Nordic-Baltic Cooperation
PROGRESS REPORT 2016

INTRODUCTION
Year 2016 in the Nordic-Baltic region was marked as the 25th anniversary of restoration of diplomatic relations among our countries leading to close, friendly and multifaceted mutual relationships. We also celebrated 25 years since the opening of the Nordic Council of Ministers’ (NCM) Offices in Riga, Tallinn and Vilnius which continue to serve greatly as facilitators of practical cooperation. Recently the NCM has even opened a new branch office in Narva, Estonia. Further visibility and representation of the NCM beyond capitals might hold potential.

The events around the anniversaries provided a good opportunity to reflect on how the Baltic countries substantially supported by their Nordic partners advanced as independent nations and became equal players in the regional developments, as well as integrated into the European and transatlantic structures.

The contemporary Nordic-Baltic region is in a leading position in terms of economic development and innovations in Europe. Our achievements along with a common understanding of values and commitment to the future security and prosperity of the region constitute our responsibilities in the present uncertain international environment. The region is linked with longstanding defence cooperation, regular political consultations, dynamic economic ties, cultural and people-to-people contacts, and various mobility opportunities. The Nordic-Baltic Eight (NB8) has often been the most immediate point of reference for the countries of this format. Present challenges continue to signify testing times calling for even more unity, solidarity and political coordination when facing geopolitical turbulences in Europe and globally, leading us to take larger role in the future of Europe and be actively involved in its formation. The NB8, thanks to its informal nature, ability to focus on the most difficult issues of broader than just regional significance, has become a comprehensive framework which can play a more active part in the new political circumstances.

Putting in use the capacity of the NB8 (i.a. synergy of the NB6-EU and NB6-NATO) we have paid close attention to strengthening of security in the region, including energy security, cybersecurity, fight against hybrid threats and support for strategic communication. Demanding matters such as the Eastern Partnership, Russia’s involvement in Eastern Ukraine and Syria, situation in Iraq, solutions for the refugee and migrant crisis, the British referendum and other topics were on the agendas of the respective NB8 formations.

The NB8 has also provided mutual support for candidatures in different bodies of international organizations. For example, in 2016, Sweden was elected to the United Nations Security Council for the 2017-2018 period and Latvian candidate Ms Ilze Brands-Kehris has been elected to the Human Rights Committee for a four year term.
Latvia appreciates greatly the support it received also from the NB8 countries to become a member of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) on July 1, 2016. The NB8 fully supports Lithuania’s path towards becoming a member of the OECD.

**Coordination of the NB8 cooperation**

In parallel with the coordination of the NB8 format, Latvia in 2016 also held the presidency of the Baltic Assembly and the Baltic Council of Ministers. Activities in the regional formats and celebration of 25 years since the restoration of diplomatic relations between the Nordic and Baltic countries inspired us to mark the year 2016 as the Baltic and Nordic Cooperation Year.

In order to pursue synergies and continuity Latvia invited the NB8 partners to continue paying close attention to the strengthening of security in the region (including energy security, cybersecurity, hybrid threats, strategic communication,) and provide support for the EU's Eastern Partnership.

These priorities set the basic frame for political cooperation in 2016.

While hosting several events in Riga the opportunity to introduce the NATO Strategic Communication Centre of Excellence was used and has been highly appreciated by participants.

The active NB8 parliamentary dimension should be particularly stressed. Speakers visited Kyiv on 1-3 February to learn about the situation first-hand and explore options for continued support to Ukraine. On 22 August, the NB8 Parliament Speakers came to Riga for their annual meeting. The Speakers discussed inter-parliamentary cooperation and matters of regional security, strengthening of energy security, cybersecurity, fight against hybrid threats and other items on European agenda. Speakers decided to visit Georgia in March of 2017 responding to the invitation from the Parliament of Georgia. These are clear and strong messages that the NB8 will continue supporting the Eastern Partnership countries.

Secretaries General of the NB8 parliaments held their annual meeting in Riga on 3-4 March. Chairpersons of the parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committees met in Tallinn on 24-25 April and in Reykjavik on 23-25 October.

