

Comprehensive analysis of the cooperation of the Baltic states during COVID-19 crisis



BALTIC ASSEMBLY
2020

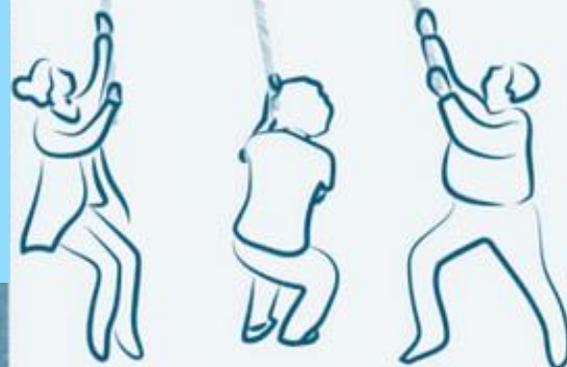


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INTRODUCTION

On 5 May 2020, in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and as a call to the governments of the Baltic states to better coordinate response to the situation, the Presidium of the Baltic Assembly adopted the Communiqué on the Baltic solidarity and cooperation in the times of crisis and recovery. We quickly became aware that the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic put solidarity of the Baltic states to a rigorous test and revealed vulnerability in trilateral cooperation. In the face of the crisis, timely information exchange was lacking, and our countries were unable to jointly coordinate emergency measures in the region, ensure proper functioning of border-crossings and jointly procure emergency medical equipment and supplies.



Throughout the pandemic, the Baltic Assembly has closely monitored the cooperation of the Baltic states and this work continues. “Comprehensive analysis of the cooperation of the Baltic states during the COVID-19 crisis” is based on the answers provided by the Baltic Council of Ministers, “Comparative review of socio-economic implications of the coronavirus pandemic in the Baltic states” made by Baltic experts, “Overview of the work of the Health, Welfare and Family Committee of the Baltic Assembly in 2020” and other public information.

The analysis shows that despite the difficulties in the initial phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Baltic states were able to strengthen cooperation in various areas, and that COVID-19 has brought countries even closer together. Better coordination in tackling the crisis brought on by the pandemic is undoubtedly of great value, however there are still many issues and areas, which need improvement of joint action and efforts. This analysis pinpoints shortages in cooperation as well as provides ideas on the way forward.

I sincerely hope that the challenges and success stories in this comprehensive analysis will be of added value to the work of the Lithuanian presidency in general, as well as in achieving the ambitious goals and priorities set for 2021. The programme of the Lithuanian presidency will focus on overcoming the impact of the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on the economy, the social field, security, education and research and other areas of cooperation. Only through partnership and trust we can secure safe future for our countries and our Baltic region.

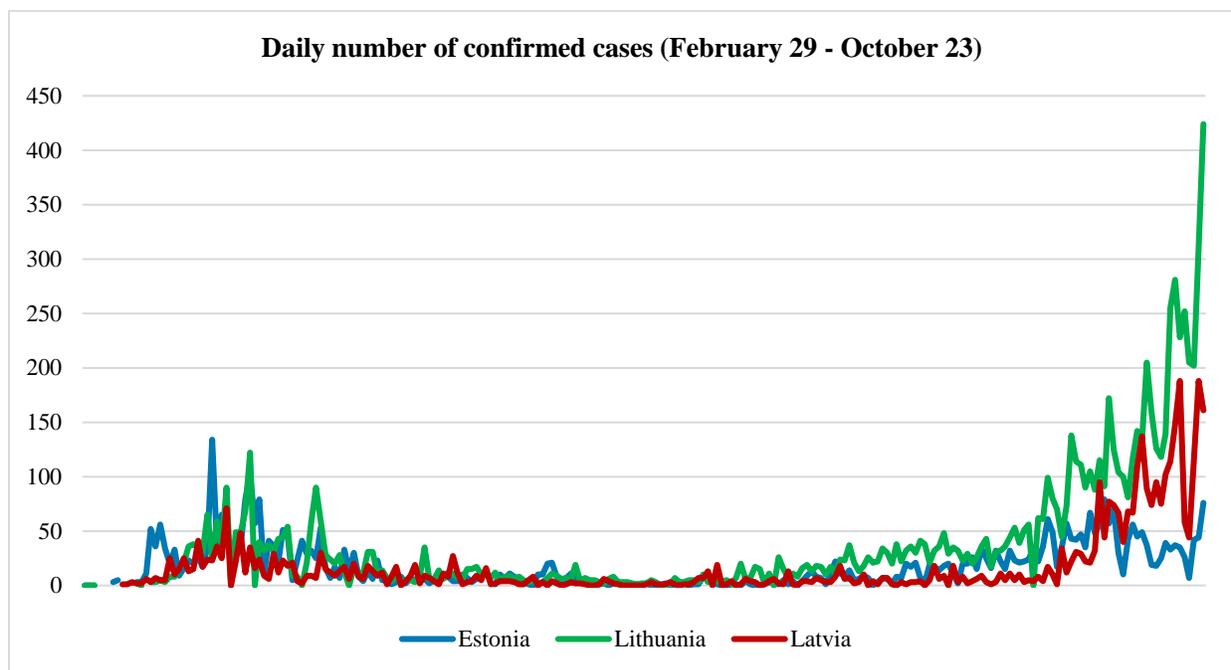
A handwritten signature in blue ink, consisting of several fluid, connected strokes that form a cursive representation of the name Aadu Must.

