Introduction

Nordic-Baltic regional cooperation in the NB8 format is demonstrating its value in changing times. 2015 has been a challenging year in our region, like the year preceding it. The conflict in Ukraine and Russia’s aggressive behaviour have altered the security situation in Europe as well as in the Nordic-Baltic region. Russia’s confrontational behaviour is testing our resolve.

Also conflicts outside our own area have been at the centre of NB8 attention and have had impacts on our countries, such as the conflict in relation to Syria/Iraq/ISIL and the refugee and migration crisis. There are many challenges to address – in our own region and beyond – and 2015 has shown that we seek to face these challenges by joint efforts.

The eight Members of the NB8, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Sweden and Denmark, have faced the regional challenges in solidarity and cooperation. Security and defence policy has continued to be an important part of the dialogue. Solidarity is shown in many ways, in addition to NATO and EU security cooperation. When Estonian security officer Eston Kohver was taken hostage from Estonian territory, abducted and imprisoned by Russian security forces in contravention to international law in September 2014, the NB8 Foreign Ministers immediately reacted as a group with a common statement in Tallinn, as well as individually and through the EU. Throughout 2015, the Kohver case remained at the centre of attention of all eight Members, including at the Foreign Ministers’ meeting on 3 September in Copenhagen, where, once again, the Ministers called for the immediate release of Mr Kohver and carried the yellow ribbon in solidarity. While Mr Kohver’s safe return has now been obtained by Estonia, aggressive Russian behaviour and the security situation in the region in general stays at the top of the NB8 agenda.

Our cooperation is based on common values deep-rooted in freedom, democracy, human rights and the rule of law. Based on a common understanding evolving from our values and our continued dialogue, we address challenges together, and we also look beyond our own borders and take joint responsibility in relation to our surroundings. Cooperation promotes regional security, strengthens our global impact and enables contributions to growth, free trade, strong and sustainable standards in the global market and the global climate agenda. A common voice is a strong voice.

The NB8 is, however, more than a voice. To strengthen its relevance and visibility, NB8 cooperation must also show concrete results within areas of importance not least to our region. In order to develop the NB8 cooperation, our dialogue should aim for action and new common initiatives where possible. Together, the group carries enough weight to be a driver, standard-bearer or even leader in matters of general importance also to others.
Within the four focus areas identified by Denmark as presidency of the NB8 in 2015 – Ukraine/Russia/security in the region; propaganda/strategic communication/Russian language media; energy security; and the Eastern Partnership – the group has aimed together to identify grounds for new initiatives and to achieve concrete results.

This year, one example of concrete initiatives and results stands out. Russian propaganda had increasingly been realised as posing a problem for our regional security, when the NB8 decided to do something about it. The NB8 countries’ actions, individually and as a group – including through seminars with media professionals and like-minded States and organisations, notably the EU, NATO, the Nordic Council of Ministers and the OSCE, as well as with the four Visegrad States – were instrumental in catching the attention of EU Foreign Ministers and Heads of State and Government, who adopted Council Conclusions in January and March on the importance of strategic communication and support to independent media alternatives to the Russian propaganda. This paved the way for the EU’s Action Plan on Strategic Communication in June and the establishment of the EEAS East Stratcom inter-institutional communication team during the summer, inter alia with seconded staff from Member States. The team is already up and running.

All the mentioned four focus areas have been pursued as central parts of the NB8 high level meetings this year, and seminars/conferences have been arranged with important contributions from all eight, including on energy security (with the Baltic Development Forum). Further events will follow during the remainder of 2015.

This progress report outlines the development of the NB8 cooperation during Denmark’s presidency in 2015. It is structured around the mentioned four focus areas of the year. The focus areas were chosen with a view to regional agendas and also with an ambition of finding areas where a joint NB8 effort could create concrete results. The Gade-Birkavs report also served as underlying inspiration, being a common reference point for the NB8 cooperation. To show the broadness of the NB8 cooperation, an overview of meetings held during the year is enclosed. Close coordination takes place in a number of multilateral organisations. NB8 diplomats also work closely together in numerous diplomatic representations. All day-to-day meetings and contacts between NB8 officials as well as Ministers can of course not be reflected in one single overview. The so-called NB6 meetings, taking place ahead of EU FAC meetings are, for instance, not included.

Strong representation from all countries was demonstrated at the high-level meetings of the year. Firstly, at the meeting between the NB8 Foreign Ministers and their colleagues from the Visegrad States that took place on 12-13 March in the High Tatras in Slovakia. An extra NB8 Foreign Ministers meeting took place in Helsingør on 5-6 May, focusing in particular on energy security in the NB8 region, as well as on strategic communication, on which a statement was issued. This meeting was followed by the traditional early autumn meeting among the NB8 Foreign Ministers on 2-3 September in Copenhagen, where regional security was one of the main issues, and statements were issued on this topic as well as on climate issues. The traditional meeting for the NB8 State Secretaries took place on 19-20 October in Copenhagen. The Prime Minister’s annual NB8 meeting took place in Reykjavik on 28 October, again with
special attention to NB8 focus areas. Iceland also hosted the annual Northern Future Forum gathering Prime Ministers of the NB8 countries and UK.

