

JOINT STATEMENT OF THE 27th BALTIC COUNCIL

The Baltic Assembly and the Baltic Council of Ministers convened on 5 November 2021 in Vilnius, Lithuania, for the 27th Baltic Council to discuss cooperation in security and defence matters, review progress in developing regional energy and transport infrastructure projects, exchange views on the current issues/issues of common concern on the EU agenda, and to define the objectives of Baltic parliamentary and governmental cooperation for the year 2022.

Cooperation in tackling COVID-19 crisis

A common EU response has been crucial in managing the COVID-19 pandemic. It allowed ensuring immediate response to the needs of public health and mitigating negative socio-economic consequences. Close cooperation between Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, constant exchange of information and best practices led to a more effective coordination of containing the spread of the virus. Common efforts and solidarity at EU level ensured equal vaccination possibilities for our citizens. The unprecedented agreement on the EU Recovery Plan provided ground for a more resilient future of the EU. Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are focusing on the effective implementation of national Recovery and Resilience Plans in order to ensure green, digital, inclusive and sustainable post-pandemic recovery and subsequent growth in the long term. Further efforts, including communication, are of crucial importance to address disinformation on vaccine safety, vaccine hesitancy and increase citizens' trust in safe and effective vaccine. Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania strongly support the "Team Europe" approach and are contributing to global efforts to overcome the COVID-19 pandemic by donating the vaccine bilaterally and through COVAX mechanism.

Bearing in mind the broader challenges of tackling the COVID-19 pandemic, short-term thinking is not sustainable. Besides the immediate task of fighting the pandemic, the Baltic states agreed on the importance of continued sharing of lessons learned, also with a view to improving our healthcare systems and reducing the vulnerability of relevant supply chains. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania reiterate their commitment to continue working together in the spirit of solidarity and mutual understanding, as the experience drawn from the pandemic will strengthen our common resilience. The Baltic states also acknowledge the importance of close cooperation aimed at keeping effective control of the new variants of the virus.

Situation at the EU external border with Belarus

Our countries are determined to continue, by all necessary means, to effectively protect our national borders in the face of hybrid attacks of the Lukashenko regime. The regime has artificially created and is sustaining the flow of third country nationals to Belarus, which upon their arrival in Belarus are brought to the EU border, where Belarusian border guards use threats and physical force to push them into crossing the border of the EU illegally. However, these are not just Lithuania's, Latvia's or Poland's borders – they are also the external borders of the EU. Therefore, measures at national level alone are insufficient. Swift and concrete solutions and strong response aimed at countering the instrumentalisation of illegal migration and other hybrid threats are needed at EU level.

Based on the experience, the Baltic states are firmly convinced that there is an urgent need to adapt the EU acquis to the new realities, in order to ensure strong protection of the EU external border and provide effective measures to prevent illegal border crossings. Therefore, the Baltic states are looking forward to the European Commission's proposal for an amendment of the Schengen Borders Code. There is also a need to foresee ways to stop the abuse of the asylum system and instrumentalisation/abuse of migrant lives, whether by state actors or criminal networks. In this regard, the Baltic states welcome the renewed EU action plan against migrant smuggling and express support for further strengthening of the operational, legal, diplomatic and financial tools to respond to the instrumentalisation of irregular migration by state actors.

We condemn in strongest possible terms the Minsk regime's hybrid attack against the neighbouring countries which ranges from instrumentalisation of migrants, spreading of disinformation and propaganda to inciting smuggling of illegal goods and the highjacking of a civilian airplane. We call on the Minsk regime to cease immediately its hostile hybrid attacks aimed at destabilising security in the region.

Common interests in Europe

Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania support the Conference on the Future of Europe as an opportunity for an open, inclusive and frank debate with citizens on what they expect from the EU. The EU's economic strength, its prosperous internal market and its influence in the world are based on democratic values and the rule of law, which have been at the heart of the European project from the very beginning.

The Baltic states therefore believe that the EU's global role in fostering and promoting democratic values and the rule of law in Europe's neighbourhood and around the world should be further enhanced. The Baltic states suggest focusing on concrete policy initiatives, expected by our citizens, where the EU can demonstrate unity and deliver tangible results, rather than discussing institutional issues and reforms. Green and digital transition, stronger management of migration flows and energy security are areas where EU's leadership will be crucial in coming years.

