

Action Plan for Cooperation between the Nordic Council and the Baltic Assembly in 2014–2015

Introductory remarks

The Nordic–Baltic region is characterised by stability, dialogue and cooperation; its trademarks are quality and a high sense of responsibility in politics, economics and finance. The Nordic and Baltic approach towards regional cooperation is regarded as a role model by other countries.

The Nordic and Baltic countries have a toolbox consisting of regional networks and cooperation formats which can be used to meet current and future challenges, such as the negative impact of the global recession, economic turbulence, fluctuating demographic indicators, increased competition, and the effects of migration and climate change.

Cooperation between the Nordic Council and the Baltic Assembly should focus on practical partnerships and the establishment of practical Nordic–Baltic networks in areas that have the most direct national impact. Cooperation between the Nordic Council and the Baltic Assembly should be pragmatic and results-oriented. The overarching objective should be to actively involve the standing committees of national parliaments, the Baltic Council of Ministers and the Nordic Council of Ministers in order to create a comprehensive cooperation network, reciprocal ties, as well as to facilitate exchange of information, experience and best practices.

Priorities of the Nordic Council and the Baltic Assembly in 2014–2015

In 2014–2015, Nordic–Baltic cooperation will focus on ever greater interaction among the regions in order to ensure cohesive, effective, outreaching and inclusive regional cooperation, as well as to raise the region's European and global profile and strengthen the position of the Baltic and Nordic countries in Europe and the global arena.

The overarching priority of cooperation between the Nordic Council and the Baltic Assembly will be responsible, dynamic, green and safe regional cooperation.

Through close coordination based on mutual trust, cooperation between the Nordic Council and the Baltic Assembly in 2014–2015 will focus on the following priority areas:

1. Progress in implementing recommendations of the NB8 Wise Men Report

The NB8 Wise Men Report is a strategic policy document which was taken as the basis for setting up the agenda for cooperation between the Nordic Council and the Baltic Assembly. The NB8 Wise Men Report presents a total of 38 proposals on how

Nordic–Baltic cooperation could be strengthened. The report has a wide scope ranging from practical issues to broader political matters; Nordic and Baltic parliamentarians should assess their progress in implementing these proposals.

2. Joint coordination of activities in regard to the European Union

The NB8 Wise Men Report points out that comprehensive political collaboration is increasingly necessary to defend the region's interests both within the EU and in other international organisations.

In 2014–2015, Latvia and Estonia will be preparing for their presidencies of the Council of the European Union.

To ensure an effective Nordic–Baltic region, there must be close contacts with the European Parliament and other EU institutions. Regional cooperation has gradually become an integral part of European policy, both politically and strategically. This is especially true in fields where the Nordic and Baltic countries have common interests. Nordic–Baltic cooperation can bring added value in the drafting of European policies.

One example is that in 2014, the European Commission will be introducing a proposal for a 2030 framework for EU climate change and energy policies. It will be a very important initiative, and a joint Nordic–Baltic position could influence these discussions.

Businesses, NGOs and researchers have already suggested that the Baltic Assembly and the Nordic Council should pool resources and form a cohesive group within the EU. In this way, we could become European frontrunners in energy, smart technologies and competitiveness.

3. Promoting relations with EU's Eastern neighbours

In order to have a stable Europe, it is important to improve cooperation with the Eastern neighbours of the EU.

While the Nordic Council has been involved mainly with the closest Eastern neighbours of the EU – Belarus and Russia – the Baltic Assembly is also developing cooperation with the GUAM countries – Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova. Both the Nordic Council and the Baltic Assembly already have some contacts with the Visegrád countries, which could be involved in promoting relations with the EU's Eastern neighbours.

The main aim of these efforts is based on a commitment to the principles of international law and to fundamental values, such as democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, as well as a commitment to a market economy, sustainable development and good governance.

4. The Nordic–Baltic region as a leading region in research and innovation

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 other regions from the current crisis. One of the reasons for the relatively swift recovery is strong regional cooperation.

The Nordic–Baltic region has to strive to become more digital and innovative. Efforts and resources of the Nordic and Baltic countries have to be pooled and directed towards facilitating innovation.

A digital economy is based on a well-functioning digital single market, which can facilitate e-commerce, simplify procedures for entrepreneurs and offer new digital services, thus enhancing not only cross-border cooperation but also cross-border commerce, as well as productivity and competitiveness. Therefore, issues such as cybersecurity, data protection, e-signature, e-identification, high-speed broadband rollout and web accessibility will be included in the agenda of Nordic–Baltic cooperation.

There is a need for common initiatives to strengthen the competitiveness of the region, as well as a need to develop a joint Nordic–Baltic information network by intensifying academic exchange and pooling resources for innovation and research.

5. A safe and secure Nordic–Baltic region

Internal border controls have been removed in the Schengen area, and the external borders of the European Union are now managed more coherently. In spite of many achievements in the areas of freedom, security and justice, the region still faces challenges which have to be addressed in a comprehensive manner. Further efforts are thus needed in order to improve coherence among policy areas. In addition, since operational activities remain the responsibility of EU member states, cooperation of neighbouring countries should be intensified. It is therefore time for the Nordic–Baltic countries to focus on a horizontal and crosscutting approach to deal with complex challenges of internal security, as well as on dynamic and effective law enforcement cooperation in regard to the fight against organised crime.

5.1. Well-organised migration policy

A well-organised migration process is in the interests of migrants, their countries of origin, as well as transit and recipient countries; however, that requires a streamlined policy. The Nordic–Baltic countries have to continue working on targeted actions to prevent and combat illegal migration.

5.2. Fight against trafficking in human beings

Human trafficking is a significant social, economic and political challenge on a national and international level. Recently much has been achieved in studying this subject, streamlining legislation, analysing public opinion, as well as raising public awareness. Human trafficking is a crime that often reaches beyond the borders of a single country, and therefore it cannot be solved by one country alone – it requires the joint efforts of countries of the victims' origin, as well as transit and recipient countries. The Nordic–Baltic countries, together with other international partners, have to assess public initiatives, as well as exchange experience and information among legislatures, governments and NGOs to achieve common goals in the fight against human trafficking.

5.3. Welfare and health

The joint health projects of the Baltic States have been an inspiration for Nordic politicians who are now trying to find similar solutions for the Nordic countries. Health care and, in a broader sense, the development of efficient welfare models could be an area of mutual benefit. This area consists of issues such as demographic challenges, including brain drain, as well as preventive measures, research and innovation in the health sector, e.g., developing e-health, preventing sexually transmitted diseases and implementing the EU's directive on cross-border healthcare. It will be useful to learn about the best practices in different countries.

5.4. Environment

The Baltic Sea unites the three Baltic States and three of the Nordic States. The six countries have agreed on targets for improving the ecological condition of the Baltic Sea by 2021 by reducing the levels of nitrogen (N) and phosphorus (P), which cause eutrophication. Even if the BSPC (Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference) is already focusing on this issue, it is still important to cooperate in making the Baltic Sea cleaner in order to ensure that the agreed upon targets are reached.

Copenhagen, 22 January 2014