

**Ministerial Conference on trade and economic co-operation
in the Baltic Sea region**

Bergen 7-8 February 2000

Action Plan

At the invitation of the Norwegian Minister of Trade and Industry, the Ministers in charge of trade and economic co-operation of the Baltic Sea States and a representative of the European Commission met 7-8 February 2000 in Bergen, to discuss ways and means to make full use of the great economic potential of the region. In particular issues such as reduction of barriers to trade and investments, the facilitating of a favourable business environment for Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), and the role of regional bodies in the Northern Dimension of the European Union (EU) were discussed.

Ministerial co-operation on trade and investments within the Baltic Sea Region has derived advantages from a linkage to the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS), and assistance of the CBSS Secretariat and the Working Group on Economic Co-operation. As a means to improve intergovernmental co-ordination of activities in our region and to ensure synergy effects, Ministers agreed that further work within their field of competence should be co-ordinated within the framework of the CBSS. The Ministers solemnly confirmed the political will to contribute to peace and security in the Baltic Sea Region by means of multilateral economic co-operation.

The Ministers gathered in the light of the latest political and economic developments in Europe, the new opportunities created by the development of regional economic co-operation, following the achievements since the last Ministerial Meeting on Trade and Investments of SMEs in the Baltic Sea Region, held in Vilnius July 9-10, 1998.

The Ministers highly appreciated the contribution of Norway to the further development of economic co-operation in the Baltic Sea Region and expressed their gratitude to the Government of Norway for the opportunity to meet in Bergen.

The Ministers welcomed as observers: France, Italy, Portugal, the United Kingdom, the Ukraine, the USA and Representatives from the Business Advisory Council (BAC), the Baltic Chambers of Commerce Association (BCCA), the Barents Euro Arctic Council (BEAC), the Baltic Sea States Sub-regional Co-operation (BSSSC), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and the Union of Baltic Cities (UBC).

The Ministers expressed their satisfaction concerning the results achieved since the Vilnius meeting, in particular:

- The activities implemented and initiatives taken under the umbrella of the Baltic Sea Customs Conference to speed up border crossing. Contributions from the Baltic Business Advisory Council (BAC) and the Baltic Sea Chamber of Commerce Association (BCCA) were welcomed in this regard.

- The trade law expert meeting held in Sweden and the certification expert meeting held in Finland in order to align rules and practices.
- The setting up of a Task Force on Conformity Assessments by the CBSS - Working Group on Economic Co-operation.
- Efforts undertaken in co-operation with the OECD in order to fight corruption in the Baltic Sea region.
- The model developed of a regional Internet based information network for SMEs, as a step to enhance the framework conditions for SMEs in the Baltic Sea Region.
- The regional exchange of information concerning business incubators which has taken place at several expert meetings between the countries in the Baltic Sea region.
- The strengthening of the dialogue between the business community and governments through the close co-operation between the CBSS Working Group for Economic Co-operation and the Business Advisory Council (BAC).
- The creation of and work carried out by the Baltic Development Forum as a timely and constructive initiative among the efforts to enhance the position of the Baltic Sea Region as a dynamic growth region in Europe.

The Ministers emphasised the importance of an active follow-up of the results of the Foreign Ministers' conference in Helsinki 11- 12 November, 1999, and the Helsinki European Council 10- 11 December, 1999, regarding the Northern Dimension of the European Union, and referred to the conclusions of the Council of Baltic Sea States meeting in Palanga in June 1999.

The Ministers pointed out that continued attention should be given to the further removal of barriers to trade and investments, and that continued emphasis on the creation of favourable conditions for SMEs is an important contribution to economic growth and stability in the region.

The ministers agreed on the following Action Plan for the period 2000-2001:

1. Improving border crossing conditions for goods

Objective: By the end of 2001 the clearance time for border crossings should be less than 2 hours.

Action:

- Ministers agreed that the responsibility for reaching this objective lies with the respective national authorities and business community and expressed their commitment to take the required measures in order to reach the objective.
- Ministers expressed their support for the activities implemented and initiatives taken under the umbrella of the Baltic Sea Customs Conference (BSCC) in order to reach this objective. Ministers agreed to increase their support for the activities of the BSCC.
- Ministers agreed to support the development and implementation of an Internet solution for the customs services, as recommended by the 'Third Baltic Sea Customs Conference in Gdansk 1999.

2. Conformity in standards and certification requirements

Objective: To develop conformity assessment procedures covering the fields of metrology, testing, certification, accreditation and market surveillance in the Baltic Sea region.

Action:

- Ministers support the establishment of a work plan on conformity assessment procedures and the need for follow-up actions during the year 2000.

3. Fight against corruption

Objective: To strengthen the fight against bribery and corruption.

Action:

- Ministers noted with satisfaction the decision by the Task Force on Organised Crime to draw up a situation report on corruption in the Baltic Sea Region.
- Ministers supported the co-operation of the CBSS with the OECD concerning the fight against bribery and corruption. The possibilities for co-operation with the Working Group on Bribery in International Transactions (WGBIT) of the Committee on International Investment and Multinational Enterprises (CIME) of the OECD should be studied.
- The Ministers also welcomed the proposal for a 'Baltic Integrity Programme' in co-operation between the CBSS and the OECD, and agreed to actively consider it.
- The Ministers urged all Baltic Sea States to co-operate with the OECD with the aim of joining the 'Convention on Combating Bribery of Foreign Public Officials in International Business Transactions'.
- Ministers supported the recommendations of the Baltic Sea Customs Conference to improve the measures safeguarding the integrity of the customs services.

4. Protecting intellectual property rights

Objective: To strengthen the implementation and enforcement of intellectual property rights.

Action:

- A seminar will be organized in Sweden in May this Year. After the seminar an ad hoc task force will be established. The seminar and the task force will deal with topics such as implementation of adequate intellectual property rights legislation and enforcement.

5. Facilitating a favorable business environment for SMEs

Objective: To improve access to information relevant to SMEs and to develop regional networking on public policies regarding business incubators.

Action:

- Ministers saw the need for a regional Internet based information network on the basis of the model presented at their meeting and to have an operational system established by the end of 2000. The possibility of promoting the region in more distant markets on the basis of this co-ordinated information network should be looked into.
- Ministers took note of the exploratory work on business incubators/science and industrial parks, and asked for continued input on related public policies.

6. The Northern Dimension of the European Union and regional co-operation

Objective: To increase the efficiency of regional efforts to promote trade, investments and economic growth in the Baltic Sea region.

Action:

- The Ministers stressed the importance of the decision taken by the Helsinki European Council in December 1999, to invite the Commission to prepare an Action Plan for the Northern Dimension in the external and cross-border policies of the European Union. The Ministers urged the regional bodies such as the CBSS, the BEAC, the Nordic Council and the Arctic Council to play an instrumental role in the preparation and implementation of the Action Plan.
- Ministers welcomed the institutionalisation of contacts between the CBSS Working Group on Economic Co-operation and the BEAC Working Group on Economic Co-operation. They agreed that a closer co-operation between CBSS and BEAC would contribute positively to the overall efficiency of the joint efforts to promote trade, investments and sustainable economic growth in the region.
- Ministers welcomed the Swedish intention to organise a high level follow-up of the Action Plan on the Northern Dimension during the Swedish Presidency of the EU.

7. Follow-up.

- The Ministers requested a progress report on the removal of barriers to trade and investments based on the agreed action plan. The report should be prepared by the CBSS Secretariat in co-operation with the Working Group on Economic Co-operation and the Baltic Business Advisory Council by June 2001.