The Baltic Assembly, Baltic Council of Ministers in close cooperation with Nordic partners organised a conference “Security in the Baltic Region: Current Developments and the Way Ahead” held in Riga on 12-13 May. The conference focused on three main topics: 1) Strengthening Media in the Region, 2) Addressing the Challenges of Hybrid Threats, 3) The Baltic Perspective on NATO and EU Strategic Recalibration. The participants discussed support for the strengthening of independent media, as well as collaboration and exchange of best practices. They also focused on the links between NATO and the EU when it comes to strategic communication, cybersecurity and energy security. Conclusions were drawn on the need to strengthen cross-border cooperation since no country or organization could or should face security challenges alone.
We see a great potential and added value in regular and close Prime Ministers’ dialogue. During their annual meeting on 2 November in Copenhagen, the NB8 Prime Ministers discussed regional security, NATO Warsaw summit results and issues on European agenda. They also focused on continued support for regional transport and energy interconnection projects.

The NB8 Foreign Ministers met during their annual meeting in Riga on 25-26 August. The Baltic ministers noted with appreciation the early political courage and support of the Nordic neighbours. The discussions on the future of Europe brought the Ministers together to consult and coordinate closely.

Meetings in the NB8 format also take place among ministers from other sectors, for example, on 22-23 September the NB8 Ministers of Justice met in Tallinn to discuss topics such as crime prevention, fight against terror threats, migration, domestic violence and efforts against corruption. On 3 October, Ministers responsible for working with issues of gender equality consulted in Helsinki with on the topics of sexism and hate speech.

Working level coordination meetings of experts of foreign ministries took place in 2016, including on issues referring to policy planning and regions such as Africa, Latin America and Asia.

The NB8 extended formats offer us opportunities to put in use new synergies and strengthen ties. A highly valuable format to be preserved in the future, especially in these changing times, is the Northern Future Forum (NFF) – an annual meeting of the Prime Ministers of the NB8 and the United Kingdom, as well as experts, researchers and representatives of NGOs since 2011. The Forum has been continuously appreciated for providing opportunities to discuss issues aimed at increasing prosperity, sustainable development and competitiveness of our countries.

Foreign Ministers in the extended format NB8+V4 together with their Visegrád Group colleagues held a meeting in Jūrmala on 21-22 April. The agenda and open discussion during the NB8+V4 ministerial once again attested the format as a valuable tool in the coordination and cooperation process for countries of the wider region.

Links that connect us over the Atlantic Ocean continue to be strengthened through the Enhanced Partnership in Northern Europe (E-PINE) – an NB8 format together with the United States. E-PINE is a regular discussion platform for the MFA Political Directors and experts and it continues to form an essential part of the transatlantic security dialogue.

The NB8 given its informal nature continues also to be guided by recommendations of the Wise-Men (Birkavs-Gade) Report (2010). Practical cooperation in diplomatic representations takes place in accordance with the Memorandum of Understanding (2011) between the Nordic-Baltic governments on the principles for locating diplomats within premises of the parties’ missions. Our consular and administrative specialists work together to arrange shared locations for our diplomats in NB8 representations and to share best practices that allow for better use of resources. Our diplomats meet regularly to consult and coordinate their work in
locations outside the NB8 region. A good example is our region's representatives working within the NB6\textsuperscript{1} format to coordinate on the European Union matters.

An excellent case of our cooperation in the public diplomacy field was the exhibition titled “Identity. Behind the Curtain of Uncertainty” in Kyiv, Ukraine from 19 March to 22 May. The exhibition was organised by the Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art in partnership with the National Art Museum of Ukraine and the main initiators of this event – the embassies of the Nordic and Baltic countries in Ukraine. Further common projects of this kind would increase the recognition of the NB8 outside of our region.

To promote NB8 visibility, Latvia created a visual identity for the Baltic and Nordic Cooperation Year. The MFA of Latvia website also featured a special front page tab dedicated to the Baltic and Nordic Cooperation Year in Latvian, English and Russian. Videos and photo galleries from various NB8 events have been included on the MFA websites. The hashtag #NB8 was widely used for social media communication.

