

JOINT STATEMENT OF THE 26th BALTIC COUNCIL

On 6 November 2020, the Baltic Assembly and the Baltic Council of Ministers convened for the 26th Baltic Council to discuss the key issues in regional cooperation, to review progress in implementing joint priorities set for 2020, and to define objectives of Baltic parliamentary and governmental cooperation in 2021.

The Baltic Council declares the following:

Cooperation in tackling COVID-19 crisis

The unprecedented situation pertaining to the spread of the COVID-19 has created challenges and strong impact on our economies and societies for the foreseeable future. Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus, the Baltic States have taken steps to ensure timely exchange of information and efficient coordination of the measures for effective handling the pandemic and facilitating the recovery of our economies and societies.

The COVID-19 crisis has proved that the Baltic States are able to adapt to the situation quickly and efficiently. Close cooperation and consultations among the Baltic States at both expert and political level have been of utmost importance to successful implementation of measures to tackle the crisis. Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania emphasise that the cooperation between the Baltic States remains the cornerstone of tackling any complex crisis.

Security and defence matters in the region and beyond, including transatlantic relations

Strong transatlantic partnership and NATO remain indispensable for European security and defence. The Baltic States underline the importance of NATO policies and measures for strengthening the deterrence and defence and implementing the decisions adopted at NATO Wales, Warsaw and Brussels Summits as well as London Leaders' meeting. Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania will continue the work both nationally and through regional cooperation to foster collective defence efforts and to build upon this commitment at the next NATO Summit and onwards.

NATO continues to fulfil its core tasks, as challenges and threats that the Alliance faces have not disappeared during the COVID-19 crisis. It is of utmost importance to maintain operational readiness and take necessary measures to ensure that this health crisis does not become a security crisis.

The Baltic States welcome the NATO 2030 Reflection Process and look forward to Allied discussion on the advisory experts group's forthcoming proposals and recommendations on strengthening NATO's political role, as agreed in their Mandate. The Reflection Process must lead to even more NATO unity, cohesion and solidarity, as well as stronger transatlantic relations, which will enable the Alliance to continue effectively address the current and also future challenges.

NATO is an Alliance based on a strong transatlantic link and Allied solidarity. NATO continues to respond to the deteriorated security environment by enhancing deterrence and defense posture, including through enhanced Forward Presence in the Baltic region. We highly appreciate the dedication of enhanced Forward Presence framework nations Canada, Germany and the United Kingdom, and thank all contributing Allies for their commitment. The Baltic

States also welcome and support the US military presence in the region. As Russia continues to increase its military presence, including anti-access/area denial build-up, and introduces additional capabilities in close vicinity to the Baltic States, it is important to maintain and enhance Allied presence in land, air and maritime domains. Allies have suspended all practical civilian and military cooperation between NATO and Russia, while remaining open to political dialogue. The Baltic States will work towards adapting and strengthening NATO's deterrence and defence posture in our region, focusing on advance planning, NATO's enhanced Forward Presence, exercises, and air defence in the region. We underline the need to ensure and demonstrate rapid and viable Allied and NATO's reinforcement in the Baltic States. Full implementation of NATO's Readiness Initiative is crucial to enhance NATO's ability to act swiftly and efficiently. The Baltic States remain committed to spending at least 2 percent of GDP on defence.

The Baltic States have taken measures to achieve better coordination and synchronization of national defence and capability development plans. Enhancing military interoperability through regular national and multinational military exercises remains an important priority. In 2020, a Baltic combined battalion level military unit BALTFOR stands ready to participate in NATO Response Force (NRF).

Since 1 January 2020 the Baltic Air Surveillance Network and Control System (BALTNET) is operational in its new configuration, featuring three separate national Control and Reporting Centres in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. The new structure enables each Baltic State to take over the responsibility for the Baltic airspace control, thus reducing vulnerability and boosting the overall security of the Baltic States' airspace.

Headquarters Multinational Division North-East in Elblag, Poland, fully operational since December 2018, and Headquarters Multinational Division North in Ādaži, Latvia, established in 2019 and on its path to reaching initial operational capability, play an important role in NATO collective defence efforts, significantly improving regional Command and Control (C2).

