

Minutes of the ERB Council Meeting on 4th March 2010

1. Summary of discussion concerning Europe 2020 Strategy

The representative of the Regional Municipality of Bornholm, Mr Niels Chresten Andersen presented the main issues concerning the preparation and implementation of Europe 2020 Strategy. Firstly, he briefly elaborated on the Strategy's priorities, i.e. smart growth, sustainable growth and inclusive growth. The implementation of these priorities, he continued, would be measured against five headline targets: 75 % of the population aged 20-64 should be employed; 3% of EU's GDP should be invested in R&D; the "20/20/20" climate/energy targets should be met; the share of early school leavers should be under 10% and at least 40% of the youngster generation should have a degree or diploma; 20 million less people should be at risk of poverty. In order to achieve these targets, he stated, seven flagship initiatives were established, namely innovation union, youth on the move, a digital agenda for Europe, resource efficient Europe, an industrial policy for green growth, an agenda for new skills and jobs and European platform against poverty. Based on this introduction, Mr Andersen presented questions for the discussion. These concerned the involvement of the ERB regions in the preparation and implementation of the previous European Union strategy, i.e. the Lisbon Strategy and the role of the individual ERB regions and the ERB as a whole in the preparation and implementation of Europe 2020.

The representative of the Regional Council in Kalmar County, Mr Roger Kaliff presented his views on the issue. In his opinion, before joining the European Union the region he represented had not been involved in regional cooperation but the level of this involvement became much more significant after Sweden had joined the EU. He stated that all three Swedish regions of the Euroregion Baltic are very active in the political process concerning Europe 2020, but emphasised the necessity to involve other local organisations, politicians, municipalities or non-governmental organisations. In his view, it is crucial that local and regional authorities are partners in the implementation of Europe 2020 as most of the tax revenues in Sweden are directed to the municipal level. He also reiterated that the Euroregion Baltic serves as an excellent political platform for discussing and implementing various regional initiatives with respect to this strategy and reminded that the ERB provides a unique opportunity to cooperate with the Kaliningrad Region. In addition, he stressed the importance of subsidiarity, cohesion policy and structural funds in the implementation of Europe 2020. Finally, he stated that the ERB should become a stronger organisation and cooperation platform so as to better implement the main goals of the Strategy.

The representative of the Regional Municipality of Bornholm, Mr Per Ole Petersen stated that his region was not consulted during the preparation of the Lisbon Strategy but the Danish Association of Regions was included in the consultation process. The Strategy was later implemented by Bornholm through the Regional Growth Forum. The main influence of the Strategy on Bornholm was exercised mainly through structural funds. The information about the goals and results of the Strategy was disseminated through a series of public meetings.

Concerning the role of Warmińsko-Mazurskie Region, the ERB President, Mr Jacek Protas stated that the region and the ERB itself were very active during Europe 2020 consultation process with the ERB Executive Board adopting and presenting an official position on the Strategy. The Board's position was also presented and consulted with the Polish Ministry of Regional Development and the opinion presented by the Committee of the Regions was also taken into account. Moreover, the position was discussed at the Commission on East Poland of the Association of Polish Regions. ERB regions emphasised the need for more active involvement of local authorities in the information process and direct implementation of the Strategy. Mr Protas stressed that the ERB is a very important organisation as it provides a strong political platform for a successful regional cooperation.

The representative of Klaipeda County Governor's Office, Mrs Viktorija Šniolienė contributed to the discussion and stated that the Lisbon Strategy was implemented in Lithuania at the governmental level through two national programmes for implementation 2005-2007 and 2008-2010. Concerning Europe 2020 strategy, she informed the ERB Council that the Lithuanian position on Europe 2020 was presented to the European Commission on 15th January 2010 by the Ministry of Economy after consultations with other Lithuanian ministries. According to this position, the main focus will be placed on sustainable economic growth and job creation while ensuring stronger integration of social and climate change aspects. Nevertheless, she said, Lithuania would also pursue and promote other important priorities within the strategy, namely common energy market and development of energy links. Future actions include the preparation of a national programme of implementation of the Strategy by the Lithuanian Ministry of Economy. Responding to the question from the floor about the involvement of Lithuanian municipalities in the preparation and implementation of Europe 2020, Mrs Šniolienė replied that this issue could be discussed after the completion of the administrative reforms in Lithuania.

