



## Baltic Assembly

# Comprehensive analysis of the cooperation among the Baltic States during the COVID-19 crisis 2021

Secretariat of the Baltic Assembly

 +371 67225178

 Citadeles Street 2-616,  
Riga LV-1010, Latvia

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Table of contents.....	2
Introduction.....	3
COVID-19 situation in the Baltic States throughout the pandemic.....	4
Spread of COVID-19 in the Baltic States.....	4
Measures to stop the spread of COVID-19 in the Baltic States.....	4
Vaccination against COVID-19 in the Baltic States.....	5
General evaluation of cooperation during the crisis.....	6
Areas where the Baltic States showed close cooperation.....	6
Areas where countries would benefit from closer cooperation.....	7
Cooperation among the Baltic States in various areas.....	8
Cooperation in the health sector of the Baltic States.....	8
Economic cooperation among the Baltic States.....	12
Digital cooperation among the Baltic States.....	13
Lessons learned and suggestions.....	14
Readiness to address challenges in cross-border regions.....	15
General evaluation of the cooperation in cross-border regions.....	15
Cooperation in the area of road infrastructure.....	16
Cooperation in the area of human resources.....	16
List of shortcomings that continue to challenge 3B cooperation.....	18
Recommendations of the Baltic Assembly.....	19

## INTRODUCTION

The whole world has been struggling for the two recent years, coming to a standstill as a result of the COVID-19 epidemic. The COVID-19 pandemic once again placed solidarity and cooperation among the Baltic States to a rigorous test. This time, it was clear that we need to work together to overcome the previously exposed vulnerabilities. We understood the great importance of timely information sharing, political dialogue and coordination of the planned action.



In 2021, the Baltic Assembly continued to intently observe the cooperation among the Baltic States with regard to the ongoing COVID-19 crisis. The *Comprehensive analysis of the cooperation among the Baltic States during the COVID-19 crisis* of 2021 is comprised of the answers provided by the Baltic Council of Ministers to the questions put by the Baltic Assembly, discussions that took place at the Committee meetings in 2021, and other public information.

The answers from the Baltic Council of Ministers in 2020 show that the governments have been able to successfully address the issues related to COVID-19 and have learned a lot from the previous experience. We see that it is necessary to look back and estimate the potential impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in the near future, and for this reason we have to analyse the areas in need of vital improvements. The analysis should include the areas where cooperation may be regarded as efficient and the areas where efforts need to be improved, as well as identify the lessons learned and give suggestions for how to proceed in future.

The year 2021 is special because the Baltic Assembly celebrates its 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. This year under the Lithuanian presidency has been very engaging but also unusual because all the meetings took place digitally. Despite the challenges, our work never stopped and the Committees proposed several recommendations for the Baltic governments. The experience with COVID-19 showed that when the neighbouring countries face a similar threat, cooperation is vital and even inevitable to achieve more efficient results.

I truly hope that this detailed analysis will be helpful for the Latvian presidency in 2022. The agenda of the Latvian presidency will focus on the rapid recovery and sustainable growth in the Baltic States, the interconnected and innovative Baltic States, and socially protected people living in a safe and resilient Baltic region. I wish the Latvian delegation all the success, strength and courage in looking for the best solutions to overcome the challenges that COVID-19 has created.

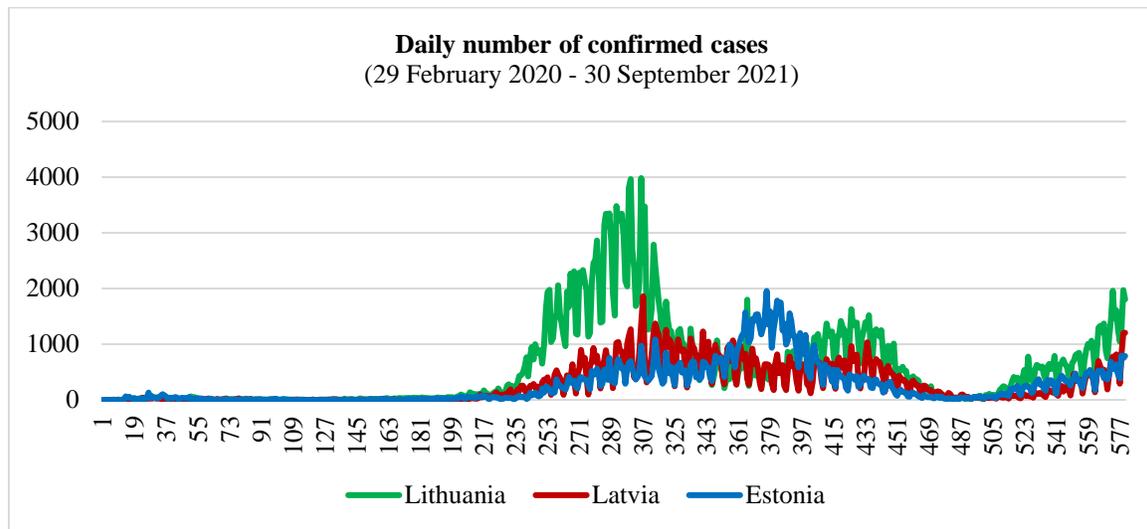
A handwritten signature in blue ink, which appears to read 'Andrius Kupčinskas'. The signature is fluid and cursive, written on a white background.

**Andrius Kupčinskas**  
President of the Baltic Assembly

# COVID-19 SITUATION IN THE BALTIC STATES THROUGHOUT THE PANDEMIC

## Spread of COVID-19 in the Baltic States

In 2021, the situation regarding COVID-19 in the Baltic States was stable for a while in the late spring and summer, but in autumn the situation worsened (see the chart below). The second wave of COVID-19 brought much more cases than the first wave with Lithuania being the most heavily affected Baltic state. Until 30 September 2021, the infections totalled over 331,680 in Lithuania, 158,290 in Latvia and 156,250 in Estonia. According to the number of people affected per 1 million, Lithuania has suffered the most (118,086) followed by Estonia (117,038) and Latvia (82,380).