The Baltic States welcome discussions on the Strategic Compass with a view to enhance cooperation both within the EU and with our partners. We continue to actively contribute to the EU security and defence cooperation and make use of the EU defence initiatives such as Permanent Structured Cooperation and the European Defence Fund and support participation of our non-EU allies in these initiatives. Cooperation between the Baltic States, NATO Allies and EU Member States in conducting and supporting civilian and military missions and operations in the wider European neighbourhood should be used to empower these states to provide for their own internal security, including by strengthening the rule of law. In this regard, maximum synergies between such missions and operations should be sought on the ground with the view of achieving a lasting impact.

The Baltic States support a close and coordinated cooperation between the EU and NATO, especially in the areas of enhancing military mobility, cyber defence, coherent and interoperable capability development, and parallel and coordinated exercises.

The Baltic States will continue supporting effective and verifiable arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation that contributes to international security and stability. We note with regret that existing international instruments in this field are still being challenged by Russia's violations, selective implementation and refusal to enter into meaningful dialogue. We urge Russia to fully comply with its international arms control commitments, including returning to full compliance within the Treaty on Open Skies and the CFE Treaty. We continue to support the modernization of the Vienna Document, which is important for trust, predictability and security in the Euro-Atlantic area. We also call on Russia and China to engage meaningfully and in good faith in negotiations on strategic arms control that corresponds to the security environment.

The Baltic States express strong concern about Russia's attempts to systematically undermine the international rules-based order by aggressive conventional military and hybrid acts. We call the international community to maintain unity and vigilance, to respond firmly to any provocative activities carried out by Russia and to support territorial integrity of Ukraine and Georgia, which are direct targets of Russian aggression. Restrictive measures against Russia for its ongoing aggression in Ukraine must be continued until the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine within its internationally recognized borders are fully restored.

NATO has to remain committed to open door policy and implementation of 2008 NATO Bucharest Summit decision.

We condemn the poisoning of the Russia's opposition leader Alexei Navalny with an advanced chemical nerve agent of the Novichok group and call for an impartial and international investigation that would include the experts of the OPCW. We urge Russia to cooperate and provide an account how the nerve agent came to be used in the poisoning of Alexei Navalny. We reiterate that any use of chemical weapons is a grave breach of international law and cannot be tolerated.

The Baltic States reconfirm their opposition to the geopolitical Nord Stream 2 project which does not serve EU energy policy objectives and threatens the EU's energy security and undermines transatlantic relations.

The Baltic States have declared the 9 August 2020 Presidential elections in Belarus as neither free nor fair. We are impressed by the courage of the people of Belarus, who continue to demonstrate peacefully for democracy and for their fundamental rights despite the brutal repressions by the authorities. Alexander Lukashenko lacks any democratic legitimacy and should respect the will of the people of Belarus. The Baltic States fully support calls for new, free and fair presidential elections in line with international standards and under the auspices of the OSCE/ODIHR.

The Baltic States strongly condemn violence by the Belarusian authorities against peaceful protesters. We call on the authorities to release immediately and unconditionally all arbitrarily detained persons, including political prisoners and representatives of the media. We demand an end to the persecution of persons engaged in the pro-democracy movement, independent media and representatives of civil society, including the members of the Coordination Council, as well as full investigation of all human rights violations and abuses. We also call on Belarus to refrain from Internet shutdowns and guarantee media freedom.

The EU's sanctions against senior officials, including Alexander Lukashenko, responsible for the fraudulent nature of the presidential elections and the violent crackdown on peaceful protests will be under our constant review, in line with the EU's gradual approach.

Countering hybrid and cyber threats

The outbreak of COVID-19 has clearly showed that multi-faceted nature of threats, the challenges we face have global impact and might increase security risks in the era of global interdependency. Moreover, the COVID-19 crisis has highlighted that strong transatlantic cooperation and interactions between the likeminded countries as well as systematic and defined strategic communication efforts are crucial in countering hybrid and cyber threats.

The Baltic States welcome the increased cooperation between the EU and NATO in these emerging areas and advocate for further developments. While some of the concerted military, political and economic actions, and disinformation campaigns make the hybrid and cyber threats increasingly relevant, the joint response capabilities are improving. In July 2020, the EU

implemented its first ever cyber sanctions regime against cyber operations originating from outside of the EU.

