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Poland's Presidency in the European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR)

On 1 July 2024, Poland assumed the annual presidency of the European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR), which will last until June 2025. In addition to advancing projects aligned with the three primary priorities – protecting the sea, fostering regional integration, and enhancing prosperity – Poland intends to improve regional security and increase cooperation with Ukraine. A critical task will also involve the ongoing coordination of activities within the EUSBSR and updating the action plan.

EUSBSR Overview. The EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region, adopted in 2009, is one of four macro-regional strategies operating within the EU and neighbouring states. It encompasses territories from eight EU member states along the Baltic Sea: the three Baltic States (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania), three Nordic countries (Denmark, Sweden, and Finland), Poland, and five federal states of Germany (Berlin, Brandenburg, Hamburg, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, and Schleswig-Holstein).

Cooperation within the EUSBSR focuses on three main priorities: protecting the sea, increasing regional integration, and promoting prosperity (see more: [“IEŚ Commentaries”, No. 34](#)). Since 2021, these goals have been pursued through a revised action plan consisting of 44 activities divided into 14 policy areas (PAs). The current action plan is designed to implement the priorities of the EU’s strategic agenda for 2019–2024¹ and align the EUSBSR with the UN’s 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (see more: [“IEŚ Commentaries”, No. 286](#)). The reform of the action plan also simplified the management structure, eliminating horizontal actions and establishing the Baltic Sea Strategy Point (BSP), which began operations in Turku (Finland) and Hamburg (Germany) in October 2022.

Priorities and Tasks of Poland's EUSBSR Presidency. The Baltic Sea Region (BSR) states are regarded as essential allies of Poland, with whom, as stated, “we understand each other without saying a word”². The region has gained strategic importance following Finland and Sweden’s accession to NATO (see more: [“IEŚ Commentaries”, No. 901](#) and [No. 1075](#)). Thus, alongside implementing agreed projects, strengthening security and resilience in the BSR will be a priority for Poland. Previous experiences highlight the need for enhanced cross-border coordination, the exchange of best practices, and improved strategic communication to boost social cohesion and trust in state decisions and actions (see more: [“IEŚ Commentaries”, No. 1187](#)). Building resilience also requires combating disinformation and Russian propaganda, including efforts to counter foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI), which often accompanies espionage and other asymmetric activities (see more: [“IEŚ Commentaries”, No. 1043](#)).

Another goal will be to increase Ukraine’s involvement in the Strategy, facilitated by the action plan’s revision, set to conclude in December 2024. It is worth recalling that before Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, some EUSBSR projects included cooperation with partners from Belarus and Russia. In March 2022, the European Commission announced the suspension of cooperation with Russia and Belarus, which affected nine

¹ They were presented on 20 June 2019 and included: (1) protecting citizens and freedoms, (2) developing a strong and vibrant economic base, (3) building a climate-neutral, green, fair, and social Europe, and (4) promoting European interests and values on the global stage.

² Radosław Sikorski, *Information of Minister of Foreign Affairs on Polish foreign policy tasks in 2024*, 25 April 2024, p. 13, <https://www.gov.pl/attachment/2f81743f-0746-4efe-9f2d-f9b0a7415d2a>.

EU programmes under the European Neighbourhood Instrument and the transnational cooperation programme Interreg Baltic Sea Region. Shortly after that, the National Coordinators Group (NCG) made similar decisions regarding the EUSBSR (see more: "[IEŚ Commentaries](#)", No. 561). In addition to integrating Ukraine, the new action plan will support the EU's 2024-2029 strategic agenda, structured around three pillars: (1) a free and democratic Europe, (2) a strong and secure Europe, and (3) a prosperous and competitive Europe. The agenda, adopted by the European Council on 27 June 2024, aims to enhance Europe's sovereignty and better prepare it for current and future challenges³.

Poland's presidency will also involve coordinating the work of the NCG and political area coordinators (PACs), facilitating decision-making processes for the strategy's ongoing management. Despite 15 years of cooperation within the EUSBSR, challenges remain, such as relatively low political leadership engagement in some states, the need for better communication and visibility of the Strategy among regional communities, and the lack of alignment between action plan projects and territorial cooperation programme priorities. In the long term, the strategy's institutional memory improvement will be supported by the BSP's activities in Turku and Hamburg. However, strengthening the support structures for national coordinators and further cooperation with other international organisations are also worth considering. The complex coordination structure (stemming from the "3 No's" principle – no new funding sources, no new legislation, and no new institutions) poses challenges involving the NCG, presidency, BSP, steering groups, PACs, the European Commission, and the High-Level Group on macro-regional strategies.

Conclusions. From Poland's perspective, it is crucial to shape the cooperation architecture in the BSR actively and use the EUSBSR presidency to enhance action dynamics in the northern direction. Poland's involvement in other regional cooperation frameworks (e.g., the Council of the Baltic Sea States, the Helsinki Commission – HELCOM, and Vision and Strategies around the Baltic Sea – VASAB), combined with its upcoming presidencies (Poland will assume the presidency of the CBSS and VASAB in July 2025), offers opportunities for better cross-sectoral coordination, improving regional strategic communication, and presenting a united regional voice.

Poland's prioritisation of security and cooperation with Ukraine reflects how these issues significantly influence Baltic regional collaboration and the foreign policies of Baltic and Nordic states (see more: "[IEŚ Commentaries](#)", No. 1023). In the coming months, cross-border activities in the BSR focused on strengthening societal resilience, increasing critical infrastructure security, energy security, civil protection, and planning will all be particularly important (see more: "[IEŚ Commentaries](#)", No. 1187).

³ European Council, *Strategic Agenda 2024-2029*, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/4aldqfl2/2024_557_new-strategic-agenda.pdf.