**Ukraine crisis**

The Ukraine crisis has been on the NB8 agenda throughout the year, i.a. at meetings of Prime Ministers, Foreign Ministers, State Secretaries, Political Directors – with the Ukrainian Political Director as a guest - and at the spring meeting of the e-PINE format.

At the meeting of Foreign Ministers of the Visegrad countries and the NB8 in the High Tatras on 12-13 March 2015, Ministers voiced their deep concern over the recent escalation of violence in Eastern Ukraine that resulted in a great number of innocent casualties among the civilian population. The Ministers expressed their strong support for solving the crisis through diplomatic means and stressed the need for a full and unconditional implementation of the Minsk Protocol and the Minsk Memorandum.

At the NB8 Foreign Ministers’ meeting in Copenhagen on 2 - 3 September, Ministers addressed the Russian aggression in Ukraine and emphasized the challenge it poses to European security, also in the Nordic and Baltic region. With the illegal annexation of the Crimea and continued support for separatists in Donbas, Russia has manifested itself as a concrete threat to Ukraine and other Eastern Neighbourhood countries’ security and European ambition.

The Nordic and Baltic Ministers and officials have on several occasions during the year expressed a clear position: Ukraine’s sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity, within its internationally recognised borders must be respected. The NB8 countries have supported the OSCE’s important work to promote stability in eastern Ukraine and international humanitarian organizations’ efforts to alleviate the consequences of the conflict for civilians in the area.

Ministers have continuously supported the Ukrainian government’s ambitious reform agenda and the promotion of European values and standards. To that end, NB8 Ministers will continue to chart progress on reforms in all areas with a special focus on anti-corruption, energy security and good governance. The NB8 countries have contributed to maintaining the conflict in Ukraine on the international agenda. Ministers have continuously urged the parties to work for a full implementation of the Minsk Agreement before the end of the year, and unanimously continue to support the EU’s sanctions policy toward Russia.

**Regional security**

In 2015, we have continued to see the return of geopolitics to the Nordic-Baltic Region. Clearly, Russia has increased its attention on our region, and the aggressive Russian behaviour and rhetoric is indeed worrying for the regional security situation. Russia’s confrontational behaviour is testing our resolve and might potentially lead to mistakes and misunderstandings, causing greater instability and deterioration of the relationship. The Nordic and Baltic countries face this challenge with mutual solidarity and cooperation.
The NB8 believes that continued exchange of information and ensuring best practices can lead to increased security and trust in the region, including in the area of air safety. This includes keeping channels for dialogue open with Russia in order to avoid unnecessary escalations. The unity among the NB8 countries is, together with a close cooperation with EU and NATO, pivotal in managing and confronting the new security situation that we face in our region.

The challenging security situation in the Nordic-Baltic Region has once more made the issue the centre of attention in recent meetings between NB8 countries. During the foreign ministers meeting in September, the ministers issued a joint statement on the regional security situation, expressing concern over the development in the region. Also the abduction, subsequent illegal detention and verdict against the Estonian police officer Eston Kohver was included in the joint statement, as mentioned above in the introduction.

Regional security has also been discussed in a number of other foreign and security policy dialogues during the year, including a new Nordic-Baltic-US political-military format with representatives from both Foreign and Defence Ministries. The new format will likely be included in the E-PINE format.

**Russian language media and strategic communication**

This topic is mentioned in the introduction as a case in point showing how concrete results can be obtained by the NB8 through the coordinated efforts of all towards convincing other States and organisations of the necessity to take action to address an area of concern.

Throughout 2015, NB8 has played a key role in addressing the issue of strategic communication and support for independent Russian language media in the challenge posed by the continuous disinformation by Russian media, inter alia in relation to the crisis in Ukraine. Several initiatives have been taken, in addition to the Foreign Ministers’ discussions of the topic at the mentioned NB8 and NB8+Visegrad meetings. An NB8 seminar gathering media professionals was held in Riga in January, and it was followed up by a conference in Copenhagen in February, where key actors from the NB8, partner countries, the EU EEAS, NATO and the Nordic Council of Ministers joined the discussion, and a list of 13 points from the discussion was distributed. Members of the NB8 worked actively together, including in the OSCE in Vienna where a seminar was arranged, and at the OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting in Warsaw, where a side event resulted in a list of recommendations. At the e-PINE spring meeting in Brussels the issue was the focus of a discussion with also representatives from NATO and the EU.

Ways forward now follow two tracks: Proactively communicating to Russian and non-Russian speaking EU target audiences; and supporting capacity-building of free and independent media. The opening in November of the Baltic Centre for Media Excellence will respond to the specific needs for media training in the Baltic countries and also the Eastern Partnership area. NB8 Foreign Ministers have welcomed the launch of EU’s Action Plan on Strategic Communication and EED’s feasibility report, which in combination with the ongoing review of the EU Neighbourhood policy and European Security Strategy as well as the follow-up on the Eastern Partnership summit in Riga provide a solid basis for the implementation, coordination
and initiation of joint initiatives. The recent opening of the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence in Riga will strengthen the effort even more.

