



**Overview of the work of the Baltic Assembly
under the Estonian presidency**

“Security. Support. Sustainability”

2023



Address by President of the Baltic Assembly Timo Suslov

The motto of the Estonian Presidency of the Baltic Assembly in 2023 is “Security. Support. Sustainability”. We started the year with a strong willingness to continue building a resilient, safe, reliable and sustainable Baltic region, which is especially crucial during a time when there is an ongoing war in Europe. For this reason, we have focused on working together to build a safe and resilient region, cooperation through unity, solidarity, and support, as well as sustainable development of the Baltic States.

Safe and resilient Baltic States has been the core priority of the work of the Baltic Assembly during the year. The war in Ukraine made the Baltic States reevaluate their security and urged us to work towards eliminating any gaps in the defence capabilities of our countries. We have also encouraged regular and active economic, social, as well as cultural cooperation to help our countries find solutions to common challenges, foster trust and improve our capacity-building.

Baltic cooperation through unity, solidarity and support is key as the Baltic States have achieved some of their most important goals through cooperation. Due to this experience, we have been very active in supporting Ukraine and other Eastern Partnership countries before and after the unprovoked and unjustified Russian invasion. As we believe that current global challenges can be solved in larger regional formats, we are glad to see that over the year the Baltic Assembly has proven to be an excellent format for bringing together parliamentarians from different parts of the world.

Lastly, sustainable development is a crucial goal of the Baltic States. We strive to be among the greenest countries around the globe. For this reason, in 2023, we focused on possibilities for protecting the biodiversity of the Baltic States, sustainable farming and forest management, as well as tried to find ways to ensure a just and efficient green transition.

In 2024, work must continue to ensure that the Baltic region is united. Security cooperation will remain among the highest priorities, and, therefore, we wish the upcoming Lithuanian presidency persistence and success in continuing the work started in 2023 and in all the joint future initiatives that await us.

Conclusions about the work of the Baltic Assembly in 2023

PRESIDIUM

The Presidium of the Baltic Assembly in 2023 was active in calling for support for Ukraine, explaining Russian activities and their dangers as well as continuing to work towards closer cooperation of the Baltic States in security and defence, economics, environment, education, science and research. The Presidium continued to serve as a bridge between the Eastern Partnership countries and the West taking stock of various formats and events.

The main task of the Presidium continues to be supporting Ukraine and convincing the partners and allies to re-evaluate their former cooperation and relations with Russia. This work also greatly contributes to the security and resilience of the Baltic States. The Presidium has been successful with this task so far, however, it will continue to be high on the agenda as Europe and its leaders start to get tired from the war and could try to search for quick solutions that would not benefit Ukraine, the Baltic States or even Europe itself.

ECONOMICS, ENERGY AND INNOVATION COMMITTEE

In 2023, the Economics, Energy and Innovation Committee discussed joint activities to mitigate the economic consequences caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, digital cooperation and long-term strategy for energy security and independence in the region. As a result, several recommendations have been included in the Resolution of the 42nd Session adopted on 24 November 2023 in Tallinn.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has had major economic consequences for the Baltic States and the whole continent. Increased uncertainty, sluggish GDP growth, and rising inflation are all significant issues. It is critical to reduce inflation as low as feasible and as quickly as possible. To achieve that, precise and thoughtful approaches directed at specific groups of people are required. Energy decentralization is also critical. It was also highlighted that, despite economic challenges, the countries have to remain strong and unified in their support of Ukraine, as maintaining support is also critical to the Baltic economic recovery.

Another priority was accelerating digital transformation and cybersecurity cooperation in the Baltic region which was discussed together with the Security and Defence Committee. Despite the focus being on cybersecurity, several conclusions were made about the digital cooperation of the Baltic States in general. The first concern should be finding ways to create a Baltic digital signature. The Baltic States should also focus on dealing with hostile actions in the digital domain and making speedy solutions.

The Committee also continued with the discussion about the Baltic long-term strategy for energy security and independence. The cooperation between the Baltic States is vital in terms of exchanging knowledge and methods for the development of renewable energy generation and reaching energy independence. The primary areas where cooperation will be required in the future are the desynchronization of the energy networks and the development of domestic, local sustainable energy production. The countries are now rapidly moving forward with plans to diversify energy supplies by building new LNG infrastructure, increasing investment in renewables, accelerating synchronization with the continental European electricity grid, and developing capabilities for producing energy

from offshore and onshore wind farms. The region would significantly benefit from a common strategy for long-term planning and policy-making.

