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POSITION PAPER ON NORTHERN DIMENSION FROM 2007

Introduction

The overall objective of the Northern Dimension policy is to strengthen peace through intensified cross border co-operation and economic integration and development, which will increase welfare in the whole Northern Dimension area as well as in the whole European union. The Northern Dimension policy is thus a process which intensifies cross border contacts. Cross border co-operation around the Baltic Sea already exists, but the Northern Dimension Policy and its Action Plan help to co-ordinate these efforts.

The Baltic Sea has gone through a historical transition period and is still affected by sweeping changes. The enlargement of the European Union, the integration process in Europe and globalisation as well as regional policy, which is still inadequate from the peripheral point of view, have obvious consequences in the maritime Baltic Sea Area.

The political framework in the Northern Europe has thus changed. The Northern Dimension covers a broad geographic area, from northwest Russia in the East to Iceland and Greenland in the West and from the Arctic and sub-Arctic to the southern shores of the Baltic Sea. The enlargement of the European Union meant that Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia and Poland who border the Baltic Sea and are covered of the Northern Dimension policy became members of the European Union. This meant that nearly all states surrounding the Baltic Sea became part of the internal politics and financial instruments of the European Union. The enlarged European Union around the Baltic Sea strengthens not only the European Union. It also opens new prospects for economic development and the gateway positions of the regions in the Baltic Sea area.

In May 2005 the European Union and Russia agreed, as part of their strategic partnership, on road maps for implementing the four common spaces: common economic space, common space for freedom, security and justice, common space for research, education and culture and a common space for external security. The result of the partnership and the road maps are thus furthering integration between the European Union and Russia.

Further, the financial possibilities for cross-border and transitional co-operation within the Northern Dimension will change after 2006 when the new financial instruments of European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument as well as the new structural funds will come into force. This will also effect the further development of the Northern Dimension and co-operation in the Baltic Sea area.

The Northern Dimension provides a broad framework for a common effort to develop the societies and economies of the countries in Northern Europe. The Northern Dimension already has strong traditions of cross border co-operation by regional actors in Northern Europe. The integration of Russia into the process of European co-operation, the extension of the zone of stability and welfare to the eastern part of Europe as well as the further development of the whole Northern European area are fundamental aims. These aims are not only in the interest of those countries located in the Northern European area, they are of interest and will benefit all of Europe, and therefore requiring active support by all European actors. The Northern Dimension not only involves projects and programmes, but also acts as a forum for dialogue and therefore it should actively involve, in a clear and coherent way, regional and local level actors and their networks.



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General comments

The North Sea Commission supports the Northern Dimension policy and welcomes future development of strategic documents such as a third Action Plan for Northern Dimension.

To strengthen support for the Northern Dimension, the implementation of a new Action Plan is vital and it is important that the European Union, Iceland, Norway and Russia agree and stay devoted and follow adopted strategic documents. Hence, it is also important that EU agreements with Norway, Iceland (EFTA) and especially Russia (Partnership agreement and the road maps) are reflected in and supported by the Northern Dimension. When rewriting and reshaping a Northern Dimension Action Plan the whole geographical area of the Northern Dimension should be maintained even though special attention must be given to the EU-Russia common spaces.

The experience of the Northern Dimension Action Plans has demonstrated that its implementation is not possible without the active involvement and contribution of regional and local actors and their far-reaching and well established co-operation networks. In implementing a new Northern Dimension Action Plan, we regard it as essential to build on this experience. Numerous ongoing projects - for example within Interreg III B Baltic Sea Region programme demonstrate the abilities of the regional level and should be seen as a positive and important contribution to the implementation of Northern Dimension.

Regional and local actors constitute the foundation of the Northern Dimension and aid its successfulness through active participation, however, The North Sea Commission recognises the European Commission's commitment and its active role as a hub co-ordinating actions is crucial. The European Commission's role is consequently of great importance in the process of developing, implementing and following up activities within the Northern Dimension and shall be preserved.

The current Northern Dimension Action Plan comprises a two-year period. The policy sets the vision and the Action Plans give guidelines for specific actions to take within the Northern Dimension. The North Sea Commission believes that a long-term plan would make the Northern Dimension more durable. A new Action Plan could thus be better co-ordinated with the new financial instrument within the structural funds (the future objective three transnational co-operation programme) in the North Sea and Baltic Sea region and the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument, which will operate in the new financial perspective 2007-2013.

Although the North Sea Commission would prefer an independent budget line for the Northern Dimension, we are convinced that a sufficient budget allocation within the financial instrument as Interreg Northern Periphery, INTERREG North Sea Region and INTERREG Baltic Sea Region would allow the regions to access sufficient funding to achieve efficient implementation of activities within the Northern Dimension.

To get the most out of available financial instruments in co-operation with regions within and outside of the European Union after 2006, the use of European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument must be interoperable with the financial instruments within the structural funds.

Financial instruments from other institutions like the G8-States, which enable multinational projects in this area especially in the field of nuclear safety and environment, shall be considered as helpful tool to achieve common goals.