Spread of COVID-19 as of 30 September 2021 in the Baltic States:

- In Lithuania, 1,806 cases of COVID-19 have been confirmed with 19 deaths; 303,288 people in total have recovered.
- In Latvia, 1,208 cases of COVID-19 have been confirmed with 11 deaths; 146,449 people in total have recovered.
- In Estonia, 789 cases of COVID-19 have been confirmed with 5 deaths; 143,943 people in total have recovered.

## Measures to stop the spread of COVID-19 in the Baltic States

The Baltic States had to respond quickly to the second wave of COVID-19. As a result, a lot was put on halt for several months with partial reopening during the summer. Despite some differences in time and intensity of the imposed restrictions in the Baltic States, in general, the measures to stop the spread of the coronavirus have been similar, such as:

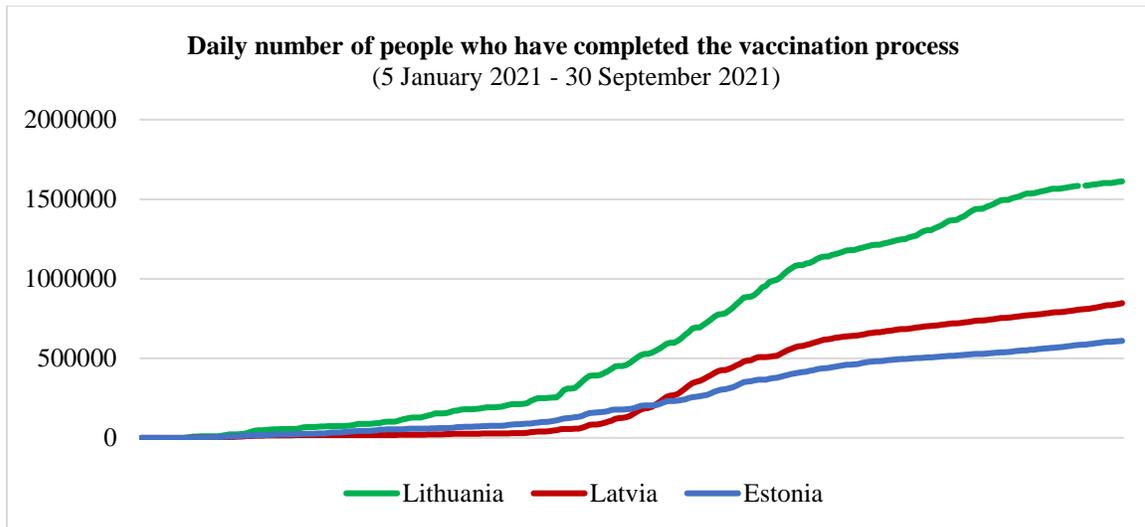
- declaring a state of emergency;
- restrictions on the free movement of COVID-19 patients and mandatory self-isolation after returning from abroad;

- restrictions on economic activities (measures to ensure a safe distance, disinfection, wearing of face masks, restrictions on participation in public and private events and more);
- restrictions on public and administrative services in the sectors of education, social and health care (remote work and study, extensive testing and more);
- vaccination.

During the second wave, there was less uncertainty about the future because the countries have learned how to deal with the crisis and were more aware of what the future holds. In addition, the Baltic States were able to adapt to the worsening pandemic situation and the previous constraints and thus make use of the lessons learned. The situation changed also due to the vaccination strategies and the new variants of the virus. Various difficulties in the provision of new vaccines and medication were identified, including the rising prices and rise in the bond for vaccines.

### Vaccination against COVID-19 in the Baltic States

The main challenge in 2021 is vaccination since the opening of economies goes hand in hand with it. The vaccination process has been actively taking place since the early spring of 2021, with over a million people in Lithuania and almost a million people in Latvia and Estonia receiving their first COVID-19 vaccine dose. Now vaccines are fully administered to about 57,7 % people in Lithuania, about 44,1 % in Latvia, and about 46 % in Estonia.



#### Vaccination process in the Baltic States:

- About 1,744,818 people in Lithuania have received their first coronavirus vaccine shot and about 1,611,973 have been given the second jab.
- About 815,259 people in Latvia have finished their vaccination process and about 918,318 have received the first dose.
- Vaccinations against COVID-19 have been performed on about 768,042 people in Estonia, about 609,667 of whom have received two doses.

## GENERAL EVALUATION OF THE COOPERATION DURING THE CRISIS

When evaluating the cooperation among the Baltic States during the crisis, the governments highlighted some positive examples and gave information on the areas that could potentially be developed in future. Some of the examples that were marked as positive initiatives in 2020 can be analysed statistically. The Lithuanian Government noted that the travel bubble in 2021 paid off. The data of *Travel in Lithuania* shows that Lithuania received almost 62,000 tourists from Latvia and Estonia in the 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter of 2020.

The successful milestone of the cooperation could be marked by March 2021, when the Baltic Ministers of Health drafted a document intended to the European Commission and invited it to search for optimal solutions to vaccine redistribution and create a transparent interim mechanism for this purpose. The Baltic Ministers of Health also addressed European Commissioner for Health and Food Safety Stella Kyriakidou with the request to focus on the urgent need to redistribute vaccines among countries. It was highlighted that decisions must be made on the basis of transparent criteria such as accessibility, level of vaccination, number and spread of cases, mobility, and morbid mortality. Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova were among the 18 countries that received the vaccine and were particularly grateful to the Baltic States for making this statement.