EDUCATION, SCIENCE AND CULTURE COMMITTEE

In 2023, the Education, Science and Culture Committee of the Baltic Assembly discussed media, cultural and educational cooperation between the Baltic States. As a result, several recommendations have been included in the Resolution of the 42nd Session adopted on 24 November 2023 in Tallinn.

In media cooperation, numerous challenges have been identified for the Baltic States, such as propaganda and disinformation, disbalance in the financing of private and public media, lack of trust in public media by the Russian-speaking minority, and others. The Baltic States need to improve the credibility and attractiveness of media, foster media and information literacy in society, and provide adequate funding. An ongoing exchange of best practices between the countries is vital for addressing the challenges.

The Committee also discussed the cultural cooperation of the Baltic States. It was concluded that there is an ongoing exchange of practices and information between the responsible institutions and other related actors, who maintain constant communication and exchange of data, as well as have come up with common solutions to challenges. Cooperation is also promoted through several cultural projects and initiatives, which are useful for the promotion of the visibility of the Baltic States. There are also many common challenges, for example, the status of self-employed cultural persons, making the culture greener and many more. The professional networks could be a strong tool for strengthening Baltic cooperation. Following the successful Nordic experience, a further discussion on joint Baltic branding took place. It became clear that the Baltic States should think about how far to go to build a similar story for the Baltic States. The discussions demonstrate that there is potential for cooperating under a single Baltic brand. Joint cultural projects, the experience of the Baltic Culture Fund and the Baltic Assembly Prize can have an important added value in discussions about joint branding.

The Committee paid attention also to the cooperation of the Baltic States in VET. Relevant ministries have developed personnel contact and the Baltics also cooperate at various levels and by varied target groups. The main challenges that prevent more active cooperation include no previous experience, differences in EQF levels of programs and no part of the institution's strategic goals. Future developments of the cooperation could include a new Baltic and EU project consortia for further joint competence developments and testing approaches for joint curricula and qualifications.

HEALTH, WELFARE AND FAMILY COMMITTEE

In 2023, the Health, Welfare and Family Committee of the Baltic Assembly discussed the cooperation of the Baltic States to address challenges in healthcare and social systems. As a result, several recommendations have been included in the Resolution of the 42nd Session adopted on 24 November 2023 in Tallinn.

Workforce shortage and protecting patients' rights were among the priorities of the Committee. The Baltic States are facing such common challenges as attracting and retaining personnel to work in medicine, unfilled necessary workloads in state and

municipal hospitals, uneven distribution of doctors throughout the country and an ageing population. Another issue that the countries are facing is the lack of health literacy. The shortage of healthcare workforce is a problem that needs to be accepted and addressed with long-term measures, exchanging ideas and practices, as well as using partnerships. The parliamentarians were introduced to the Beneluxa Initiative and decided to further explore the possible cooperation.

It also became clear that in the Baltic States, there are similar challenges and solutions regarding social inequality. The parliamentarians and experts highlighted the need to be more active in continuing to share best practices and regular exchange of information regarding such challenges as the evaluation of disability, refugees from Ukraine, pension systems, as well as social services, benefits and protection. The experience shows that the biggest motivator is the safety and availability of the necessary services.

The Committee in 2022 concluded that one of the most vulnerable groups in the labour market is the youth, therefore, in 2023 tackling youth unemployment was one of the main topics of discussion. The youth unemployment rate in the Baltic States is higher than general unemployment, and the NEET rates are generally higher in rural than in urban areas. The number of unemployed youth has decreased over time, but so is the share of youth itself. In light of population ageing, it is important that all young people are mobilized and can contribute their skills and talent to the labour market.

NATURAL RESOURCES AND ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE

In 2023, the Natural Resources and Environment Committee discussed the cooperation of the Baltic States in protecting biodiversity, ensuring just and green transition as well as sustainable farming and forest management. As a result, several recommendations have been included in the Resolution of the 42nd Session adopted on 24 November 2023 in Tallinn.

Biodiversity is essential to human development and for adapting to all kinds of changes. The Baltic States cooperate and share practices in this area and, of course, the challenges are similar. Common initiatives to address biodiversity concerns include stakeholder agreements, the formulation of collaborative recommendations and monitoring programs, the execution of action plans and regulations, and collaboration through international organizations. There are also several areas which the cooperation should address in the future, such as preventing and minimising the effects of invasive alien species.