We recognise the need to continue to work in all key sectors that would improve our situational awareness, address vulnerabilities by enhancing resilience and developing response measures to prevent, counter and deter hybrid and cyber-attacks.

Disinformation does not know state borders. Its landscape is expanding and new actors are emerging. That calls for even greater cooperation among allies.

This year we have seen a number of attempts on behalf of Russia to manipulate history, especially concerning the onset of the Second World War, its course and aftermath. We strongly condemn these activities – for our countries the end of the Second World War brought decades of Soviet occupation.

Furthermore, the EU, its neighbours and partners face increasingly assertive disinformation campaigns, influence operations and electoral interference by foreign states. We strongly support the EU's efforts to strengthen its capabilities in tackling disinformation, such as the successful work of EEAS Stratcom Task Forces. These teams should be further strengthened and supported. We should also seize the opportunity provided by the forthcoming European Democracy Action Plan and by the Digital Service Act for protecting our democracies in such areas as integrity of elections, media freedom and media pluralism and addressing disinformation. Both of these initiatives will propose steps to tackle disinformation and strengthen the resilience of our democracies.

Exchange of information on hybrid and cyber threats is in our collective interest. We should continue utilising the expertise of the Centres of Excellence, including the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence in Tallinn, the NATO Strategic Communication Centre of Excellence in Riga, the NATO Energy Security Centre of Excellence in Vilnius, and the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats in Helsinki.

The Baltic States express strong support of EU's and NATO's commitment to continue close and mutually reinforcing cooperation with all relevant partner countries, in particular in the EU neighbourhood, on enhancing resilience and countering hybrid and cyber threats.

Connectivity, including regional gas and electricity market

To ensure the Baltic gas market integration and strengthen energy independence, well-developed infrastructure has a key role, therefore, we strongly welcome Balticconnector (FIN-EE) and GIPL (PL-LT) gas interconnection projects. The Baltic States believe that both projects will strengthen security of supply of the region, bring new possibilities for market participants in the whole region, improve liquidity and create opportunities for renewable energy use (biomethane).

We shall continue the ongoing work for the creation of the Regional gas market as well as continue the efforts in developing mutually acceptable cooperation terms towards a united Finnish and Baltic functioning joint gas market. In the common gas market, interconnection tariffs within the single entry-exit system will be eliminated, ensuring free flow of natural gas and biomethane within the single entry-exit tariff area and better utilisation of gas infrastructure, therefore, avoiding overinvestment.

Bearing in mind the competitiveness of the gas sector in the future, we endorse the work on detailed analysis of possible scenarios for decarbonization of the Regional gas market.

We stress the need to continue work on the enhancement of interconnections between the three Baltic States, including the introduction of reverse flow capacity on Latvian-Estonian

interconnection and the expansion of the Latvian-Lithuanian gas interconnection, to ensure continuous work of functioning and well-integrated gas market.

The situation regarding the common electricity market in the Baltic States has changed significantly in recent years, driven by initiatives taken by policy makers in the EU, the Baltic States and Scandinavian countries. We stress that an important issue in this process was the creation and development of capacity guaranteeing reliable electricity supply and adequate electricity network infrastructure. We are pleased to acknowledge that electricity interconnections have already been built with both the continental European energy system and Scandinavia, and the work in this direction will continue.

In the scope of functioning of the EU internal energy market and the achievement of the Energy Union objectives, the synchronization of the Baltic States' electricity grid with the continental European system is one of the most important projects to be completed.

We welcome the Connection Agreement and the Catalogue of Measures that came into force on 27 May 2019 as well as the Political Roadmap on implementing the synchronization of the Baltic States' electricity networks with the continental European network via Poland that was signed within the European Council held on 20-21 June 2019. These political commitments of all parties, together with the EU Member States' decision of 1 October 2020 to allocate funding from CEF to Baltic Synchronisation Project demonstrate the readiness and support to complete the synchronization project by 2025 at the latest and find solutions to ensure the financing for the project.