The representative of Region Blekinge, Mr Bo Löfgren said that his region was not very involved in the preparation and implementation of the Lisbon Strategy. In his view, the ERB regions should participate very actively in the implementation of Europe 2020 strategy with each of the regions taking responsibility for specific activities.

The representative of the Regional Council of Södra Småland, Mr Carl-Olof Bengtsson stressed the importance of regional cooperation and stated that it was necessary to have a joint cooperation plan, which then could be presented at both national and EU level.

Marshal of Pomorskie Region, Mr Mieczysław Struk presented a very detailed recapitulation of region's involvement in the implementation of the Lisbon Strategy. He said that although the Strategy had not involved local authorities and had been implemented on the national level, Pomorskie Region managed to receive more than 1 billion Euros for the implementation of the Strategy, mainly through the European Social Fund and the European Regional Development Fund. Half of these funds were spent on realisation of strategy goals. As a result, significant investments in the regional railway systems were made. Substantial funds were also spent on issues concerning the development of SMEs, clean energy, bio-gas plants, cooperation of R&D institutions with local business sector and joint international projects such as the Innodoktorant project granting scholarships for PhD students. Concerning Europe 2020 strategy, Mr Struk stated that the Region presented its position on Europe 2020 on various forums, e.g. the Association of Polish Regions, Polish Ministry of Regional Development, Joint Commission of the Polish Government and Local Governments, Convent of Marshals of Polish Regions. Mr Struk stressed that the goals of the strategy could be achieved only if apart from authorities, other sectors were involved in the implementation process. Finally, he said that during the formulation of detailed goals one must not abandon the principles of the cohesion policy and emphasised that the EU Strategy for the Baltic Region should be closely related to Europe 2020 Strategy.

The representative of the Regional Municipality of Bornholm, Mr Per Ole Petersen reiterated that there was a need for a stronger cooperation within the ERB in order to facilitate the implementation of this strategy and the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region should be used for that as well.

In summary, all regions participating have been involved in the implementation of the Lisbon Strategy, mainly through regional growth programs, strategies, forums and the use of the structural funds, and, except for the Klaipeda County, were engaged in the open consultations concerning Europe 2020. The participants emphasised the importance of this Strategy for the future of the ERB and welcomed the fact that the ERB contributed to its preparation by presenting a joint position. Finally, it was reiterated that the ERB is a very important political platform of successful regional cooperation and its capacities should be strengthened so that it could meet future challenges.

2. Summary of discussion concerning the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region

The discussion was moderated by Mr Sławomir Demkowicz-Dobrzański who briefly recapitulated the activities which Euroregion Baltic has so far been engaged in with respect to the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region, and in particular recalled the ERB conference organised in Brussels in June 2008, with the participation of the European Commission, European Parliament and the regions around the Baltic Sea, joint position adopted by the ERB Council in November 2008 as well as the proposal of the Strategy implementation and governance model drafted together with other organisations (BDF, B7, BSSSC, CPMR and UBC). He then requested the participant to comment on the role of the individual regions and the ERB itself in the preparation and implementation of the Strategy.

ERB President, Mr Jacek Protas stressed that Russia must be included in all strategies concerning the Baltic Sea Region.

The representative of the Regional Municipality of Bornholm, Mr Per Ole Petersen stated that the ERB and B7 Baltic Islands Network were involved in the implementation process. He also said that the Regional Municipality was in contact with many different organisations on Bornholm in order to spread information about the strategy and was also represented in the national committee at the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs where the issues related to the strategy were discussed. In his opinion, the ERB is very important for successful regional cooperation. Therefore, the ERB should be very active in presenting its positions and initiatives on regional and international forums. Mr Petersen also said that ERB's success should be presented to other organisations as a good example of a very effective regional cooperation. In order to achieve these goals, he said, the ERB needs to actively disseminate information about its activities, e.g. through frequent updates of its internet portal.