Another topic of great importance is the just and efficient green transition in the Baltic States. Sustainable economic development needs to consider the future needs and limits of the environment and people. In the Baltic States, several projects have been launched to organize a socially equitable and sustainable transition to climate neutrality, ensuring that no one is left behind. At the same time, it is critical to address concerns of energy poverty and do it together.

The Committee also addressed the cooperation of the Baltic States to further develop sustainable farming and forest management. It can catalyse the green transformation by advancing the bioeconomy, enhancing biodiversity and supporting wealth creation in rural and urban areas. Forests offer enormous promise for mitigating climate change, conserving biodiversity, and advancing the bioeconomy. However, there is a conflict between two opposing viewpoints on the forest and its future. A similar situation can be observed in

the area of peatland management. As a result, it would be beneficial for the Baltic States to identify solutions that strike the proper balance between social, ecological, and economic interests.

SECURITY AND DEFENCE COMMITTEE

In 2023, the Security and Defence Committee of the Baltic Assembly discussed the cooperation of the Baltic States to implement a well-functioning joint operational area, improve whole-of-society crisis preparedness and readiness as well as provide military and humanitarian assistance to Ukraine. As a result, several recommendations have been included in the Resolution of the 42nd Session adopted on 24 November 2023 in Tallinn.

The Committee assessed the progress in implementing a joint Baltic operational area to ensure more rapid and coordinated responses to common challenges and significantly improve defence cooperation. While it was agreed that progress on the creation of a joint operational area has been slow, the need to change that was acknowledged. One of the key elements of the joint operational area must be regular information exchange between the Baltic States, as well as having unity when addressing other allies. Synchronization of the legal formats, joint training and cooperation on civilian protection were also highlighted.

The whole-of-society crisis preparedness and readiness in the Baltic States was also analysed by the Committee. The threats nowadays have become multi-layered and target the whole society. Therefore, also defence should go beyond the traditional military realm and include the whole of society. Developing the Baltic model of comprehensive national defence was discussed, highlighting the importance of sharing knowledge and best practices, as well as cross-border cooperation among municipalities. The benefits of extending the cooperation to Finland in this area were also emphasized.

The Committee also assessed the cooperation of the Baltic States in providing military and humanitarian assistance to Ukraine. The Baltic States have been the loudest and strongest supporters of Ukraine as they have continuously cooperated to ensure peace and stability in the region. One of the biggest proofs of the support was the fact that the Baltics were leaders in Europe per capita figures in sending both military and humanitarian aid to Ukraine. Despite the regular exchange of information, the cooperation of the Baltic States should be expanded in the future to provide more coordinated assistance.

Summary regarding the implementation of the recommendations of the Baltic Assembly from 2022 to 2023

General conclusions about the implementation of the recommendations of the 41st Session

In 2022, the Baltic Assembly adopted 122 recommendations:

- 48 recommendations have been fully implemented (39%);
- 44 recommendations are in the process of implementation (36%);
- 30 recommendations with no actions taken or no results achieved (24%).

In comparison with the previous period of analysis (2021-2022), the share of implemented recommendations has increased, and the share of recommendations in the process of implementation – decreased. The share of recommendations with no results achieved has remained the same.

Cooperation issues to be included in the agenda of the next presidency

Based on the answers provided by the Baltic Council of Ministers (BCM) regarding the implementation of the recommendations of the Baltic Assembly in 2022-2023, the following **issues should be included in the agenda for the next presidencies**:

- parliamentary oversight over recommendations that are in the process of implementation;
- follow up on the recommendations that were either not implemented or governments submitted a position that no joint actions and measures in these fields will be carried out (due to different conditions and factors);
- parliamentary oversight over recommendations that have been implemented but where more coordinated actions would bring benefit for the region.

Presidium	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Rail Baltica project- International cooperation in times of crisis and uncertainty- Dialogue with the European institutions and organizations
Economics, Energy and Innovation Committee	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Energy, transport, and digital connectivity in the region- Digital transformation in the Baltic region- Smart and modernized Baltic industries
Education, Science and Culture Committee	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Vocational and technical education in the Baltic region- Cultural cooperation and minimizing environmental footprint- Cooperation with CERN and ESA- Baltic Culture Fund
Health, Welfare and Family Committee	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Cooperation in cancer treatment and prevention- Mental health and prevention of mental disorders in the region- Baltic cooperation in joint procurements and projects