The Baltic States also share the view that it is necessary to ensure a level playing field for the EU electricity producers in order to remain competitive in relation to third country producers, whereas, electricity import from third countries applying lower safety and environmental standards, undermines the competitiveness of the EU producers.

We reconfirm the Baltic States' agreement to cease electricity imports from Belarus and taking into account that Belarus nuclear power plant became operational, stress the importance to continue the work of the Committee of Senior Energy Officials with close assistance of the European Commission on common measures, which would effectively prevent access of Belarusian electricity into the Baltic States electricity market while providing transparency and predictability for market participants.

Nuclear and environmental safety

Being aware that environmental and nuclear safety in the EU neighbourhood is an integral part of the European Union's foreign policy, the Baltic States resolve to further promote the implementation of the highest international nuclear and environmental safety requirements for nuclear facilities in the EU neighbourhood.

Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania condemn hasty commissioning of the Belarussian nuclear power plant in Ostrovets without the implementation of all international environmental and nuclear safety recommendations. We urge Belarus to comply with the highest international environmental and safety standards and implement the EU stress tests recommendations without delay. In this regard, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania underline the importance of the cooperation between Belarus and European Nuclear Safety Regulators Group (ENSREG) in the stress test process, including a formal review and monitoring of the implementation of the Belarus' National Action Plan by ENSREG. We also urge Belarus to align the power start up of the Belarusian NPP with stress tests process and its progress. We reiterate that this is a crucial exercise to ensure nuclear and environmental safety in the Baltic region and the whole EU.

Development of transport infrastructure and digital agenda

We recognize that Rail Baltica project has made significant progress in all three Baltic States. Implementation of the project is in progress, the key infrastructure objects and the main line of Rail Baltica are being designed, the construction has started and will pick up full speed during 2021. We note that the project is visible and highly welcomed in all Baltic States. As for the rest of Europe, rejuvenation of railways, supported by large scale investments into “green transport” elements aim for the largest possible shift from road traffic to the railway. We acknowledge that implementation of Rail Baltica project signifies our common goal to strengthen the position of railways as leaders of greener, safer and reliable transport solutions for all Europe. Rail Baltica will contribute to the EU, regional and national transport, cohesion, environment and innovation policies, as well as to the objectives of the European Green Course and military mobility.

In order to speed up the implementation of Rail Baltica project it is first and foremost necessary to efficiently and effectively use the EU and national funds already committed to the project in cooperation between our states. The Baltic States as owners of the project and the built infrastructure, main beneficiaries of the fast railway connection, have identified methods to accelerate implementation of design and construction of the railway, considering the task given by the Prime Ministers of the Baltic States to responsible ministries. These have to be put into practice.

Notwithstanding the changes in Rail Baltica implementation structure, Rail Baltica remains above all a joint project of the Baltic States, to be implemented according to common standards and an established implementation timetable serving as the necessary means to complete the construction of an interoperable cross-border railway infrastructure by 2026. This is a shared goal of the Baltic States, which we will continue to work on together.

We maintain and reinforce the regional and European importance of development of the rail connections on the North Sea Baltic corridor together with Finland and Poland as well as with the support of the European Parliament and the European Commission.

Stable and predictable financing is vital to complete the agreed rail connection and enable its economic use. Preliminary indicative budget allocations for CEF in 2021-2027 MFF show strong support for the completion of missing major cross-border railway links between cohesion countries. We reiterate that within the development of the TEN-T network it is a common objective of the Baltic States together with our partners to secure the necessary financing for completing Rail Baltica in 2021-2027 MFF. We acknowledge that we must speed up the delivery of the project, ensure sufficient means of financing to complete the planned actions in a timely manner and invite the responsible institutions and officials to strengthen cooperation aimed at achieving this objective.

We acknowledge the decision of the Baltic States to designate the infrastructure managers of Rail Baltica infrastructure, who shall, in cooperation, 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. We are looking forward to its results as we deem it necessary to provide a workable and optimal solution based on coordinated functions for pricing, charging, capacity allocation, safety and traffic management, with emphasis on common charging scheme with shared definitions, common capacity allocation framework with harmonized rules and methodology, common network statement, enhanced cooperation of national regulatory bodies and safety authorities and a seamless railway traffic link with Poland.