Close cooperation among the experts is also proof of the successful Baltic cooperation because the decisions of the governments were mainly based on the expert opinion and advice. The Latvian Government believes that it is an outstanding example of good practice that should be considered in the future. Other valuable practices to stop the spread of the virus include detailed tracing of each infection case to identify how the infection has spread, taking of targeted anti-epidemic measures, and extensive public testing. The public support for the imposed measures has also been of great importance. During the crisis, cooperation activities between the Baltic public employment services also continued. In 2020, three online seminars were held covering topics such as seasonal work, online interactive tools, and cooperation among information technology departments. In 2021, the planned seminar topics include multilingual classification of European skills and competencies, artificial intelligence (AI) in public employment services, and exchange of good practices in addressing the COVID-19 crisis.

### **Areas where the Baltic States showed close cooperation**

The exchange of information and experience was the area that all the three governments saw as having the most positive outcome. For example, regular meetings have been held among the Ministers of Health of the Baltic States through video teleconferencing (VTC). During the meetings, the ministers discussed the status of the epidemiological situation in the countries, vaccination-related questions, other prevention measures taken, and plans on how to control the situation. Exchange of information took place on different levels. Several informal discussions were held among high-ranking politicians but principally health institutions maintained regular contacts with their Baltic counterparts. The consultations were useful for exchanging information on the planned measures to limit the spread of the COVID-19 virus, as well as helped to clarify positions before meetings of

different formats at the European Union (EU), the World Health Organisation (WHO), and other international organisations.

It can be concluded that efficient coordination, timely exchange of information on epidemiological situations, close personal contacts at various levels and between all relevant authorities of the Baltic States were successful. The cooperation in this format has continued even after lifting the emergency. Steps have also been taken to improve the policy coordination among the Baltic States in the economic sector; for example, experts had regular informal meetings to exchange information and best practices and find ways to deepen cooperation on specific projects.

### **Areas where countries would benefit from closer cooperation**

All the three governments of the Baltic States highlighted the importance of cooperation in the region. The countries indicated some areas where improvements are needed to ensure better cooperation, such as making the tourism sector more sustainable, evaluation of the COVID-19 crisis, and improvement in temporary measures of border control.

The cooperation should be improved in addressing the challenges in the border areas. If temporary border control is reintroduced at the internal borders of the Baltic States, it would be necessary for all sides to identify problems and to plan the timely and efficient establishment of the complex road infrastructure for joint border checkpoints. To ensure readiness for a complex temporary reintroduction of border control, border guard agencies should evaluate the possibility of preparing a legal basis for the organisation of joint border controls at joint border checkpoints.

Unfortunately, the governments of the Baltic States have not yet evaluated the measures taken by the three countries and have not yet estimated the potential regional impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. This is an area where the cooperation among the Baltic States is vital to prepare for the future. No joint measures have been planned regarding joint post-crisis action aimed at reducing the negative impact on the economy in hard-hit sectors in the Baltic region.

## COOPERATION AMONG THE BALTIC STATES IN VARIOUS AREAS

The cooperation among the Baltic States is vital in numerous areas and even more vital in some areas than in others. The comprehensive analysis in this Chapter covers the cooperation as regards to the health sector and free movement of people and goods, economic cooperation, and digital cooperation. This Chapter also provides the lessons learned and suggestions for the Baltic States to foster cooperation in addressing COVID-19 challenges in the near future and beyond. The cooperation in cross-border areas that has been a major source of discussion will however be addressed in a separate chapter.

### Cooperation in the health sector of the Baltic States

The health care sectors of the Baltic States cooperated during the crisis and these close relations intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2020, a lot of gaps in cooperation were identified. Nevertheless, it seems that some initial problems have been resolved. However, COVID-19 has brought many new challenges or intensified the previous ones. All the three states struggled with public communication, in particular, about the vaccination process and the implementation of the restrictions. Discussions on how to engage society and how to disperse the myths will be key in future.

The shortcomings in the health and social sector discovered by the Baltic Assembly in the *Comprehensive analysis of the cooperation among the Baltic States during the COVID-19 crisis* in 2020 include:

- lack of evaluation of measures taken by the Baltic States;
- lack of cooperation in ensuring preparedness and response in health crises;
- insufficient inter-agency cooperation;
- lack of joint procurements regarding medical supplies and vaccines;
- insufficient Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) production capacities of industries;
- lack of coordination as regards regional stocks;
- insufficient exchange of information;
- insufficient cooperation in different formats, including international organisations.

In March 2020, the Ministers of Health of the Baltic States agreed to join efforts in managing the COVID-19 situation and signed a joint statement. By signing the Joint Statement, the Ministers agreed to take joint action to combat the global challenge caused by the pandemic, namely, to share and standardize information for travellers, share medical and epidemiological information as well as information on the adopted measures, exchange the information provided to health care and other professionals and to the public, and to conduct regular conference calls and VTCs at expert and ministerial levels. The governments of the Baltic States took joint measures to ensure timely cooperation in ensuring preparedness and response in crises for the health sector. This was manifested by regular meetings and exchange of information between the Baltic Ministers of Health about the epidemiological situation, public health measures, and restrictions. They also expressed solidarity and readiness for mutual assistance in preparedness and response efforts. Competent health institutions maintained regular contacts with their Baltic counterparts.

