

The successes of the European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region and its challenges from the Baltic cities' perspective

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The European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR) is the first macro-regional strategy in Europe, which was approved in 2009. Three key objectives of the EUSBSR are: **saving the sea, connecting the region, and increasing prosperity**. The Strategy aims to strengthen cooperation between the countries bordering the Baltic Sea in order to meet the common challenges and to benefit from common opportunities facing the region. I asked three local government politicians how it looks like in practice from the Baltic cities' perspective.

Interviewees: Ms. **Aleksandra Dulkiewicz**, Mayor of Gdańsk and Member of the European Committee of Regions; Mr. **Mantas Jurgutis**, Deputy Mayor of Kaunas and President of Union of the Baltic Cities; Mr. **Piotr Grzelak**, Deputy Mayor of Gdańsk and Vice-President of Union of the Baltic Cities.

What is the most significant impact of the EUSBSR on the development of the Baltic cities so far? Are there any concrete positive examples from a city perspective?

Mantas Jurgutis: The most significant impact of the EUSBSR is the cooperation between Baltic Region countries aiming for the same goals. The world is facing great challenges due to global warming, pollution, health care crisis so now more than ever it is important to stay united and collaborate to ensure sustainable development in the region. Sustainable mobility and better accessibility are one of Kaunas City's main priorities. Based on the EUSBSR, Kaunas City is a partner in RESPONSE project (funded by Interreg Baltic Sea Region Programme) aiming to create and test (demand-responsive transport) that would help certain citizen groups choose public transport instead of private cars. At the moment we are testing this system on taking children to school from remote city parts where parents usually use cars for everyday trips. Trips to and from school make up a large part of car trips in the city so we hope that this kind of service will reduce the need for private car trips and encourage children from a young age to get used to using public transport.

Aleksandra Dulkiewicz: Gdańsk has been striving to utilize the potential of the EUSBSR since the beginning. The Strategy helped us recognize and systemize the current challenges, like climate change consequences, water pollution, or marine ecosystem losses. They affect us all on different levels but we realise the only way to solve the problems is working together across the borders. For sure the Strategy has boosted the Baltic Sea Region cooperation, enabled to develop ideas and implement projects. Gdańsk has been very active in transnational projects, i.e.: IWAMA, BSR Water, NonHazCity being the EUSBSR flagships. Over the past years of intensive exchange of experiences, development, and implementation of the projects results we have produced concrete tools and solutions that could be applied in the city and in the whole region.

What are the most important challenges of the EUSBSR in the urban context, how the revised EUSBSR Action Plan responds to the needs and expectations of the Baltic cities?

Mantas Jurgutis: Since 2020 we are facing a new reality due to the pandemic affecting worldwide almost all aspects of life. The Baltic Sea Region has, like other regions, suffered from economic lockdowns and restrictions in the direct people-to-people contacts.

Resilience, understood as the ability to cope with, adapt and recover from crises like economic ones, pandemic or natural disasters seem to be at the top of the challenges the Baltic Sea Region as a whole, but specifically, the cities are facing now. As the closest public authorities to the citizens, they are keenly aware of the people's needs. Support to health problems, a growing number of disadvantaged citizens, especially young people, temporary unemployment, are the challenges that require fast and vast reactions.

UBC believes that collaboration and knowledge sharing are the strongest tools in fighting crises, not only the pandemic one. The modern city is globally connected and internationally dependent. Communication with the inhabitants, but also externally with other cities, to be really effective, requires boosting digitalisation and cyber security. That is the second important challenge for the Region in the urban context. And later, in a wider post-covid perspective, it will not only help cities to be more resistant to different crises, but it will also contribute to make the whole region more competitive and innovative.

One of the overarching global challenges is also the climate change and environmental degradation being the threat much before pandemic times.

Last, but not least of the main issues for cities is the challenge to democracy, social cohesion, including vulnerable groups, like migrants, but also citizen's engagement. Here the role of cities cannot be overestimated.

The revised EUSBSR Action Plan, with its aim to boost resilience and recovery in the Region, seems to be a good response to the cities' needs and expectations. Simplified coordination and management system, as well as the reduction in the number of actions can contribute to easier and more efficient collaboration.

Also, especially some of the actions in the framework of Policy Areas, like e.g.

Action 1: Build capacities for prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery in emergency and crisis management in the framework of PA Secure; Action 2: Digital innovation and transformation in the framework of PA Innovation, Action 3: A labour market for all, using resources of longer lives, PA Education, just to name a few, will meet the cities' expectations.

Piotr Grzelak: The new EUSBSR Action Plan is not a revolution but we welcomed the decision on including climate perspective in all policy areas with satisfaction. Mainstreaming climate actions is one of the most important tasks of all stakeholders. Climate change related consequences are a crucial challenge in the nearest future. We have to intensify our efforts to respond wisely and to minimize the risks. We do hope all EUSBSR actions and projects will now contribute more effectively to reduce the negative impact of the climate change. Another question is the financing of these actions. The EUSBSR has no budget and is not supported by any single funding programme which might be an option. From the beneficiary's point of view, simplifying the INTERREG funding procedures would be very helpful and would take the burden of administration off. Last, but not least, the involvement of local stakeholders remains a challenge. We appreciate all awareness-raising actions that aim to get new partners on board. In my opinion, EUSBSR and its Action Plan do not

clearly show benefits for the local actors. They must understand the Strategy not only provides a chance to tackle global challenges on the local level, but also offers an opportunity to bring local issues to the regional and European policy levels.

Which of the following sub-objectives of the EUSBSR revised Action Plan are the most important and why in the urban development from Kaunas and Gdańsk perspective?