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

The security of NATO Allies is indivisible. We reaffirm our commitment to NATO and a strong, vibrant transatlantic bond based on mutual trust, unity, and solidarity as a cornerstone of our security. Continued NATO and Allied military presence in the Baltic states and readiness for collective defence remain key elements of credible deterrence, especially in the context of Russia's aggressive military posture. 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 and call for increased presence amidst the deteriorating security situation in the region.

Russia remains the greatest security threat to the Baltic states and NATO. Russia's ongoing military modernisation, its posture, size and capability to launch a short notice attack together with aggressive rhetoric are aimed at escalating tension, undermining unity and cohesion of Allies. Deterrence and defence are especially important in view of Russia's militarisation and ongoing efforts to create a Union state with Belarus. The Zapad 2021 joint Russian-Belarusian strategic exercise did not meet transparency requirements of the OSCE Vienna Document. It demonstrated military preparedness of

Russia and Belarus to engage in a military conflict in the Western strategic direction and was used to further exploit their military integration. Possible permanent deployment of Russian troops and military equipment on the territory of Belarus, together with the plans announced by Alexander Lukashenko to acquire USD 1 billion worth of weapons from Russia by 2025, including S-400 missile systems, would significantly change the security situation in the region and affect our countries' defence calculus.

In this context we underline that full and speedy implementation of NATO's ongoing work to further strengthen deterrence and defence posture, including 2014 Defence Investment Pledge and development of defence planning, especially related to rapid reinforcement and regional air defence, remain crucial for our common security. We actively support and closely coordinate positions on the key issues of NATO's adaptation and underline the need to prioritise deterrence and collective defence in the process of implementation of NATO 2030 agenda, including the development of NATO's next Strategic Concept. We also remain committed to spending at least 2 percent of GDP on defence.

The Baltic states will continue assisting our partners in implementation of democratic and defence reforms in their preparation to eventual NATO memberships as agreed at 2008 NATO Bucharest Summit. It is in the security interest of the NATO Alliance to maintain the credibility of the Open Door Policy and to support comprehensively partners who face Russia's pressure. We also continue to attach great importance to NATO cooperation with Sweden and Finland in order to enhance security in the Baltic Sea Region.

We firmly support stronger and more comprehensive NATO-EU cooperation to achieve full complementarity. We call for ensuring complementarity and coherence between the EU and NATO with a strong focus on countering hybrid threats, enhancing cyber security, preserving technological edge, building resilience and military mobility.

The Baltic states look forward to the next NATO Summit in Madrid in 2022 and subsequent Summit in Vilnius.

Eastern Partnership

The Baltic states look forward to the 6th Eastern Partnership Summit, which takes place on 15 December 2021 in Brussels, Belgium. We expect the Summit to reaffirm the EU's and partner countries' strong commitment to strategic and ambitious Partnership and stress its importance for the long-term policy objectives and the next generation of related deliverables. We agree that post-2020 Eastern Partnership policy must be strategic and motivation driven.

We support that an ambitious joint declaration on the future of Eastern Partnership will be adopted at the Summit that motivates the EaP partners to continue with reform processes. The prospects for their societies' transformation will be enhanced by further economic integration and political association with the EU. The EaP contributes to stability and prosperity of the region, to the benefit of both the partner countries and the EU.

We strongly support incentive-based approach, with a view to bringing our Eastern partners closer to the EU and aligning with its standards to benefit those partners most engaged in implementing reforms. It is essential to keep all partners motivated and take into account their ambitions, interests and capabilities.

We express our full support to the Associated Partners' European aspirations and their European choice as well as their goal for gradual integration into the internal market. In this context, we strongly welcome the initiative by the Associated Partners to enhance cooperation among them and with the EU by establishing the Associated Trio on 17 May 2021.

The Baltic states reiterate the importance of Eastern Partnership countries' continued efforts aimed at tackling corruption, reinforcing good governance, rule of law, and media freedom, and further empowering respective civil societies.

We encourage the Eastern Partners to make timely decisions needed to benefit from EU's digitalisation and green agendas that would bring them a step closer towards the EU and ensure their international competitiveness. We underline the need to strengthen the security dimension of the EaP – resilience in countering hybrid and cyber threats, dialogue and cooperation with partner countries in the field of foreign and security policy (CSDP/CFSP framework) and EU-led crisis management and military operations, European Peace Facility, PESCO, etc.

