

JOINT STATEMENT OF THE 22nd BALTIC COUNCIL

On the 28th of October 2016 in Riga, Republic of Latvia, the Baltic Assembly and the Baltic Council of Ministers convened for the 22nd Baltic Council to discuss current affairs and cooperation in security and defence, strategic communication, transport and energy infrastructure, education, culture and health care, as well as to evaluate the implementation of the joint priorities of 2016 and define objectives for 2017. The Baltic States view the cooperation between the Baltic Assembly and the Baltic Council of Ministers as traditionally close and constructive. Both formats effectively interact and complement each other.

In 2016 Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are celebrating the 25th anniversary since the recognition of the renewal of independence and re-establishment of diplomatic relations. Latvia has reached one of its foreign policy goals by joining the OECD this year, and Lithuania is on its way to join the organisation in 2017. Estonia is preparing for its first Presidency of the Council of the European Union in the second half of 2017.

The 22nd Baltic Council declares the following:

European Union

The Baltic States welcome the renewed focus and political reflection on the European Union's (EU) future. In the aftermath of the British referendum, it is important to remain strong and united, and work together to tackle the challenges Europe is facing. Full potential of the Baltic cooperation should be used in order to meet our citizens' expectations and provide a better future for the people. The foundations of the European project along with commonly agreed principles and values should be upheld. The Baltic States will continue to work closely and coordinate their positions within the EU, which is especially significant in the face of new challenges.

In these turbulent times Estonia is preparing for its first Presidency of the Council of the EU. Latvia and Lithuania reaffirm their commitment to strongly support Estonia, along with sharing their experience and best practice.

The Baltic States consider well managed **migration** a benefit for all and the best method to ensure legal migration pathways, provide protection for those in need and effectively return irregular migrants. Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania confirm the readiness to provide support for frontline EU Member States. Nevertheless, the participation in any kind of support measures should continue to be voluntary.

Strengthening of the **EU external border security** will remain as one of the key priorities of the Baltic States, as it has a direct impact to the overall security within the EU. In the context of border security issues, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania will continue to explore possible ways for a closer coordination, including better interagency cooperation and exchange of information. The Baltic States welcome the establishment of the European Border and Coast Guard and fully commit themselves to this process.

Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania reiterate the importance of the **Eastern Partnership** policy and reaffirm their commitment to assist Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine in implementation of the Association Agreements with the EU, as well as to develop efficient framework of cooperation with Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus. The Baltic States stress the need to implement the decisions taken at the Eastern Partnership Summit in Riga on May 21-22, 2015, and underline the importance of holding the next summit during the Estonian EU Presidency in the second half of 2017.

Security and Defence

The Baltic States highly appreciate the dedication and solidarity that NATO Allies have demonstrated through firm and important decisions taken at the **Warsaw Summit** on July 8-9, 2016, which will strengthen Alliance's deterrence and defence. Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania express full readiness to contribute to the implementation of Warsaw Summit decisions and particularly reaffirm their commitment to ensure adequate Host Nation Support for Enhanced Forward Presence deployed to the Baltic States.

Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania will work closely with the framework nations and other contributing Allies to ensure that the multinational battalion-sized battlegroups can operate in concert with national forces and are provided with all necessary enablers to act by triggering an immediate Allied response to any aggression.

Building on the commitments made at the Warsaw Summit to invest in robust, flexible and interoperable military capabilities and strengthen national resilience, the Baltic States will uphold the Defence Investment Pledge and explore ways to reinforce and deepen defence cooperation which would maximise our efforts.

The U.S. presence remains the main key for security and stability in the region. The Baltic States will stay focused on U.S. security assistance and deterrence measures as part of NATO's approach to regional security.

Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania strongly condemn **terrorism** in any form of its manifestation. In parallel to the ongoing work within the United Nations, the EU and other international forums, the Baltic States are committed to further enhance the trilateral cooperation in the field of information sharing and exchange of best practice in order to prevent radicalisation, violent extremism and terrorism and to ensure security for the whole community.

