

Action Plan for Cooperation between the Nordic Council and the Baltic Assembly for 2012-2013

2011 - The 20th anniversary for the Baltic States regained independence - is an obvious starting point for strengthening and updating Nordic-Baltic co-operation. Nordic-Baltic co-operation has been close for 20 years. It is now important to update it to a new situation, where for instance EU matters more for all the countries. The Nordic and Baltic countries work well together on many themes but greater dynamism could be injected into the partnership by working more closely together also in the international arena as in EU. Here more themes for Nordic-Baltic co-operation can be found. Regional cooperation supplements and strengthens EU integration.

The cooperation between the Nordic Council and the Baltic Assembly should be pragmatic and result oriented. Priority must be given to initiatives where the mutual benefits for the countries and citizens are the greatest. The effectiveness of the cooperation will be enhanced by continuing constructive cooperation with the governmental partners – the Nordic Council of Ministers and the Baltic Council of Ministers as well as the NB8 Foreign Ministers.

Better coordination of policies, effective actions in different fields of mutual interest is needed to meet global challenges and promote growth and stability in the Nordic and Baltic region. Both partners will focus their activities on the maintaining and updating the NB8 cooperation thus sustaining the NB8 concept regionally and globally.

Proposals on the priorities for the Nordic Council and the Baltic Assembly for 2012-2013

The Presidiums of the Nordic Council and the Baltic Assembly have the overall responsibility for the cooperation and are directly involved in matters involving international cooperation. The next annual summit of the Nordic Council and the Baltic Assembly is planned to be held in late 2012.

The framework of cooperation between the standing committees of the Nordic and Baltic national parliaments will be developed. Here are listed proposals on the priorities for the Nordic Council and the Baltic Assembly for the coming two years, 2012-2013. The standing committees might find common ground dealing with these issues.

Follow up of the NB8 wise man report

The NB8 Wise Men Report is a new strategic policy document which was taken as basis for setting up the agenda for cooperation between the Nordic Council and the Baltic Assembly. It was discussed with the two authors at the annual summit of the Nordic Council and the Baltic Assembly in December 2010. The report was written by the former Danish Minister of Defence, Søren Gade, and Valdis Birkavs, former Prime Minister of Latvia. The Gade-Birkavs report presents a total of 38 proposals on how Nordic-Baltic co-operation could be strengthened. The report has a broad scope from the practical issues to larger political questions, and Nordic-Baltic parliamentarians should follow the implementation of the proposals.

Joint coordination of activities in regard to the European Union

The NB8 report points out that comprehensive political collaboration is increasingly necessary to defend the region's interests, not least in regard to the EU and other international organisations.

Following the Nordic Council's initiative "A Nordic voice in the EU" lobbying of Baltic – Nordic interests on the EU level could be a new focal point for the cooperation. Already The EU Baltic Sea Strategy showed EU's importance also for the Baltic Sea region. Since both

the Nordic Council and the Baltic Assembly each has lobbied for among other themes the EU Common Agricultural Policy and the EU Cohesion Policy for 2014-2020 and the revised fishery policy. In the future a common Nordic-Baltic voice will be stronger – and in some cases it could include the Benelux Parliament and other regional parliamentary organisations inside EU.

Promoting relations with EU's Eastern neighbours

In order to get a stable Europe, it is important to improve the cooperation with EU's Eastern neighbours.

The Nordic Council met with a number of opposition politicians and NGOs from Belarus in Vilnius, Lithuania, on 25 October 2011. The Lithuanian Vice-President of the Baltic Assembly, Paulius Saudargas, also attended the seminar. The situation in Belarus remains serious. Nordic Council and Baltic Assembly need to assess its commitment and its contacts with the opposition in the run-up to parliamentary elections next year. Depending on the situation during the coming election it might be possible to renew Roundtable Seminars with representatives of both the Parliament and opposition parties, but the situation must be monitored closely before making new plans for contact with Belarus deciding whether further co-operation is feasible.

While the Nordic Council mainly has been involved with EU's close Eastern neighbours, Belarus and the Russian Federation, the Baltic Assembly develops cooperation with the GUAM countries, Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldavia. It may seem that the geographic distance from Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova to our countries is large, but globalisation and interdependence clearly show that borders and distances are relative concepts. As a matter of fact, we are closer than we can imagine. The GUAM countries have expressed their desire to strengthen relations, to adopt cooperation practices, to come closer to the family of European countries. We believe that it is our duty to leave the doors open for this region's countries and to support Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova on their way to the European citadel of democracy and prosperity.