The Baltic Assembly is convinced that there is a need for the Baltic States to elaborate a joint Baltic comprehensive strategy for crisis management in health and social care in preparation for future pandemics. To work out such a strategy, regular VTCs have been held among the Ministers of Health. During these meetings, the ministers shared information on current developments, measures and procedures. They also discussed the status of the epidemiological situation in the countries, vaccination-related issues, prevention measures taken, and plans on how to control the situation. Regular contacts and experience exchange among experts helped to improve preparedness for the crisis on a national level and gave new directions to revising preparedness plans and strategies. However, a regional evaluation report has not been produced in the Baltic States because the potential impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on health care could be fully evaluated only after the pandemic is over. At the same time, it was also mentioned that the enhancement of efficient inter-sectoral and inter-ministerial cooperation is also necessary in the long term to be ready for future crises.

The COVID-19 impact on mental health also needs assessment. The Lithuanian Government measured the impact of the pandemic from various perspectives. For example, the report of the National Audit Office of Lithuania on the pandemic's impact on mental health concluded that the number of individuals who sought treatment against depression, anxiety, and acute stress disorders increased by about 10 %. The knowledge about the level of physical and mental health of the Baltic citizens could help to find the necessary post-pandemic solutions.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Baltic Health Ministers met regularly with Dr Hans Kluge, WHO Regional Director for Europe. At the meetings, the Baltic States shared their experience in responding to COVID-19, taking promising steps, and solving specific issues and challenges. This provided a good opportunity to apply for the WHO support on specific issues, including mask wearing, social distancing, use of rapid antigen tests and more. Regular contacts between respective departments of ministries helped to clarify positions before the meetings. Exchange of views took place on various levels from the expert level in working groups to the senior and political leadership at ministerial level. During the COVID-19 crisis, it has been extremely important to exchange precise information on the epidemiological situation in order to understand the performance of measures and to timely assess the possible impacts.

For the time being, all the Baltic States have been part to the EU joint procurement agreements on vaccines. There are no plans for joint Baltic procurement of medical supplies and vaccines for meeting the needs caused by the crisis. On a trilateral basis, work continues on the previously established joint procurement of some standard vaccines. Similarly, coordination as regards to regional stocks for the moment is not on the agenda of the respective institutions since each country plans the arrangements for stocks according to the assessment of its needs.

In 2020, PPE manufacturing capacity by the industries in the Baltic States was identified as insufficient. The Latvian Government noted that Latvia is in the process of establishing an accredited laboratory of PPE testing to certify PPE products according to the EU regulatory framework. The first stage will include developing testing capacity for medical face masks and respirators, and the second stage will involve doing testing of protective wear and also some categories of protective wear for armed forces and rescue personnel.

The laboratory is based in Riga Technical University. The Estonian Government noted that they have set up emergency stocks for PPE and other medical supplies at the EU level and that they prefer to use the EU level solutions as long as they are resource effective. In March 2021, they approved changes to the legislation, which provided the basis for the creation of an Estonian Stockpiling Agency that would be responsible for PPE supply. Several investment grant schemes and financial instruments are available for the establishment of new PPE production capacities.

### **Free movement of the Baltic people**

During the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, it was important to ensure a strong and well-structured cooperation model to enable the free movement of the Baltic citizens. Simultaneously, action was taken to harmonize regulations and restrictions regarding travel in the Baltic States to ease the burden of movement restrictions for the Baltic people.

The shortcomings regarding the free movement of Baltic people discovered by the Baltic Assembly in the *Comprehensive analysis of the cooperation among the Baltic States during the COVID-19 crisis* in 2020 include 1) the lack of strong and well-structured cooperation model; and 2) different travel regulations and restrictions that impede the cooperation.

The Lithuanian Government noted that several informal discussions have taken place among high-ranking politicians, including the meeting on 28 May, when Aušrinė Armonaitė, Minister of the Economy and Innovation of Lithuania, met with Edmunds Valantis, State Secretary of the Ministry of Economics of Latvia, and Andres Sutt, Minister of Entrepreneurship and Information Technology of Estonia. During the discussions, it was pointed out that the Baltic Bubble would increase the number of tourists and help the struggling hospitality businesses. Eventually, it was noted that the EU Digital COVID Certificate will be soon put in place, and Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia will make efforts and cooperate to ensure safe journeys between the countries. However, there are no specific measures or agreements on the free movement of workers between the Baltic States.

The Latvian Government noted that the availability of the international air, rail, sea and bus passenger transport services has changed due to the rapid and significant changes in demand. The EU Digital COVID Certificate was marked as key for the safe free movement of citizens in the EU during the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the beginning of the pandemic, border guard agencies of the Baltic States have agreed to organise regular VTCs for Heads or Deputies of institutions to provide an efficient and rapid exchange of information on the impact of the pandemic on the overall performance of the institutions, as well as to provide up-to-date information on illegal border crossings and current affairs in the field of immigration.

The Estonian Government added that efficient coordination, timely exchange of information on epidemiological situation, close personal contacts at different levels and between all relevant authorities of the Baltic States have continued even after lifting the emergency. In addition, the EU Member States have adopted the Council Recommendation on a coordinated approach to the restriction of free movement in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Free movement of goods in the Baltic States

A common issue that the Baltic States experienced during the COVID-19 crisis was the lack of stable fast lanes for essential goods, including medical and food supplies. It has become clear that the internal borders of the Baltic States need to stay open to ensure the functioning of the single market, including the flow of essential goods, such as medical and food supplies. A coordinated approach is necessary to prevent the introduction of internal border controls and ensure the free movement of goods. Movement restrictions can be imposed to protect public health; however, the measures have to be proportional and comply with EU Single Market principles.

The shortcomings regarding the free movement of goods discovered by the Baltic Assembly in the *Comprehensive analysis of the cooperation among the Baltic States during the COVID-19 crisis* in 2020 include 1) the lack of stable fast lanes for essential goods, including medical and food supplies; 2) the lack of solutions to avoid losses for agricultural and food producers who are unable to store their products for the long-term.

