



Baltic Sea States Subregional Co-operation

BSSSC paper on subsidiarity and democracy – and the future of Europe

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The political landscape in Europe and in the Baltic Sea Region is demanding - with challenges such as: citizens' lack of trust in the political systems with movements towards centralisation, infringements of civil liberties and threats to the independence of the judiciary, poor EU-Russia relations, refugee crisis, reintroduction of border controls, extremism and xenophobia.

Bottom-up cooperation - involving local and regional level - is more important than ever and cooperation must be based on shared values of democracy, peace, respect for human and social rights and the rule of law.

At the same time, there are ongoing and planned reforms in the governance structures of several BSR countries. This includes merging of municipalities into larger units, new geographical composition of the regional level as well as new distribution of competences between the different levels of governance

It is also important to recognise that countries and regions are more dependent on each other than ever before. To find solutions to the big societal challenges, such as climate change, international conflicts and immigration, collaboration and joint actions of countries and regions are of utmost importance. This interdependence is a tendency that will increase in the future.

The same applies to seizing the opportunities of today. Despite of challenges previously mentioned there are plenty of opportunities for regions to utilize. These possibilities are best utilized only in the societies where democracy, rule of law and subsidiarity are respected and fostered.

In light of this, BSSSC recalls

The European Charter of Local Self-Government (ECLSG) ratified by 47 countries – including the 10 BSR states. The Charter lays down standards for protecting the rights of local authorities and requires states which have ratified it to comply with a number of conditions, principles and practices.

In addition BSSSC points to the Council of Europe Reference Framework for Regional Democracy as a complement to the ECLSG.

With regard to the principle of subsidiarity and democracy, BSSSC underlines that subsidiarity is a fundamental democratic principle, because an ever closer union among the citizens of Europe demands that decisions are taken as openly as possible and as closely to the people as possible.

As the subsidiarity principle aims to ensure that decisions are taken as closely as possible to the citizen, constant checks should be made to verify that action at the EU level is justified in light of the possibilities available at national, regional or local level.

BSSSC strongly supports the good governance principles – the rule of law, participation, transparency, efficiency, equity, accountability, responsiveness and consensus.

Support and active participation of citizens in politics and civic life is vital for the development of good governance and prosperous societies.

BSSSC welcomes the EU-commissions statement in its work programme 2018 stressing that the respect for the rule of law implies as an independent judiciary that must be free from political control and should be a prerequisite for a society in which peace, freedom, tolerance, solidarity and justice prevail. The Commission also underlines that rule of law is indispensable for sustainable and fair growth, as well as for trust in Europe.

With regard to reforms on local and regional level, the BSSSC recalls

The recommendation of the Committee of Ministers in Council of Europe (CoE) to member states on the processes of reform of boundaries and/or structure of local and regional authorities. CoE calls on the governments of member states to:

- undertake thorough preparation, in order to identify and take account of the applicable legal and practical preconditions;
- ensure the existence of well-designed decision-making procedures based on good institutional dialogue;
- elaborate a step-by-step plan and clearly assign responsibilities including leadership for the implementation of the reform, as well as arrange for the consistent monitoring of it;
- undertake broad and unbiased evaluation of the results and keep the relevant local and/or regional authorities informed;

BSSSC urges national authorities in the Baltic Sea Region to respect the principles of subsidiarity and democracy when planning and implementing reforms at local and regional level.

BSSSC acknowledges that the youth have legitimate opinions and want to share their approaches and models for stronger involvement in decision-making at all levels of governance. Young people's commitment, creativity and critical thinking should be seen and utilised as a resource when reforming the governance structures.

With regard to the future of Europe, the BSSSC

underlines the need for a territorial dimension as the key vehicle for improving the governance process within the EU, by reinforcing relations between all levels of government, and consequently by helping to implement a sound multi-level governance process within the EU territory.

agrees with the EU Commission when stressing the need to make a democratic leap forward to respond to the concerns and expectations of European citizens in its 2018 work programme.

BSSSC supports all genuine possibilities of the young people to participate in the governance of their societies and influencing the decisions taken through access to public discussions.

BSSSC calls on the European Union as well as all politicians around the Baltic Sea to facilitate youth involvement in political processes as well as allocating funding in support of concrete projects for youth involvement.

BSSSC underlines that the pressing challenges at European and global level can only be successfully tackled by European policies and initiatives if actors on the local and regional level are truly involved in their implementation. In cohesion policy – unlike in policy areas with directly managed sectoral funds - European strategic approaches are linked to long-term development strategies at regional level. EU-objectives are implemented through regional projects in the realm of research, innovation, sustainable regional growth, renewable energy, SME, accessibility, competitiveness, and job creation. This linkage between the EU and regional levels is not only crucial for the effectiveness of the European strategies, but also strengthens the ownership of European policies on the ground by bringing them closer to the citizens. This is clearly the central European added value of cohesion policy.

BSSSC emphasises the partnership principle and highlights the fact that macro-regional strategies gather stakeholders and actors from all sectors and levels of governance relevant for regional development in the respective macro-regions. They offer the opportunity for tailor-made strategies suitable to tackle the specific challenges and potentials of the respective macro-regions. Furthermore, macro-regional strategies help improving and strengthening cooperation structures, thus contributing to regional and European integration.

BSSSC underlines that all political levels need to cooperate across borders - within the EU and between the EU and its neighbours. The future of Europe rests on mutual trust and this should be reflected by all EU policies - including funding programmes.

The BSSSC is convinced that the EU is more than only an economic and monetary union. It is also culture and cultural heritage that unites us in Europe and strengthens the sense of togetherness and belonging to a continent of shared values.

BSSSC is an open, non-party political, network organisation, which represents the interests of all regions around the Baltic Sea. According to the BSSSC Strategy 2016 - 2020, BSSSC will use its role as a political network organisation and a regional partner to the Council of the Baltic Sea States to promote and advocate the interests of the regions of the Baltic Sea area towards decision makers, such as national governments, the EU institutions and inter-governmental organisations. Subsidiarity and democracy are basic principles of BSSSC and the role of local and regional authorities and the voice of young people is at the heart of the BSSSC work.