

Secretary General Per Unckel
Minister FURMANAVIČIUS
Dear BEN-Partners,

It is a great pleasure for me to address the Starting Conference of our joint Baltic Euroregional Network project on behalf of the Icelandic CBSS Presidency.

It took quite a time from first consultations between the Nordic Council of Ministers and the CBSS on possible Cross Border Cooperation, until this starting conference today.

All the more we are very proud that we have reached together with you this step and can launch today the Baltic Euroregional Network.

It might seem rather untypical that the CBSS as an overall political forum for regional intergovernmental cooperation gets involved in concrete project business.

However, the CBSS understands its participation in the BEN-project as a political pilot project to enhance Cross Border Cooperation in the Baltic Sea region. In addition, we believe that the BEN-project is for the whole of the CBSS – a further step strengthening the cooperation between the CBSS and the Nordic Council of Ministers.

The importance the CBSS attributes to this project was reiterated in the Communiqué of the 13th CBSS Ministerial Session last June.

With regard to cross-border and transnational activities, as a means to enhance economic ties and further consolidate democratic civil societies, the Ministers expressed positive expectations in connection with the Baltic Euroregional Network.

The Ministers of Foreign Affairs agreed, *„that cross-border, transnational and interregional activities are important components of the European integration process, especially to prevent the creation of new dividing lines within the Baltic Sea region. Therefore, this type of cooperation remains a priority of the CBSS.”*

We believe, that the BEN-project can benefit from the participation of the CBSS at the national level.

First of all, the BEN-project enjoys strong political back-up at the national level – a fact which might make the dialogue easier between the regional and the national level at the National Roundtables in Work Package 3.

It shows that the national level is aware of the special situation on the regional level with regard to the great value of Cross Border Cooperation.

Cross Border Cooperation doesn't concern only the involved border regions, but the whole country, and the Baltic Sea region as such.

Further, for the CBSS as an overall Baltic Sea regional organisation, it was of importance to include partners from all around the Baltic Sea. The commitment of the CBSS to the BEN-project has enlarged the geographical scope of the project to the South of the Baltic Sea region.

In addition, we are extremely pleased to have also project partners from Russia, one of the CBSS member countries, as well as Belarus on board.

Finally, I would like to express my thanks to you, Mr Secretary General and your team around, Mr. Teppo Heiskanen and Mr. Šarunas Radvilavičius for taking over the “burden” of being the project's Lead Partner.

I also want to thank all other project partners for their engagement and promise to devote much time and efforts to our common BEN-project.

In this regard, I wish all success to all of us for building up a strong and sustainable Baltic Euroregional Network.

Thank you for your attention.