Lithuania believes that during a similar crisis, the Baltic States should proceed in compliance with Council Recommendation 2021/119 on a coordinated approach to the restriction of free movement in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. To prevent the problems from recurring in future, the Lithuanian Government suggests looking into the implementation of Green Lanes to avoid supply chain disruptions and losses for agricultural and food producers when long-term storage of products is not possible. The Green Lane border crossings have to be open to all freight vehicles carrying goods. These possibilities go hand in hand with the EU Digital COVID-19 Certificate. Going through these Green Lane border crossings, including any checks of transport workers, should not exceed 15 minutes on internal land borders. The Green Lane border crossings should be open to all freight vehicles including all heavy and light-duty vehicles, trains and vessels where applicable. Estonia noted that ensuring the smooth flow of cargo is a strategically important and clear responsibility of each Member State and that the introduction of the Green Lanes has been relatively successful. Throughout the crisis, no administrative burden fell on the entities ensuring the functioning of supply chains because transport workers were exempted from any kind of testing certificates to guarantee the smooth movement of goods. Estonia also emphasized the need to recognize the effectiveness of joint efforts, which gave positive results and showed the need for harmonized approach all over the EU.

Another topical issue was the losses for agricultural and food producers who were unable to store products for the long term. The Lithuanian Ministry of Agriculture informed that it did not face any challenges regarding cooperation among the Baltic States in crisis handling and that it was able to supply inhabitants with food. The Ministry does not see a reason to worry about food security. On the national level, action was taken by the Lithuanian Ministry to minimize the negative effects of the pandemic on agriculture to continue to assure the performance of the necessary functions effectively.

Similarly, since March 2020, the Ministry of Agriculture of Latvia has implemented various measures to alleviate the situation in the agricultural sector and help farmers and food producers to overcome the crisis. Measures and support were mainly aimed at improving the viability of farms, providing income stabilization and instruments for the

continuation of financial resources. The Ministry has set up a crisis management group that assesses the current situation and constructively solves problems.

There has been no cooperation among the Baltic States on finding solutions to avoid losses for agricultural and food producers, although the Agricultural Ministers of the Baltic States share the same approach to the problem. It is most significant to keep borders and transport routes open to ensure the transportation of agricultural products and raw materials. Since trade flows and the demand for food are still recovering, the developments in the markets should be monitored closely.

## **Economic cooperation among the Baltic States**

The year 2021 has been a burden for the economies of states, therefore by joining forces it is possible to come out of the crisis faster. Even if the economic impact of the pandemic on the EU has been enormous, the Baltic States have been among the more resilient economies that experienced relatively smaller contractions. The impact was limited, but it varied substantially by sectors, occupations, and population groups, with low-income workers affected the most.

The shortcomings of the economic cooperation discovered in the *Comprehensive analysis of the cooperation among the Baltic States during the COVID-19 crisis* in 2020 include:

- vulnerability to market failures due to the international nature of the economies;
- limited self-production capacity;
- insufficient discussions about post-crisis measures aimed at reducing the negative impact on the economy in hard-hit sectors;
- insufficient policy coordination;
- insufficient cooperation among tourism officials.

Joint and regular cooperation on, planning for, and coordination of restrictions on movement should be enhanced not only for COVID-19 but on a larger horizon, taking into account also military mobility considerations. Joint procurement and coordination as regards regional stocks is an avenue that needs to be explored and analysed more. Regarding preparation for the potential crisis in the future, intra-governmental cooperation in this mindset needs to be mainstreamed into regional cooperation. No joint measures are planned for the time being to start discussions about joint post-crisis measures aimed at reducing the negative impact on the economy in hard-hit sectors. The Latvian Government noted that the Baltic States have long observed that synergies enable best practice exchange and reinforce the effort to recover and grow. For instance, during the first COVID-19 wave, the three states kept their economies and societies interconnected through the single travel zone in the Baltics. Therefore, further active cooperation among the Baltic States will help to successfully overcome the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and reduce the negative impact on the economy in the hard-hit sectors.

It is a necessity to continue working on economic and social stability in the region, and wider vaccination against COVID-19 would allow to facilitate and maintain economic activity. In the economic recovery process, further development of infrastructure projects, supply chain management, passenger mobility, promotion of digitalization and innovation, and tourism have a vital role. Furthermore, with a view to reducing the negative impact on the economy, Latvia is planning to offer Estonia and Lithuania to boost capacities and

innovation in five sectors, namely, bioeconomy, biomedicine and biotechnologies, smart materials and engineering, advanced information and communications technology, and smart energy.

An effective insolvency system is another significant means to mitigate the negative impact on the economy. To improve the aforementioned, all Member States of the EU, including the Baltic States, are implementing the Directive on Restructuring and Insolvency (2019/1023). Its implementation will bring about new or improved procedures to ensure the existence of a restructuring procedure and more effective insolvency procedures in case restructuring is no longer a viable option.

With a view to improving the policy coordination among the Baltic States in the economic sector, regular informal meetings between senior government officials, as well as experts and specialists from different sectors took place during 2021 to exchange information and best practices, as well as to find ways to deepen cooperation on specific projects. Several working groups have been established, for example, in the energy and tourism sectors. As regards other types of economic cooperation among the Baltic States, such events as Baltic Miltech Summit and Life Sciences Baltics are also important.

In the tourism sector, considering that restrictions on the entry of foreign tourists into the Baltic States continued in 2021, no joint marketing activities took place. But with the introduction of the Digital COVID-19 Certificate, marketing activities between the Baltic States have resumed and cooperation in foreign markets is planned for 2022. According to the agreement between the governments of the Baltic States, all parties cooperate in marketing a joint tourism destination and work in the Joint Tourism Committee. Every year, the Committee meeting is organised to discuss the main issues of the year and to prepare the Annual Action Plan. The main objective for the period is to join forces making tourism in the Baltic countries more sustainable. The Lithuanian Government expressed a wish for the main objective to be joining forces in making tourism of the Baltic countries more sustainable since the principles of sustainable tourism have become increasingly relevant and the COVID-19 pandemic has pushed even more attention towards their value.