Aadu Must
President of the Baltic Assembly

COVID-19 SITUATION IN THE BALTIC STATES THROUGHOUT THE PANDEMIC

Spread of COVID-19 in the Baltic states

The situation regarding the COVID-19 virus in the Baltic states has been quite similar throughout the pandemic. Despite this, in October the situation in the countries started to differ, however, in the wider context it can still be considered similar (see the chart below). The similarities in the spread of the virus throughout the pandemic as well as previously established neighbourly relations allowed the region to implement joint efforts, including creating the so-called “Baltic bubble”.



Spread of COVID-19 in the individual states until 23 October 2020:

- In Estonia, 4,300 cases of COVID-19 have been confirmed with 71 deaths; 3,418 people have recovered.
- In Lithuania, 9,104 cases of COVID-19 have been confirmed with 126 deaths; 3,978 people have recovered.
- In Latvia, 3,958 cases of COVID-19 have been confirmed with 49 deaths; 1,357 people have recovered.

Measures to stop the spread of COVID-19 in the Baltic states

The Baltic states responded to COVID-19 in a timely manner, and in general the measures to stop the spread of the coronavirus in all three countries have been similar:

- declaring a state of emergency (in the initial phase of the pandemic);
- restrictions on crossing of the Schengen internal and external border;

- restrictions on free movement of COVID-19 patients as well as mandatory self-isolation after returning from abroad;
- restrictions on economic activities (measures to ensure safety distance, disinfection, wearing of face masks as well as restrictions on participation in public and private events);
- restrictions on public and administrative services in the sectors of education, social and health care (remote work, extensive testing, use of personal protective equipment, etc.).

Despite the similarities in the overall situation and measures adopted in the Baltic states, there are also differences regarding the managing of the pandemic, time and intensity of the imposed restrictions in each of the countries.

Evaluation of national activities to address the crisis

Taking into account the circumstances that occurred during the pandemic and the unpredictability of the situation in general, each of the Baltic states believes that its national response to the challenges posed by COVID-19 has been adequate and timely; however, the countries have also recognized failures and vulnerabilities that arose nationally.

Each of the countries highlights a different view on what helped to limit and combat the COVID-19 virus. For Estonia, it was mutual trust between the government and the society, plentiful and open communication as well as testing and analysing data and sharing their findings as swiftly as possible. Lithuania believes that public confidence in the government was important (63% of the adult population of Lithuania appreciated the work of the government during the quarantine). Latvia highlights the close cooperation between the government and experts as well as the fact that the decisions of the government were mainly based on the opinions and advice of these experts.

In regard to failures on a national level, the Lithuanian government highlighted the frequent changes made in legislation that have hampered the implementation of measures, as subordinate institutions have not been able to plan their actions accurately. The Latvian government believes that the COVID-19 crisis indicated the social problems in Latvia and their causes. Among them also the tax compliance issue – government support in form of downtime benefits was provided only to compliant taxpayers, where the amount of the benefit depends on the amount of taxes paid. A lot of employees were not satisfied with the amount of their downtime benefits, as before the COVID-19 crisis they received untaxed “envelope wages”.

GENERAL EVALUATION OF COOPERATION DURING THE CRISIS

The Baltic states in their evaluation of the Baltic states' cooperation have been positive, as the governments believe that the cooperation of the Baltic states throughout the pandemic has been well-functioning. Despite the overall positive experience of the Baltic cooperation, countries also highlight the need for closer cooperation in future.

The Estonian government points out that the cooperation of the Baltic states on all levels – from political to local – is very good. The Latvian government similarly believes that the Baltic states have shown that close cooperation and exchange of information at different levels contribute to the successful implementation of restriction measures on cross-border risks of communicable diseases. The Latvian government notes that close consultations among the Baltic states at the level of experts and politicians have been very useful for exchanging information on the planned measures to limit COVID-19 as well as mitigate or lift the measures.

