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Guidelines for the Nordic Council of Minister's cooperation with Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania 2006-2008.

Since the beginning of the 1990s the Nordic Council of Ministers and the three Baltic countries have developed increasingly broader cooperation. With the accession of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania to the European Union, a new and important step has been taken. These guidelines should be seen as the Nordic Council of Ministers' contribution to move cooperation forward in a new political environment.

During the first phase of cooperation between the five Nordic countries and Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, relations had the character of being support and aid functions. In the second phase of cooperation, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania were consulted during the preparation of the current Framework Programme that expires at the turn of the year 2005/2006.

The present guidelines represent a new, third phase of cooperation between the Nordic countries and Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, constituting cooperation between eight states on an equal basis (NB8). For the Nordic Council of Ministers, the guidelines will partially take effect from the year 2005. Ongoing projects falling outside the scope of the guidelines will be terminated as soon as possible and at the latest at the end of 2005.

The intention behind the guidelines is to identify the areas in which the Nordic and Baltic countries may have shared interests, i.e. in which sectoral areas cooperation should primarily be depend. The guidelines are a tool for the Nordic ministerial councils and should be seen as a starting point for the development of common ambitions between the eight countries. Responsibility for the concrete process lies with ministerial councils or senior officials' committees, together with Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

The guidelines should not be regarded as a final product, but as a step in the ongoing process to further develop cooperation, in a phase where all countries involved are searching to find the way forward. During the preparation of the guidelines the Nordic Council of Ministers has consulted with the governments of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. The task of the Nordic Council of Ministers as an institution is to assist in the work in such a way that NB8 cooperation may develop for the good of all eight countries.

1. Why cooperate?

Following the Baltic countries' accession to the EU, Nordic-Baltic cooperation has changed in character. Aid-oriented cooperation will be replaced by a broader political partnership on a reciprocal basis. Such cooperation is of **strong intrinsic value** and paves the way for achievements in a variety of areas.

Future cooperation should be in the interests of all participant countries and of **mutual Nordic-Baltic benefit**. Through joint Nordic-Baltic cooperation, the countries will achieve more than they are in a position to do separately.

Nordic-Baltic **cooperation within the framework of the EU and EEA** will gain increased importance in a positive sense, without being perceived, for this reason, as promoting the creation of blocs. The fact remains that smaller countries in the same geographical area will often share common aims, even if they may not be specifically embodied in established relations.

Responsibility for the **environmental state of the Baltic Sea unites the Nordic and Baltic countries**. It is in the interests of all countries around the Baltic Sea to protect these waters, not only as an important economic traffic artery, but also as a tourist area and marine environment.

Sustainable development represents a strong common obligation and is a field where the Nordic countries occupy a leading position. This theme reconciles environmental, economic and social issues. The application of the new Nordic cross-sectoral strategy for sustainable development could prove particularly useful in this specific area.

Historical ties and neighbourliness between the Nordic countries and Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are factors behind the bridge-building process that has evolved. Today, this manifests itself in diverse forms of cooperation, also in the **field of culture**. In the future, culture will continue to form the connective tissue of mutual Nordic-Baltic cooperation, thereby contributing to joint access to the development of democratic societies, respectful of human rights and with open economies.

Against this general backdrop, Nordic-Baltic cooperation should have one clear objective, namely to **reinforce cohesion between the eight countries**. The results of such Nordic-Baltic cohesion can give positive effects on several levels:

- Increased international contacts in the Baltic Sea region and thereby a strengthening not only of political relations, but also of economies and societal development. The Baltic Sea region can become a dynamic centre in the new Europe.
- Developing democracies through activities fostering democracy and the rule of law is in the interests of all the countries concerned. The Nordic region has longstanding experience in cooperating with government authorities and NGOs. Together, the Nordic and Baltic regions can contribute to strengthening democracy and societal development across the EU's new eastern borders, especially in respect of Russia and Belarus.

2. How to cooperate?

As far as the Nordic countries are concerned, the cooperation described here is the **multilateral cooperation engaged in between national states**, where the Nordic countries jointly cooperate within the framework of the Nordic Council of Ministers with Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. The activities of the Nordic Council of Ministers should be regarded as a complement to the Nordic countries' bilateral cooperation with Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania and in compliance with the principles jointly laid down by the countries involved.

The natural institutional basis will be regular NB8 meetings at ministerial and senior officials' level.

For the Nordic Council of Ministers, the year 2005 is the final year of the "2003-2005 Framework Programme". 2006 will see the start-up of a new form of cooperation where responsibility for the **sector-specific content** of joint Nordic-Baltic cooperation will be placed with the respective sectoral ministerial council, whereas cooperation ministers will continue to attend to overriding responsibilities. Accordingly, cooperation will be pursued along the fundamental guidelines adopted by the Nordic cooperation ministers, whereas sector-specific content will be defined by the respective sectoral ministers.