Due to the COVID-19 crisis, the planned face-to-face tourism activities in the Baltics took place online. In total, three meetings were held to discuss the re-planning and reorganisation of activities included in the 2020 Action Plan of the Baltic Joint Tourism Committee, national experiences to mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 crisis, and support measures for the tourism industry, as well as to exchange information on the current situation and support instruments for the tourism industry during the 2021–2027 planning period. The goal is to cooperate more intensively in distant markets in future; in times of crisis, however, crisis support and marketing activities have also been topical.

### **Digital cooperation among the Baltic States**

The pandemic has changed daily habits; for example, digitalization allowed individuals and the public sector to have regular meetings online. COVID-19 led to the digitalization of businesses as well. Due to the spread of COVID-19, digital solutions became especially important since the Baltic States have also developed different applications for contact tracing. The Baltic States have the potential to be leaders in the EU in digital matters, and the region could gain a lot from digital cooperation.

The shortcomings of the digital cooperation discovered in the *Comprehensive analysis of the cooperation among the Baltic States during the COVID-19 crisis* in 2020 include 1) different levels of requirements, rules and security; 2) discrepancy with digital signatures.

Regarding the introduction of digital signatures between the Baltic States, the Governments of Lithuania and Estonia informed that interoperability and the use of digital signatures is ensured through the implementation of eIDAS framework (regulation on electronic identification and trust services for electronic transactions in the internal market), which also applies in the Baltic region. It is worth promoting the use of electronic signatures as widely as possible in the future, but for now, all eSignatures are made compatible across Europe. To facilitate the use of eSignature at the cross-border level, ASiC-E, a common eSignature format, is already available for use. The European Commission has also published a list of the trusted eSignature providers for reference. However, more could be done in this area. For example, it would be practical to discuss common formats for electronic documents and ease the burden on institutions by adopting electronic formats of different documents.

### **Lessons learned and suggestions**

The pandemic has been a significant stress test for the efficiency of governments, democracy, international standing, and solidarity. COVID-19 has changed people's attitudes and has given new initiatives to governments on fundamental questions of democracy and trust. The pandemic has reminded everyone that the scope of security and insecurity depends on societies. During the pandemic, a lot of misinformation could be seen, since it was used to spread deceptions and disinformation to create a split among citizens and undermine their trust in institutions and democracy. These processes are nurturing radicalization, hence a further exchange of knowledge is needed. The values that unite the Baltic States for cooperation need to be engaged and protected. The Baltic States could exchange information on how to better inform society about the available vaccines. Up to now, public support for measures introduced by the governments has played an important role. All restrictions or prohibitions must be justified, and they should not be excessive. Joint and regular cooperation and planning for restrictions on movement and their coordination should be enhanced not only for COVID-19 but on a larger horizon. Joint procurement and coordination as regards to regional stocks is an avenue that needs to be explored and analysed more as well. The new normality increased the costs of living, which led to an economic burden on families. The increase in household expenses was related to higher consumption of energy and food, loss of school meals, need for new IT equipment, etc. As a result of the pandemic and the imposed restrictions, a general rise in domestic violence and mental health challenges could be observed.

Intra-governmental cooperation at the regional level needs to be discussed to prepare for crises in the future. The crisis brought also solutions for some issues, e.g. preparedness for further emergencies and pandemics is now considered crucial. Another positive reaction was the rapid transformation of the health care systems. The development of digital services is also a highly positive aspect. The virus has also forced companies to create remote workforces and operate on platforms. The roll-out of 5G has made connected devices even more connected than before, and the cyber security industry has never been more important than now. The cyber security skills gap remains an issue, hence discussions on more education to keep the societies safe and well-skilled need to take place.

## READINESS TO ADDRESS CHALLENGES IN CROSS-BORDER REGIONS

For the Baltic States, the readiness to address the challenges in the cross-border regions is of great importance because the daily lives, work and recreation of the Baltic people are closely connected. This chapter evaluates the cooperation in cross-border areas, paying attention to the adequacy of the road and checkpoint infrastructure, as well as human resources.

The shortcomings discovered in the *Comprehensive analysis of the cooperation among the Baltic States during the COVID-19 Crisis* in 2020 as regards the cooperation in cross-border areas include:

- lack of coordination and discussions on the closing of borders;
- inadequate road infrastructure in border areas;
- insufficient human resources;
- insufficient number of border checkpoints.

### **General evaluation of the cooperation in cross-border regions**

The pandemic has reminded everyone that societies and international communities can be tested not only by traditional challenges but also by newly emerging and rather unexpected problems. The experience also shows that when a threat is alike in neighbouring countries, cooperation is vital for more efficient cooperation. Keeping the borders as open as possible and taking similar steps are good for cooperation.

Regarding cooperation on the borders, a great example of trilateral cooperation is the Forum of the Border Guard Subcommittee of the Committee of Senior Officials on the Interior of the Baltic Council of Ministers, composed of the heads of the border guard institutions of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the border guard agencies of the Baltic States agreed to organise regular VTCs for their heads or deputy heads. This decision was aimed at providing an efficient and rapid exchange of information on the impact of the pandemic and the overall performance of the institutions, as well as sharing the up-to-date information on illegal border crossings and the developments in the field of immigration. Heads of the border guard agencies have agreed to organise additional meetings when necessary to exchange the information on the existing situation at the external borders and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on border security. Now the plenipotentiary border representatives of the Baltic States started to develop a plan on the distribution of roads in case border crossing points are re-established. All sides have agreed on the division of the state border sections and closed roads (discussions are ongoing on the number of roads distributed between the border guard agencies in case of the temporary re-establishment of border crossing points).