The Lithuanian government is more critical of the cooperation of the Baltic states. The government believes that the cooperation between the Baltic states has been efficient at the government level but the practical implementation was not that effective and was also time-consuming, which may prevent a smooth and rapid implementation of initiatives in the future. The Lithuanian government believes that challenges in the implementation of the joint measures resulted from different policies and safety regulations in each of the Baltic states.

First responses to the pandemic and their coordination

The most of the criticism towards countries and their approach to the COVID-19 crisis came in the initial phase of the pandemic, when countries chose to deal with the COVID-19 on a national level first, putting the cooperation on Baltic, European and world levels second. Organisations working towards improving cooperation, including the Baltic Assembly, were struck by the vulnerabilities the COVID-19 crisis revealed in the cooperation of countries. The Baltic states were not an exception.

Ministers of health of the Baltic states were able to come to an agreement and the same can be said about epidemiologists as well. However, problems in cooperation arose on the government level, as it was difficult to find common ground – in the beginning the approaches taken by the governments of the Baltic states were different. Currently, the governments of the Baltic states believe that the cooperation of the countries has been efficient; however, they also acknowledge that there were failures in cooperation during the initial phase of pandemic. The countries identify three areas where failures in cooperation were observed: 1) closure of borders; 2) free movement of goods; and 3) supply of personal protective equipment (PPE).

The Estonian government pointed out that one of the failures recognized by the governments was the long queues at border control posts and the impeded free movement of goods in the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Also, supply of PPE was lacking in the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis as the demand for PPE increased drastically.

However, the initial phase of the COVID-19 pandemic showed not only the vulnerabilities, but also the strengths of the Baltic cooperation. For example, the Baltic states made a joint effort and showed solidarity by organizing repatriation flights to bring back citizens locked in other countries at the start and peak period of the crisis.

Areas where countries would benefit from closer cooperation

All three of the Baltic states in a uniform manner highlighted the importance of the cooperation in the region. The Estonian government noted that the cooperation of the Baltic states is a key part in the success to combat the virus and its larger implications. The Lithuanian government pointed out that it is obvious that joint and coordinated actions of the countries in the region are needed to reduce the risk of the COVID-19 outbreak. Similarly, the Latvian government indicated that the cooperation is key in tackling this crisis not only on a national level, but also on an international level.

In general, the countries indicate different areas of cooperation that need to be improved to ensure better cooperation of the Baltic states. Baltic cooperation could be broken into different areas:

- Cooperation in addressing the health crisis, including inter-agency cooperation;
- Regular exchange of information, including coordination of restrictive and post-crisis measures;
- Free movement of Baltic people and goods;
- Further development of the “Baltic bubble” approach;
- Economic cooperation;
- Digital cooperation;
- Cooperation in social protection and mitigation of the effects of the crisis;
- Cross-border cooperation.

Also, cooperation of the Baltic states in different formats, including international organizations, like the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, the International Monetary Fund, the United Nations, the World Health Organisation, etc. could be very important. Strong international cooperation can help all countries in the world to recover, as a global crisis calls for global solutions to be solved as soon as possible.

Shortcomings and opportunities of the Baltic states’ cooperation in these areas will be analysed further in the report.

COOPERATION OF THE BALTIC STATES IN VARIOUS AREAS

Cooperation in addressing the health crisis in the Baltic states

During the COVID-19 crisis, the health sector has suffered as well as was transformed perhaps the most. So far, the Baltic states have been successful in containing the spread of the virus and the health care systems of the Baltic states have been able to cope with the number of patients hospitalized and cared for. However, autumn and the second wave of COVID-19 are troubling. Most probably countries will have to learn to live with the virus until an effective vaccine becomes available, therefore, it is necessary to learn from the experience and prepare for months to come. Challenges in addressing health crisis can be divided in four categories:

- Common approach in addressing the health crisis;
- Evaluation of measures;
- Inter-agency cooperation;
- Stock of medical supplies.

One of the coordination measures that might be implemented in the Baltic states is the mutual assistance and coordination in the field of disaster prevention, preparedness and response. In December 2019, the Baltic states organized the Baltic States Cooperation Seminar on Emergency and Crisis Management "A Common Approach and Challenges to Prevent, Prepare and Respond to Health Emergencies". The seminar was organized in compliance with the recommendations of the Baltic Assembly on the establishment of cooperation in ensuring the preparedness and response in crisis situations of the health sector. The aim of the seminar was to share experiences on the preparedness of the health sector for emergencies, to exchange information on new initiatives and collect common interests and priorities for further cooperation. During the seminar, common tasks were set: 1) health sector preparedness planning and emergency response; 2) emergency preparedness planning of hospitals; 3) planning and provision of medical reserves; 4) provision of emergency medical care in daily and emergency situations.

