

JOINT STATEMENT

PRIME MINISTERS' COUNCIL OF THE BALTIC COUNCIL OF MINISTERS

On the occasion of their videoconference to conclude the Estonian presidency of the Baltic Council in 2020, the Prime Ministers of the Baltic States highlighted successful cooperation and committed to continue working together in the following areas, namely:

Reaffirmed the joint effort and fruitful cooperation in the course of negotiations of the Multiannual Financial Framework and Recovery effort under Next Generation EU, which is a crucial element for a sound and sustainable recovery of the EU economy following the COVID-19 crisis. The coherent effort of the Baltic States led to the favourable outcome on the priorities of the Baltic region.

Expressed full determination to the rapid implementation of Recovery and Resilience Facility and presenting ambitious national recovery and resilience plans, which set out reforms and investment agendas, highlighting the response to the COVID-19 crisis, and contributing to the digital and green transition.

Cooperation in tackling the Covid-19 crisis: the success of Baltic coordination

Highlighted the successful cooperation in implementing a coordinated COVID-19 response and agreed on continuing regular information exchange between Health Ministers on the epidemiological situation and envisaged COVID-19 measures.

Reiterated the importance of continued cooperation in border areas between the Baltic States in order to ensure the free movement of people and the functioning of daily life.

Agreed to cooperate in ensuring equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines in the Baltic States and exchange information regarding vaccination strategies.

Reiterated the importance of providing transparency and comprehensive information on vaccine safety matters.

Highlighted that vaccination will be voluntary and encouraged the public to take part in the vaccination program, which is a part of the COVID-19 exit strategy.

Agreed to enhance cooperation in cross-border contact tracing, including with the help of digital solutions, and to harmonise testing strategies regarding cross-border movement.

Decided to launch a pilot project as soon as possible between the Baltic States in order to facilitate cross-border movement by mutually recognising test results using a digital solution.

Agreed to implement the cross-border exchange of e-prescriptions between the Baltic States by 2023 at the latest in order to facilitate the free movement of people.

Security, defence and foreign policy: strong commitment to allied and transatlantic relations

Reaffirmed full dedication and commitment to close security and defence cooperation. Pledged to further strengthen our states' common efforts in areas of key importance, such as enhancement of the armed forces, development of new capabilities, and participation in joint

exercises and training, as well as operational planning, situational awareness, military mobility and interoperability.

Emphasised the key role of NATO and strong transatlantic cooperation in ensuring security and stability in the Baltic region and the entire Euro-Atlantic area. Underlined the need to strengthen further NATO's defence and deterrence posture, including through implementation of all relevant NATO Summit decisions, as well as remain committed to the fight against terrorism.

Welcomed the continued presence of Allied military forces in the Baltic states as an integral part of NATO's deterrence efforts in the region; thanked all participating NATO Allies for their contribution to the enhanced Forward Presence Battle Groups, the Baltic Air Policing Mission as well as other Allied engagements in the region.

Reaffirmed support to NATO's Open Door policy and commitment to the NATO Bucharest Summit decisions.

Reiterated their commitment to keep defence spending above 2% of GDP.

Expressed their support to NATO Secretary General's forward-looking reflection within NATO 2030 and in preparation of next year's meeting of NATO leaders.

Reaffirmed enduring commitment to strong allied relations and close partnership with the United States. Welcomed the United States' military presence in the Baltic region and expressed readiness to continue working with the United States in order to enhance security and defence cooperation in the region.

Expressed determination to take further NATO-EU cooperation to promote stability and prosperity on both shores of the Atlantic; first of all in domains such as military mobility, cyber defence, strategic communication.

Emphasised the need to work in all key sectors that would improve situational awareness, address vulnerabilities and continue efforts to bolster cyber resilience and deter malicious cyber activities as well as to increase awareness on 5G security issues.

Condemned the violence against peaceful protestors, and called on the authorities of Belarus to release immediately and unconditionally all arbitrarily detained persons, including political prisoners and representatives of the media. Expressed support to the legitimate demands of the people of Belarus for free and fair presidential elections in a transparent way with the participation of international observers. Expressed support to the expansion of sanctions against human rights abusers and supporters of the regime.

Condemned the use of a chemical nerve agent against Russian opposition figure Alexey Navalny which constitutes a severe violation of international law and basic human rights, and urged Russia to fully cooperate with the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons in all aspects of the investigation regarding the poisoning of Alexey Navalny.

Reaffirmed their unwavering support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity and to the non-recognition policy of the illegal annexation of Crimea, while expressing continued support for democratic reforms in Ukraine, including in security and defence sectors.

Digital transition: enhancing the economic recovery

Reiterated the importance of innovation and digital development in leading the Baltic States into a new European digital decade.

Agreed on increasing their efforts in enhancing the federation of interoperability platforms like X-Road and VISS in order to offer more cross-border public e-services, while striving to make the Baltic countries stand out as a region for its agile, innovative and human-centric digital solutions.

Highlighted the importance of interoperable and mutually recognized e-identification solutions such as ID-cards and emphasized that digital identities should be made available for all EU citizens, as also stressed in the European Council conclusions from 2 October. The Baltic States support introducing interoperable digital signatures all over Europe.