Nordic cooperation ministers, including the Nordic Committee for Cooperation, will draw up the Nordic Council of Ministers' guidelines for cooperation, and hence they have *primary* responsibility for coordinating the joint Nordic content of such cooperation. The current Nordic and Nordic-Baltic committees of experts will be dissolved. Cooperation ministers will also assume primary responsibility for ensuring the necessary coordination with the relevant parties in the Baltic countries.

The former principle whereby the Nordic Council of Ministers was not to cooperate with the **Baltic states individually**, but as far as possible "en bloc", will be replaced by a more flexible approach. In the future, it will be natural for sectoral ministerial councils also to cooperate as required with Baltic countries individually, in order to follow up more specific interests. However, cooperative activities involving the participation of all Baltic countries will undoubtedly continue to play an important role in the future.

Examples of activities where the participation of all countries represents a clear advantage are the preparation and implementation of joint Nordic-Baltic ministerial council meetings for the sectoral ministers. This will constitute a continuation of the NB8 cooperation to which foreign ministries have given high priority.

Future cooperation will be **evaluated** on a continuous basis – by cooperation ministers, as well as by the secretariat to the Nordic Council of Ministers. To this end, the individual sectoral council will annually prepare a status report on cooperation. The reports will describe the specific cooperative projects that have been carried out, provide an evaluation of the extent to which the guidelines of the cooperation ministers have been followed and whether the political priorities in force at any given time have been fulfilled. They will also contain a description and evaluation of cooperative activities planned for the coming years. The reports will form the basis of a more general annual discussion of principle among Nordic cooperation ministers of such cooperation and its development in the future. The evaluation of cooperation should also be discussed in a joint Nordic-Baltic context.

Nordic cooperation ministers have at their disposal a **reserve for political initiatives** under the annual budget for cooperation with relevant neighbouring countries. These funds will be used for special measures of current political interest. The reserve may also provide support for Baltic participation in Nordic institutions.

In the future, sectoral as well as cooperation ministers will contribute more actively to achieving **increased attention and information** about joint Nordic efforts deployed in the region and, by so doing, improve knowledge of such cooperation and publicise them more

widely outside the Nordic sphere. This is a task to be shared with the Nordic Information Offices in the Baltic countries, as well as by the secretariat.

3. Areas of cooperation

The aim of further developing the Nordic-Baltic political community and strengthening cohesion between the Nordic countries and Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania will have consequences for most areas of cooperation, but it might still be useful to highlight the most significant tasks and topics. These are of an instructive nature for the different ministerial councils.

It is essential to focus on forms of cooperation where joint Nordic-Baltic cooperation **represents added value and additional worth by comparison to bilateral cooperation, regular EU/EEA cooperation and cooperation with EFTA**. In this respect, consideration should also be given to the input to be provided in the coming years by Nordic EFTA/EEA countries through their two new financing mechanisms, which will annually invest close to EUR 30 755 400 in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in the period 2004-2009. The application of such funds will be based on priorities presented by the Baltic countries.

Priority will be given to **building on** already successfully established cooperation where there is mutual interest in further development. The principles of gender equality will occupy a central position and will be integrated into further cooperation.

Efforts **promoting Nordic interests** are a benefit for all Nordic countries. Well-developed cultural cooperation is especially significant in this context. As in the past, culture may serve as a lever for other forms of cooperation. Achievements aimed at furthering the Nordic region also include the fostering of Nordic business start-ups in the Baltic countries.

As for the **relevant themes**, there are certain key areas where the Nordic Council of Ministers has special interest in developing cooperation, including:

- Trans-boundary activities along the EU's new border could be developed on the basis of positive Nordic experiences. In this area, several ministerial councils would have the opportunity of making a contribution.
- Research and innovation work, as well as cooperation in the field of education would provide natural continuity in the context of cooperation that has already been initiated and that is vital to the attractive force of the entire region.
- IT cooperation could be developed in terms of content and technology. The areas of application of – and the need for – broad IT solutions in the Baltic Sea region are vast.
- Social and health issues, including the fight against drugs and safeguarding the interests and needs of children and young people, particularly within the “Northern Dimension Partnership in Public Health and Social Well-Being”.
- Environment and sustainable development.

4. Forms of cooperation

The various forms of joint Nordic-Baltic cooperation may range from policy development and coordination to activities entailing more distinct financial consequences. Cooperation within the respective sectoral ministerial councils should be established as **cooperative programmes drawn up jointly and running for several years**, as declarations or agreed minutes. They should contain specific, focused activities based on the political priorities adopted by the cooperation ministers.

Joint Nordic-Baltic ministerial meetings of high sectoral relevance should be held on a regular basis. Such meetings should be prepared by the respective committees of senior officials in collaboration with Baltic colleagues.

At the level of senior officials, cooperation in the form of joint NB8 meetings should be further developed and strengthened as required.