Regarding the lack of coordination and discussions on the closing of borders, the Lithuanian Government noted that to compensate for the lack of discussions about possible future scenarios of the reintroduction of checks at the internal border, the State Border Guard Service of Lithuania and the State Border Guard of Latvia are prepared to use the mechanism of border delegates' cooperation established following the Agreement between

the Government of the Republic of Lithuania and the Government of the Republic of Latvia on the Maintenance of the Lithuanian-Latvian State Border and the Activities of Border Delegates signed on 18 July 2019. The border guard agencies are progressing with the development of a standard operation plan for the reintroduction of checks at the internal border, which is inspired by the closing of borders due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Cooperation in the area of road infrastructure**

In recent years, Lithuania and Latvia implemented the cross-border cooperation project within the INTERREG Latvia-Lithuania programme *Easycrossing/Improvement of Cross Border Road Infrastructure for Well-Connected Regional Centres and Facilitated Labour Mobility in the Border Areas*. According to the programme, the reconstruction of three roads of national significance on the territory of Lithuania has been completed (Ežerė-Mažeikiai No 163, Žeimelis-Viliešiai-Adžiūnai No 2912 and Pandėlys-Suvainiškis-Bereta No 3647). The development of border checkpoints on the Lithuanian-Latvian border is not planned in the near future.

In Latvia every year, especially in the last two years, when additional funding has been allocated from the state budget for the development of public infrastructure to stimulate the national economy during the COVID-19 crisis as much as possible, the motor road network in border areas is also being reconstructed. *SLLC Latvian State Roads*, in cooperation with *SE Lithuanian Road Administration*, has implemented the project *Improvement of Cross Border Road Infrastructure for Well-Connected Regional Centres and Facilitated Labour Mobility in the Border Areas*, which was co-financed by the EU Regional Development Fund Interreg V-A Latvia-Lithuania Programme 2014–2020.

Currently, the road infrastructure at the internal borders cannot be seen as adequate for a temporary restoration of border checks. For this reason, the State Border Guard of Latvia has requested *Latvian State Roads* to provide the information on upcoming modernization and planned reconstruction works, as well as on new road signs on the main roads close to the Latvian-Lithuanian and Latvian-Estonian borders. After that, the State Border Guard of Latvia will evaluate and find the ways to improve the current road infrastructure to make it suitable for establishment of immigration control posts and for temporary restoration of border checks. The given solutions are not intended for the long term.

### **Cooperation in the area of human resources**

For possible future scenarios of the reintroduction of checks at the internal border, the State Border Guard Service of Lithuania and the State Border Guard of Latvia are progressing with the development of a standard operation plan for the reintroduction of checks at the internal border, which is to compensate for insufficient human resources needed along the whole length of the border and in as many border crossing points as possible. The plan, which is to be signed, is designed to clearly identify the border sections that each party is responsible for to avoid overlapping efforts at the same border section and to clearly identify the border crossing points that each party will operate at. The measures envisaged in the plan will be supported by such form of cross-border cooperation as joint border patrols, which are arranged in a situation when international contacts are not limited due to a threat of the cross-border spread of diseases.

The annual planning of joint border patrols is part of border delegates' regular cooperation, and each patrol may involve either officials of the two border guard agencies or officials of all four border guard agencies and police. The compensation for insufficient human resources is implemented through the planned improvement of skills of available staff by arranging exercises for scenarios of temporary reintroduction of checks at the internal border. To ensure the filling of positions at the State Border Guard of Latvia in the field of immigration control, job announcements will be published and personnel will be recruited. Officials will be appointed as instructors or officers for carrying out return and asylum procedures at immigration control points. Moreover, each year measures are taken to popularize the profession of border guards to attract new applicants and promote the role of border guards in society.

### **Cooperation in the area of border checkpoints**

If temporary border controls are reintroduced at the internal borders of the Baltic States, it would be necessary for all sides to identify problems and to promptly plan for building road infrastructure facilities suitable for common border checkpoints. To ensure readiness for a complex temporary reintroduction of border controls, border guard agencies should evaluate the necessity of preparing a legal basis for the organisation of joint border controls at joint border checkpoints (e.g. intergovernmental agreements or protocols).

The Estonian Government proposed that since such crises are hopefully not permanent, it is not wise to invest in the infrastructure of border checks between the Member States. Rather, this problem should be addressed in terms of road safety and safe parking of vehicles and resting areas for truck drivers. As the European Commission pointed out, truck drivers in Europe are often confronted with an insufficient number of parking facilities and therefore often park in non-secured zones or unsafe locations, exposing themselves and others to potential thefts and a high risk of accidents. Synergies in cooperation between the Member States and the Commission can be seen, and it would be sensible to set up such parking areas between the Member States and, if necessary, these areas could then be used for speeding up the border controls and avoiding bottlenecks.

## LIST OF SHORCOMINGS THAT CONTINUE TO CHALLENGE 3B COOPERATION

The tendencies in the shortcomings discovered by the Baltic Assembly in 2021 differ from the ones discovered in 2020. This is because the governments of the Baltic States have improved their cooperation in many areas. Positive developments can be observed in cooperation on ensuring preparedness for and response to crises in the health sector, exchange of information, and cooperation in different formats, including international organisations. There are some new shortcomings discovered in the analysis of 2021, including the insufficient assessment of the COVID-19 impact on mental health, absence of specific measures or bilateral agreements on the free movement of labour between the Baltic States, etc. However, the following list mostly consists of shortcomings that were identified in 2020 but continue to challenge the cooperation among the Baltic States in 2021.

