

WELCOME SPEECH BY
UNDERSECRETARY OF THE MINISTRY OF INTERIOR
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DURING THE STARTING CONFERENCE OF
THE BALTIC EUROREGIONAL NETWORK

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Vilnius, “Reval Hotel Lietuva”

Honourable Representatives of the Nordic Council of Ministers,
Honourable Participants of the Conference and Guests,

It is a great pleasure for me to welcome you in Lithuania having an opportunity to coordinate one of the most ambitious projects under the initiative of the European Communities INTERREG III B, which will facilitate creation of an informational network of euroregions in the Baltic Sea Region promoting preconditions for socio-economical cooperation between neighbouring countries and strengthening administrative capacities of representatives of euroregions. Although geopolitical situation of the project partner-countries Denmark, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Russia, Finland and Belarus is rather different, their participation in the project proves presence of common fundamental values: democracy, close cooperation and good neighbourhood.

The Ministry of Interior of the Republic of Lithuania as one of the institutions implementing regional policy measures highly appreciates the initiative of the Nordic Council of Ministers, not only

helping to find new opportunities for cooperation between the EU member states, but also paying an extensive attention towards cooperation over the external border of the EU with its eastern neighbours Russia and Belarus. We hope, that the project will be useful both for the cross-border cooperation of the EU member states and in the context of local self-government in terms of new ideas.

Considering historical and political conditions, I think, that the countries of the Baltic Sea Region have one of the broadest potentials of implementation of the neighbourhood policy, as they are located on the crossroad between East and West. The Baltic Euroregional Network, the high-speed railway *Rail Baltica*, which is going to connect Eastern and Western Europe in 2010, international highway VIA HANSEATICA stretching from St. Petersburg in Russia to Lübeck in Germany and other projects can be not only of political, but – I am sure – also of historical importance for the development of border regions and territorial cooperation.

Supporting goals of the European Council of building confidence and relations of good neighbourhood between different states, removing obstacles complicating local and regional cooperation – **legal restrictions** first of all, and pursuing a well-balanced European enlargement, as well as economical, social and territorial cohesion, the Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania has already ratified the European Outline Convention on Transfrontier Cooperation between Territorial Communities or Authorities of 1997 (the Madrid Convention) and two protocols to this Convention adopted on 9

November 1995 and 5 May 1998 in Strasbourg. Different forms of cooperation between border regions corresponding the interests of territorial communities, as well as various standard treaties between neighbouring countries, standard framework agreements, statutes and contracts between municipal or regional authorities offered by these documents have facilitated existence of Lithuanian euroregions as well. At present 6 Lithuanian euroregions: *Nemunas*, *Baltija*, *Saulė*, *Ežerų kraštas*, *Šešupė* and *Bartuva* unite as many as 40 municipalities, which makes 2/3 of all municipalities of our country.

The Government of the Republic of Lithuania, as well as other authorities of the EU supporting euroregional activities has been providing methodical, consultative and financial support to these activities since 2002. According to the approved Measure of the Regional Development Programme envisaging “to support international cooperation in the field of regional development”, the euroregions working in Lithuania get an annual coverage of their membership fees payable to the Association of European Border Regions (AEBR). Furthermore, it turns into an annual tradition to organise conferences, seminars and trainings targeted towards development of international cooperation by Lithuanian regions. Publications presenting euroregions are issued.

After Lithuania joined the European Union in 2004, even broader opportunities for using the facilities provided by transfrontier, transregional and international cooperation programmes INTERREG,

PHARE CBC (Cross-Border Cooperation) and other Neighbourhood programmes have opened to the euroregions.

Taking into consideration the experience of coordinating euroregional activities developed at the national level and conclusions of the international conference on regional cooperation after the EU enlargement organised by the Ministries of Interior and Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Lithuania in cooperation with the European Council in 2004, I would like to stress, that the initiative of establishing and developing transfrontier regions between neighbouring countries should not belong to the central authorities – it should be an independent local initiative. Differentiating the topics of euroregional activities, which can be developed at the domestic, national or international level, it was stated, that a large part of decisions concerning management, administration and financing issues could be taken independently.

It is pleasing, that Lithuanian representatives have a possibility to present their position also at the international level when participating in the workshops organised by the European Council actively working on presently the most topical issue of the **legal status** of euroregions. A new European Convention presented by expert of the European Council professor Yves Lejeune covering the Framework Law on Transfrontier Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (TGTC) and prepared taking into account the answers to the questionnaire provided by 14 countries and representatives of the Association of European Border Regions, as well as conclusions of

the workshop determine new forms and opportunities for the activities of euroregions, now enjoying the status of a **legal unit**. I believe, that after the Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania ratifies this Conventions, the euroregional cooperation will move to a new level, because legal status should help to solve relevant domestic problems of financing, management etc.

Hoping that euroregions will turn into strong partners assisting us in promoting successful implementation of the national regional policy, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the representatives of the Nordic Council of Ministers, as it is due to their initiative today we can be here together and share useful information, experiences and adjust our further activities as partners striving for the common goal, as euroregions turn into an important instrument of international cooperation.

Thank you for your attention.