



ASSOCIATION FOR COOPERATION WITH NORDIC COUNTRIES
"NORDEN"



XI BS NGO FORUM

“Tolerance and Cultural Diversity in the region of Baltic Sea”

16-17 April 2013, St. Petersburg, Russia

Final Statement

XI BS NGO Forum took place for the second time in **St. Petersburg on 16 – 17 April, 2013** in the framework of the Russian presidency in the Council of Baltic Sea States. Over 300 participants from CBSS countries and the regions of North-west Russia attended the event.

The Forum offered a unique opportunity for a wider cross-sectorial dialogue as it brought together NGOs, politicians, decision-makers and academia in order to improve cooperation in the Baltic Sea region on the people-to-people level and put common efforts into collaboration on issues of vital importance.

The main topic of the XI BS NGO Forum in Russia was “Tolerance and Cultural Diversity in the Region of Baltic Sea”. The Forum participants discussed joint opportunities of NGOs, governments and other authorities, academia, and all interested partners to create effective mechanisms for promoting traditions of tolerance as a means to combat tendencies of racism, xenophobia and extremism, a common goal for all of us.

The Forum’s agenda included **working sessions** on the following themes: Multicultural Societies – Challenges and Expectations; Social Inclusion - Basic Demand for Stable Society in the Baltic Sea Region; Environment Unites People; SEBA and Turku-process Cooperation and a round table on refugee and migrants issues.

Plenary meetings in the Forum focused on: “The human dimension in BSR’s cooperation - role of contacts on the “people-to-people level”; “Youth Affairs”; “Financial instruments for the support of people-to-people cooperation in the region of the Baltic Sea” and “Legal framework for NGOs in CBSS countries”.

Open discussions on challenges for the development of civil society in the countries of the Baltic Sea Region resulted in the following joint outcomes, proposals and recommendations:

To recognize and strengthen the role of cooperation on the level of civil society organizations as an important and essential part of the Baltic Sea region's transnational cooperation with huge potential for creating favorable social climate, providing stability and good-neighborhood. It is necessary for the Baltic Sea Council member states to acknowledge a special status for cross and trans-border regional cooperation between NGOs.

To provide overall political and financial support for the international activities of civil society organizations in the Baltic Sea region.

To significantly increase the involvement of civil society organizations and their expertise into the decision-making process including planning activities and processes related to the international programs in the BSR; to include NGOs in the BSR projects and programs on the national, regional, municipal levels. As a concrete step it could be proposed to include the "human dimension" and NGO cooperation in the priority list of the EU Baltic Sea Region Program, a program that promotes regional development through transnational cooperation and available for partners from eleven countries around the Baltic Sea.

To expand joint activities in the framework of the existing **EU BS Strategy and its Action Plan as well as the Northern Dimension partnership** with a clear definition of the space and the role of NGOs in that collaboration.

The European Commission named the Baltic Sea NGO Network and the Forum a Horizontal Action Leader for Horizontal Action "HA Involve". In that context it is also essential to create **a suitable mechanism for involving Russia and Russian partners** into this common action. For that purpose one could consider using the existing programs: Northern Dimension, EU BSR Program and Strategy for North-west Russia Region's Development.

The Baltic Sea NGO-Forum acknowledges the importance of the further integration of young people and youth representatives into the international co-operation within the Baltic Sea Area. The Forum welcomes therefore the creation of the Baltic Sea Youth Network, which The Baltic Sea NGO Forum offers its partnership for future cooperation.

As a follow up to previous BS NGO Forum and its recommendations - to work further on support for achievement of an official resolution by UN General Assembly to declare the World NGO Day.

To facilitate the existing visa regime: to expand the list of humanitarian matters by including NGO cooperation and youth cooperation issues, so that visas could be issued by direct invitations and without a registration fee. In the future a possibility of visa-free regime for all

the border areas in BSR could be considered a possibility, taking the Kaliningrad –Poland case as a good example.

To secure respect for democratic rule and democratic development in all Baltic Sea countries that allows contribution from free, independent organisations and a free cross-border co-operation between NGOs around the Baltic Sea. We want the Baltic Sea to be a region of sustainable environment, mutual trust and democracy.