The representative of the Regional Council in Kalmar County, Mr Roger Kaliff pointed out that it was necessary to engage Russian partners in various Strategy initiatives, e.g. the issue of water treatment. He also said that the added value of ERB cooperation should be sought within the scope of issues that the regions themselves do not deal with at home.

The representative of Blekinge Region, Ms Marie Fridh made a presentation of regional priorities with respect to the implementation of the strategy, following a very strategic approach adopted in Blekinge. She pointed out that the focus will be on such issues as maritime safety, transport and communications, political cross-border cooperation, youth cooperation, Kaliningrad and Northern Dimension, innovation and entrepreneurship, tourism and culture. Ms Fridh concluded her presentation with concrete examples of prioritised flagship project.

The representative of the Regional Council of Södra Småland, Mrs Mariana Johannesson contributed to the discussion and made a presentation about the reviewed strategic development programme. She stressed the importance of the Baltic strategy for the region and the impact it makes on the regional development programme. She added that the main focus should be placed on energy security, green technologies and innovations, and gave the example of the aluminium cluster operating in the region

The representative of the Klaipeda County Governor's Office, Mrs Viktorija Šniolienė presented the position of the Lithuanian delegation. She said the strategy was being implemented at the national level where the most important elements of the action plan were coordinated. She stated that Lithuania, together with other countries of the Baltic Sea Region, was responsible for the coordination of three priority areas, i.e. reinforcing sustainability of agriculture, forestry and fisheries; improving internal and external transport links; decreasing the volume of, and harm done by, cross-border crime. Regarding flagship projects, Mrs Šniolienė mentioned the Nemunas Midland

River Basin project which aims at reducing the total load of pollutants into the Baltic Sea from domestic sources and, as a result, contributing to long-term sustainability of water quality and ecological status of the Baltic Sea.

ERB President, Mr Jacek Protas elaborated on the role of Warmińsko-Mazurskie Region in the implementation of the strategy. In his view, the strategy is important for the region and its future development. He stated that there was a need for coordinated actions concerning the implementation of the strategy and that the ERB had a very important role in outlining these actions. Mr Protas reiterated that there was a need for a more active involvement of the Kaliningrad Region in the strategy related issues, e.g. issues concerning water treatment. He concluded by saying that the Strategy actions can be bilateral as well as euroregional, and gave the example of a possible development strategy for the Vistula / Kaliningrad Lagoon.

The representative of Pomorskie Marshal's Office, Mrs Krystyna Wróblewska elaborated on Pomorskie Region's involvement in the preparation and implementation of the strategy. As far as the preparation stage is concerned, the region was actively involved in the Strategy conferences and round-table seminars, hosting the environmental round-table meeting in Gdańsk. Moreover, regional authorities conducted vigorous lobbying activities by presenting its position on the strategy on various political forums, e.g. the European Commission, Association of Polish Regions etc. Mrs Wróblewska stated that the process of the implementation of the strategy was being monitored by Pomorskie Regional EU Office in Brussels. Regarding the implementation of the strategy, Mrs Wróblewska said that the main focus areas would include tourism; promotion of national and natural heritage; green transport including railway systems, roads and inland water transport; R&D cooperation and clean technologies. She also presented an idea for a joint project entitled the Baltic History Book. The project would include research and educational institutions from the Baltic Sea Region and could result in a common regional history textbook. In conclusion, Mrs Wróblewska once again stressed the importance of future ERB lobbying activities and the need for a more significant involvement of Russian partners in future cooperation initiatives. In her view, the ERB is a very important platform facilitating the achievement of these goals.

Mr Sławomir Demkowicz-Dobrzański briefly summed up the discussion. In his view, the ERB member regions voiced their strong support for more active involvement of Russian partners in future regional cooperation activities, including the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region. Secondly, he pointed out that, the regions see ERB as an excellent platform for coordination, consultation and communication activities regarding the implementation of the Strategy. Thirdly, he continued, the regions consider a possibility of a new joint project related to the Strategy as a tool to strengthen ERB, making it a more recognisable and attractive platform for regional cooperation. Such a joint project would greatly contribute to the added value of the ERB cooperation.