The Latvian government pointed out that there are differences and similarities in the provision of emergency medical care and the planning of emergency preparedness in all Baltic states. The overall concept of preparedness for crisis situations is based on the same international documents and structure. Also, all three countries have a well-established civil protection mechanism where the preparedness of the health sector for crisis situations is well integrated.

Another important area where the Baltic states should cooperate is the evaluation of chosen measures. It is crucial to understand if the measures taken by the Baltic states are truly the best way to approach the crisis, for example, is the amount of hospital beds sufficient for such crisis?

Inter-agency cooperation in the Baltic states also could be of great value, as it would ensure not only speedy information exchange but also the exchange of best practices. The Estonian government believes that inter-agency cooperation in the field of public health and its research, sharing best practices, etc. should be utilised more.

Although the process of organizing state medical reserves in the Baltic states is ensured according to similar principles, differences are found in the amount and type of stored materials and technical units. The Baltic states could cooperate in regard to the stocking of medical supplies, including PPE. Sufficient supply is critically important during health crises. Limited local manufacturing capacity and dependence from import makes the Baltic states vulnerable in case there are disruptions in global supply chains. The Estonian government also believes that it is necessary to increase PPE production capacities of industries of the Baltic states. The Baltic states might try to develop cooperation in regard to providing individual protection measures, ensuring strategical medical supplies and also trying joint vaccine procurements.

The Baltic states have had significant accomplishments in joint procurements in the health sector. Despite this, the Baltic states did not jointly procure essential items which could have been an economically feasible step for the region. The Estonian government notes that the crisis came unexpectedly to everyone and the European Commission started planning the EU joint procurement process quite immediately, therefore there was no reason to start a Baltic states' joint procurement in parallel. The Latvian Government explained that the main reason why the Baltic states did not organise joint procurements of essential items was limited personnel resources, namely, the capacity of countries. At the same time, the Estonian government believes that joint procurements and regional stocks coordination is an avenue that needs to be explored and analysed more.

Regular exchange of information between the Baltic states

During a crisis such as COVID-19, it is important to have accurate information on the epidemiological situation to better the effectiveness of public care measures as well as public care and socioeconomic impacts. The Latvian government believes that it is necessary to exchange information on a daily basis, especially regarding travel restrictions and lifting them. Information exchange in regards to post-crisis measures could also be valuable for the Baltic states.

An important aspect in order to improve information exchange is digital developments. Improvements in the exchange of information could improve different areas, including facilitating the reporting of cases and ensuring better support in contact casing activities.

During the times of disinformation, dissemination of reliable information and effective risk communication are also important efforts. This requires raising awareness among the population about health protection, personal hygiene and adapting social norms.

Free movement of Baltic people and goods

All the governments of the Baltic states are proud and vocal about the success story of the Baltic cooperation – the so-called “Baltic bubble” agreement. A similar epidemiological situation in the Baltic states allowed foreign ministers to sign a memorandum of understanding on the free movement between the Baltic states. Starting from May 15, the borders of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania could be crossed by individuals who display no symptoms and hold the citizenship of one of the countries (or have a residence permit, right of residence or whose permanent place of residence is in one of the Baltic states). The “Baltic bubble” was the first such travel zone within the 27-member European Union (EU) during the pandemic.

However, the “Baltic bubble” came to an end when the epidemiological situation in the Baltic states changed. On 11 September, the Latvian government made the entry conditions applying to

people coming from Estonia stricter. Despite this, the Baltic states seem to believe that this approach should be used also further.

The Estonian government noted that the “Baltic bubble” is an excellent example of efficient cooperation to support the free movement of goods and people. The government believes that joint and regular cooperation activities and planning for restrictions on movement and their mediation should be enhanced not only for the purpose of COVID-19 but on a larger horizon as well, also taking into account military mobility considerations. The Estonian government believes that the “Baltic bubble” is a way of thinking about preparing for crises in the future, namely that **inter-governmental** cooperation in this mind-set needs to be mainstreamed into regional cooperation.

The Lithuanian government also believes that there is no doubt that the threat management in one country directly affects the neighbouring states, and therefore the decisions taken in regard to creation of the Single Baltic anti-virus area which led to the restoration of the unrestricted and free movement of people, labour, goods and services would be appreciated. A stronger and better-structured coworking model needs to be implemented, and a strategic vision of a single unified region must be discussed and documented by the governments of the Baltic states in order to create a region with open internal borders.