Ukraine

The Baltic states reaffirm their strong support for Ukraine's independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity within its internationally recognised borders.

The Baltic states strongly condemn the illegal annexation of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol by Russia and its continuing military aggression in eastern Ukraine, where ceasefire violations continue, causing more losses of human lives. Politically motivated detentions of Ukrainians, persecution of Crimean Tatars, torture, ill-treatment, continuous restrictions of fundamental freedoms of expression, religion or assembly, ongoing conscription campaigns and forcible demographic change must cease immediately. Our countries strongly support Ukraine's reform process, its Euro-Atlantic aspirations and Ukraine's further political association and economic integration with the European Union.

Belarus

Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania stand united and firm in our support to Belarusian civil society and its efforts to build a democratic and prosperous Belarus.

We strongly condemn the ongoing systemic actions of the Belarusian regime aimed at eliminating the entire civil society and silence free media. We deem such actions as completely unacceptable and contrary to Belarus' international commitments and obligations and call on the international community to pursue accountability for all those who have committed or have enabled the regime's crimes against Belarusian population. Impunity is not an option. We will continue to work for justice for the victims and holding the perpetrators to account. We will also continue to raise the human rights situation in Belarus in all relevant international fora.

We condemn the hybrid attack that has been orchestrated by the regime of Alexander Lukashenko against the EU (Latvia, Lithuania, Poland) and state-run instrumentalisation of migrants. We call upon international organisations working in the field of migration and human rights to focus their efforts on addressing the root causes of the problem in Belarus.

We will further follow our agreed policy not to present EU Ambassadors credentials to Lukashenko, and do not accept new Belarus ambassadors in our capitals.

Our three nations are carefully assessing the broader implications of ongoing attempts by Russia and the Lukashenko regime to forge ahead with the formation of a Union state. We believe a free, sovereign and democratic Belarus, which respects fundamental democratic freedoms and human rights of its citizens and is a constructive partner in relations between states, is in the best interest of the people of Belarus.

The only way forward out of the current political crisis is new free and fair presidential elections in the presence of international observers.

Russia

We stress the importance of maintaining a critical and consistent approach towards relations with Russia, based on the five principles adopted by the EU in March 2016. We concur that the EU's overarching strategy towards Russia should aim at stopping Kremlin's external aggression, as well as domestic repressions, while building a stronger partnership with the civil society and the people of Russia.

Along with our partners, we regret that the 17-19 September Duma elections failed to meet the standards of free and fair elections. This is a serious step back for the democratic values in Russia and Russia's obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the European Convention on Human Rights. We also regret that the Russian authorities used the epidemiological situation in the country as a pretext to exclude the OSCE international election observers from monitoring the elections.

We will continue to address democratic values and will insist that Russia abide by its international obligations and commitments.

Connectivity, including regional gas and electricity market

The Baltic states confirm great importance they attach to effective cooperation on energy policy, especially through strengthening of energy security, diversification of routes and sources of supply across the region, as well as protection of infrastructure against risks of attacks, including malicious use of ICT, and the green energy transition.

We reaffirm that full and timely implementation of the synchronisation of the Baltic states' electricity networks with the Continental European Network by the target date of 2025 remains a joint priority. The Baltic states welcome the progress made in technical preparation for the power system synchronisation, including an extension of existing electricity interconnections, preparation for contingencies, and a test of independent frequency management among Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. The synchronisation will contribute significantly to energy security of the region and in addition will lay solid foundation for the integration of large-scale renewable energy sources.

Security and resilience of the electricity system remain of critical importance. The Baltic states agree to enhance regional cooperation on risk assessment and accelerate all necessary measures in order to achieve maximum resilience of our electricity system, including the preparedness for isolated operation mode at the earliest possibility. The Baltic states also underline the importance of the

development of safe energy sector infrastructure, which will strengthen cyber resilience capabilities, create a culture of cyber security, and promote cooperation between the private and public sectors as well as international cooperation.

Acknowledging the region's renewable energy potential as well as the opportunity to step up the green transition, the Baltic states intend to intensify their cooperation on sustainable low carbon technologies, in particular renewable energy. The Baltic states will take action to ensure that uptake of renewables will be accompanied by adequate infrastructure, including investments in reserve and balancing technologies, including energy storage. All three states are developing their capabilities for producing energy from offshore wind farms. We reiterate our interest in cooperative manner to take full advantages offered by the European Union funding mechanisms for regional and cross-border cooperation.

