

25 April 2012

X. Baltic Sea NGO Forum

“Social Capital for a sustainable Baltic Sea Region”

23–25 April 2012 in Berlin

Final Statement

We, the participants of the X. Baltic Sea NGO Forum, representing about 150 civil society organizations from Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Poland, Russia and Sweden, have been assembled from the 23rd to 25th of April 2012 in Berlin, Germany, to discuss challenges and developments of the civil society in the countries of the Baltic Sea Region.

These organisations, networking at the Baltic Sea NGO Forum, covered social issues, human rights, climate change and environment, youth, culture, citizens’ participation and lifelong learning.

The NGO Forum in Berlin was held as part of the framework of the Baltic Sea Days, under the auspices of the German presidency of the Council of the Baltic Sea States, and was also attended by representatives of the German government, the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS), the European Commission, and the Baltic Development Forum. Furthermore, representatives of Belarusian NGOs and of the Black Sea NGO Network were guests of the forum.

The motto of the Forum has been “Social capital for a sustainable Baltic Sea region”. This motto expresses our common conviction that NGOs can make the voice of citizens heard and thereby add to the legitimacy of political decisions made on the local, regional, national, Baltic Sea regional and European levels. Not only can NGOs contribute with the skills and knowledge of their members, but they can also provide a societal basis for the politics in our common Baltic Sea region.

With this in mind, we reiterate what we had stated in the resolution of the Baltic Sea NGO Forum in Vilnius 2010: building a democratic society that is close to the people by involving civil society should always be matched by its political implementation. We find it important that the dialogue related to the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region be not limited to EU institutions, the Governments of the Baltic Sea Region, and the Project implementers, but also actively involve civil society and the private sector of the region. The civil society dimension shall constitute an integral part of each element of the Strategy.

We also reiterate that, being aware that not all countries of the Baltic Sea Region are members of the EU, we are convinced that it is essential to establish instruments, e.g. through the Northern Dimension and its partnerships, ensuring co-operation among all countries as equal partners.

Cooperation on the people-to-people level is an important part of international relations in the Baltic Sea region. To strengthen and develop public diplomacy, this must be supported both strategically and practically.

In view of the above, we reiterate and extend our appeal to the Council of Europe, the Council of ministers of the European Union, the European Parliament and the European Commission, the Council of the Baltic Sea States and the national Governments to include in their agenda the following measures:

- to work out a regional NGO development program and set up the fund to promote NGO co-operation, establishment and strengthening of regional networks;
- to further promote transnational, intersectoral co-operation between NGOs, informal citizen groups, academics, businesses and public institutions, and encourage their partnerships by improving and extending the conditions of the existing support instruments for the region, with specific reference to programming the 2014–2020 EU structural funds.

Furthermore, we appeal to the EU bodies and the national governments

- to increase opportunities for joint activities in the framework of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region and the Northern Dimension and to define the space, place and role of NGOs, not least of which are small and grassroots organisations, in the strategy;
- to involve NGOs from the region, and in particular Russia, in the implementation of the EU Baltic Sea Strategy, e.g. through the Northern Dimension partnerships;
- to urge the Governments of CBSS countries to approve national NGO development programs that would support the participation of public diplomacy actors in the project related to the EU Baltic Sea Strategy and other strategies covering the Baltic Sea Region;
- to initiate regional surveys under the Council of the Baltic Sea States on the level of engagement of civil society in the decision-making processes at national and local levels, and best practices in individual countries, the enforcement of existing legislation, the public benefits of NGO activity, and its input into national GDPs and the funding resources;
- To expand the ratified agreement between the Russian Federation and the EU concerning the visa regime, by including free of charge visas for NGO representatives from Baltic Sea countries and to advocate for the establishment of a non-visa regime in the border areas of the EU with third countries, which would facilitate people-to-people interaction.

We declare that the Baltic Sea NGO Network will, also in the future, contribute to co-operation on a people-to-people level

- by bringing NGOs from different Baltic Sea countries and from different fields together, for exchanging experience and information and improvement of knowledge and creating of transnational partnerships;
- by making the work of NGOs more visible and giving NGOs better information on funding available for common projects and activities for NGOs from all countries of the region;

- by working with different proposals about how people and NGOs can be better involved in activities related to the EU Baltic Sea Strategy and the Northern Dimension;
- by increasing the competitive capacities of NGOs, not only by encouraging the use of new technologies, but also by facilitating the design of innovations by NGOs that will encourage the involvement of citizens in the decision-making processes on the national, trans-national and international levels.