The Latvian government pointed out that recently the Baltic states have applied different regulations and restrictions regarding travelling to and from countries with a high COVID-19 risk. It is very important that also after opening borders to other countries, the Baltic states continue to synchronize the travel restrictions and epidemiologic precautions in order to maintain the fundamental strategy of the “Baltic bubble”.

Baltic cooperation in regard to free movement of goods also has faced some problems. Free movement of goods in the beginning of the pandemic was impeded. The Lithuanian government believes that in the future it is necessary to secure stable fast lanes for essential goods, including medical and food supplies. It is particularly essential to ensure that products like food, medicine and medical products reach patients, healthcare providers, factories and shops.

In the case of Latvia, the consequences of COVID-19 for agricultural and forestry producers were made significantly worse by restrictions on the crossing of Latvian-Lithuanian borders and by the fact that for quite a long period of time, border crossing, including for agricultural and food freight transport, was possible only through three crossing points on the Latvian-Lithuanian border. Due to the closure of Latvian-Lithuanian borders, Latvian producers had to face significantly increased transportation costs, even though fuel prices decreased. Latvia calls for cross-governmental solutions in crisis situations to be accelerated to avoid losses for agricultural and food producers for which long-term storage of their products is not possible.

Economic cooperation of the Baltic states

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a huge burden for the economies of the Baltic states and the impact of the pandemic must be mitigated. The governments of the Baltic states see that cooperation of the countries could be important also in this area. Small economies are believed to be more vulnerable, therefore joint measures of the Baltic states to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 could be vital for future development.

The Estonian government highlights that the Baltic states as small states are vulnerable to market failures due to the international nature of the economies and limited self-production capacity.

The Estonian government believes that this risk might have been underestimated in the beginning, but needs to be mitigated.

The Lithuanian government believes that the key lesson learned from the crisis in regard to the economic cooperation of the Baltic states is taking coordinated efforts to support a speedy and harmonized response. From the very beginning of the crisis, the Baltic states managed to stop the spread of coronavirus and have cooperated very closely with each other, being among the first ones to start a staged exit from the lockdown. The Lithuanian government also pointed out that post-crisis measures aimed to reduce the negative impact on the economy in hard-hit sectors should be discussed on a regular basis.

“Comparative review of socio-economic implications of the coronavirus pandemic in the Baltic states” concludes that societal and economic relatedness, similar export markets and shared geopolitical position mean that the Baltic states are often seen as a unified region. On the one hand, this provides a unique opportunity to benefit from the previous success in managing the first wave of the virus in order to foster long-term growth. On the other hand, the most difficult in turbulent times seems to be policy coordination, which means that joint efforts might fade into individualistic policy actions.

The Review has provided with scenarios for the Baltic states, and they can be an effective tool in case of a high level of uncertainties. Considering various opportunities and threats, the Review suggests four scenarios or trajectories for coordinated actions:

- ***DigiGreen bubble***. The Baltic states become the “centre of excellence” for the rest of the EU in areas of digital and green transformation by incorporating newest IT, developing biotechnologies and applying them widely without borders in all major policy areas, by attracting the EU funds, exploring opportunities of expanding collaboration in research and industry between the Baltic and leading Nordic, UK and other countries. The Baltic states become the most popular holiday travel destination as they are safe and clean.
- ***Bubble burst***. As the EU has managed quickly to provide a new anti-COVID vaccine for its member states, since 2021 the three Baltic states each further built on their own alternative ideas and current strengths: further advancement of e-Stonia lead to the expanded digital nation; development of life sciences in Lithuania lead to the development of “Green Lithuania”; Latvia – becoming the gateway for the “Baltic bubble” to Europe, etc.
- ***Piecemeal upgrade***. By 2030, each of the three of the Baltic states have developed bits of digital and green transformations after negotiations for the EU Recovery and Resilience Facility. Brussels provided the “Baltic bubble” as an outstanding example of trilateral cooperation and advised the three governments to bring more joint proposals. Due to some inner considerations prevailing and other obstacles to cooperation, the real progress in the implementation of big projects remains negligent.
- ***Nothing ever happens***. The Baltic Assembly in 2030 meets virtually (by means of augmented reality) to discuss potential areas of further cooperation of the Baltic states.

The Review states that in a longer perspective the Recovery and Resilience Facility, aimed at making the EU economies more sustainable, resilient and better prepared for the challenges posed by the green and digital transitions, creates a common ground for fostering transformation of the whole Baltic region. Practical examples of joint actions could include the creation of a common e-residency programme, joint green energy initiatives (e.g. windfarm in the Baltic Sea) or perhaps the creation of joint virtual reality tourism programs.

