

## A social democratic agenda for the Baltic area

Vilnius – What interests have the countries around the Baltic? Is there a way to reshuffle such interests as a network? What latent potential is there in such co-operation? These questions were discussed by social democrats and union representatives from countries around the Baltic – Poland, Germany, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Finland, Denmark and Sweden – at a Friedrich Ebert Foundation conference called „New Economic Thinking – economic growth and social security around the Baltic” on 15 April 2010 in Vilnius.

Björn Engholm, formerly prime minister of Schleswig-Holstein, summed up the central purpose of social democratic policy in the Baltic region this way: „To overcome the prosperity gradient in the region is now the biggest challenge for social democracy and the trade unions.” The conditions for that are these: first-class education, top quality



vocational training, opening higher education opportunities for as many young people as possible, and standing further education of adults. „Beyond that we have to support small and medium enterprises in their efforts to create value in our region “, said Engholm. On the ground of the common culture that is shared by people around the European inland see we might

succeed in revamping the Baltic region into a socially equitable and future-oriented living environment, and in designing co-operation in the region as a model for the world. Justas Paleckis, member of the European Parliament and Lithuanian social democrat, also emphasised that joint efforts should be launched to develop economic and social political perspectives for the Baltic region, to hold back the emigration of labour from the area and to get young skilled people want to stay and live in the region.



How can a common social policy in the Baltic region specifically be developed? What must be the inherent contents of such policy? Ralf Stegner, SPD party chairman in the state of Schleswig-Holstein and of the SPD caucus in the local diet, spoke on that at the first panel on the „Social policy region around the Baltic“ with Rasma Pipkie, the director of the Latvian NGOs association, Finnish Parliament deputy Kimmo Kiljunen, his Swedish colleague Shinikka Bohlin, and Helmut Uder of the German union confederation DGB North Region. Along with the promotion of social dialog and improved exchanges between civil society representatives and parliamentarians, Stegner said, a common labour market for the future development of the region is a central assignment for social democrats. Kimmo Kiljunen pointed out that a common labour market did provide employees with major opportunities for free movement, yet could also easily threaten social security systems in the particular countries through neoliberal designs. That is why common minimum wage and minimum taxation tariff agreements are necessary for the protection of employees and in order to maintain social policy standards in countries around the Baltic. Helmut Uder also put forward the idea for training centres to be established across the Baltic area for young people from all the countries together to learn their trades.

Common educational initiatives were also up-front topics of discussion at a second panel, which was called „The Baltic as an economic area“. The panel, chaired by Dr. Mindaugas Jurkynas of Vilnius University Institute for International Relations, with the participation of Jarosław Szczukowski, SLD politician from the Polish province of Pomorze, Ivar Indans of the Riga Centre for East European Studies, and Bundestag deputy Franz Thönnies, were one in understanding that research and education were central factors for future economic growth in the region. The Baltic region holds great potentials for innovation which can be used to forge into value. To that end synergies have to be used through efficient co-operation and co-ordination around the internal sea. A „Baltic Think Tank “ is maybe an idea to ponder in that connection. Next to joint research and educational projects, Szczukowski argued, efforts must be undertaken to strengthen co-operation in tourism. One idea that can be developed in a joint effort is perhaps a long-term concept to promote „green“ tourism. Another idea to work on is a co-ordinated energy trading system between the countries, which can lend the countries involved greater energy independence, said Franz Thönnies. In all these activity areas, the participating parliamentarians and union representatives concluded, there were opportunities for social democrats to make their contributions to the development of a common strategy for the Baltic area.

Major impulses came from Professor Dr. Klaus Busch of Osnabrück University and Dr. Carsten Schymik of the foundation Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik. Busch said in this epoch of global capitalism it is time for the social welfare state concept to be submitted to renovation and to adjust it to the changed conditions. Schymik described the EU strategy for the Baltic area as a first framework for co-operation. Since this strategy, however, has yet encompassed just the areas infrastructure, economics and environment, so it has urgently to be expanded to give it a social and a cultural dimensions as well. This presupposes an improved co-ordination of activities, say, through a „Baltic Week Summit“, at various levels.



In a recap, Knut Dethlefsen, director of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation in Poland, summed up the conference in a first draft of a social democratic agenda for the Baltic area. He named the following activities as central points on the agenda:

- founding knowledge-based partnerships
- looking together for solutions for lasting developments
- bridging the divide between rich and poor
- working for sustained economic and social development
- designing a common social policy with the participation of civil society
- developing a concept for a common labour market
- conducting a fair labour migration policy
- starting common education initiatives
- promoting innovation
- working together at municipal level
- using international contacts to forge alliances

It is important, said Dethlefsen, not to allow the ideas presented at the conference to peter out. It is up to the participants to take the wind of a new Hanseatic idea home in their countries and to trigger the political process there. „Only through close co-operation and joint concepts can we shape the Baltic region for the future in a sustainable way“, said Knut Dethlefsen, „Only through such co-operation can the region speak in a voice which is heard in Brussels and can make possible a recovery of a social democratic majority in Europe.“