

“Friction generates heat” – tourism, cooperation and the Baltic Sea identification factor

By Detlef Müller

Upon looking at a map of the Baltic Sea region and letting the eyes wander from South to North and from East to West, one catches sight of 11 countries which directly border the waters of the Baltic Sea. Each country and region along this coastal line has its own cultural and leisure highlights to offer potential visitors.

But perhaps *BusinessWeek* had a point when stating that the Baltic Sea region “incorporates 11 countries, dazzling cities, major shipping ports and peaceful island gateways. The only problem is no one really knows about it”¹. Although bluntly put and in a sense standing in contrast to the continuously rising visitor figures of the region, there is evidence to suggest that there remains great potential for tourism development and marketing of the Baltic Sea region as an entity.

There absolutely is a large tourism potential all across the Baltic Sea. From the chalk cliffs of Rügen in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern in the Southwest all the way to St. Petersburg’s winter palace in the Northeast, this potential is right in front of our doorstep, but it takes effort and cooperation to exploit it to the maximum and to the benefit of the entire region.

At present, the cooperation in the tourism sector among the various regions is limited and a question to ask is if greater cross-Baltic Sea cooperation would yield better results for all. The Baltic Sea region certainly has high potential in attracting international travelers and visitors. However, a joint and coherent image is lacking, as are cross-Baltic promotional activities. If one supports the hypothesis that greater cooperation leads to an increase in tourism within the entire region or, put in terms of thermodynamic, if ‘friction generates heat’, long-term actions are required to convert the hesitation of regional actors into energy for the whole region.

The EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR) must be named in this context, as it aims to strengthen the cooperation between the numerous different actors in the region, also in the field of tourism, a priority area of the strategy and for which Mecklenburg-Vorpommern is priority area coordinator. The EUSBSR provides a long-term perspective, and this is very important. Being the nature of projects, they often cease to exist after they have run out, but there generally is a need to continue efforts with a long-term view if lasting benefits are to be reaped.

From a regional perspective, the EUSBSR has moreover been a signpost pointing towards future ways of involvement of regional stakeholders during the consultation process. The strategy very much follows a bottom-up approach, being based on consultation of national, regional and other stakeholders of the region. As both - a member of a regional parliament and of the EU-Committee of the Regions - I vehemently support this approach. The knowledge that is gained from this type of consultation process is valuable in formulating strategies which truly tackle the right challenges and strive to seize the needed opportunities. It is the regions which have the possibility to share their knowledge on local challenges and opportunities and when combining the input of the various regions, a coherent picture of challenges and opportunities can be generated. Every region is unique and this is a major advantage for the Baltic Sea area if an overall marketing of itself as a tourist destination is envisaged, and I would be surprised if the regions bordering the Baltic Sea could not also

identify similarities. As discussed during the 2nd Annual Forum of the EUSBSR in Gdansk in October 2011, one similarity between the regions and countries around the Baltic Sea could already be the common culture of cooperation.

The discussion on identification or branding of the Baltic Sea region for the benefit of tourism is ongoing. Identification with the Baltic Sea region by the citizens living in the area is seen as an engine for developing tourism as is the branding of the region to the international market. The Baltic Sea Tourism Forum states that the term “Baltic Sea tourism” can more strongly and globally be positioned as a brand. Possibly, there is the need to engage in stronger joint marketing efforts.

With regard to marketing of the destination ‘Baltic Sea Region’ and tourism as the overall field, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern has, as mentioned previously, taken on the role of priority area coordinator within the EUSBSR. One of the steps taken in the context of better coordinating the various actors in the tourism field was the organization of the first Baltic Sea Tourism Forum by Mecklenburg-Vorpommern in Rostock-Warnemünde in 2008. Since then, three further forums have taken place. Clearly, there is a willingness to cooperate among the actors. The upcoming Baltic Sea Tourism Forum is envisaged to be held in Germany and Denmark 14-16 November 2012. Moreover, in 2012 - on 3-4 May - Mecklenburg-Vorpommern will host the Priority Area 12 Tourism Conference of the EUSBSR in Rostock-Warnemünde.

During the first half of 2012, it will also be interesting to follow the development of the EUSBSR during the Danish presidency of the Council of the European Union and to see to what extent Denmark will carry on with the promotion of the EUSBSR and greater cross-Baltic Sea cooperation efforts. The hope is that it will do so strongly. The economic and financial crisis which today requires much attention will certainly continue to play a major role also during the upcoming Danish presidency. Nevertheless, sight should not be lost of the need to further promote the Baltic Sea region in general and cooperation in the field of tourism in particular.

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¹ Collier, M., (2008) ‘The Challenge of Branding the Baltics’, *BusinessWeek*, 15 July 2008, available at www.businessweek.com/globalbiz/content/jul2008/gb20080715_150523.htm?campaign_id=rss_daily.