and EUSBSR Support Programme meetings. The latter also provided good opportunities to contact PAC/HACs. Due to circumstances we had to reschedule the so-called Spring meeting with PAC/HACs to September.

2. 9th Annual Forum of the EUSBSR

The 9th Annual Forum of the Strategy was held in Tallinn 4-5 June 2018. It was organised by Estonian MFA as the Lead Partner and Baltic Development Forum as the Project Partner. The main theme of this Annual Forum was EU Cohesion Policy and EUSBSR after 2020. The issues of the digital development of the Region and the Baltic Sea marine environment were also among main themes of the Forum. Besides three plenary meetings there were 21 seminars and a practical live exercise.

Nearly 800 participants reflected high level of interest in Baltic Sea Region cooperation. Annual Forum once again confirmed its status as the main annual event of the regional cooperation as all the main stakeholders were in some degree contributing to its success. It is also important to mention numerous back-to-back meetings held in connection with the Annual Forum.

The Forum discussed the future of EU Cohesion policy and Macro-regional Strategies post - 2020. The participants reflected on Commission's MFF proposals which were presented in May, especially regarding the future of the Cohesion Policy and its instruments. There was strong will to integrate EUSBSR into the EU policies and financial instruments during the coming programming period. Participants also welcomed Commission's proposals towards simplification of the procedures related to the projects.

A special report about the EUSBSR current challenges was prepared by Spatial Foresight and it led to many discussions, in particular about the governance of the EUSBSR, but also financing mechanisms.

The discussion about the digital development focused especially on cross-border digital services and on starting of the 5G connections in the Baltic Sea Region in the near future.

In the field of the Baltic Sea marine environment the discussion was focused on implementation of the decisions of the HELCOM ministers meeting in March 2018. Renewal of both the EUSBSR Action Plan and the Baltic Sea Action Plan will increase the importance of closer cooperation between the EUSBSR and HELCOM.

9th Annual Forum was once again organised using decentralised model- there was open call for seminar proposals, Networking Area was prepared by HA Capacity and involved all Horizontal Areas and Policy Areas, many flagships. Broad ownership and wide spread of topics continued to be important aspects of the Annual Forum. During the plenary meetings participants actively used opportunity to comment via Twitter, tweets appeared on the screens. Brella meeting app was used to support wider networking.

3. Support to the implementation of the EUSBSR

In order to reflect the changes in the development of the Region and Strategy the NC-group decided to start the review of the EUSBSR Action Plan from autumn 2018 and to conclude the work in 2019. The process is oriented towards strong contribution into the programming process of the new EU budgetary period.

In November the NC-group discussed in depth governance aspects and recommendations of the study on "Macro-regional strategies and their links to Cohesion Policy" contracted by DG Regio and prepared by COWI in 2017.

National Coordinators group continued active support to the activities of the Policy Area Coordinators and Horizontal Area coordinators. National Coordinators participation at the EUSBSR SUPPORT Programme meetings ensured better mutual understanding and allowed the NCs to contribute with their ideas. Module 1 in Riga on 19-20 September discussed together with representatives from the funding instruments (ERDF, ESF, Interreg, Erasmus+ etc.) the alignment of funding. Module 2 of the EUSBSR SUPPORT programme in Tallinn on 12-13 December 2017 was devoted to monitoring and evaluation. Module 3 in Brussels on 10-11 April 2018 was oriented towards creating policy impact.

Estonian Chairmanship paid a lot of attention to the issues of Steering Groups/Committees of the Policy Areas and Horizontal Areas. During the programming period their role will increase, especially there is a need to streamline priorities of the Strategy and new period EU programmes and financial instruments. HA Capacity will pay special attention to the Steering Groups during the coming years and there will be a special EUSBSR SUPPORT Programme to energize the work of the Groups.

Due to the decision of the Nordic Council of Ministers to cease its activities as the Policy Area Coordinator for PA Innovation the NC-group was working to find a new Leading co-PAC. The efforts have to be continued under the Danish Chairmanship.

NC-group continued to approve new EUSBSR flagships at its meetings: in September - 3, November - 5, February - 1, April - 4, June - 1, all together 14. The flagships were added to the Action Plan. It is important to mention that the flagships have now more diverse sources of financing, even the Interreg Baltic remains the dominant source.

At the February meeting the members of the NC-group supported the proposal by the Swedish Institute to organize a Baltic Leadership Programme for the support of two MA-networks (ERDF+ESF). There was also an agreement that the two networks should be operational in relation to the needs of the Strategy and at the same time preparing inputs for the next Operational Programmes (OPs). Some challenges with ensuring continuity of the ERDF MA Network Chairmanship were identified as different Member States have a different range of engagement and some Member States are more involved than others in the practical projects supported by the MA network.

4. Present and future of the financing of the EUSBSR

During the Estonian Chairmanship NC-group paid special attention to the issues of the financing as it continues to be one of the main factors influencing the progress of the EUSBSR.

Programming of the current MFF period was conducted, when the Macro-regional Strategies were in the phase of building up or not even yet established, so some issues were left open. Strategy stakeholders, especially PAC/HACs consider the development of the financial matters also very important.

