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Formats of multilateral cooperation in the Baltic Sea Region: in search of their niche

During the last six months participants of the various regional cooperation formats have started a discussion on the 2030 vision of the Baltic Sea Region (BSR). The year 2021 will be a summary period on cooperation effects already achieved (HELCOM Baltic Sea Action Plan), an interim period (the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region), as well as a new stage of activity (result of the reform of the Council of the Baltic Sea States).

At the dawn of the third decade of the 21st century, the Baltic Sea Region is most often perceived as stable and developed, especially when compared to Eastern Europe or the Western Balkans. Meanwhile, it is still a place of intense interactions between states and non-state actors in international relations. They function in the regional multi-level management system frameworks, which enforces participants to constantly adapt to new challenges. In this context, special roles are played by the Baltic Marine Environment Protection Commission (Helsinki Commission, HELCOM), the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS) and the European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR).

Baltic Marine Environment Protection Commission. It was established in 1974 to monitor the implementation of the Convention on the Protection of the Marine Environment in the Baltic Sea Area and to make recommendations for the protection of the marine environment. The Helsinki Convention was revised in 1992 and, after ratification by all the Baltic Sea littoral states, entered into force on January 17, 2000. In 2007, the Helsinki Commission adopted the Baltic Sea Action Plan (BSAP) to restore the Baltic Sea's good environmental status by 2021. There are several actions and measures of the BSAP's four priorities: eutrophication, hazardous substances, biodiversity and nature conservation, and maritime activities. The current HELCOM structure includes ministerial level meetings held every few years (last on March 6, 2018), annual meetings of the Helsinki Commission (the contracting parties are represented by the Heads of Delegation) and eight working groups that make up the HELCOM Secretariat in Helsinki.

HELCOM's work is led by one of the Member States holding the two-year chairmanship. On July 1, 2020, it was taken over by Germany, which presented six priorities for its activities, including strengthening regional cooperation and international ocean governance, updating the BSAP to consider new challenges (climate change, post-World War II toxic warfare agents dumped in the Baltic, underwater noise), as well as enhancing biodiversity. Moreover, one of the most important tasks currently facing HELCOM is to prepare another holistic assessment of the Baltic Sea (HOLAS III) in 2023, covering the period from 2016-2021. Conclusions of the second assessment (covering 2011-2016), conducted in 2018, are unequivocal: despite improvements in the Baltic Sea environment, the BSAP objectives have not been yet achieved. Nor will this happen by 2021. Eutrophication is still the main problem in the region, affecting 97% of the Baltic Sea area, and new challenges are emerging (increased litter, including plastic and pharmaceutical residues, underwater noise, and progressive degradation of the seabed).

The EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR). The 11th Annual Forum of the EUSBSR, initially planned to be organized in mid-June, was held on October 20. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic it was held online. This year's forum focused on the importance of innovation and sustainable development for BSR. According to the speakers, both processes are important for the implementation of the new revised EUSBSR Action Plan, adopted by the National Coordinators in July. Similar conclusions were also reached by the European Commission in the

third biennial report on the implementation of the four EU macro-regional strategies, adopted at the end of September 2020.

The new Action Plan will be more closely aligned with other strategic projects of international cooperation, including stricter adherence to the UN 2030 Sustainable Development Goals and an even closer inclusion of the EUSBSR in the implementation of various Community policies. It will consist of 14 Policy Areas (previously 13 Policy Areas and 4 Horizontal Actions) covering 44 actions (previously 73). This means a significant simplification of the structure and the elimination of Horizontal Actions, the tasks (implementation of climate work and neighbourhood cooperation), which are to be taken over by the newly created Baltic Sea Strategy Point (BSP) or a new Policy Area. The BSP will be selected in a competitive procedure and should be ready for operation starting January 2022 as administrative and technical support for the management of development and communication activities in the EUSBSR. Specific tasks for the BSP and the scope of its activities will be determined by a group of National Coordinators who will also supervise its operation. Its main added value will be the result of better coordination of resources and activities, while maintaining costs at a level similar to that of the entities performing the tasks of the future BSP. This creates opportunities to overcome one of the basic challenges (not only for Poland), which so far has been the issue of management / control of the Strategy (more on this topic: ["IEŚ Commentaries", No. 34](#)).

In the third report on the implementation of macro-regional strategies of the European Union, the European Commission emphasized their importance for the implementation of its priorities for 2019-2024 (including the European Green Deal, making Europe fit for the digital age and building Europe's strength in the world). Regarding the Baltic Sea, it was pointed out that the EUSBSR helped to improve the state of the environment mainly through better management of hazardous substances released into the sea (nitrates and phosphates), taking actions to protect biodiversity, promoting the development of the "blue bioeconomy", and supporting sustainable development of transport corridors in the BSR.

Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS). On July 1, Lithuania took over the annual presidency of the CBSS. It intends to focus on four priorities: supporting sustainable development, especially in developing eco-friendly industry, rebuilding the economies of the region's countries through green and maritime tourism, strengthening the region's resilience in disaster response and civil protection, and combating human trafficking for labour exploitation. At the same time, the Presidency intends to carry out an evaluation of the CBSS's achievements related to implementation of the assumptions of the Vilnius Declaration "A Vision of the Baltic Sea Region until 2020" (Vilnius, June 3, 2010). Conclusions from the assessment will serve the preparation of a new document by the Committee of Senior Officials – a vision of the Baltic Sea region until 2030, which should be ready for the next high-level meeting scheduled at the end of the Lithuanian CBSS Presidency (May-June 2021).

Since September 1st 2020, the new Director General – Grzegorz Marek Poznański, is the head of the CBSS Permanent International Secretariat. This, together with the completed organisation's reform (for more information, see: ["IEŚ Commentaries", No. 203](#)), will allow it to increase its activity. One of the most important tasks of the newly reformed CBSS will be to develop an effective model of cooperation with other institutions in the BSR. To this end, the CBSS Secretariat has launched a structural dialogue with other formats of cooperation in Northern Europe, including the Baltic Sea States Subregional Co-operation (BSSSC) or the Baltic Sea Commission of the Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions (CPMR BSC). In the comments published after the meetings by the institutions involved, the willingness to cooperate in order to make the BSR more robust and resistant to political turmoil is emphasized.

Conclusions. Over the past six months, there have been attempts to strengthen regional synergy, based on cooperation between actors representing various levels and areas. Their actions are, in many cases, complementary to each other, which is particularly visible in relation to the protection of the marine environment, sustainable development and the mitigation & adaptation to climate change. Being aware of and considering the activities of other institutions are keys to everyone finding their own niche in the structure of regional cooperation. At the same time, these prevent unnecessary overlaps in the regional dimension, thus strengthening the effectiveness of international institutions.

From the Polish perspective, it is extremely important to actively shape the architecture of regional cooperation in the BSR. Poland's involvement in the activities of the CBSS and HELCOM is a natural extension of its regional activity in Central Europe (the Visegrad Group and the Three Seas Initiative). All experiences from these organisations, as well as adaptation of the EUSBSR can be used to promote the creation of a new EU macro-regional strategy for the Carpathian region.