Enhancing integrated and stable financial markets of the Baltic and Nordic countries

The lessons of the financial crisis show the lack of coordination of financial supervision in the Nordic and Baltic countries. Most of the countries have been engaged with short term actions to overcome consequences of the global economic and financial crisis. It is necessary to continue measures to overcome the crisis. However, this should be connected to the medium and long-term vision on the development of the financial sector. Nordic and Baltic financial markets are closely interlinked which means that there is a need for more integrated approach in their supervision.

Developing innovative and competitive Nordic – Baltic region

The increasing interrelatedness of the Nordic and Baltic economies is a sign of a close relationship. The Baltic Sea Region is recovering faster than most from the current crisis. One of the reasons for the relatively swift recovery is the strong regional cooperation.

However there would be a need for common initiatives strengthening the competitiveness of the region. There is a need to develop common Nordic and Baltic information by intensifying academic exchange and uniting resources for innovation and research. Information exchange between the Nordic and Baltic countries, as well as coordinated dissemination of information about the region as a whole brings social, economic and political benefits to all the citizens of the region. Intensified academic exchange could be used to unite resources for research that leads to innovation.

Baltic – Nordic Idea: cultural integration and educational cooperation

The success of the cooperation between the Nordic and Baltic countries has been bolstered by effective institutions like the successful initiative the Nordplus education programme.

Preservation of cultural heritage and its inclusion in modern architecture has been high on the Baltic agenda, while Nordic Council is preoccupied with Culture for all – taking advantage of new media in order to get a broader part of the population access to cultural activities.

Health care and social policy

To ensure sustainable growth, renewing our competitiveness we should focus on the development of the human resources. Health is a basic human value and it is the foundation for the quality of life as well as for personal well-being. Health care is an essential part of public health. To ensure sustainable growth and to strengthen competitiveness it is necessary to provide relevant health care, sufficient availability of primary health care services, promote birth-rate and decrease mortality rate, decrease alcoholism and other addictions. Strengthening Nordic – Baltic efforts to develop a common vision of joint health projects and identifying common challenges in the health care sector and developing common vision for problem solution both in the social sector and the health care will ensure the improvement of society's welfare and health.

Food safety

In the Nordic and Baltic countries consumers should be able to trust that the food on the table is safe to eat. By focusing on food safety the countries can find solutions to manage and minimise the problems.

The rise in global resistance to antibiotics is one of the acute problems addressed under the umbrella of One Health, a concept based on the idea that human and animal diseases are so closely interlinked that efforts to combat them need to be co-ordinated. The Nordic Council has taken an interest in the issue. Nordic data has led to an EU ban on antibiotic growth medicines for animals, a measure it is hoped will spread to the rest of the world.

Green growth: sustainable transport

Well-functioning transport and infrastructure system is one of the factors which increase the competitiveness of the countries and regions. The Nordic-Baltic region has been characterised by low accessibility in the whole Europe. Baltic and Nordic countries should focus their cooperation on the development of an integrated transport and infrastructure system within the region as well as between the region and neighbouring countries. By developing cooperation in this field it should be taken as the basic principle that countries have to find climate friendly solutions towards transport policy and infrastructure. Integrated Maritime Policy dealing with safety at sea in the Baltic Sea is also important. Nordic countries have accumulated experience in implementing environmentally friendly solutions for the transport sector. The Nordic Council and the Baltic Assembly support continued Nordic - Baltic co-operation on promoting experiences, technologies and knowledge to ensure environmentally friendly transport and transport infrastructure in the region.

Energy efficiency offers a powerful and cost-effective tool for achieving a sustainable energy future. Improvements in energy efficiency can reduce the need for investment in energy infrastructure, decrease fuel costs, increase competitiveness and improve consumer welfare. Energy security can also profit from improved energy efficiency by decreasing the reliance on imported fossil fuels. The Nordic and Baltic countries confirm their shared commitment to increase energy security and energy efficiency.

Migration

Migration and asylum policy is of greater political significance in the Nordic-Baltic countries today than previously. The countries face many common challenges in this area. There is consensus to work together on migration policy in the Nordic-Baltic region – migration was theme of the trilateral seminar in 2010 in Oslo. The theme was also discussed at Baltic Assembly's seminar on external and internal security policies, which took place in the Estonian capital Tallinn in May 2010, but many problems still need to be solved.

Trafficking in human beings

Weak cooperation on law-enforcement can jeopardise efforts to combat organised crime and trafficking in human beings. All security risks are interlinked. The Nordic and Baltic countries should increase internal and external security by coordinating actions against human trafficking, smuggling of persons and illegal substances, money laundering, corruption and ensuring social cohesion. BSPC Working Group on Trafficking in Human Beings has done an important job, but the problems have to be dealt with also in the future.