The spread of the COVID-19 and travel restrictions imposed all over the world has had a serious impact also on the tourism industry of the Baltic states. The Lithuanian government notes that a good example of cooperation among the Baltic states was the solution to open borders to one another. The “Baltic bubble” enabled thousands of tourists to cross the borders, without fearing mandatory self-isolation, and spend their vacation in a way which is more fulfilling. This step allowed local businesses, including accommodation, catering, tourist attractions and shops, to enjoy more visitors than they otherwise would, which has helped them to support themselves. The Lithuanian government believes that there is a need for greater cooperation among tourism officials at national authorities.

The areas where the Baltic states cooperate to ensure better results are various. For example, the Estonian government pointed out that in the energy sector the overall cooperation was good and that successful information exchange was in place, as regular meetings of the Committee of Senior Officials on Energy of the Baltic Council of Ministers took place during the crisis. The Estonian energy sector did not experience notable negative impacts and experts operating critical infrastructure were allowed to travel between critical objects and cross borders in Estonia without restrictions.

The Estonian government also highlighted that the crisis again showed the importance of the Rail Baltica project. It is strategically important to have alternative transport modes to ensure smooth cargo flows.

Digital cooperation of the Baltic states

Due to the spread of COVID-19, digital solutions and their performance became more and more important, as workplaces and other institutions increased their use of digital solutions to protect people from getting the COVID-19 virus and to comply with restrictions that countries had imposed. The Baltic states have the potential to be leaders in the EU in digital matters and the region could gain a lot from digital cooperation.

Estonia believes that e-solutions and communication are key to solving crises – sustainability, security and capacity in these fields are vital to sustain the public sectors and societies. The Estonian government points out that it has become more evident globally that there is a strong need to move towards digitalisation, but much faster than previously thought. Digital cooperation of countries could become better as in the light of digitalisation there are still silos of different levels and there is a need to foster cross-border business as there is a place for improvement. The Estonian government highlights that quite often the issue at hand is that the levels of requirements, rules and security are not the same. In addition, there is still a discrepancy with digital signatures which do not work cross-border as first anticipated. On the other hand, the Estonian government sees that there is visible willingness to move forward with mutual digital advancements as well as try out new solutions in order to look deeper into opportunities like cross-border data exchange between the Baltic states, mutually and/or bilaterally.

Latvia also sees the importance of digital solutions, as during the COVID-19 many of the institutions such as the Register of Enterprises of the Republic of Latvia, State Land Service of Latvia and Latvian Investment and Development Agency used new or improved digital solutions to continue their work also during the pandemic.

Social protection and mitigation of the effects of the crisis

COVID-19 has suddenly and severely impacted not only healthcare systems and economies, but also the way people live and work – their physical and mental wellbeing and conditions. In the current situation, social protection and social safety nets are of critical importance. It is necessary to ensure the sustainability of social protection system and the adequacy of benefits. In this regard, countries should look at the experience of closer neighbours.

Lockdown has encouraged the development of innovative approaches in the social care sector. After quickly shifting most of the services online or remotely, social service providers were able to adapt to a new reality and relaunch face-to-face services. It is important for innovative solutions to ensure both assistance for clients and occupational safety and health for social workers, keeping in mind that there are cases when remote services are not an option.

There are different challenges regarding social services and their development that are important to the social security system. Challenges in the Baltic states are similar, also regarding deinstitutionalisation and social security coverage, therefore cooperation, exchange of practices and coordination of different measures could be valuable for addressing social issues in the countries.

The Lithuanian government noted that the main social challenges in managing the consequences of COVID-19 were: 1) to respond to the needs of parents raising young children and relatives caring for disabled or elderly people after the closure of kindergartens, schools and day care centres; 2) to encourage employers to retain employees, refrain from redundancies; 3) to provide support to the self-employed by restricting various activities, and to help the unemployed or the poor who are not covered by social security.

The Latvian government noted that in crisis situations, social protection and social safety nets are of critical importance. However, in Latvia, the COVID-19 crisis highlighted a need for additional temporary and targeted social security measures, especially for people who contracted COVID-19 (sickness and quarantine). Also, gaps in social security coverage due to flexible tax regimes and undeclared wages became clearly visible in case of allowances for idle time. Thus, improvements in the social security coverage will remain Latvia's medium-term challenge aimed at ensuring both the sustainability of the social protection system and the adequacy of benefits.