Agreed to promote joint industry digitalisation projects and innovative technology diffusion networking including cybersecurity, AI, and sharing of best industry digitalisation practices.

Aimed to building a true Real-Time Economy ecosystem, starting with establishing the Real-Time Economy Flagship for the Baltic Sea Region by mid-2021.

Climate Transition and Connectivity: together towards a sustainable future

Reiterated the Baltic States commitment to achieving a climate neutral European Union by 2050 and expressed their support for the enhanced EU emissions reduction target of at least 55% by 2030 in order to ensure sustainable growth in Europe.

Considered the Commission's Communication on 'Stepping up Europe's 2030 climate ambition' as a good basis for further discussions on an enabling framework, in order to ensure a realistic, affordable, fair and cost-effective transition, taking into account different national circumstances, and called for additional financial support to accelerate investments in key sectors.

Considered the Commission's 'Circular Economy Action Plan' as a good basis for opening up wider opportunities for new business models and business cooperation on the basis of sustainable product policy framework.

Pledged to cooperate on enhancing offshore wind energy in the region, encouraging cooperation between Baltic transmission system operators for the sustainable and cost-efficient development of the Baltic Sea Offshore Grid, while recognizing the vital role of BEMIP and the European Commission in leading regional cooperation, and called for potential additional EU investment solutions into offshore-related joint and hybrid grid projects, while noting the importance of joint infrastructure planning.

Welcomed the launch of a regional gas market including Estonia, Latvia and Finland, and committed to developing the market in coming years, with the aims of full Lithuanian and

Finnish participation on mutually acceptable terms, and finding ways to decarbonise the gas sector to boost the use of biomethane and in future, also green hydrogen.

Recommitted to complete the synchronisation of Baltic electricity grids with Continental Europe via Poland by 2025, streamlining all efforts to install all necessary infrastructure, including Harmony Link and synchronous condensers in all Baltic States, as soon as possible. The Baltic States welcomed the recent funding decision of 720 million euros from the Connecting Europe Facility, and the strong political support of the European Commission for this European project.

Reaffirmed the agreement of the Baltic States to cease electricity trade with Belarus following the start of operations of the Belarusian nuclear power plant in Ostrovets, and committed to speed up work on all common measures, which would continuously and effectively prevent trading Belarusian electricity (directly or indirectly) in the Baltic market. The Baltic States condemned the hasty commissioning of the nuclear power plant in Ostrovets, and strongly urged Belarus to comply with the highest international environmental and safety standards and implement the EU stress tests recommendations without any further delay, in order to ensure nuclear and environmental safety in the Baltic region and the whole EU.

Welcomed the recent European Council decision, underlining the importance of ensuring nuclear safety of the Belarusian nuclear power plant in Ostrovets and reiterated the invitation for the Commission to investigate possible measures preventing commercial electricity imports from third countries' nuclear facilities that do not fulfil EU recognised safety levels as soon as possible.

Reconfirmed strategic importance of the Rail Baltica project for the Baltic states' economy in this extraordinary COVID-19 situation as investments for the project are of crucial importance for economic recovery. Welcomed the political agreement struck on additional funding for missing major cross-border railway links between cohesion countries, including Rail Baltica during the EU Summit in July, and invited the European Parliament to share this position in the on-going Connecting Europe Facility trilogues. The Baltic States pledged to continue coordination with putting funds into efficient and effective use in a speedy manner, and recommitted to completing the cross-border railway project by 2026. Highlighted the importance of timely allocation of financing to the project activities, moreover called to maintain 85% EU funding for the entire Rail Baltica project scope. Emphasized cooperation towards reinforced project implementation to accelerate design and construction works, with the Baltic States remaining in control as owners of the built infrastructure and shareholders of RB Rail AS, and providing guidance over strategic elements of the project.

Recognized the progress achieved in the discussions on the Rail Baltica infrastructure management between the institutions involved, who shall, in cooperation with other responsible institutions, pursue further the development of the Rail Baltica infrastructure management model which is conceptually defined as having the objective to provide equal, non-discriminatory and easy access to infrastructure to railway undertakings, customers and other third parties. The Prime Ministers encouraged the responsible ministers to ensure that a road map and action plan for further development of a commonly agreed Rail Baltic infrastructure management model is produced without delay. The Baltic states commended the

progress made by Poland, and in line with agreements and declarations on Rail Baltica, confirmed their support to the recent memorandum of understanding between Poland and Lithuania.

Expressed support to ongoing cooperation in the Baltic States on the development of 5G TEN-T cross-border corridor and stressed the necessity of fast and efficient roll-out of 5G infrastructure and services, while noting that ubiquitous and uninterrupted 5G coverage is not just a common European goal, but also a way to boost our economies, promote innovation and increase safety.

Emphasised the importance of forest biomass as a renewable energy source and called upon the European Commission to ensure a stable regulatory environment, based on the agreed sustainability criteria on forest biomass usage in energy established with the Renewable Energy Directive (EU 2018/2001) to ensure that biomass is produced, processed and used in a sustainable and efficient manner.

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Via videoconference, 21 December 2020