Our common goal is to attract operators and users to the new railway, resulting in reduction of transport related emissions and sufficient feasibility of Rail Baltica. In order to achieve that, the

administrative burden for operators must be curtailed and alignment of decisions of the responsible institutions ensured. We regard the decision to appoint the respective Rail Baltica infrastructure managers a welcome development of Rail Baltica project achieved.

For continuing progress of Rail Baltica project, we urge the competent national entities to step up efforts focusing on sustainability and socio-economic viability of the new railway connection, alignment with priorities of the common EU and national security policy.

Although strategically planned over the past decades, flagship infrastructure projects such as Rail Baltica will help us to overcome the possible economic downturn posed by the COVID-19 outbreak.

We welcome the signing of the Memorandum of Intent on Cooperation in Developing 5G Connectivity and Connected Automated Mobility in the North Sea-Baltic Corridor in September 2020 between the Baltic States and Poland, and the objective to further develop 5G connectivity. The Memorandum welcomes the activity of the intergovernmental Task Force, launched on 7 March 2019 in Riga, with confirmed determination and task to engage in a structured dialogue making continuous and timely progress towards achieving the goal of deploying 5G/Connected and Automated Mobility in the North Sea-Baltic corridor.

Secure, sufficient and trustful digital interoperability is one of the issues to be considered, regarding digital connectivity in compliance with the Baltic States' ambitious projects, such as Rail Baltica and 5G connected automated mobility in the North Sea-Baltic corridor. In conjunction to 2021-2027 MFF, Europe should consider these issues as a vital part of Europe's milestones for the nearest future. In this regard, we fully share the EU Council Conclusions of 1-2 October 2020. Also, the EU Council Conclusions on shaping Europe's digital future adopted in June 2020 stress the importance of counteracting the spread of disinformation related to 5G networks.

Common interests in European Union

Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania emphasize the importance of reaching an agreement between the EU institutions on 2021-2027 MFF and the plan for European recovery "Next Generation EU" on the basis of the European Council conclusions of 21 July 2020 with the objective to enable the rapid implementation. We stress that this is necessary in order to jointly recover from the COVID-19 crisis and thrive towards EU's future development. The MFF as well as the "Next Generation EU" are essential tools to facilitate the green and digital transition, strengthen resilience in parallel to the competitiveness, productivity, connectivity and convergence objectives. For this purpose, the legal acts necessary for the implementation of the EU programmes and including, in particular, of the Recovery and Resilience Facility need to be approved and enforced without delay.

The Baltic States support the overall EU coordinated response to COVID-19 crisis and further strengthening coordination at the EU level, in particular in developing and distributing the vaccine. We emphasize the importance of global efforts to ensure equitable access to the vaccine.

The COVID-19 outbreak also showed that the EU has to strengthen its resilience. In order to foster economic prosperity we deem it necessary to continue with efforts in building a well-functioning single market, including services market without barriers. To facilitate growth of cross-border business, a European digital identity framework should be developed. The Baltic States stand ready to further cooperation.

The Eastern Partnership has proved to be an efficient and dynamic framework for European reforms, democratic transformation of societies and has contributed to closer ties between the

Eastern Partnership countries and the EU. The Eastern Partnership remains one of the foreign policy priorities of the Baltic States - for economic integration and political association of Eastern Partners with the EU as well as promoting democracy, continuation of reforms, security, stability and prosperity in the European neighbourhood – and we reconfirm our strong support for the Eastern Partnership policy. We commit to continue to provide our support to the Eastern Partnership countries in enhancing reforms and economic development through the efficient use of political dialogue, practical cooperation and financial instruments.

We reaffirm the strategic importance of the Eastern Partnership, and look forward to the 6th Eastern Partnership Summit in 2021, which is expected to endorse long-term policy objectives and the next generation of post-2020 deliverables on the basis of these objectives. We agree that post-2020 Eastern Partnership policy must be strategic and motivation driven. Therefore we will jointly seek to secure a new set of long-term objectives, foreseeing strengthening of resilience, deeper sectorial integration, and increased motivation for European reforms by the prospect of gradual integration into the EU internal market. We will seek these objectives to envisage enhanced political dialogues and dedicated assistance for deeper integration with the Eastern Partnership countries that have expressed their willingness to move closer to the EU and have made the necessary progress in implementing reforms. Our common goal is to have such aspirations secured in the Joint declaration of the upcoming Eastern Partnership Summit in 2021.