READINESS TO ADDRESS CHALLENGES IN CROSS-BORDER REGIONS

General evaluation of cross-border cooperation

Cross-border cooperation of the Baltic states generally is perceived as good throughout the crisis. Despite the overall positive evaluation, the countries also point out that in the initial phases there were challenges, for example, long queues that occurred at border control posts.

Estonia considers the border crossing coordination in the period of the crisis smooth and efficient. Border management authorities have been benefitting from long-term tactical, operational, strategic and political contacts and granted up to date information exchange on situation in the countries, best practices, legislative basis, etc. Border management authorities used an opportunity to arrange several meetings via videoconferencing systems in order to discuss questions pertinent to the smooth movement of persons across the borders before reopening the borders for travelling between the Baltic states.

The Lithuanian government pointed out several areas that impede the crossing of borders, namely, inadequate road infrastructure, lack of human resources, reduction in the number of border checkpoints, public services and the organization of work. The Lithuanian government noted that looking to the future, and given the epidemiological situation which is quite similar in the Baltic states, common control measures that meet uniform standards should be implemented at both the external and internal borders.

Cross-border movement of people and goods

One of the criticisms towards the cooperation of the Baltic states from the Presidium of the Baltic Assembly was the lack of ability to ensure the proper functioning of border-crossings. In the initial phase of pandemic, many inhabitants of Latvia and Estonia who were at that moment in a different country and were using roads were not able to return to Latvia and Estonia, because Lithuania closed its borders for road transport. It would be desirable that in the future matters of closing borders would be discussed between the Baltic states.

In regard to the labour market and free movement of labour force, the process, according to the Estonian government, ran smoothly. Those persons who had the opportunity to work remotely, did so, and the essential movement was allowed throughout the crisis.

Latvia did not reintroduce border control at the EU internal borders during the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. When the self-isolation requirement applied to all persons coming to Latvia from other countries, there were specific exceptions, including those necessary to ensure free movement of goods and provision of services within the EU. For example, the self-isolation requirement did not apply to transport sector workers as well as other specified workers if they did not display the signs of an acute respiratory infection.

During times of crisis, free movement of specialists is also highly important. The Estonian government acknowledges that it is important to ensure that specialists can move across borders, for example, specialists providing warranty service for equipment to keep factories running.

Cooperation in cross-border regions

The Baltic states have numerous cross-border regions, where cooperation between the countries is extremely important for the citizens of these areas, as usually lives and work of the people living there are tied to two countries.

Estonia and Latvia collaborated on the movement of people across the border in the border regions (Valga-Valka) to support the companies relying on the labour of a neighbouring country. The Estonian government noted that between the relevant authorities of Estonia and Latvia regular contacts and good cooperation in cross-border regions has been established. Also, in the spring, at the height of the crisis, cooperation ran smoothly.

In order to facilitate the movement of labour in border regions, in Lithuania specific provisions were enshrined in the legal regulation, for example, the cross-border movement of international commercial carriers was not restricted as they always remained on the lists of those who could cross the border.

Lessons learned and suggestions

One of the failures recognized by governments was the long queues at border control posts. The Estonian government believes that the first days of the reintroduction of border control are crucial and, in the future, more attention must be paid to them. Long queues on the first days can be avoided with better planning and cooperation.

The Lithuanian government noted that during the quarantine period only one border checkpoint (Saločiai-Grenstale) operated at the Lithuanian-Latvian border. Therefore, all the traffic crossing the border at this border section was concentrated there. The existing road infrastructure was physically unable to cope with the vehicle flows. The staff of the National Public Health Centre carried out the quarantine medical check and each stopping of a vehicle made a negative impact on the checkpoint's throughput. Later, upon opening more checkpoints at the Lithuanian-Latvian border the problems were solved.

The Latvian government believes that in order to ensure effective cooperation at the international level, it is necessary to continue information exchange with neighbouring states on border control reintroduction activities, therefore ensuring an optimal solution that will allow effective use of resources and ensuring border control in accordance with the existing situation. It would be important to further harmonize the modalities for the reintroduction of border control on roads crossing the border between two countries, so that it is clear on which roads the country in question reintroduces border control with checks and where the roads are closed for traffic. Such an exchange of information would allow the neighbouring country to plan ahead of time the necessary resources and actions to be taken for the reintroduction of checks or the closure of roads, while also informing other authorities involved in case it is necessary to reintroduce border control at internal borders.

