



Weekly Briefing

**Lithuania External Relations briefing:
The Baltic-Nordic cooperation is coming of age with a focus on the
participatory democracy in the region**

Linas Eriksonas

China-CEE Institute

Kiadó: Kína-KKE Intézet Nonprofit Kft.

Szerkesztésért felelős személy: Chen Xin

Kiadásért felelős személy: Huang Ping



1052 Budapest Petőfi Sándor utca 11.



+36 1 5858 690



office@china-cee.eu



china-cee.eu

The Baltic-Nordic cooperation is coming of age with a focus on the participatory democracy in the region

The start of the new political season this autumn brought the Nordic-Baltic regional cooperation back on the agenda. At the intra-governmental level the preparations were made for the bi-annual Northern Futures Forum involving the Prime Ministers and the Ministers of Foreign Affairs from the Nordic and the Baltic countries and the United Kingdom (the event took place in Oslo, Norway on 29 October, followed by the 70th session of the Nordic Council of Ministers, which ran from 30 October to 1 November). At the non-governmental level, the gatherings of socially-active people (marketed as discussion, democracy festivals) were organized with the support of the Nordic Council of Ministers across the Nordic and the Baltic countries to demonstrate the commitment for the participatory democracy. One such event entitled as the discussion festival “Būtent!” („Indeed!“ in English) was held for two days in a spa town in Lithuania on 7-8 September.

The analysis below will try to explain how the Nordic-Baltic cooperation at different levels came together and how that relates to the ongoing search of the region for the shared and common values and policy interests.

The inter-governmental cooperation. The start of the Nordic-Baltic cooperation goes back to the period when the Baltic countries regained independence in 1990-1991. On February 11, 1991, the Icelandic Parliament voted to confirm that Iceland's 1922 recognition of Lithuanian independence was still in full effect, as it never formally recognized the Soviet Union's control over Lithuania. This political act by the then Foreign Minister Jón Baldvin Hannibalsson (Chairman of the Icelandic Social Democratic Party), recounted in his recently published memoirs (*The Baltic road to freedom - Iceland's role,*

2017), established early on a symbolic yet highly relevant trust bond with the Nordic countries. .

Despite the initial enthusiasm on both sides during the initial, formative years of the Nordic-Baltic diplomatic relations (from the opening of the offices of the Nordic Council of Ministers in the Baltic capitals in 1991 until the decisions made on the European Union's accession of Estonia in 1998 and Lithuania and Latvia in 1999), the Nordic-Baltic cooperation was rather asymmetrical. The Nordic countries, being one of the most advanced economies globally, fulfilled their role of mentors to the Baltic countries providing technical and administrative assistance in setting up effective and modern public structures (for example, the state registers in Lithuania, key to the public sector administration, had been created with the support of Norway).

The situation started to change with the Baltic countries becoming the subject of the EU integration project and, especially, especially after joining the EU in 2004. The Nordic countries actively assisted the Baltic countries in their preparations for the integration into the EU. Norway and Denmark further supported the integration of the Baltic countries into NATO. In 2000 during the meeting of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of three Baltic States and five Nordic Countries the decision was made that this group would be called NB8.

After the access of the Baltic countries to the EU, three Nordic countries the EU Members (Denmark, Sweden and Finland) involved three Baltic countries in the group of six Nordic-Baltic (NB6) EU Member States conducting regular informal meetings at the Prime Minister or the Minister of Foreign Affairs level for consultations in preparation for the EU Council, General Affairs Council and Foreign Affairs Council meetings. From 2008 onwards, the Baltic States have been also involved in coordinating the NB8 foreign ministry co-operation. The importance of NB8 for the European affairs gained momentum in 2010 when the newly formed UK government under David Cameron started to reconsider the country's role in the EU and looked

northwards for the allies. In 2011 the UK government initiated and convened in London a high level meeting the Nordic Futures Forum (which was to become a bi-annual policy event) bringing together NB8 and the UK.

On 28 October, 2018 the seventh Nordic Futures Forum bringing NB8 and the UK took place in Oslo where the UK Prime Minister Theresa May indicated a new approach to the political alignments of the UK after the Brexit. The British Prime Minister expressed a strong interest to continue and indeed strengthen the collaboration of the UK with NB8 through the Nordic Council of Ministers where the UK has a status of an observer. This has been welcomed by Lithuania which has a vested interest in keeping closely engaged with the UK due to a large number of Lithuanian nationals residing in the UK and due to joint geopolitical interests.