The Baltic States view **Russia's aggression in Ukraine** as a matter of great concern and regret that there have been no considerable developments with regard to implementation of the Minsk Agreements. Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania will continue to support all measures taken by the OSCE, the EU and NATO demanding Russia to play an active role in implementing its international commitments. The Baltic States urge Russia to engage constructively in finding sound and sustainable solution to this conflict, including ending the illegal annexation of Crimea.

The Baltic States reaffirm their commitment to prevent and fight **cyber threats** and welcome the declaration of cyber as a separate domain at the Warsaw Summit. The Baltic States welcome the signing of the trilateral Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation in Cyber Security on November 4, 2015, and support the ongoing process of coordination of cyber security measures in the form of annual expert consultations and exercises. On March 29-30, 2016, the 8th Baltic Cyber Security Coordination Meeting took place in Tallinn, during which the implementation of National Cyber Security Strategies was discussed amongst other issues. The Baltic States also welcome the efforts of the Baltic States' Cyber Guard volunteers, as well as appreciate the valuable work in research, training and exercises at the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence in Tallinn.

Strategic Communication

Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania praise the common understanding not only in the Baltic States, but in the whole EU and NATO towards the necessity to strengthen common strategic communication capabilities. The Baltic States stress the crucial need for continuous cooperation in dealing with targeted Russian information operations against the transatlantic community, Nordic-Baltic region and our societies, spread of Russian propaganda and disinformation campaigns. Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania welcome the inclusion of strategic communication as one of the core elements in joint military exercises. The Baltic States fully support work of the NATO Strategic Communication Centre of Excellence in Riga and the EU East Strategic Communication Team in Brussels. The Baltic States also mark the importance of the high-level conference "Security in the Baltic Region: Current Developments and the Way Ahead" on May 13, 2016, in Riga, which was jointly organised by the Baltic Assembly and the Baltic Council of Ministers. Besides being a successful event in terms of addressing the current issue of strategic communication, it also serves as a good example of fruitful cooperation between the legislative and executive bodies of the Baltic States.

Media

Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania confirm the readiness to promote initiatives that encourage the media to offer high quality, responsible, reliable and independent journalism to the public. The Baltic States are exchanging experience in the development of media literacy. In particular, the Baltic States will continue to work together to explore the best ways how to reach out to those parts of society which are not easy to access due to language barrier and different consumption of media content. Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania welcome the establishment of the Baltic Centre for Media Excellence in Riga, which is a clearinghouse for journalism training and a facilitator of professional dialogue in the Baltic region and beyond.

Energy Security

The Baltic States will continue to work closely together to develop an integrated and well-functioning regional energy market and strengthen energy security, which is one of the top priorities, especially considering the EU's dependence on external natural gas suppliers and the existing geopolitical risks.

Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are committed to choose the best solution for the synchronisation of Baltic States' electricity networks with the European network according to the planned schedule of the BEMIP high-level-group agenda, while taking into account the results of Joint Research Centre study on the Baltic States' synchronisation alternatives with the European network, as well as interests of all involved parties. The Baltic States agree that it is very important to ensure that the necessary nuclear safety and environmental requirements are met in all Nuclear Power Plant (NPP) projects without exception, including in Ostrovets NPP. Due to different market structures, as well as environmental and nuclear safety standards of the EU and third countries, the Baltic States recognise the need to work towards the creation of a level-playing field in electricity trade vis-à-vis third countries and to find an optimal solution that meets concerns of everyone involved. The electricity interconnections Estlink 1 and Estlink 2 between Estonia and Finland, LitPol Link1 between Lithuania and Poland and NordBalt power link between Lithuania and Sweden are already contributing to the regional security of supply and integration of the Baltic States to the European market.