LIST OF SHORTAGES DISCOVERED THROUGHOUT THE PANDEMIC

Area of cooperation	Shortages
Cooperation in the health sector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - lack of cooperation in ensuring preparedness and response in crisis situations for the health sector - lack of evaluation of chosen measures by the Baltic states - insufficient inter-agency cooperation - lack of joint procurements in regard to medical supplies and vaccines - insufficient PPE production capacities of industries - lack of regional stocks coordination - insufficient exchange of information - insufficient cooperation in different formats, including international organizations
Free movement of Baltic people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - lack of strong and well-structured cooperation model - different regulations and restrictions regarding travelling that impede the cooperation
Free movement of goods in the Baltic states	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - lack of stable fast lanes for essential goods, including medical and food supplies - lack of solutions to avoid losses for agricultural and food producers for which long-term storage of their products is not possible
Economic cooperation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - vulnerability to market failures due to the international nature of the economies - limited self-production capacity - insufficient discussions about post-crisis measures aimed to reduce the negative impact on the economy in hard-hit sectors - insufficient policy coordination - insufficient cooperation among the tourism officials
Digital cooperation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - different levels of requirements, rules and security - discrepancy with digital signatures
Cross-border cooperation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - lack of coordination and discussions about closing of borders - inadequate road infrastructure in border areas - insufficient human resources - insufficient number of border check points

RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE BALTIC ASSEMBLY

In 2020, adopted recommendations of the Baltic Assembly will be crucial for the parliaments and governments of the Baltic states. A large proportion of the recommendations will be vital for the overcoming of COVID-19 created situation in the Baltic states as well as for preparing for any future crisis. The Baltic Assembly calls on the parliaments and governments of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, as well as the Baltic Council of Ministers to cooperate in various areas, including cooperation in the field of disaster prevention, preparedness and response, crisis management and civil protection; cooperation in the health care sector; economic cooperation; digital cooperation; and new partnerships in education, science and research.

Recommendations in regard to cooperation in the field of disaster prevention, preparedness and response, crisis management and civil protection:

- to facilitate timely exchange of information regarding crisis situation in the Baltic states and ensure that agencies in the Baltic states responsible for emergency operations exchange relevant crisis-related information promptly in order to facilitate better planning and coordination for future necessitated lockdowns
- to keep monitoring epidemiological situation, facilitate timely exchange of information and experience between competent agencies in order to improve 3B crisis management capacities and disaster preparedness
- to encourage 3B governments and respective ministries to continue good cooperation in restraining possible second wave of COVID-19 and even closer cooperation should second wave occur
- to strengthen cooperation between regional specialist networks dealing with disease prevention and control
- to ensure implementation of Agreement on Cooperation in Disaster Response in the Baltic states, which was ratified by the national parliaments in 2018 and discuss within framework of 3B working group possibility of concluding operational agreements
- considering lessons learned, to elaborate common Baltic comprehensive crisis preparedness strategy in health care and social field to be ready for pandemics in the future;
- to elaborate common approach and understanding of planned activities and mutual cross-border coordination mechanism in case of escalation of security situation
- to eliminate gaps in regard to civil protection and disaster preparedness in cross-border cooperation of the Baltic states
- to develop joint emergency plans in border regions of the Baltic states and ensure training of health care providers to enhance their readiness to work in crisis and emergency situations

Recommendations in regard to the cooperation in health care sector:

- to estimate potential impact of COVID-19 pandemic in health care and social sector, from the point of cross-sectoral and cross-border regions preparedness and regional coordination
- to eliminate obstacles to 3B common E-Health network and ensure compatibility of systems and proper health data exchange

- to continue joint procurements of medicine, develop a strategy and publish a plan of joint procurements, and harmonise the list of joint procurements (vaccines, chemotherapy drugs, medicine for rare diseases etc.)
- based on the positive experience in the joint procurements of vaccines, responsible agencies are to take stock of crisis reserves in the Baltic states and negotiate promptly joint procurements of protective gear and medical supplies, coordinating to that end 3B procurement cycles, if necessary, and taking into account the possibilities in the framework of the EU joint procurement agreement

Recommendations in regard to the economic cooperation of the Baltic states:

- to expand cooperation in the tourism sector in the Baltic region by creating a strategic vision on target markets and tourists flows

Recommendations in regard to the digital cooperation of the Baltic states:

- to agree on 3B common data standards, lists of data to exchange and ensure digital data exchange and interoperability via already existing different platforms or seeking a common platform
- to agree on a common regional approach and overcome obstacles in using Real-Time Economy

Recommendations in regard to new partnerships in education, science and research:

- to explore the possibility of concentrating the resources and expertise of scientists and PhD students of the Baltic states and strengthening existing joint initiatives to enhance the quality of research, improve academic recognition, encourage cooperation between institutions and boost mobility, thus increasing the overall scientific competitiveness of the region
- to develop coordinated approach of the Baltic states for common challenges in increasing scientific capacity and excellence in the Baltic research area