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Social inequality in the Baltic States - Employment and labour market challenges
Natural Resources and Environment Committee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sustainable circular economy - Sustainable farming and forest management - Biodiversity in the Baltic States - Just green transition in the Baltics
Security and Defence Committee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Well-functioning joint Baltic operational area - Joint procurements in the military sector - Cooperation in cybersecurity and the fight against cybercrime - Whole-of-society crisis preparedness - Cooperation in the fight against organized crime - External border control and management

Developments and tendencies in the cooperation of the Baltic States

The work of the Baltic Assembly in 2023 continued to be affected by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, but less than in 2022. The same can be observed in the answers by the BCM about the implementation of the recommendations as the countries seem to have come out of the initial shock and have been able to put more focus on the areas that due to the crisis were neglected. The most active cooperation of the Baltic States can be observed in defence and digital cooperation as well as in the work towards a common electricity and gas market of the Baltic States. The least progress has been achieved in clean energy transition and development of renewable energy projects, education, research and science as well as in the healthcare sector. The problem areas have remained similar to those in the previous period of analysis, however, significant progress can be observed in the cultural cooperation. The overall progress in the Baltic cooperation is obvious.

Security and defence

In 2022-2023, the cooperation of the Baltic States in security and defence cooperation continued to intensify as the countries faced similar challenges. The cooperation has significantly intensified in the area of cyber security, where the countries have proposed a joint Baltic project, connecting the existing state intranets into a joint secure connection throughout the territory of all the Baltic States. The countries in this period have also focused a lot of attention on strengthening various capabilities and military mobility, including addressing challenges in the Suwalki Gap. The Baltic States also continued active cooperation in strengthening the command and control structure in the region. All these areas have been of particular importance since the beginning of the Russian war in Ukraine on 24 February 2022. Unfortunately, the Baltic States seem to have moved away from the idea of establishing a common and well-functioning system for joint military procurements (however, cooperation in this area is ongoing).

Regarding disaster prevention, preparedness and response, crisis management, and civil protection, cooperation in some areas has been more active than in others. The Baltic States have maintained regular communication and exchange of information which is important, but when it comes to joint long-term planning and harmonisation of activities, there is continued lack of progress. A positive development is the proposal to conclude a health emergency treaty which would enable the countries to better cooperate in case of health-related emergencies. In external border control and management, countries continued to

work with common planning and situational awareness; however, had problems in joining efforts to ensure the best possible result for the Baltic States regarding EU regulation.

Economics, energy and innovation

The cooperation of the Baltic States in the economic sector has been quite successful. The countries continued cooperation within the Three Seas Initiative and gave indications about being ready to discuss the establishment of a format for the cooperation of the Baltic States within this format. As a result of the economic cooperation of the Baltic States, Morgan Stanley Capital International has announced the regional consolidation of the Estonian, Lithuanian, and Latvian markets for index construction and maintenance. The countries have evaluated the possibility of developing joint Baltic business incubators of the European Space Agency and concluded that a much more feasible option would be a Baltic ESA business incubator network, similar to one in the Nordics. Official negotiations about the Baltic Innovation Fund III seem to be just around the corner as well. Cooperation between the Baltic States in the implementation of the Rail Baltica project also continues to be active - both design and construction go hand in hand in all the countries, and progress compared to previous years is noticeable. However, when it comes to joint long-term strategies and planning, economic cooperation is lagging.

A common electricity and gas market of the Baltic States has been a high priority in the region. The Baltic States have looked for ways to accelerate the technical readiness of synchronization and to be better ready for any unwelcome activities. The transmission system operators from the Baltic States and Finland have initiated a technical feasibility study on the adaptability of the gas transmission networks for transporting methane-hydrogen mixtures. Estonia and Latvia are currently engaged in a comprehensive analysis of the potential use of nuclear energy. Lithuania with partners from the US has started a long-term study which will prepare scenarios and investment pathways to full self-sufficiency and carbon neutrality for Lithuania's energy sector that could be also used for the needs of the Baltic States. A common approach to cyber security in the energy sector of the Baltic States is also being created according to the recommendations of the NATO Strategic Communication Centre of Excellence.

Progress can be also observed in digital cooperation, where the Baltic States seem to take stock of the possibilities provided in the EU and the Baltic Sea region. The Baltic States actively cooperate to launch digital services with each other, however, the problem of interoperability of electronic signatures in the Baltic States remains, therefore, a political wish should be enforced on the organisations that continue to not fulfil the set requirements to ensure the interoperability of electronic signatures in the region.