Appropriate instruments for achieving the specific forms of cooperation are, among others:

- Exchange programmes are efficient with a view to building interpersonal relations. Such programmes would be relevant in a number of important areas.
- Joint initiatives that could form the basis of promoting projects of particular development value and thereby serve as “path-finders”.
- Exchange of experience and information could provide mutual benefit as part of a necessary benchmarking process.
- Cooperation within the framework of current Nordic institutions.

The Nordic region has a tradition for establishing **cooperation at grassroot level**, something that has also proven successful in the context of cooperation with Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. This approach will be pursued. This type of cooperation is moreover an example of how Nordic cooperation can complement EU cooperation.

5. Financial principles

The value of cooperation lies in its **quality**. Good cooperation presupposes that the parties shoulder a common responsibility - politically and administratively, as well as financially. The possibility of applying for project funds from a specific Nordic Adjacent Area Programme will be discontinued. This will be replaced by regular, reciprocal cooperation where each of the parties finances its own expenses or where, in special circumstances, the parties jointly agree on a distribution of costs. This type of arrangement will secure that cooperation is of **mutual Nordic-Baltic benefit**. Purely development aid projects will be terminated.

During a three-year transition period, consideration should be given to the capacity of the Baltic authorities/joint venture partners to provide co-financing in their respective ministerial councils. Valuable and already initiated projects will be completed. One such example is the ongoing work to combat contagious diseases.

6. Nordic Council of Ministers' offices in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania

The information offices in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania have played a **pivotal role** in the development of joint Nordic-Baltic cooperation. The Nordic Council of Ministers is the only regional organisation with a physical presence in the Baltic countries. Through their longstanding presence, these offices have established valuable networks on behalf of Nordic players.

The functions of the offices will be specified **more clearly** and their size adapted to the new priorities of cooperation. The offices' mandate and profile are to be homogeneous, albeit taking due account of country-specific criteria and differences. The offices serve as catalysts for joint Nordic-Baltic cooperation as they :

- constitute the local **contact point** for Nordic sectoral ministerial councils, their committees and working groups, e.g. by identifying the relevant Baltic partners and thereby facilitating cooperation;
- develop **networks** with national authorities, NGOs and other national and international players in their respective countries;
- serve as the Council of Ministers' local **observers**, identifying trends and opportunities for joint Nordic-Baltic cooperation. This is a task that cannot exclusively be carried out at a distance;
- serve as exponents for all that is “**Nordic**” and work to increase attention to cooperation, especially in the field of culture;
- possess considerable **competence** that could also be useful for the offices in Northwest Russia and for the further development of cooperation with the Russian regions, thereby constituting a **network between the Nordic Council of Ministers' offices**;
- carry out the **practical case handling, quality assurance**, etc. of exchange programmes and other schemes in a more efficient manner than would otherwise have been possible.

These tasks will gradually be adapted to whatever needs may be appropriate in view of the future development of joint Nordic-Baltic cooperation.

As at present, the offices will continue to have a **budget** at their disposal for locally initiated cooperation in compliance with the Nordic Council of Ministers' guidelines.

These offices make up part of the Nordic Council of Ministers' secretariat and their executives **report** directly to the Secretary General. Contacts between the offices and the secretariat in Copenhagen will be expanded. Their names will be shortened to the “Nordic Council of Ministers' Office in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania” respectively.

7. Institutional cooperation

Several of the Nordic Council of Ministers' sectoral institutions are involved in cooperative activities in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. The other activities of these institutions and of the Council of Ministers will be coordinated by means of **consultations and annual reporting**.

Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania will be offered closer cooperation with Nordic institutions on terms that are of mutual interest. Resources will be allocated to the cooperation ministers to enable this type of institutional cooperation.

Cooperation between institutions will be governed by needs and characterized by a high degree of flexibility. The possibility for full ownership (such as in the NIB) or more comprehensive partnerships will be kept open.

8. EU, CBSS and other players

In the future joint Nordic cooperation with the Baltic countries will be pursued taking due account of the cooperation in which these countries are engaged within the **EU framework**. The Northern Dimension and trans-boundary activities are two such examples.

Cooperation with the three Baltic countries should, to a certain extent, **also include Russia**. Stronger Nordic-Baltic-Russian cooperation, especially in border regions, should be pursued. Such cooperation should be founded on experiences gained from internal Nordic cooperation in border regions in the eight regional cross-border committees, but also on Baltic knowledge and experience with Russia. Within the context of this cooperation, the EU's financing instrument Interreg and the forthcoming "Neighbourhood Instrument" will have a crucial role to play.

Expanding coordination and specific cooperation between the **Nordic Council of Ministers and the CBSS** would be welcomed, not only to avoid an unnecessary duplication of activities, but also to reduce the resources that countries expend on participating in the work of several, often overlapping organisations. The Nordic region and Nordic priorities often play a crucial and decisive role, since Nordic countries participate in many different forums.

The Nordic Council of Ministers' participation in the context of regional cooperation is founded on separate, overriding guidelines for such activities, as adopted by the cooperation ministers on the co-financing of activities. Consultation between the organisations involved takes place on a regular basis.