

## Mainstreaming non-EU cooperation into the EUSBSR Policy Areas

### Analysis and support measures by Let's Communicate! -project

#### Background

The EUSBSR Action Plan(AP) states that

*"(EUSBSR) Objectives can only be successfully pursued through constructive cooperation with neighbouring non-EU countries. The EEA Member States Iceland and Norway as well as the neighbouring countries Russia and Belarus are inextricably linked to the Baltic Sea Region through historical, political, economic, environmental, cultural and people-to-people ties. Therefore, the participation of these countries should be promoted, where relevant and appropriate, across the activities within all Policy Areas."*

and further adds

*"Due to their cross-cutting nature and increased importance, the former Horizontal Actions climate change and cooperation with neighbouring non-EU countries are mainstreamed as essential elements into all 14 PAs. Integrating them into the PAs ensures that they are properly taken into account. It also allows the PAs to tailor-make the implementation of climate change adaptation and mitigation as well as cooperation with neighbouring non-EU countries in ways that are the most efficient for each PA."*

The AP thus emphasizes that

- 1) the objectives can only be successfully pursued through cooperation with neighbouring countries,
- 2) the cooperation should be constructive
- 3) mainstreaming allows the PAs to tailor-make the implementation and
- 4) cooperation with neighbouring countries should be done in ways that are the most efficient for each PA.

It should also be noted that on March 10 2022 the EUSBSR NCG issued the following statement

*"Referring to the European Council conclusions of 24 February 2022 on Russia's unprovoked and unjustified military aggression against Ukraine, the cooperation with the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus within the framework of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR) shall be suspended."*

*The National Coordinators Group (NCG) of the EUSBSR shall not support any actions of the Policy Areas of the EUSBSR that would include the Russian Federation and/or the Republic of Belarus as observers/ partners/ members of the Steering Groups of the Policy Areas and in any other capacity. The Policy Areas of the EUSBSR shall also make sure that the cooperation to date is suspended with immediate effect and new partnerships with these countries shall not be created."*

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*The NCG shall ensure the proper adjustment of the functioning of the EUSBSR in these changed circumstances.”*

Subsequently Let's Communicate -project seized all activities related to Russia and Belarus. And hereafter when referring to Russia or Belarus, all activities in developing cooperation with them happened before this.

The guiding principles of mainstreaming are constructive and efficient cooperation through tailor-made solutions for each PA.

In the AP it is stated roughly that the PA will ensure that addressing non-EU cooperation is appropriately integrated into the work their work. Thus, it is the responsibility of the PA to address the issue. However, they might lack the capacity to do this. Therefore, the project will focus on offering the PAs assistance in addressing non-EU cooperation appropriately.

The project will work with each PA individually to first

- 1) consult the PAs on their needs based on the requirements of the AP and current status of non-EU cooperation in their PA, then
- 2) assess with the PA the best course of action,
- 3) provide the needed support and
- 4) document the methods and results.

## Consultations

Let's Communicate consulted the PAs through the PACs in a number of stages. The focus on the work was on Russia and Norway as the two most important potential partners for the EUSBSR.

In the case of Russia Let's Communicate analyzed and cross-referenced the Russian regional strategies priorities with the EUSBSR activities. The results can be seen in attachment 1 EUSBSR-Russian Strategies cross-comparison. These outcomes were then further consulted with some of the PAs that viewed cooperation with Russia as important to their thematic field at the time.

In the case of Norway, the process was more straightforward and discussive. The project contacted the Norwegian MFA and discussed the potential cooperation and went on to organize a seminar in Norway for the various line ministries to elaborate the potential cooperation areas. With those results the project contacted the PAs and has offered cooperation possibilities to the PAs.

The analysis of the current status of non-EU cooperation was done via structured online interviews where the PACs were asked to define their level of cooperation with each of the 4 target countries Action by Action and on the level of governance, implementation or other levels such as ad hoc communication.

The aggregated outcomes of these interviews pointed out that most implementation level cooperation happened under those activities that were most funded by the Interreg BSR programme and cooperation on governance level happened most in those PAs where one of the PACs was a pan-baltic organization and one or more of the 4 target non-EU countries was a member. This resulted in most cases to the non-EU country also being involved in the work of the PA.

## Assessing the best course of Action

As not all PAs viewed non-EU cooperation of equal importance to their thematic progress, the next step on the work was done with the most interested PAs. A second round of interviews and discussions was organized and a number of potential approaches were identified. Firstly the level of knowledge especially in the non-EU countries of the EUSBSR and how it functions was viewed by the PACs to be low. Secondly the most successful implementation level cooperation would only happen under joint financing programmes (ie. Interreg BSR and the ETC programmes). Thirdly closest communication and cooperation happened in those PAs where the non-EU countries were involved in the Steering Groups or in the PAC organization as members.

## Assessing the best course of Action

It was decided based on those outcomes that given the recent Action Plan update, the most added value could be gained by supporting the PACs in developing their Steering Groups Rules of Procedure so that they would function as a suitable platform for including the non-EU countries in the work of the PA.

This process was implemented in tandem with Let 's Communicate assisting the PAs in drafting their Steering Groups Rules of Procedure on the basis of the Common Structure developed by the National Coordinators Group. Let 's Communicate was already involved in the design of the Common Structure and was therefore in the position to know how the mechanism could work.

In the end all PAs have Steering Groups that have the formal capacity to include non-EU members or observers to their work and can have thus a direct contact to the respective country. And the system is built so that the respective National Coordinators will be involved in the process of including the non-EU countries and the decisions are made by the consensus of all the EUSBSR Member States.

## Outcomes of the process

There were a number of outcomes of the process conducted by Let 's Communicate! -project.

- 1) All PAs have been consulted on their needs
- 2) The needs of all PAs have been assessed
- 3) Support has been provided to those PAs who have requested it
- 4) Documentation is finalized and available for the use of the PAs that participated in the process and the BSP for further development.