The North Sea Commission also believes, that the introduction of "Tripartite Contracts" could help facilitate project co-operation of a cross-border and transnational nature in several priority fields for the Northern Dimension.



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Thematic contributions

With reference to the priority sectors set out in the Guidelines we would like to underline *our* particular interest in enhanced co-operation on the following issues:

Economy, Business and Infrastructure

The North Sea Commission welcomes the European Commission's proposal on the revision of the TEN-T guidelines, which have a vital impact on the Northern Dimension Policy. The introduction of Motorways of the Sea to the list of priority projects offers a realistic objective both to reach intermodal shift effects and better connect geographically disadvantaged regions by transnational maritime links. The North Sea Commission recognises the need of building efficient transport systems in order to cope with future cargo flows due to increased trade between Russia and China on the one side and Western Europe and USA on the other. At the same time because of the harsh natural conditions in the Baltic Sea sufficient funding should be guaranteed for research and development to keep the transport systems safe and running around the year. By building efficient and environmentally sustainable transport systems that uses rail and sea, we believe that it is possible to create regional development through out the region. One important issue will be to assure that Motorways of the Sea fit in existing or new TEN-corridors in order to attract intermodal logistics chains. Moreover, current approved and existing INTERREG-projects such as "Baltic Gateway", the Northern Maritime Corridor as well as the NETA-project should be taken into consideration.

There are significant natural and mineral resources in the area of Fennoscandia where the arctic nature is very sensitive. The European Union is dependent on natural resources and minerals outside of its external borders and through Northern Dimension co-operating, supporting and building environmentally friendly production and mining techniques e.g. in northwest Russia. The European Union may also strengthen its self-sufficiency in natural resources and minerals by preserving the nature in Northern Dimension area.

Freedom, Security and Justice

The North Sea Commission supports actions taken within Northern Dimension that foster a secure and efficient management of the EU-Russia border to prevent illegal movements and at the same time allow an easy passage for legitimate trade and travel, reducing waiting times, improving infrastructure, increasing co-operation between relevant border authorities, and the harmonisation of legislation, standards and procedures.

Research, Education and Culture

The North Sea Commission would like to underline the importance of the cultural qualities and the diversity that exists within the Northern Dimension area. Greater focus should be put on strengthening the regions' possibility to develop their own identity as well as to find good answers to the challenges they face. Projects to strengthen the cultural identity in the Northern Dimension area should be given priority - among others to strengthen people-to-people relations between regions and countries. The Northern Dimension influences the development of future societies and generations. It is therefore important to focus on young people's participation, engagement, interests and ideas when concrete projects and actions are shaped - among others through the implementation of a new Northern Dimension Action Plan.



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Research and development needs to strengthen its position in all areas of co-operation. The North Sea Commission believes that further development of meta co-operation networks such as the ScanBalt initiative, aimed at the development of a network of networks in the life science field in Northern Europe with to goal to establish this region as a major player in the European and global biotechnology arena.

Environment, nuclear safety and natural resources

The coastal regions are the ones suffering from the harmful effects of oil spills. Citizens and businesses of the coastal regions will suffer from the consequences of lack of maritime safety. The regions therefore call upon the national governments to have a proactive attitude to maritime safety and to develop a safety culture in the application of their national policy. This concerns both preventive action as well as systems to deal with the incidents that actually occur. Regional authorities offer their participation as a working partnership with national governments and across national and regional borders.

The development of large oil-harbours in Russia - in the north as well as in the coastal areas of Gulf of Finland close to St. Petersburg - will lead to increased tanker-transport along the Norwegian coast as well as in the Baltic Sea - Kattegat - Skagerrak into the North Sea. The consequences of an oil catastrophe in the Northern Dimension area will be remarkable, and we therefore strongly recommend that this issue will receive particular attention in the implementation of a new Northern Dimension Action Plan.

Based on the implementation of the EU Water Framework Directive, that due to the EEA agreement is also binding for Norway, great challenges arise for regions and municipalities in the Northern Dimension area. Many of the new EU member states and Russia have large environmental problems connected to water and water supply.

Regional and local authorities in the North Sea and Baltic Sea Regions have experience and competence in this field, and can contribute to a positive development among others by getting a better overview of pollution in rivers and lakes, water quality management programmes, freshwater supply, knowledge transfer and competence development. In our opinion, water quality management, cleaning development of river and lake areas should therefore be included and taken into consideration when implementing a new Northern Dimension Action Plan.

Social welfare and health care

In order to have a balanced development of the whole region, building sufficient social welfare systems are of crucial importance especially in Russia, who still suffers from the swift shift from a central planning system to a market economy. Many regions do not have tools, mechanisms and resources to influence their own regional planning and development. The new EU member states in the Baltic Sea area will also be depending on good tools and methods to prepare plans and implement actions in relation to EU regional policy and the use of new financial instruments. It will be of utmost importance to strengthen exchange of experiences and models for regional planning and development between East and West in Northern Europe and to establish and strengthen centres of competence in the regions. Therefore cross border co-operation and partnerships with regions in Northwest Russia should find special support in the implementation of a new Northern Dimension Action Plan.