Each country of the Baltic Sea NGO Network is encouraged to celebrate World NGO Day, on 18 November 2012, providing information to the Baltic Sea co-ordinating committee and the Secretariat of the World NGO Day. Nationally, organizations are invited to receive conceptual support letters from their respective governments to support the creation of World NGO Day by the UN internationally.

The Forum operated in plenary sessions and working groups dealing with the following issues: Social Affairs, Youth, Human rights, Environment/Climate change and Civil participation/Lifelong learning. Each group dealt with its item, taking into account the role of NGOs and the resources and tasks to be improved. Each working group also adopted a statement of objectives.

WS I: Youth

The Baltic Sea region is a good example of successful co-operation between countries of diverse historical, cultural, social and economic situations. We believe that this regional co-operation should be maintained and further developed. Unfortunately, younger generations' knowledge of, and interest in neighboring countries has decreased significantly. This could result in increasing stereotypes, myths and feelings of xenophobia and intolerance. As the region is the main playground for young people of the future – this is where they live, work, travel, start their businesses and families – it is necessary to increase youth participation and their interest in the region again. To this end, we propose that the Baltic Sea states prioritise youth co-operation in the Baltic Sea region by encouraging intraregional co-operation and allocating financial support for it.

We participants of the youth workshop at the Baltic Sea NGO Forum feel that existing funds for youth-related projects and events in the Baltic Sea Region should be made more accessible.

Public authorities should pay special focus on the capabilities and needs of small youth NGOs in the process of granting funds for youth-related projects. There is also a need for small grants. The current amount of red tape involved in applying for funds makes it hard for many actors to finance their projects. Easier funding for youth NGOs will increase the number of youth projects in the Baltic Sea Region and help to foster co-operation between the Baltic Sea countries in youth work. That promotes the participation of young people in civil society and develops the identity of the Baltic Sea Region.

On the other hand, there are many young people who want to participate more actively in Baltic Sea co-operation. They are interested in decision-making processes. For young people, it is important to see that their participation has effects in the Baltic Sea Region. The Baltic Sea NGO Forum recommends establishing a consultative body for youth affairs. It will consist of representatives from the national youth councils and of representatives from the regional youth associations of the Council of the Baltic Sea States member states. It will meet at the same time as the Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference, at the same place and work on the same agenda. Furthermore, youth delegates should have a right to speak during the Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference meetings.

The meeting of the consultative body of youth affairs will issue policy recommendations to the Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference.

WS II: Environment

The participants of the environmental workshop are concerned about the environmental situation in the Baltic Sea Region in various areas.

The most urgent key problems are pollution, eutrophication, inefficient use of energy, dependence on environmentally unfriendly carbon-based fuels, unsustainable economic development, safety hazards (e.g. nuclear power, chemical weapons), and threatened biodiversity. Another problem is the low commitment to environmental issues and international co-operation by decision-makers, citizens and the private sector, lack of multisectoral co-operation, and the lack of a common green strategy for the whole BSR.

We are aware of our task to make environmental information more accessible to citizens and politicians, to make the best practice and lessons from the local level more visible; to raise awareness about environmental issues and climate change in society through educational programs, empowering citizen to participate. However, closer co-operation and strengthening of dialog with the public sector is needed, e.g. in the form of public partnerships, and with the policy sector through more participation in decision-making and planning processes.

We propose the following actions:

- development of a common Baltic Sea Region green strategy in synergy with existing structures and programs for all Baltic Sea countries (EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region, Northern Dimension, HELCOM BS Action Plan), with broad NGO participation;
- participation of the Baltic Sea NGO Network in the process of the Macro-Regional Baltic Sea Climate Change Adaptation Strategy;
- establishment of a Baltic Sea Civil Society Foundation, which would be available for the smaller projects;
- establish continuing working groups using existing social networks and a project database;
- to commit to the process and outcomes of Rio+20;
- unifying approaches and methods for collecting and analyzing data.

Russia's Presidency in CBSS is a good opportunity to consolidate the efforts of all the Baltic Sea Region countries for protecting the environment and climate. In this respect, participating and taking quantitative emission reduction targets in the "Kyoto II" agreement by all countries, including those from the Baltic Sea Region, would be the major step.

WS III: Human rights

1. We urge the CBSS to create an Ombudsman for Human Rights.
2. In each country of the Baltic Sea Region, there shall be installed independent national Human Rights Institutes according to the Paris principles.
3. The workshop recommends that the Baltic Sea NGO Network oversee the implementation of the UPR process in each CBSS member state.