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.

The Baltic states reconfirm their agreement to cease commercial electricity exchange with Belarus after the Belarusian Nuclear Power Plant became operational. We stress the importance of joint regional approach for trade in electricity with third countries and share the view that discussions on this matter should continue to find solutions for common methodology.

Regarding the common gas market, the Baltic states remain committed to a common goal of the development and integration of the regional gas market to further strengthen energy independence, contribute to the security of supply and improve market liquidity. Fully-fledged integration of the regional gas market will contribute to significantly increased competition in the region and will help to ensure affordable gas prices to the benefit of the end-consumers.

Therefore, we welcome the progress achieved in multilateral discussions among the Baltic states and Finland on market-based solutions for more flexible regional gas flows and invite to continue close cooperation among the transmission system operators of the respective countries in order to foster regional gas market integration, harmonisation and decarbonisation.

Safe and efficient use of key gas infrastructure in the region such as Estonia-Finland gas interconnection (Balticconnector), Inčukalns underground gas storage facility and LNG terminal in Klaipėda helps ensure the security of supply and enhance competitiveness. The Lithuania-Poland gas interconnection (GIPL) is due to become operational in 2022 and will finally enable the integration of the Baltic States and Finland gas markets into the European market.

Nuclear and environmental safety

The Baltic states underline the importance of nuclear safety in the EU and in its neighbourhood and express their deep concern over the Belarusian Nuclear Power Plant (NPP) that is considered a multifaceted regional threat. We are concerned that despite the constant calls from the international community on Belarus to abide by the highest international nuclear and environmental safety regulations and implement the recommendations provided by the international experts, Belarus launched the commercial operation of Unit 1 of the NPP in June 2021 and continues the preparation for launch of Unit 2. The Baltic states repeatedly urge Belarus to take all necessary steps to comply with the above-mentioned standards and recommendations without any further delay.

The Baltic states highly value the active role of the European Commission and other EU institutions in enhancing nuclear safety and appreciate further actions to ensure that the highest nuclear standards are applied in EU neighbourhood. Taking into account the fact that the Belarusian NPP is operational, but the possible negative impact on neighbouring countries has never been properly assessed, special attention should be paid to emergency preparedness and response.

Development of transport infrastructure & digital agenda

The Baltic states emphasise the importance of a flagship railway project Rail Baltica to the accessibility and connectivity of the region and beyond, including its vital role in ensuring military mobility. Rail Baltica is projected to become a new economic corridor on the Southern and Northern railway axis, connecting the economic and demographic centres of the Baltic states, as well as completing the physical integration of the Baltic states in the European Single Market.

The Baltic states reconfirm that timely implementation of Rail Baltica and the construction of the entire railway line remains a priority, especially in the context of greening the transport sector. In order to avoid significant delays in the project implementation process, delivery of designs and other preparatory works is critical. Every effort to accelerate this activity shall be put to achieve the project's milestones. Timely investments and steady financing is essential for the smooth implementation of the Rail Baltica project. The Baltic states must maintain a united position by emphasising the importance of implementing Rail Baltica as a joint cross-border project and also addressing the financial challenges.

We are fully committed to ensure smooth and seamless cross-border operation of Rail Baltica railway line within the North Sea Baltic Corridor. Our common goal is to move forward with the implementation of the infrastructure management model with the aim of creating an open, well-functioning and competitive market. One of the main components of this goal is a one-stop shop client service, which will ensure easy access with minimised administrative burden for carriers throughout the Rail Baltica corridor. Furthermore, seeking to meet the needs of citizens for greater mobility and to promote rail travel, we shall explore the possibilities and consider the opening of the Vilnius-Riga-Tallinn train route on the existing railway even before the completion of Rail Baltica.

The Baltic states are committed and work towards ensuring 5G coverage in International TEN-T Transport Corridors "Via Baltica" and "Rail Baltica". To this end initial steps have been taken by the signing of the Memorandum of Intent on Cooperation in Developing 5G Connectivity and Connected Automated Mobility in the North Sea-Baltic Corridor, preparation of the roadmap on 5G cross-border corridor and the establishment of international Task Force. Still further active cooperation and continuous joint efforts are needed to attract the investments from the 2021-2027 Connecting Europe Facility (CEF) Digital component as well as to ensure successful implementation of the projects.