Nature resources and the environment

The clean energy transition is vital for the Baltic States, yet there are only a few activities where the trilateral cooperation of the countries is active. Discussion about the green taxes has not moved forward since the last discussion in the meeting of the Baltic Assembly in 2022. The Baltic States have not been able to formulate joint investment priorities, start discussions about the Baltic strategy for sustainable extraction and management of peat, and discuss building energy system models for the Baltic-Nordic region. Within the recent IMPEL project planning period of 2022 – 2024, there are no projects that have been proposed by the Baltic States aimed at working together to solve issues regarding the clean energy transition and the development of renewable energy.

However, there are also good examples of cooperation between the Baltic States in this area. The project about the harmonisation of Estonian-Latvian systems for deposit refund systems for beverage bottles concluded. The project showed that it is technically possible to interoperate the systems of the two countries but to implement it in the future, several different issues need to be addressed. Practical cooperation activities of the Baltic States regarding recycling textiles, as well as reusing and repairing products have been proposed. The possible practical cooperation activities are the joint creation of a financially sustainable recycling solution to collected textiles in the Baltic States and the establishment of a harmonized approach to reusing products and textiles.

Health and Welfare

The cooperation of the Baltic States addressing the health and welfare challenges is medium speed. The most active cooperation has remained in the area of the exchange of information. Also, the cooperation in supporting Ukrainian refugees arriving in the Baltic States has mainly been in the format of exchanging experiences. The exchange between the Baltic States regarding persons fleeing Ukraine takes place in the framework of relevant EU instruments, but creating a coordinated, well-functioning and flexible system for monitoring the needs and activities of Ukrainian refugees has not been discussed in the meetings between relevant authorities in the Baltic States. Despite regularly exchanging information and best practices on numerous occasions, the Baltic governments seem to be resistant to ideas about harmonizing solutions and finding joint approaches to challenges regarding supporting Ukrainian refugees and Ukrainians living in Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia.

Regarding cooperation in the healthcare sector, the Baltic States have had some successful examples, but in most of the areas, lack of activity can be observed. The Baltic States have identified joint solutions for strengthening the capacities of the food laboratories, executed several activities to implement the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control and the SAFER initiative of the WHO and made a preliminary assessment of the joint initiative of the CERN Baltic Group and CERN on Advanced Particle Therapy Center for the Baltic States. However, there are many areas where cooperation has lagged, including a Baltic roadmap for improving mental health, a joint waiting list of innovative medications, a joint system for addressing medicine shortages and others.

The Baltic cooperation in the social sector with the help of the Baltic Assembly has improved and the Health, Welfare and Family Committee of the Baltic Assembly has been a format where the governments exchange information and practices on social issues. The governments have used numerous other formats to ensure regular exchange of information as well. However, the Baltic States have not been able to discuss possible cooperation areas on the impacts of current crises on poor and vulnerable groups in the societies.

Education, science and culture

The cooperation of the Baltic States in education, research and science has been fluctuating. The countries have continued active support towards cooperation with CERN and ESA. However, the Baltic States continue to be inactive towards common solutions in other areas, including coordinating the implementation of policy initiatives to address the challenges in the STEM field, preparing a map of the existing Baltic research cooperation, creating a mechanism for efficient use of the research equipment acquired in the Baltic States and others. A serious discussion regarding further cooperation of the Baltic States in education, research and science is needed as trilateral cooperation in this area is lagging.

The Baltic States have not jointly discussed creating a white paper about the strategic goals to fight disinformation and increase social resilience of the Baltic States, however, during the meeting of the Education, Science and Culture Committee of the Baltic Assembly, some of the possible strategic goals were highlighted: 1) well-functioning technology-neutral public media; 2) effective defence mechanism for the European information space; and 3) media and information literacy. The governments also continue to be reluctant about creating a Baltic information platform, however, they believe that the public media broadcasters of the Baltic States could serve as a reliable source of knowledge about events and developments in the Baltic region.

The cooperation of the Baltic States has improved in the cultural sector. The countries have discussed a joint cultural leadership programme in the Baltic States and an ongoing Estonian Cultural Leadership Programme has the potential to become a Baltic-format event. The governments have also evaluated the existing practice of the Baltic Culture Fund of granting funding and providing an opportunity to fund projects implemented in the Baltic States. The countries plan to start discussions about the need for changes in the second half of 2024. The countries have also discussed the possibility of applying an international marketing and communication strategy for the Baltic region, demonstrating that there is potential for cooperating under a single Baltic brand. However, other recommendations have been neglected, for example, there is no additional funding allocated for the Baltic Culture Fund in 2023 but such a possibility will be revisited at the end of 2024.