

JOINT STATEMENT OF THE 21st BALTIC COUNCIL

On 20 November 2015 in Vilnius, Republic of Lithuania, the Baltic Assembly and the Baltic Council of Ministers convened for the 21st Baltic Council to discuss key issues of regional security and Baltic cooperation, to review progress in implementing joint priorities set for 2015, as well as to define objectives for parliamentary and governmental cooperation of the Baltic states in 2016.

The Baltic Council declares the following:

Security and defence

- The Euro-Atlantic community is facing two major challenges to its security emanating from the East and from the South. Russia's aggression in Ukraine, including the illegal annexation of Crimea, has fundamentally undermined the post-Cold War order in Europe. Ongoing conflicts in the southern neighbourhood, erosion of state institutions and growth of terrorist groups pose a number of conventional and unconventional threats to the populations in Europe.
- The adoption of NATO's Readiness Action Plan at the Wales Summit last year was a timely and necessary step in responding to these changes. But since then, the security environment has deteriorated even further.
- In light of these challenges, the Baltic states stress the necessity of the full implementation of NATO's Readiness Action Plan by the Warsaw Summit in 2016. NATO adaptation measures – especially the persistent presence of the Allied forces in the eastern part of the Alliance – provide a basis for credible deterrence as NATO's framework for collective defence. NATO Summit in Warsaw should pave the way for the long-term strategic adaptation as the new normal for the Alliance.
- Proper burden-sharing and investment in security and defence are vital to defence values and interests underlying our Euro-Atlantic community; the Baltic states remain committed to the 2% GDP guideline as per the Wales Defence Investment Pledge.
- In cooperation with the Allies, the Baltic states have continued to develop a number of military capabilities. The Allies highly value our special operations forces, joint terminal attack controllers (JTAC), Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) specialists, navy units, as well as training, mentoring and provincial reconstruction teams, common contribution to the EU Battlegroup (EUBG) and NATO Response Force (NRF), including recent participation of the Baltic Battalion in the exercise Trident Juncture in Spain.
- We will share information to analyse possible solutions for the development of air defence capability in the Baltic region which is of great importance to the defence of our countries.
- A long-term vision on common security and defence challenges and political will are necessary to further improve our cooperation. We should increase interoperability by enhancing our current projects and developing new ones if deemed mutually beneficial. We should use our successful cooperation in situational awareness of the air space over the Baltic states and improve information sharing in sea and land border surveillance.
- Developments in Ukraine and the wider neighbourhood are impacting the wider security situation in Europe. We will continue to support the current EU and NATO policy towards Russia with a principal objective of a full and verified implementation of the Minsk agreements. We will seek increased support by international community to Ukraine and we will step up our own support and assistance to Ukraine to enhance its resilience and defence capabilities.

- The EU, NATO and international community must strengthen joint efforts to find sustainable solutions to the refugee crisis in Europe and its neighbourhood.
- We strongly condemn the brutal acts of terrorism in Paris. It is an attack against humanity and fundamental values of our civilisation. We stand together with the whole Europe and the international community in solidarity with the French people and support the French authorities in their determination to respond to the latest attacks and to deal with the terrorist threats. We should continue and enhance information sharing with our partners and assist in any other way that would help to defeat terrorism.

Transport and infrastructure

- The Baltic states perceive the implementation of the *Rail Baltica* project as a means of removing the remaining obstacles to facilitate the mobility of Baltic people and goods and to connect the Baltic region to the rest of Europe by an efficient and environment-friendly railway connection.
- The Baltic states welcome the submission of the applications for the *Rail Baltica* project to the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF) first Call for Proposals and the approval of EU funding, which will lead to the signing of grant agreements by the end of 2015. The Baltic states will also submit the joint application to the second CEF Call for Proposals, with a view to contributing to the development of the *Rail Baltica* project with their respective national envelopes within the CEF. The Baltic states will strive for continuous support and proper funding from the European Commission to accomplish the construction of the fast European gauge railway by 2025.
- The Baltic states will seek to explore ways to cooperate and reinforce common interests in relation to the upcoming European Commission initiatives in the field of transport – aviation, land transport and maritime.

Healthcare

- 2 May 2012 marked the signing of the Baltic states' Partnership Agreement on Joint Procurements of Medicinal Products and Medical Devices and Lending of Medicinal Products and Medical Devices Procurable Centrally. Although the pilot project of joint procurements has been currently delayed, the Baltic states are committed to work further on jointly procuring medicinal products.
- In order to maximise the use of resources allocated on the national level for healthcare, the Baltic states will continue to cooperate in providing healthcare to patients with rare and specific diseases where it is needed to use advanced technologies and costly treatment, including the regular update of the list of areas where the specific cooperation in patient treatment can take place; they will also continue to cooperate in elaborating a common Baltic states' position with regard to implementation of Directive 2011/24/EU on the application of patients' rights in cross-border healthcare, particularly concerning the establishment of the European Reference Networks.
- The Baltic states are committed to facilitating cooperation in developing innovation and digital market in compliance with Directive 2011/24/EU, therefore they will elaborate an action plan for introducing an exchange of electronic medical data between the Baltic healthcare systems.