Two infographics were published to demonstrate a balance between the political dialogue and practical cooperation, as well as to explain the NB8 format to broader audiences:

- “Nordic and Baltic Cooperation in the NB8 Format”
- “Briefly on Practical Baltic-Nordic Cooperation”

**Strengthening Security in the Region**

As a part of wider Europe, our region is facing rather difficult multiple challenges, which influence the current security environment we live in. Attempts of using force in order to change borders in Europe, terrorism, and hybrid warfare are just a few of these challenges. To tackle them we have to take steps to adjust our response. Consequently the importance of regional cooperation on various security issues is growing.

The Baltic Sea region has been affected by developments in Europe’s security environment. In this context, we are dedicated to the continuous process of further strengthening NATO cooperation with its closest partners Sweden and Finland. The NB8 countries welcomed the joint declaration by the EU and NATO leaders at the NATO Summit in Warsaw. Its implementation could open new possibilities for the Nordic and Baltic countries to work together in tackling conventional and hybrid threats. Therefore defence and security cooperation between the Nordic and Baltic countries becomes even more significant. Geography and challenges we face deem strategic coherence between the NATO Allies and non-NATO partners and likewise NATO and the EU in order to respond in a timely and effective manner.

**Energy security**

Energy security priorities were coordinated taking into account further development of the Energy Union and the renewed framework of the Baltic Energy Market Interconnection Plan (BEMIP). With the continuation of the energy security priority in the NB8 agenda the importance of regional cooperation for successful Energy Union was underlined.

\textsuperscript{1} Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Sweden
Our region has advanced remarkably towards a free and transparent energy market. Baltic countries will continue to work closely together to develop an integrated and well-functioning regional energy market and to strengthen energy security. To facilitate energy security it is important for Baltic countries to continue the work on further development of regional market legislative framework as well as concrete energy infrastructure projects.

We still have work to do to implement essential regional energy infrastructure projects – 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 Klaipėda LNG terminal are key elements for an open and competitive regional gas market.

The Baltic countries, in particular, are committed to work on synchronization of the 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.

We agree that it is very important to ensure that the necessary nuclear safety and environmental requirements are met in the neighbouring Nuclear Power Plant (NPP) projects, including in the Ostrovets NPP. We recognize the need to work towards 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.

It is important to ensure decent level of ambition in the Energy Security Package as well as to secure that new projects are implemented in full compliance with the European Union legislation and Energy Union aims. In this context political, legal and environmental assessments of Nord Stream II project, as well as, the compliance of nuclear power projects on the border with the EU with the international nuclear and environmental standards, remain on the agenda.

One of the main tasks ahead is implementation of the EU climate and energy framework 2030, required to accelerate a shift to low-carbon economy in Europe and to fulfil our international climate mitigation commitments agreed in Paris in December of 2015. It is important to make the best use of meeting the overall EU target through facilitating growth, jobs and innovations.

**Hybrid threats and cyber security**

It is imperative to raise awareness and develop a unified approach towards initiatives to counter and build resilience towards hybrid threats stemming from Europe’s Eastern and Southern neighbourhoods on the national, regional and international levels.

Coordination’s aim was to synchronize efforts towards increased awareness about cyber security and discuss security implications from hybrid threats in the region as well as to develop a coherent understanding of the issues in relevant international fora, especially in the EU, NATO, OSCE and the UN.

Full attention to the risks, solutions and cooperation in the field of cybersecurity was paid during the NB8 and the United States High-Level Cybersecurity Roundtable, so called Cyber E-PINE, in Vilnius on 14-15 September. In their Joint Statement countries noted that cyberspace
issues, including cybersecurity, the application of international law and norms in cyberspace, and Internet governance are important policy priorities.

The Baltic countries and the United States of America seminar on energy and critical infrastructure protection and cyber security in Vilnius on 18-19 May provided an opportunity to discuss specific aspects of cyber security. Cyber defence was also one of the topics discussed as a field of regional research cooperation in an international workshop on societal security in the Nordic and Baltic countries, in Riga, on August 31-September 1.

