



The EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region and the civil society in the region

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The EU strategy for the Baltic Sea Region consists of several flagship projects, but the civil society in form of ordinary citizens, voluntary organizations/NGOs and the business life is only involved in a few of the concrete cases under the different flagship projects. The different projects are in most cases run by representatives of various governmental organizations.

Most of the citizens of the states around the Baltic Sea have never heard about the strategy.

Now when the strategy is evaluated, it is important to include NGOs and civil society in a more direct way into the strategy.

NGO cooperation is an important part of the cooperation in the region as it concerns neighbouring countries – development and support of the public diplomacy should always be an essential part in any region's strategies, so that citizens and NGOs also feel they have an ownership of the strategy.

The Baltic Sea NGO Network has existed since 2001. It consists of NGOs from the different Baltic Sea countries including non-EU member states as Russia, Norway and Iceland who are interested in transnational cooperation. In each country a national focal point/platform is established. This platform is open to all NGOs wishing to participate in the Baltic Sea Network. Chair of the network is the co-ordinator from the country which has the chair of the Council of Baltic Sea States. Since its inauguration the network has been working closely together with the Council of the Baltic Sea States, especially in cases concerning the civil society.

The purpose of the network is to support the civil society in the Baltic Sea Region:

1. By bringing NGOs from different Baltic Sea countries and from

different fields together, for exchanging experience and information, improvement of knowledge and creating partnerships.

2. By creating partnerships and supporting transnational and intersectional networks between NGOs from different Baltic Sea countries.
3. By making NGOs more visible and influencing the democratic decision-making process on national, regional and EU level.
4. By supporting the development of international understanding and inter-cultural activities.
5. By raising public awareness and understanding of the work of NGOs, citizens' activities and initiatives, and by encouraging people to get involved and take an interest in their own affairs.

During our existence we have almost every year arranged a NGO Forum in the presidency country of the Council of Baltic Sea States with discussions in many different areas. Information of the NGO Forum 2011 and the network you can find on this homepage:

<http://www.balticseango.net/>

Our future vision for the EU strategy is that citizens and NGOs be more involved in the strategy, so that everybody gets a common ownership of the different parts of the strategy.

We are in the network discussing several solutions.

One element can e.g. be that the applicant for representation should make clear which implications the project will have on civil society and the NGOs and how the applicant plans to involve civil society, NGOs and citizens in the project. From our experience it is important that the civil society is involved at an early stage to avoid serious conflicts at a later stage.

Some of our focal points has extended the activities by informing about the EU Baltic Sea Strategy.. Our Danish Focal Point has in the last years arranged public meetings focusing on the strategy from a European parliamentarian point of view, from the Commission's point of view and from a national governmental point of view.

The European citizens' initiative has just been introduced. The purpose is to involve the citizens in the legislative process of the European Union. Maybe, it could also be a possibility to use some of the principles of this initiative on a more regional basis on a few of the projects included in the EU Baltic Sea Strategy.

For the success of the strategy it is important that the citizens can feel an ownership to the strategy and get the possibility to have a dialogue with responsible persons in each project, e.g. by establishing a homepage for the strategy.

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From our point of view it is also important for the success of the strategy that the non-member EU-states from the region is included in the projects as closely as possible. This will also give the best synergism for the future development of the Baltic Sea Region.

An important existing obstacle for NGO cooperation in the region is the absence of common funding and project budget lines available for NGOs from all of the Baltic Sea countries.

At the Baltic Sea NGO Forum in Berlin our wishes were stated in the following way in the declaration:

“Furthermore, we appeal to the EU bodies and the national governments

- to increase opportunities for joint activities in the framework of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region and the Northern Dimension and to define the space, place and role of NGOs, not least of which are small and grassroots organizations, in the strategy;
- to involve NGOs from the region, and in particular Russia, in the implementation of the EU Baltic Sea Strategy, e.g. through the Northern Dimension partnerships;
- to urge the Governments of CBSS countries to approve national NGO development programs that would support the participation of public diplomacy actors in the project related to the EU Baltic Sea Strategy and other strategies covering the Baltic Sea Region;”

At our stand at the Networking Villages you can get information about our vision for the future development. We will also present the Baltic Sea NGO Network and some of the NGO members of the network and give examples of their international cooperation in the Baltic Sea region, including the work for creating a World NGO day (18. November) by the UN internationally.