4. The workshop urges the CBSS to find new forms to promote dialogue on migration, women's rights, and to raise awareness on men's violence against women.

WS IV: Social Affairs

We are worried about current social trends developing in the Baltic Sea States, which include

- growing social exclusion and poverty;
- growing inequality and social polarisation;
- low accessibility and the lack of standards of services provided for vulnerable groups;
- the steadily deteriorating conditions of the welfare state and its impacts on NGO service provision;
- lack of adequate resources and long term funding for NGOs.

We strongly encourage that the governments of the Baltic Sea States incorporate social and welfare issues in the policy and strategies of the Baltic Sea States and relevant institutions of these states. These issues include

- building partnerships with NGOs in the decision making process;
- providing more long term funding for NGOs. We propose the following as ideas:
 - the promotion of public private partnerships;
 - government taxation of legal economic externalities, such as gambling, tobacco, and alcohol abuse in order to setup a fund which supports NGOs that work for health and social issues;
 - governments should provide incentives for private companies which support NGOs in different forms (money, *pro bono*, volunteers);
 - an international tax on financial transactions with the purpose of raising funds for NGOs, such as a Tobin tax.
- the protection and participation of vulnerable groups of people, e.g. people with disabilities, children and youth, elderly, migrants, minorities, and unemployed people;
- encouragement of social entrepreneurship with the aim of providing better opportunities to vulnerable groups;
- development of international co-operation and dialogue with NGOs in order to build social capital;
- increasing possibilities for active citizenship in the Baltic Sea countries;
- promoting a social market economy which
 - by definition is inclusive of vulnerable groups,
 - develops and enforces quality standards in competition policy, and
 - regulates financial markets and taxes' offshore transactions of funds.
- the governments of the Baltic Sea states should guarantee a minimum standard of living

above the poverty line, which takes into account what constitutes a decent life.

WS V: Civil participation / Lifelong learning

1. In the new planning period of the EU structural funds and EU funding programmes, instruments should be created to provide opportunities for civil society to plan and implement lifelong learning programmes.
2. To intensify cross-border co-operation we, the working group, suggest that the recommendations of the *Winnet* (Sweden) be widely distributed within the Baltic Sea NGO Network. The Co-ordinating Committee shall take responsibility for finding ways to address recommendations within their respective countries to their decision making bodies (lobby for concrete steps in regards to gender issues within the national planning process of the new planning period in the EU). The European Commission trusts in testing the model within the Baltic Sea Region according to the *Winnet* 8 recommendations. (Forum 2012)
3. In order to understand the work of the CBSS, the workshop presents an initiative: Simulation for Participation. Simulation for Participation invites people to carry out a simulation game of CBSS, in which the topic is environment and regional identity. The aim is to achieve a situation where the voices of the citizens and NGOs are heard by politicians and organizations, who would then have a better understanding of the CBSS and its decision-making process.
4. The workshop suggests that an explanatory process of the work of Focal Points and the structure of the Baltic Sea Region NGO Network is needed. In order to create a successful up-coming Forum, regular e-meetings of national organizations and BSR organizations are needed, e.g. webinars. During the inter-forum period, it is necessary to disseminate quarterly reports about the results of the forum and to create a database of contact information of the NGOs who participated in the forum or database.
5. Until 2014, with the support of the CBSS and national governments, to create and introduce the online platform 'EuroSay.com' for the ideas of people in the Baltic Sea region. We believe that the people and the NGOs of Baltic Sea states are the true stakeholders of our region. We want to give every stakeholder's idea an opportunity to improve our region. We wish to adopt the Latvian website EuroSay.com, which has already proven itself by engaging over 20 % of the people of Latvia, has earned recognition from US president Obama, and even online giant facebook.com has expressed interest in helping to spread the project. That way, we can have a truly powerful online engagement tool, boost the recognition of our network, and develop innovative civic engagement practices in our region for good! In this platform, every NGO or individual can start an initiative and build support from others electronically signing it. The Platform has four characteristics that distinguish it from similar ones all over the world:
 1. 100% legitimacy due to use of online banking or ID card authorization,
 2. extreme simplicity that exceeds the simplicity standards of any government- or EU-made platforms,
 3. tight integration into social networks – the platform and the participation comes to the people and not the other way around,

4. tools for all our NGOs to directly communicate to the people of our region and attract more activists, volunteers, etc.

By having this tool to hear our shareholders' true ideas, we can build the best region for our people.