

9th Annual Forum of EUSBSR

Tallinn 5 June

CLOSING REMARKS BY Mr MATTI MAASIKAS

Under Secretary for European Affairs, MFA Estonia

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentleman

The Annual Forum of the European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region has become one of the main events of the regional cooperation around the Baltic Sea. I would like to start by thanking all of You for your active participation and interest, we had around 770 participants.

We had intensive working hours with 3 plenary meetings, 21 seminars, one live exercise, a networking area, Speakers Corner and many back-to-back events. A written report of all the discussions and other information from our Forum will soon be available on the Strategy's website.

The importance, that we all attach to the regional cooperation, was reflected by the high-level attendance of the Forum. Prime Ministers of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, Foreign Minister of Poland, Vice President of the European Commission Andrus Ansip and Commissioner Corina Cretu as well as other high-level participants shared their visions about how to develop our region and the European Union's Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region after 2020. We also heard many other speakers sharing their expertise. Among others I would especially like to thank the former Estonian President Toomas Hendrik Ilves and the Vice-President of the European Investment Bank Alexander Stubb for their contribution

- the people, who initiated the whole Strategy in European Parliament more than a decade ago.

Ladies and Gentleman,

The Annual Forum in Tallinn was very much forward-looking. Its main themes included cohesion policy and our Strategy post-2020, perspectives of digital development in the region and future activities for cleaning up the Baltic Sea.

Last week the European Commission presented proposals about the **future of the cohesion policy**, at our Forum we heard a respective statement by Commissioner Corina Cretu. There were elements in the Commission's proposals for Cohesion policy post-2020, which got wide support during the discussions, such as more attention to the new challenges, simplification of the usage of Cohesion funds. Nevertheless, there are elements where we need to continue our discussions: the proposed cuts to the Cohesion funds; the question of smooth decrease of Cohesion funds for countries and regions crossing the 75% threshold of the EU's GDP and of course the proposed level of national co-financing. We need also more information from the Commission, when it comes to the Commission's proposals related to the territorial cooperation as this is one of the most important sources of financing for projects in the framework of the European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region.

The Future of our Strategy was covered in general during the first plenary discussions and several seminars, and in more detailed way by the report prepared for the Forum by Spatial Foresight. We need better integration of macro-regional strategies into EU policies and financial arrangements by the European Commission and the Member States during the forthcoming programming period. The proposals of the report led to interesting discussions about the governance of

the Strategy and its financing mechanisms. There was wide support for activation of the steering groups in the Policy Areas of the Strategy. The discussions during the Forum are a good preparation for the review of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region Action Plan, to be started this autumn.

Let me add here one thought about the political component of our Annual Forums and Strategy in general. When the Strategy was created it was somehow natural that Foreign Ministries played a substantial role. We have experience in initiating cooperation. But now I feel that we also need stronger contribution from those national institutions which play prominent role in coordination of national policies. Maybe in the future they will take over the current coordination role of Foreign Ministries, who are now in charge of coordinating the Strategy in most of the countries. For example - how about the regular meeting of ministers responsible for regional development of our 8 countries as back-to-back event to the Forum?

Dear participants,

This building Creative Hub-Kultuurikatel has witnessed many discussions about **digital development**, most importantly the European Digital Summit last September during the Estonian EU Presidency. At this Forum we had a plenary session with keynote speech from Vice-President of the Commission Andrus Ansip as well as a number of seminars. Our region is well placed to embrace technological progress, but there are still substantial differences between the countries. We are still at early stage of connecting governmental e-services over the state borders. The European Union has to continue working with digital single market regulations, where we still are halfway.

We are approaching the day when first 5G Network starts to work in our region. We need to modernize our economy as a whole using the opportunities opened by

the 5G. Vice-President Ansip's statement: "Everyone, everywhere, should access the high-speed internet, including 5G" was a popular tweet from our Forum yesterday.

Our third main theme **marine environment** got most media attention before and during our Forum. In order to demonstrate the marine pollution, the students of the Estonian Academy of Art created a sculptural composition from marine litter. We have now new data from the assessment of the situation of the Baltic Sea environment. There are decisions by the HELCOM ministerial meeting in March. We watched a video message from Commissioner Karmenu Vella. Besides the plenary, several our Seminars and the practical exercise in the Seaplane Harbour were devoted to improving the marine environment. Relevant Policy Areas of our Strategy are closely related to the work of HELCOM. I am sure that our work at this Annual Forum contributed a lot to the further activities towards reaching a healthy Baltic Sea.

Let's look at the plastic related problems, as today is World Environment Day and its focus is to reduce the plastic pollution. Just one example of Strategy's activities - the BLASTIC project, with participants from four countries, including Estonia, demonstrates how plastic waste in urban areas finds easily its way to the Baltic Sea and becomes marine litter. In practice, the project takes regional and national strategies into use on a local level and produces updated local action plans. March HELCOM ministerial re-committed to preventing and reducing marine litter and to achieving a significant quantitative reduction by 2025.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We were happy to have you here for two days full of intensive work, new information, ideas, contacts. You all together created the Forum.

The Forum was a joint effort of very many people.

I would like to thank all speakers and moderators, starting with our general moderator Johannes Tralla. Our gratitude goes to the European Commission, the Baltic Development Forum and the Estonian Ministry of Environment, who supported the content side of the Forum and also to the Spatial Foresight for the preparation of the report. Next I would like to express our gratitude to the organisers of the plenary meetings and seminars, the exercise in the Seaplane Harbour, the networking area and speakers corner. Our Thank You goes also to our communication partners Let's Communicate project and Meta Advisory and of course to devoted journalists who have been with us.

Our Forum was co-financed by the Interreg Baltic Sea Region Programme.

The City of Tallinn and The Association of Estonian Cities and Rural Municipalities were our cooperation partners, we highly appreciate Your contribution!

We are thankful to the Amazing Production and RGB Baltic, the managing companies of the conference, its partners and Carmen Catering for smooth organisation and delicious food.

And now it is the moment to Express our gratitude and applaud our volunteers who represent many countries of the world - please show up! Thank You!

My final emotional Word of gratitude goes to the Head of the preparation's team Eva-Maria Liimets, Estonian National Coordinator Raul Mälk, Kristel Konsa and all other people from the Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who were working long days and nights to make it all happen.

I wish a lot of success to the organisers of the 10th Annual Forum in Pomorskie region of Poland, in Gdansk.

Thank you!