**Strategic communication**
The NB8 countries acknowledge the need to strengthen cooperation in the field of strategic communication in the region, the EU and NATO. Latvia's approach in 2016 was to encourage the exchange of information and expertise among nations. The work of institutions such as the EU East StratCom Task Force brings added value in this field. Particularly, throughout 2016, the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (CoE) provided invaluable input in supporting these NB8 activities. Under the CoE’s aegis, the countries embarked on a comparative study on exploring Russian disinformation activities in the Nordic-Baltic region. Subject-matter-expert meetings will continue to take place and the work is scheduled to be completed in 2017.

Capacity building of the NB8 community was another line of effort. On 21 September, an educational seminar on strategic communication was hosted by the CoE in Riga. This event brought together around 60 mid-level experts representing communication and operational branches of the respective governments, ministries and institutions.

**Eastern Partnership**
Latvia as the NB8 coordinator has kept the Eastern Partnership high on the agenda. The annual NB8+V4 Foreign Minister’s meeting, parliamentary contacts, participation of the Deputy Foreign Minister of Georgia Mr Gigi Gigiadze at the NB8 Political Directors meeting, and NB8 Directors for relations with Russia, East Europe and Central Asia meeting provided fora for exchange of views and formation of coordinated positions.

The importance of Eastern Partnership to remain a priority of the EU was underlined. It was noted that the implementation of the 2015 Riga Eastern Partnership Summit Joint Declaration decisions has to continue. Important steps therefore are the decision on a visa free regime with Georgia and Ukraine without delay and finalisation of ratification of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement. The NB8 affirmed that cooperation with partner countries should be continued according to the differentiation principle. The NB8 stressed the strategic importance of the Eastern Partnership and invited to start practical preparations for the upcoming Eastern Partnership Summit in 2017. Preparations should include a forward-looking narrative and a reinvigorated reform agenda. The situation in Ukraine was discussed extensively. Countries reaffirmed their political and practical support for the continuous reform efforts in Ukraine. The support for the Minsk process was highlighted. The NB8 affirmed continued support to territorial integrity and sovereignty of the Eastern Partnership countries.
Training programmes tailored to support young journalists and future leaders coming from the Eastern Partnership countries are carried out by the Baltic Centre for Media Excellence and Riga Graduate School of Law in cooperation with the Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Substantial support to implement the programmes has been provided by the Nordic Council of Ministers and individual donor countries. Consideration could be given to more active promotion of common Baltic-Nordic development cooperation projects in all six Eastern Partnership countries.

**Final words**

During the year more than fifty NB8 events and meetings at different levels were organized by foreign and line ministries in the Nordic and Baltic countries. They covered a wide spectrum of areas, just to mention a few – defence, foreign affairs, legal affairs, finance, education, energy, cybersecurity, agriculture, and gender equality. The NB8 region is united and continues to move in the direction of deeper integration on numerous levels.

A High-Level Roundtable devoted to the 25th Anniversary of Baltic-Nordic Cooperation “1991-2016 and the Way Ahead” took place in Riga on 22 August. The event organised in association with the NCM’s Office in Latvia was both reflective and symbolic. It brought together prominent Baltic and Nordic politicians, diplomats, researchers who highlighted the particular role of the Nordic Baltic partnership from the very early days of the Baltic countries’ struggle to regain their independence. A look was taken at what has been achieved and at future tasks. In this context, the NB8 has been appreciated as a group of likeminded neighbours committed and able to contribute to building a more secure and prosperous Europe.

Latvia would like to thank everyone who participated and supported the Baltic and Nordic Cooperation Year 2016, and wish all the best to Norway as the NB8 coordinating country in 2017.

---

**Note:** Words in grey throughout the report contain hyperlinks.

---

2 Edgars Rinkēvičs, Foreign Minister of Latvia welcomed speakers from the NB8 countries: Dagfinn Høybråten, Secretary General of the Nordic Council of Ministers; Petras Aušrevičius, Member of the European Parliament from Lithuania; Carl Bildt, former Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Sweden; Uffe Ellemann-Jensen, former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Denmark; Jón Baldvin Hannibalsson, former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Iceland; Jüri Luik, Director of the International Centre of Defence and Security based in Tallinn, Estonia; Kimmo Sasi, former Minister of European Affairs and Foreign Trade of Finland; Michael Tetzschner, Member of Parliament of Norway.