Education, science and innovation

- The Baltic states will continue active cooperation in implementing the Memorandum of Understanding among the Ministry of Education and Research of the Republic of Estonia, the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Latvia and the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Lithuania on Closer Cooperation in Higher Education, Research and Innovation signed in November 2012.
- Within the framework of the Memorandum, the Baltic research infrastructure expert group completed its work and published the results of the Baltic research infrastructure

mapping exercise on the Internet with links to the list of core research infrastructure objects. The creation of this list provides the necessary background for future Baltic cooperation in this area. This information will encourage scientists from the Baltic states to use each other's infrastructure and reduce the need to have the exact same facilities in home country. Moreover, it will let the Baltic states make more informed decisions on future investments in research infrastructure and should facilitate cooperation when developing new research infrastructure.

- The Baltic states will continue the well-established cooperation among the Ministries of Education and Research and will aim at continuing to pilot the rotating Baltic Summer Academy, organised in cooperation with the Council of Europe.
- The Baltic states will encourage closer cooperation between their educational institutions on the specialisation of costly higher and vocational education study programmes, as well as on joint marketing efforts for the education sector aimed at increasing competitiveness and accessibility of education to citizens of other countries.

Energy

- The Baltic states are committed to strengthening regional cooperation in the Baltic region and making sure that sufficient interconnectors, synchronisation of the Baltic states with the continental European networks, balancing arrangements between the Baltic states, capacity mechanisms and market integration are contributing to energy security, at the same time ensuring the right balance between costs and overall benefits of these developments.
- The Baltic states have agreed to jointly address and look for enhanced energy security, having in mind the technical and economic considerations related to the development of the electricity sector in the region, including: 1) synchronisation with the continental European network; 2) common projects in electricity generation 3) operation of the electricity market.
- The Baltic states have agreed to work closely together on the regional challenges by focusing on reaching an agreement on the measures for the development of an open, transparent and effectively functioning regional gas market, as well as for the implementation of these measures.
- The Baltic states shall continue closer cooperation and facilitate fair competition in seeking the most appropriate ways to diversify natural gas supplies to the region. The access to regional liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminal in Klaipėda, operation of underground gas storage (UGS) in Inčukalns under non-discriminatory *third party access* regime and the implementation of the EU Third Energy Package in the Baltic states' natural gas sector are the necessary conditions of creation of the regional gas market.
- The Baltic states should cooperate even more closely in the transfer of experience and knowledge in order to develop and introduce innovative technologies to exploit renewables and increase energy efficiency, as well as to use the existing technologies and boost their effectiveness in order to promote a competitive, safe and sustainable low-carbon and climate-resilient economy.
- The Baltic states noted that the proposed projects to expand transit pipelines from Russia to Europe via Turkey and Germany should not threaten the continued supply of natural gas to and through Ukraine and go against the aims of the EU's policy on diversifying gas supply sources and enhancing energy security.
- To seek further transparency of agreements with third countries in the field of energy, the Baltic states will actively call on the European Commission for a robust and legislative response following an outcome of public consultation on the review of the Intergovernmental Agreements (IGA) Decision.
- The Baltic states will seek to explore ways to cooperate and reinforce common interests in further development of Energy Union in relation to the upcoming initiatives, in

particular ensuring a fair balance in burden-sharing in ETS (Emissions Trading System) and non-ETS sectors.

The European Union

- The Baltic states work closely in the European Union to contribute to the region and the entire European Union, as well as to ensure more effective protection of joint interests. The Baltic States emphasise the need to develop joint interest groups building on the existing cooperation mechanisms that would conduct an active dialogue and work closely with EU institutions, European partner organisations and countries.
- The Baltic states reiterate the importance of the Eastern Partnership and will continue working closely together to support and further develop the Eastern Partnership policy in line with the decisions of the Eastern Partnership Summits held since 2009, the latest of which was held in Riga in May 2015. The Baltic states express the need to deliver on commitments of the Summit until the end of 2015: expecting positive report by the European Commission on visa-free regime for Georgia and Ukraine, finalisation of the internal ratification procedures of the AA/DCFTA with Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova and provisional application of the AA/DCFTA with Ukraine as of 1 Jan 2016 without further delays.
- The Baltic states will cooperate in elaborating joint approaches and strategies for EU funds made available in the new multiannual financial framework for 2020–2027.

The Baltic Council defined the following joint priorities for cooperation in 2016:

1. **Strengthening of security within the region** (including joint defence planning, strengthening of national borders, good governance of migration and asylum policy);
2. **Promotion of strategic communication** (including provision of quality, unbiased information within the region, protection of European values, increasing public awareness about democratic values, supporting independent media);
3. **Development of transport and energy infrastructure** (including active work on the implementation of the *Rail Baltica* project, strengthening energy security of the Baltic States, integrating and connecting the Baltic energy markets and infrastructure to the EU internal market and infrastructure).

The 22nd Baltic Council will be held during Latvia's presidency on 28 October 2016 in Riga, the Republic of Latvia.

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Vilnius, 20 November 2015