

JOINT STATEMENT OF THE 23rd BALTIC COUNCIL

On 10 November 2017 in Tallinn, Republic of Estonia, the Baltic Assembly and the Baltic Council of Ministers convened for the 23rd Baltic Council to discuss current European Union affairs and co-operation in security and defence, to review progress in developing regional transport and energy infrastructure projects, and to define objectives for Baltic parliamentary and governmental cooperation for 2018.

The Baltic Council declares the following:

European Union

The determination and cohesion of the EU along with commonly agreed principles and values remain important while tackling current challenges. The safety and well-being of our citizens should be at the heart of our actions. Estonia, which currently holds the Presidency of the Council of the EU, is aiming to achieve the balance between openness and safety and security of our societies.

While one Member State is preparing to leave the European Union, the unity of the EU is more important than ever. Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania fully support the Commission as the chief EU negotiator and its approach on sequencing and strategy of the negotiations, in line with the European Council guidelines and the negotiating directives.

We stand for a strong, stable and united Europe that focuses on delivering practical solutions to EU citizens' real problems. The next Multiannual Financial Framework should reflect our ambitions accordingly. With a view to the forthcoming Commission proposals on the next Multiannual Financial Framework, we are working together closely for defining and incorporating common interests in the next financial planning period, including policy areas which support sustainable growth, employment, and convergence in the EU.

The Baltic States remain committed to the comprehensive approach to migration, attaching particular emphasis on effective control of external borders of the EU, improving results regarding the return of irregular migrants, strengthening cooperation with countries of origin and transit, and taking forward the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) reform

The Eastern Partnership has proven to be very successful since its policy priority areas will bring concrete benefits for the countries in institutional reforms, good governance, economic opportunities, market access, interconnections and energy efficiency as well as people-to-people contacts, thus enhancing stability and prosperity. The EU should retain a differentiated approach for a cooperation with the partners that is based on their level of ambition and sovereign choice. At the Eastern Partnership Summit in November, the EU and partners should reaffirm their common political commitment, setting a forward-looking agenda for the coming years.

We draw attention to the fact that Russian aggression against Ukraine is still ongoing and Crimea has been illegally annexed for more than three years now. Furthermore, the Georgian territories of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia remain under *de facto* occupation by Russia and the illegal borderization and creeping annexation of both occupied territories is continuing. In this regard, we call upon Russia to respect its international commitments.

Security and defence

We face multiple strategic security challenges in and around Europe today and therefore we should pay particular attention to strengthening national and collective defence and security, and contribute to ongoing international efforts. We regret that the Russian Federation did not

exercise transparency during the ZAPAD-2017 military drills, which does not contribute to mutual confidence and security in the region.

NATO remains the cornerstone of security and defence in Europe. The Baltic States highly value the unity and solidarity of the NATO Allies for providing the enhanced Forward Presence and will continue Host Nation Support for Allied troops. NATO's presence in the region significantly contributes to strengthening of the Alliance's deterrence and defence posture. The Baltic States have each committed to spend at least 2 per cent of GDP on defence from 2018 and invest substantially into development of its respective national defence capabilities, hereby contributing to collective defence as well. We also reiterate that NATO's military adaptation is a long-term process for which continuous efforts are needed.

The Baltic States support the efforts to strengthen the EU's security and defence including the establishment of permanent structured cooperation (PESCO) within the Union's framework. PESCO should contribute to the further development of the EU's defence capabilities in complementarity with NATO.

Close relations between NATO and EU remain of utmost importance. We should explore ways to deepen cooperation in such areas as counter-terrorism, hybrid threats, cyber security and facilitate movement of military forces across the NATO and the EU territories. Development of military mobility, increased co-operation in cyber security, maritime surveillance systems or European Logistic Hub would be useful in this context. The transatlantic relationship remains indispensable to ensuring the security and defence of Europe.

Development of the regional energy market

Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania will continue to work closely together to secure a competitive, transparent and open Baltic energy market. We are committed to find a common solution for synchronisation of the Baltic States' power systems to the Continental European networks as soon as possible.

Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania support the approach that the Baltic and Polish transmission system operators together with ENTSO-E conduct a technical study on all synchronisation alternatives with Continental European networks by spring 2018 in order to be able to make a political decision by summer 2018.

The Baltic States continue working towards establishing appropriate regional measures to secure a level playing field in electricity trade with third countries, which is essential for the creation of competitive, transparent and open electricity market.

The Baltic States will further promote the implementation of the highest international nuclear and environmental safety requirements for all nuclear facilities within EU borders as well as in the EU neighbourhood, especially in the development of the nuclear power plant project in Belarus.

Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania emphasise the importance of creating a common Baltic-Finnish gas market as well as the cooperation with Poland and acknowledge the Regional Gas Market Coordination Group for the timely implementation of the relevant action plan.

Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania continue monitoring timely implementation the development of their vital electricity and gas market infrastructure projects that also contribute to enhancing the competitiveness of the Baltic energy market. Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania expressed mutual position that if the Nord Stream 2 project is implemented, it should be in full compliance with the EU acquis and the Energy Union principles.

Development of transport connections

Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania reiterate the strategic importance of the Rail Baltic/Rail Baltica project integrating the region with the EU TEN-T network and thus enabling the development of a new, fast and environmentally friendly railway connection for passenger and freight mobility.

On 31 January 2017, the Prime Ministers of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania signed in Tallinn the Intergovernmental Agreement on the development of the Rail Baltic/Rail Baltica railway connection. On 10 October 2017, the ratification of the agreement was completed by the parliaments of all three countries.

Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania look forward to enhanced co-operation with neighbouring Finland and Poland in the development of the North Sea–Baltic Sea TEN-T Corridor to improve connectivity and ensure efficient use of the Rail Baltic/Rail Baltica project.

In the current EU financial framework the Connecting Europe Facility has enabled a breakthrough in the implementation of Rail Baltic/Rail Baltica project, a railway which is essential for the functioning of the whole North Sea-Baltic corridor. Taking into account the large regional impact of the Rail Baltic/Rail Baltica, we stress the need for the continuation of European Union financial support, including grant component, for the development of priority projects of the Trans-European infrastructure networks also in the post-2020 period.

Education, research, health care, culture

Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania will continue their close cooperation towards building a common higher education and science area to boost research excellence, innovation, investment and overall competitiveness of the region. The main undertakings to be highlighted are the Baltic Bonus programme for the Horizon 2020, and the Interreg project “Baltic Science Network”.

The education and research/science ministries of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania will make efforts to finalise the trilateral agreement on automatic academic recognition for signing as soon as possible.

In the healthcare sector, the Baltic States continue to work on joint procurements of medicinal products and medical devices. The two successful joint procurements of medicinal products in 2016 and 2017 provide a firm basis for co-operation.

Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania reiterate their commitment to continuing the active and successful cooperation in organising joint projects to mark the centenaries of the Baltic States. The preparation of various thematic regional, cross-border and community events in the Baltic States has been defined as a strong integral element of the centenary celebration.

The Baltic Council defined the following priorities for cooperation in 2018:

1. Further enhancement of regional security;
2. Co-operation in the development of the strategic infrastructure;
3. Continuing to ensure the interests of the Baltic States in the European Union.

The 24th Baltic Council will be held during the Lithuanian Presidency on 26 October 2018 in Vilnius, the Republic of Lithuania.

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Tallinn, 10 November 2017