For a long time the main barrier for a more inclusive and deepening cooperation between the Nordic and the Baltic countries has been the lack of the clear strategic framework as the cooperation was fostered more by ad-hoc decisions and needs to address the issues shaped by external factors rather than by a more consistent and future-looking planning of the common goals and the strategic plans to achieve them. The situation had started to change in 2010 when the specific guidelines for promoting between NB8 countries were prepared under the guidance of the NB8 Cooperation Coordinator, the former Latvian Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Valdis Birkavs and the former Danish Defense Minister Søren Gade. The Birkavs-Gade policy report identified specific suggestions how to improve cooperation, including fostering foreign political dialogue, cooperation between diplomatic missions, civil protection, defense cooperation, energy and the NB8 brand.

A separate organizational structure was not setup to implement the guidelines; the Council of the Nordic Ministers took over the initiative of acting as a back office with support of the individual country's Foreign Ministries

which rotate annually in the role of the coordinator for the NB8 cooperation. This year it is Sweden.

The non-governmental cooperation. In parallel to the high-level cooperation, the cooperation in support of civil society and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) has been going on with support by and through the efforts of the Nordic Council of Ministers. The Council launched the NGO-support programme back in 2006 to promote co-operation between NGOs across the Baltic Sea Region including the Baltic countries, Poland, Russia and Belarus with the focus on social and health, culture, environment and development of democracy.

Until recently the main emphasis at this level of cooperation was on the support of individual projects or institutions as has been the case of the European Humanities University relocated from Minsk to Vilnius in 2004 and supported by the Nordic Council of Ministers. Since 2017 the Nordic Council of Ministers has come up with an initiative of funding the activities targeted at the society-at-large in a more comprehensive way.

In each NB8 country an event was organized bringing public opinion leaders (political commentators, public intellectuals, business leaders and entrepreneurs) in a direct contact with the audiences in a few day festival which included both public speeches and entertainment activities (movie screening, music concerts, activities for families and children). The format for these events was modelled upon the annual weekly gatherings organized in Almedalen park in the city of Visby (on the island of Gotland in the Baltic Sea) in Sweden. They started in 1968 when Olof Palme, the then Minister of Education and the contender to lead the Social Democratic Party of Sweden, made an improvised speech from a truck to the audience of several hundred people. Since then the annual Almedalen Week (Almedalenveckan in Swedish) have been organized to a wide acclaim attracting people from around the country and connecting the politicians with the people.

Since 2017 the Nordic Council has been co-funding Olaf Palme-inspired festivals across the Nordic and Baltic countries, which included the following events: the festivals SuomiAreena (Finland), Lampa (Latvia), Fundur Fólksins (Iceland; Lysa from 2018), Arendalsuka (Norway), Folkemødet (Denmark) and Būtent! (Lithuania). The guidelines were prepared to help the organizers to follow the main concept of these festivals aimed to strengthen the participatory democracy. The guidelines entitled explain that “Democracy Festivals are the platforms for a constructive political dialogue across opinions, age, gender and hierarchy where people come together each summer to discuss how to improve their countries. Civil society activists, entrepreneurs, government officials, ministers and people at large sit together and casually talk about how to make their country a better place for everybody.” The following criteria were established for each event: the event has to be a nationwide event, should be working for participatory democracy and societal benefit, ensure a free admission for participants and open to everyone, should be festival-like in form and expression, reflect a participatory democracy philosophy, provide informal atmosphere and focus on conversations and dialogue.

In Lithuania a two-day festival this autumn attracted several thousand participants, involved 220 speakers, included 80 different activities and delivered 60 hours of content in an open-air environments: the activities were organized in largely tents. The organizers were put on the record explaining the rationale behind this event as follows: “One of the aims of the discussion festival “Būtent!” – to demonstrate that important decisions are inseparable from the diversity of opinions and the involvement of different societal groups in discussing them. A high level of discussion culture helps the society to agree on the priorities of the development of the state and conditions a better quality of the approved decisions. There is a need to create an open discussion space which would contribute to the creation of the democratic, united and progressive

society, the cultivation of the culture for discussions, listening and tolerance towards other opinion or view.”

By making the participatory democracy one of the tenants of the Nordic-Baltic cooperation, NB8 as a group has finally found a common ground to align the value-based policies applied in the international affairs with those promoted domestically. To conclude, the Nordic-Baltic cooperation has come a long way from the cabinet politics in the ante-chambers of Brussels to the outdoor gatherings of people discussing public issues openly to keep the participatory democracy closer to the people, as was indeed the intension of Olof Palme.