NC-group was discussing the forthcoming MFF and programming period at its meeting in September. Before that the first EUSBSR Support module "Aligning Funding for policy Impact", organised by HA Capacity, was held in Riga on 19-20 September.

In November the Group was looking to the organisation of the cooperation with the Interreg-Baltic Monitoring Committee.

In February the NC-group together with the specialists from Member States' relevant Managing Authorities and ministries discussed in depth the financial aspects and recommendations contained in the study on "Macro-regional strategies and their links to Cohesion Policy" by COWI. There was an agreement on the importance to have an up-to-date EUSBSR Action Plan ready in time before the programming of the new EU financial period, as well as on the need to have very close links and cooperation with the Interreg Baltic Sea Region Monitoring Committee. Intensive dialogue in the Member States is also needed because most of the financial instruments are nationally and regionally managed. There was a debate on possible ways to encourage more transnational cooperation from the regional/national funding programmes in support of the EUSBSR.

The proposal by the European Commission for the new MFF period and also sectorial proposals were also debated during 5 June NC-group and Interreg –Baltic Monitoring Committee joint meeting. Both sides acknowledged that there is a clear need to continue this process and to cooperate closely during the forthcoming programming period of the new MFF period. It is important that priorities reflected in a revised EUSBSR Action Plan and priorities agreed for the next period for the Interreg BSP are as close as possible. During the joint meeting on 5 June, some new ideas from Interreg four MA/JSs were presented on how to change the existing system of EUSBSR governance support. The NC-group agreed at its own meeting on 6 June that we need a solution, which will enhance the work of the PAC/HACs, communication activities of the Strategy including Annual Forums also during the next period, that does not risk undermining the existing governance system of the EUSBSR.

5. Communication

National Coordinators play an important role in both internal and external communication of the Strategy. The biggest single event is of course the EUSBSR Annual Forum. A successful Forum facilitated the stakeholders community to be „on the same page“. Wide media coverage

also led to the increase of the general knowledge about the Strategy. The Forum's website was visited more than during previous Forums, the plenary meetings and some seminars were live streamed. The materials of the Forum remain available on the website.

Reflecting the changes the NC-group decided at its November meeting to renew the EUSBSR Communication Strategy. The work is led by Let's Communicate Project. This exercise will be concluded during the Danish Chairmanship. The NC-group will receive a first draft of the revised document for comments in autumn 2018.

During the Estonian Chairmanship the webpage of the Strategy was further developed by the Let's Communicate Project and reached mature level offering complex information about the progress of the Strategy both for stakeholders and wide public. New EUSBSR promotional videos were presented during the Annual Forum in Tallinn and a new EUSBSR Communication toolkit is available in autumn 2018.

6. External activities

The NC-group has a web of external relationships which involve communication, coordination of policy, cooperation between different stakeholders, exchange of experience.

Chair of the NC-group presented the achievements of the Strategy and thoughts about the future at the Conference of Parliamentary Committees for Union Affairs (COSAC) meeting in Sofia on 22 January 2018 at the session „The role of EU macro-regional strategies for sustainable development, stability and security“. It was an important opportunity to increase the support to the Strategy from the National Parliaments.

Members of the NC-group participated at the EU High-Level Group of Macro-regional Strategies meeting in Brussels on 1 March. It was focused on December 2018 2nd European Commission report on the implementation of EU Macro-regional Strategies. Also important was debate over the EU cohesion policy after 2020 and EU macro-regional strategies. EUSBSR representatives were very active during the discussions.

Four existing EU Macro-regional Strategies continue to increase the level of their cooperation and especially experience sharing. It is facilitated by InterACT, in particular InterACT Turku, who supports meetings between sectorial stakeholders and communication structures. Chair of the NC-group participated at the Danube Strategy 6th Annual Forum in Budapest on 18-19 October 2017 and was among the panelists during the Plenary session „The future of macro regional strategies post 2020“. Estonian Chairmanship also participated at the Annual Forum of the EU Alpine Strategy 23-24 November 2017. Representatives from other EU Macro-regional Strategies were also present at the 9th Annual Forum of the EUSBSR in Tallinn and there was a Seminar devoted to the joint experience of the Strategies.

Chair of the NC-group was during this year also a member of the Council of the Baltic Sea States Committee of Senior Officials. This opened possibilities to the exchange of information and coordination of activities. CBSS participates in coordination of three EUSBSR Areas.

Another important partner for EUSBSR is HELCOM. Chair of the NC-group participated at the meeting of the Heads of Delegation meeting in Helsinki 14 June. The two cooperation formats have to cooperate closely during the forthcoming period of the review of the EUSBSR Action Plan and Baltic Sea Action Plan.

During the Estonian Chairmanship NC-group also paid attention to further cooperation with partner states of the Strategy- EEA countries Iceland and Norway, Russia and Belarus. During the discussions at the NC-group meetings in April and June the perspectives of further cooperation with Norway were discussed with a focus on using the EEA framework opportunities.



Participants of the NC-group meeting in Tallinn on 6 June 2018.