The Baltic States stress the need for a timely implementation of gas infrastructure projects such as the gas interconnections between Lithuania and Poland (GIPL) and Estonia and Finland (Balticconnector), as well as timely modernisation of Inčukalns underground gas storage, which together with the operational liquid natural gas (LNG) terminal in Klaipėda are the key elements of open and competitive regional gas market. The Baltic States see these projects of crucial importance for the development of regional gas market and security of supply, as well as physical integration of the Baltic States with the EU gas market. Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania will also seek the ways to explore the potential of regional cooperation in terms of renewable energy sources.

In the context of wider regional energy security the Baltic States reiterate that any new infrastructure objects should comply with the EU legislation and the objectives of the Energy Union, and note that the Nord Stream II project goes against the aims of the EU's policy on diversifying gas supply sources and enhancing energy security.

Rail Baltic/Rail Baltica

Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania reiterate the strategic importance of re-establishing their railway connectivity with the European railway network, especially as part of the EU TEN-T North Sea – Baltic Core Network Corridor, thereby allowing the Baltic States to develop new, environmentally friendly solutions for passenger and freight mobility.

The Baltic States reconfirm their commitment to implement the *Rail Baltic/Rail Baltica* project and rapidly move forward in accordance with the set objectives and timeframe, thus ensuring continued EU support and funding at the highest permissible EU co-financing rates in the current and following EU multiannual financial frameworks.

Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania welcome the agreement on the Contracting Scheme laying practical foundations for a transparent, efficient and timely implementation of the *Rail Baltic/Rail Baltica* project. The Baltic States aim to develop and sign the Intergovernmental Agreement, thus strengthening the commitment to implement the project and ensure its functionality.

The Baltic States encourage Poland and Finland to continue active participation in the development of the North Sea – Baltic Sea TEN-T Corridor with the aim to improve connectivity and ensure efficient use of the *Rail Baltic/Rail Baltica* project.

Education, Science and Culture

Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are committed to continue the close cooperation towards building a united higher education and science area of the Baltic States with an aim to boost the research excellence, innovations, investment and overall competitiveness of the region.

In 2015 the implementation of the Baltic Bonus program started in order to increase the success rate of the Baltic projects submitted for the Horizon 2020, as well as to encourage cooperation and raise the quality of projects among the Baltic researchers. The Baltic States are actively participating in the INTERREG project "Baltic Science Network" in order to further develop the Baltic research infrastructure mapping and joint strategies for scientific excellence, to align policies on widening

participation in future EU programmes on research and innovation, as well as to improve the mobility tools in research and higher education.

The Ministries of Education and Science of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia are actively working on harmonising the trilateral Agreement on automatic academic recognition, which was developed under the Erasmus+ project AURBELL and discussed during the trilateral ministerial meeting in Estonia in June 2016.

Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania reiterate their commitment to continue the active and successful cooperation in organising joint projects to mark the Centenaries of the Baltic States. The preparation of various thematic regional, cross-border and community events in the Baltic States has been defined as a strong integral element of the Centenary celebration throughout the whole five year period (2017-2021). The preparations are supported by regular meetings of Centenary organising bodies and communication activities.

Healthcare

The Baltic States are committed to work further on joint procurements of medicinal products and medical devices.

Further options for cross-border cooperation between Latvia and Estonia in the provision of ambulance services will be explored. Latvia and Lithuania will continue negotiations on the Draft Agreement on Cooperation in the Provision of Ambulance Services in the Border Area.

The Baltic States are committed to further develop the cooperation in exchange of organs for transplantation.

The Baltic Council defines the following **joint priorities for cooperation in 2017**:

- 1) Strengthening of security within the region, enhancement of security and defence cooperation;**
- 2) Developing regional energy market;**
- 3) Developing transport connections.**

The 23rd Baltic Council will be held during the Estonian presidency on the 10th of November 2017 in Tallinn, Republic of Estonia.

Jānis Vucāns
President of the Baltic Assembly

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Chairman of the Cooperation Council
of the Baltic Council of Ministers

Riga, October 28, 2016