Area of cooperation	Shortages
<b>Cooperation in the health and social sector</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— lack of comprehensive evaluation of the potential impact and chosen measures</li> <li>— insufficient information about the COVID-19 impact on physical and mental health</li> <li>— lack of coordination as regards regional stocks</li> <li>— insufficient PPE production capacities of industries</li> </ul>
<b>Free movement of Baltic people</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— no specific measures or bilateral agreements on the free movement of workers between the Baltic States</li> </ul>
<b>Free movement of goods in the Baltic States</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— lack of stable fast lanes for essential goods, including medical and food supplies</li> <li>— lack of solutions to avoid losses for agricultural and food producers who are unable to store their products for the long-term</li> </ul>
<b>Economic cooperation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— limited self-production capacity</li> <li>— lack of discussions about joint post-crisis measures aimed at reducing the negative impact on the economy in hard-hit sectors</li> <li>— insufficient policy coordination</li> <li>— lack of coordination as regards regional stocks</li> </ul>
<b>Digital cooperation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— different levels of requirements, rules and security</li> <li>— insufficient promotion of the use of electronic signatures</li> </ul>
<b>Cooperation in the cross-border regions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— insufficient coordination and discussions on the closing of borders</li> <li>— inadequate road infrastructure in border areas</li> <li>— insufficient human resources</li> <li>— insufficient number of border checkpoints</li> <li>— lack of complex road infrastructure for common border controls</li> </ul>

## RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE BALTIC ASSEMBLY

In 2021, the adopted recommendations of the Baltic Assembly will be crucial for the parliaments and governments of the Baltic States to overcome the COVID-19 crisis in the Baltic States and prepare for the future. The Baltic Assembly calls on the parliaments and governments of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia as well as the Baltic Council of Ministers to cooperate in various areas, including cooperation in the field of disaster prevention, preparedness and response, crisis management and civil protection; external border control and management; cooperation in the health care sector; cooperation in the social sector; economic cooperation; digital cooperation; new partnerships in education, science and research; and cultural cooperation.

### **Recommendations regarding cooperation in the field of disaster prevention, preparedness and response, crisis management and civil protection:**

- to develop the concept for a comprehensive security model of crisis preparedness coordination in the Baltic States;
- to revise the crisis management approach in the Baltic States during the COVID-19 pandemic, and to identify effective practices and errors in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia to ensure learning from each other's experiences;
- to prepare a long-term strategy of the Baltic States to ensure coordinated action in addressing the challenges posed by COVID-19 and future crises;
- to maintain regular communication and exchange of information between the relevant institutions of the Baltic States in the field of disaster prevention, preparedness and response, crisis management and civil protection;

### **Recommendations regarding external border control and management:**

- to prepare a plan of the Baltic States for effective implementation of border checks during crisis situations, including seeking ways to solve issues, such as inadequate road infrastructure in the border regions and insufficient human resources;
- to establish an early warning procedure for the closing of the Baltic borders to reduce the risk of uncoordinated activities and ensure the continuation of daily lives of citizens in the border areas;
- to evaluate successes and failures of the agreement between the Baltic States to lift travel restrictions and ensure free movement of residents by land, sea and air or the so-called Baltic Bubble agreement;
- to intensify the cross-border cooperation among the Baltic States, including addressing challenges posed by the spread of COVID-19, the situation in Belarus, and the hybrid attacks on Latvia, Lithuania and Poland carried out by Alexander Lukashenko's regime;

### **Recommendations regarding the cooperation in the health care sector:**

- to prepare a joint long-term plan for addressing the health crisis created by COVID-19 thus ensuring efficient coordination of planned activities and measures, exchange of information, and estimation of potential impact;

- to evaluate and draw conclusions about vaccination strategies, their execution and crisis communication;
- to evaluate the possibility of joint action to improve the physical and mental health of the Baltic population;

**Recommendations regarding cooperation in the social sector:**

- to evaluate and draw conclusions about the impacts of COVID-19 on poor and vulnerable groups in the Baltic societies and to discuss possible cooperation areas;

**Recommendations regarding the economic cooperation among the Baltic States:**

- to look for the opportunities to deepen the interconnection of the Baltic economies that will ensure faster post pandemic recovery;
- to jointly develop alternative market-based funding sources to foster immediate recovery of the economies of the Baltic States;
- to evaluate the possibility of interlinking the Baltic initiatives for the Recovery and Resilience Facility of the European Union, including in the area of digital transformation;
- to learn from the successful cooperation among the Nordic countries in the tourism sector in order to elaborate a plan for deepening the cooperation among tourism sectors of the Baltic States;
- to highlight the importance of widening social security package to address the short-term labour market challenges caused by the COVID-19 crisis, and to discuss possible joint measures to address long-term labour market challenges (such as skill mismatch and structural unemployment) in the Baltic States;

**Recommendations regarding the digital cooperation among the Baltic States:**

- to further develop the cooperation among the Baltic States with the focus on the three major elements, namely, cross-border digital services, data exchange and eID recognition, to contribute to the digital transformation in the EU;
- to boost investment in digital transformation aimed at scaling up unicorn start-ups in the Baltic States;
- to create a format for regular exchange of experience and knowledge about digital transformation in the Baltic States;
- to enhance the usage of electronic signature between the Baltic States;

**Recommendations regarding new partnerships in education, science and research:**

- to evaluate the possibility of launching a joint Baltic research call to fund the projects regarding COVID-19;

**Recommendations regarding cultural cooperation and minimizing environmental footprint:**

- to create a format for the exchange of best practices in reopening the cultural sector in the Baltic States.