The Governments of the Baltic states confirm their intention to work closely together as well as involve other stakeholders (telco operators, roads administrations, etc.) to properly prepare for the next year's call of the CEF financial instrument and to make the international 5G transport corridor a reality.

Capital markets

The Baltic states stressed the need to strengthen regional integration of capital markets within the framework of ongoing work towards completion of the capital markets union at the EU level. The creation of common Baltic capital market would raise the visibility of the Baltic states to foreign investors and enhance SME access to diversified financing instruments.

We are pleased to acknowledge the ongoing initiatives such as the acceleration fund for Baltic capital development, harmonised rules for covered bonds and strive for recognition of the Baltic region as one region to be rated in terms of international indices. The well-functioning Baltic capital market will require clear and consistent regulatory rules, the enhancement of investor protection and the improvement of financial literacy of our societies.

Cooperation in the field of education and science

The Baltic States are proud of the fruitful joint work in the field of recognition of higher education qualifications. This year, a significant step has been made with the signing of the multilateral treaty on automatic and general mutual recognition of the level of higher education qualifications among the Baltic and the Benelux states, thus, removing potential obstacles to studying or finding a job in one of the countries. Being front-runners in the European Higher Education Area in this regard, these countries have an ambition for other European countries to follow the same path.

The Baltic states are also pleased to note the importance of and their support to the UNESCO initiative of the Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications Concerning Higher Education adopted in Paris on 25 November 2019. The process of the accession of the states to the Global Convention is getting momentum, the Baltic states being among the first to start the accession procedures and deposit their instruments of ratification/accession/approval with the Director-General of UNESCO.

In the field of education, the Baltic states have been cooperating closely and exchanging relevant information periodically during the COVID-19 period. This communication has been very useful in managing education response to the pandemic to ensure equal opportunities for all.

The Baltic states value scientific cooperation in several joint programmes, such as the Baltic Science Network activities and the Baltic Research Cooperation Program 2021+, that aims to enhance research collaboration between R&D institutions of the Baltic states and EEA countries, to stimulate long-term cooperation, capacity and competence building.

Cooperation in the field of culture

The Baltic states are pleased that the Baltic Culture Fund has successfully ended its first cycle of three years and the interest in cooperating at Baltic level to promote Baltic culture internationally has been particularly high. The fund will further continue its activities aimed at connecting the Baltic region for cooperation with international partners.

In order to implement the Memorandum of Understanding on the translation and publication of the prize-winning works of the Baltic Assembly Prize for Literature signed by the Ministries of Culture in 2020 the Writers' Unions of all three countries take further action necessary to enhance long-term cooperation and exchange in the field of literature.

The Baltic states continue to implement the Joint Agreement on the Baltic States Committee for the Safeguarding and Development of the Song and Dance Celebration Tradition that foresees concrete actions to strengthen sustainability of this tradition, organising tradition-related conferences and seminars, exchanging best practices and engaging in joint celebrations, such as the Baltic Students Song and Dance Festival Gaudeamus and the International Folk Music Festival Baltica.

Climate change and environmental issues

The Baltic states recognise the urgent need to fight the climate crisis and call on all parties for stepping up global ambitious actions and securing the rights of future generations. We support the EU leadership along with the climate and energy diplomacies in pursuit of a timely global transition towards climate neutral and resilient economy. Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania reiterate their commitment to pursue biodiversity goals and to seek climate neutrality in the region and the EU. The Baltic states welcome the European Commission's "Fit for 55" package and recognise that it is a good basis for further discussions, underlining that the necessary decarbonisation of all economy sectors shall be carried out in a socially fair and just manner, leaving no one behind.

The Baltic Council priorities for 2022

The Baltic Council has defined the following priorities for cooperation in 2022:

- 1) Regional security and defence, countering hybrid threats and disinformation;
- 2) Modernising economy by advancing green and digital transition, connectivity and development of regional infrastructure projects;
- 3) Strengthening strategic and ambitious Eastern Partnership and support to civil society in Belarus.

The 28th Baltic Council will be held during the Latvian Presidency on 27-28 October 2022 in Riga, the Republic of Latvia.

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Baltic Council of Ministers

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Vilnius, 5 November 2021