We stress the importance of solidarity at the time of the COVID-19 crisis, including the EU's substantial support to address the impact of the outbreak in the Eastern Partnership region.

The Eastern Partnership countries are a focal point of Russia's disinformation and influence operations. The EU needs to do more to help countries and societies in the region build the resilience to Russia's destabilising influence. The EU should therefore further prioritise supporting independent pluralistic media in the Eastern Partnership countries.

We reiterate our support for the EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime. Ending impunity of minions of oppressive regimes will be an important step to support democracy and long-term stability worldwide.

Climate change and environmental issues

The Baltic States welcome that Green transition forms a central part for economic recovery from the current COVID-19 crisis. Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania express strong support for regional cooperation between the countries to maintain a clean environment, mitigate and adapt to climate change, including reducing the release of pollutants and garbage into the Baltic Sea and also looking for further possibilities to increase the share of renewables. The Baltic States call for adequate instruments, incentives, support and investments to ensure a cost-effective, just, as well as socially balanced and fair implementation of climate targets, taking into account different national circumstances. The Baltic States stand ready to increase our cooperation in green recovery efforts as those policies will remain crucial in the future.

The Baltic States welcome the European Commission's 2030 Climate Target Plan as a solid foundation for a decision on raised ambition this year. The Baltic States are fully committed to achieving a climate neutral European Union by 2050. At the same time, it is important to take into account the specificities of different EU Member States and regions.

Cooperation in education, research, culture and health care

The Baltic States are working towards closer co-operation with Nordic and Baltic Sea Region countries in the fields of research and innovation in different frameworks such as Horizon 2020,

Horizon Europe NordForsk common projects, Baltic Science Network in the Baltic Sea Region, Bonus programme and in the area of research infrastructure and researchers' mobility. We reiterate the importance of the continuity of the Norwegian Green ICT Fund that has stimulated and developed innovation-led long-term business cooperation between the Baltic States and Norway.

The Baltic States are pleased that the recently established Baltic Culture Fund is successful in promoting joint cultural events in the Baltic States and abroad thus increasing visibility of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

This year, significant progress has been made in the cooperation regarding the literature. The Memorandum of Understanding on the translation and publication of the prize-winning works of the Baltic Assembly Prize for Literature, signed between the Baltic Ministries of Culture on 24 July 2020, will allow to systematically translate and distribute the awarded literary works of the Baltic States, thus widening the knowledge of the literature of all three Baltic States and promoting the creation of a more cohesive common Baltic cultural area.

We are pleased that the centenary programmes of all Baltic States have resulted in enhanced cultural cooperation in the region. The greatest cooperation project in visual art was the Baltic Symbolism exhibition, which is continuing its journey to the national museums of the Baltic States after its successful exhibition in Paris.

An implementation of the joint Agreement on the Baltic States Committee for the Safeguarding and Development of the Song and Dance Celebration Tradition allows our countries to work together on maintaining the sustainability of the Song and Dance Celebration tradition.

The Baltic States will continue implementing joint procurement of medicinal products, especially vaccines, and devices. The Baltic States will continue the cross-border cooperation in the provision of ambulance services in the border area.

The Baltic Council defined the following priorities for cooperation in 2021:

- Regional security and defence;
- Digital transformation, combating cyber-threats and disinformation;
- Green agenda, timely implementation of strategic energy and transport projects;
- Support to democratic transformation in Belarus, strengthening of the Eastern Partnership;
- Coordinated response (regional and EU) to COVID-19 pandemic.

The 27th Baltic Council will be held during the Lithuanian Presidency on 5 November 2021 in Vilnius, the Republic of Lithuania.

Aadu Must

President of the Baltic Assembly

Urmas Reinsalu

Chairman of the Cooperation Council
of the Baltic Council of Ministers

Tallinn, 6 November 2020