Sub-objectives:

- Clear water in the sea;
- Rich and healthy wildlife;
- Clean and safe shipping;
- Reliable energy markets;
- Good transport conditions;
- Connecting people in the region;
- Better cooperation in fighting cross-border crime;
- Improved global competitiveness of the Baltic Sea Region;
- Climate change adaptation, risk prevention and management.

Mantas Jurgutis: Kaunas City is not a coastal city therefore our main target sub-objectives are: Good transport conditions, Connecting people in the region, Reliable energy markets, Improved global competitiveness of the Baltic Sea Region, Climate change adaptation, risk prevention and management. Our aim is to develop a sustainable and lively city that is suitable for various people to live in, therefore improvement of urban infrastructure, conditions as well as risk prevention are our priorities.

Aleksandra Dulciewicz: Actually, all EUSBSR sub-objectives are equally important for the sustainable development of the city and the region. They reflect actual challenges we have to face on different levels. Also, they are interlinked and interdependent. To some extent, the Gdańsk 2030 Plus Development Strategy goes hand in hand with the EUSBSR, setting similar priorities for our urban development.

Are there any common priorities of the cities around the Baltic Sea for the next EU Multiannual Financial Framework 2021-2027?

Mantas Jurgutis: In 2020 upon the decision of the UBC Executive Board, a new Task Force on Policy & Projects was set up. Among the goals of this Task Force, there was creating a comprehensive policy framework and position papers on topics relevant for UBC, related to its core values and priorities of member cities. As a result of the work, four policy position papers were prepared, defining which areas are of importance for the UBC: Climate Change and Sustainable Development; Resilient UBC Cities; Social Cohesion beyond 2020; Urban Agenda for the EU. Generally, we can say that UBC stands for integrated and sustainable urban development. The social dimension, but also investments and innovation, digital transition and, as the last year showed us extremely clearly, the resilience to crisis, are on top of the UBC agenda.

A highlight is also put on activating citizens and cooperation with other actors from the Baltic Sea Region and beyond.

Piotr Grzelak: Gdańsk has extensive city relations across the Baltic Sea Region, including project partnerships, twinning and cooperation within the Union of the Baltic Cities, the latter providing the platform for common actions, ideas exchange and ready-to-apply solutions. By working together we also agree on the most burning questions that have to be tackled in the future. Since the beginning of the UBC, our priority has been to develop a sustainable, smart and inclusive Baltic Sea Region. This goal remains unchanged. What we are aiming for now is to build the urban resilience towards any shocks and dangers the future might bring. We want to be able to maintain continuity of the city's services and functions, to respond and react, while protecting and enhancing people's lives. We will be trying to find out the answers on how to design a more equitable, livable, and resilient city.

How are the Baltic cities going to cooperate? How the opportunities for common projects/actions/initiatives/networks should be used?

Mantas Jurgutis: UBC is a network of seventy member cities and associated partners, with 30 years of experience in cooperation and as such can be a good example of contacts between the local authorities. There are numerous possibilities of collaboration in the framework of our organisation. Practical work is carried out by our 7 thematic commissions: Cultural Cities, Inclusive and Healthy Cities, Planning Cities, Safe Cities, Smart and Prospering Cities, Sustainable Cities, Youthful Cities, as well as the Working Group on Gender Equality, Task Force Supporting Youth Employment and Well-Being and Communications Network. Those bodies share the best practices and tools and provide a network of experts for consultation and cooperation. In the UBC history, cooperation has been taking many forms – joint projects, actions, seminars, online workshops, meetings, exhibitions, publications, study visits, exchange of professionals, consultations of problems. One of the examples is the Planning Cities Commission, which before the pandemic was gathering one-two times per year in a member city which had some spatial problem to consult. Participants of this meeting - the city architects, planners, urbanists from different UBC cities had study visits, then worked in different groups for a couple of days on the solutions and at the end of the meeting, they presented the proposals to the host politicians.

UBC has been also involved as an organisation in the EUSBSR cooperation practically since the beginning of this initiative. UBC is recognised as a reliable partner in projects and processes. During 2016-2020, the UBC was a co-ordinator of the Horizontal Action (HA) "Capacity", together with the Baltic Sea NGO Network and the Swedish Institute. Increasing the project capacity, skills and competence of all stakeholders involved in the strategy through the training programs was the main aim of the HAC. The other dimension of the Horizontal Action Capacity was to ensure broad participation of local and regional authorities, as well as all other stakeholders.

At present UBC is a partner in flagship projects:

- Water project - Lead Partner - City of Riga, HA Climate
- IWAMA project- Lead Partner - City of Turku/UBC SCC, PA Nutri
- BSR Water project - Lead Partner - City of Turku/UBC SCC, PA Nutri
- Cascade project - Lead Partner - City of Turku, HA Climate
- School to Work /S2W (co-ordinated by the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions/ SALAR and UBC Task Force on Youth Employment and Well-being), PA Education

UBC is open for cooperation also with other local authorities. Our organisation can be a good umbrella for joint work of the cities in exchanging good practices. Generally, I believe that different cities in the Baltic Sea Region shall use the opportunities the EUSBSR gives not only to learn from each other and cope together with common challenges, but they also shall strive for increasing the recognition of cities as key players for the practical implementation of the EUSBSR Strategy.

Aleksandra Dulkiewicz: Gdańsk gets involved in different initiatives and projects being an active member of the Union of the Baltic Cities, which is the biggest city network in this part of Europe. Together we are going to strengthen our lobbying capacities and influence the EU policies in a more effective way. However, not only contacts matter but active participation is also needed. The more we get involved, the more benefits we gain from the cooperation.