These initiatives have also expanded the cooperation between the informal NB8 format and the Nordic Council of Ministers, including through its local offices in the Baltic States, in contributing to the strengthening of independent and balanced Russian language media and the enhancement of media literacy. Valuable synergies have been established in this regard.

**Eastern Partnership**

Throughout the Danish Presidency, the EU Eastern Partnership has figured prominently on the agenda of Ministers and officials.

At the meeting of foreign ministers of the four Visegrad States (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia) and the Nordic and Baltic States in the High Tatras in March, the Ministers discussed the EU Eastern Partnership prior to the Eastern Partnership Summit in Riga in May. A co-chair statement from Slovakia as Visegrad presidency and Denmark was issued in which the Ministers fully subscribed to comprehensive modernization and prosperity in Eastern Partnership countries based on common values, norms and standards, i.e. democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights and market economy. The Ministers underlined the importance of developing and strengthening the relations with all partner countries involved in the Eastern Partnership. The Ministers expressed the common wish that the key deliverables of the Summit should include the strengthening of economic integration, better involvement of civil society and stronger incentives to preserve the pro-European commitment in the partner countries. There was agreement that differentiation of partner countries is crucial in accordance with the level of their ambitions. It is important to provide each partner with tailor-made support. The Ministers finally agreed that the EU activities and visibility remain a principal prerequisite for the success of the EU Eastern Partnership and expressed their commitment to stay at the forefront of these endeavours.

At the NB8 Foreign Ministers meeting in Copenhagen 2-3 September, the Ministers confirmed their commitment to support Ukraine and other countries within the EU’s Eastern Partnership subjected to Russian aggression and propaganda. Furthermore, the Ministers discussed Strategic Communication which, in the follow-up to the Eastern Partnership Summit in Riga, provided a solid basis for implementation, coordination and initiation of joint initiatives.

In September, NB8 Russia Directors met in Copenhagen to discuss developments in the Eastern neighbourhood including the EU Eastern Partnership. The discussions reflected the continued substantial engagement of NB8 countries in support of the EU Eastern Partnership.

**Energy security**

Strengthening the energy security remains a continuous priority, and the NB8 Foreign Ministers agreed in September to keep the item high on the regional agenda in the coming years, as a complement to ongoing work in other competent fora. Increasing the infrastructure of the region to further cooperation to ensure energy security and energy markets remains a priority.
Building on the positive developments during the Estonian NB8 presidency in 2014, the region continues to investigate opportunities for interconnectors within the NB8 and the wider region both regarding new gas pipeline connections and electricity lines.

The issue was in focus at the NB8 meeting with the Visegrad in March, where European Commissioner for Energy Union Maroš Šefčovič took part in the discussion.

In May, an extra NB8 Foreign Ministers meeting was held where energy security and internal energy markets was the main area of attention. A special guest from the private sector participated in the discussion with technical and hands-on experience. The Ministers agreed that close cooperation in the region on enhancing a free energy market and expanding the regional energy infrastructure are central elements for the regional energy security.

The meeting was followed by the NB8 conference “Energy Dialogue in the Baltic Region” co-hosted with Baltic Development Forum. The conference discussed the benefits of regional cooperation on energy efficiency an energy security. Realising that the regional energy challenges have to be addressed through close cooperation, and that the regional energy interdependency is high, the conference concluded that the region should continue to work closely together to increase energy efficiency and improve infrastructure and interconnectors. The private sector’s constructive role in this process was highlighted.

The strong commitment to close cooperation was reaffirmed by the State Secretaries in Copenhagen in October. The State Secretaries discussed avenues for furthering the regional infrastructure development, and in this regard it was welcomed that a feasibility study related to the Baltic Pipeline which will allow for Norwegian gas to be exported to Poland via Denmark has been initiated. The pipeline will potentially also be able to supply the Baltic countries provided the Baltic-Polish interconnectors are appropriately developed.

Acknowledging that energy issues in the NB8 are regional, and that the challenges have to be addressed in solidarity and with one regional voice, the Ministers furthermore agreed to keep regional energy issues on the agenda when the Danish presidency ends.

Final words

During 2015 the NB8 cooperation has again showed its high importance. Close coordination, dialogue and partnership create a foundation of understanding, make coordinated efforts possible and establish a willingness to make a difference. This is needed in light of challenges and crises, close to our region as well as further from our borders. Close dialogue within the NB8 on multiple levels makes it possible to cooperate on a number of issues, and to react fast, jointly. When appropriate, as initiators and leaders which create concrete results.

Denmark would like to thank all Nordic and Baltic colleagues for the cooperation, valuable contributions, openness, flexibility and trust provided throughout the year. We wish Latvia all the best for the NB8 presidency in 2016.