



Dear BEN friends,

The final BEN conference in Jelgava is over, and this left me with two contradictory feelings – relief and sadness. For me it was two and a half amazing years of a unique experience, with lot of new great acquaintances and a constant process of learning. I hope this applies to you as well.

During this time 37 different events in 10 countries were arranged under various work packages for the project. More than 1,700 people participated in these events. 22 resolutions/lists of recommendations were adopted, more than 50 best-practice examples were exchanged, 3 publications, 6 newsletters were issued, one website and one database created.

What kind of qualitative results are behind all those numbers? What has changed in the cross-border cooperation in the Baltic Sea Region during those two years? As usually it is difficult to decide, which of the apparent changes were directly affected by the implementation of the BEN project, but there are some tendencies, where I hope BEN had a positive effect:

- A network of institutions working in the field of cross-border cooperation in the Baltic Sea region has been established;
- Increased and deepened dialogue between the Euroregions and the central authorities in four countries: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Russia (by the means of a national roundtable system of annual meetings having been established);
- Institutional capacity of Euroregions/CBC structures increased (more active participation of Euroregions in the implementation of the CBC programmes);

- Best-practice experiences exchanged and used in the everyday life of the CBC structures;
- New projects between Euroregions started. During the final conference two already on-going projects were presented: the project between Euroregion “Country of Lakes” and NGO “Chudskoj project” on environmental education and the BEN-EAST project. The Cooperation agreement between two other BEN partners – Zemgale Planning Region and the Association of Local Authorities of the Republic of Karelia – was signed in Jelgava;
- General increase of interest in CBC issues and promotion of Euroregions as a specific tool for CBC in the BSR.

As already mentioned, the project was also a process of learning, and I would like to share with you some of the lessons I, as the main project coordinator, have learned:

- CBC structures in the BSR are different – but that is not necessarily a problem;
- Institutional capacity of CBC structures around the Baltic Sea is still very varying, and it directly affects their capacity to take part in the projects and networks;
- Euroregions are among the most important actors responsible for the practical implementation of the CBC, and the only institutions established specifically for that purpose;
- Central governments express political support to CBC but do not always support local and regional governments with resources and rights to perform their function;

- Central governments sometimes are afraid that CBC structures might have independent policies in relations with neighbouring countries, and therefore not always support Euroregions;
- Local /regional authorities not always put sufficient efforts and resources into development of Euroregions as unique instruments of CBC;
- The issue of the legal status of Euroregions is not solved, and there is little hope that a single solution for all countries and all kinds of structures will be found in the near future;
- Euroregions have to decide if they want to be centres for project production or hubs for cross-regional development;
- The Role of Euroregions in spatial and regional development is still not sufficient;
- Discussion about the role of Euroregions in the management of CBC programmes have to continue;
- Unstable political relations between neighbouring countries threaten CBC;
- Cooperation between regional organizations is necessary – BEN is a positive example of cooperation between two of these (NCM and CBSS);
- Successful combination of experiences from the EU and Russia/Belarus;

The next important question, which is essential for all partners – what is next? The project has approved the strategy for the future of the network, and with this strategy the Nordic Council of Ministers and the Council of the Baltic Sea States were encouraged to support the further activities of the Baltic Euroregional Network. In Jelgava, we received the news that the NCM is ready to provide financial resources for the coordination of the network in 2008. This will be again coordinated from the NCM Office in Vilnius. But the main guarantee for sustainability of the network is, of course, new initiatives and new projects from the BEN partners. Responsibility is from now much more in your hands, and I will look forward to receive from you new ideas for future cooperation.

Finally, I would like to express my warmest thanks to all of you who made this project possible. At the final conference many people told me that they felt as if they were attending a gathering of a big family, where everyone knows each other well, and where people were enjoying being together. I am happy that I had a chance to be a member of this family!

With warmest greetings,

By: Šarūnas Radvilavičius

BEN seminars and meetings

BEN Steering Committee final meeting; 4 September, in Pirita Convent in Tallinn

The opening speech of the final Steering Committee-meeting held by Ms. Carita Pettersson, the Director of the Nordic Council of Ministers' Office in Estonia, was followed by a welcome and a presentation regarding the history of the Pirita Convent by their Chaplain, Mr. Vello Salo, and the opening words by the SC Chairman Mr. Teppo Heiskanen, the Director of the Nordic Council of Ministers' Office in Lithuania.

The project coordinator, Mr. Šarūnas Radvilavičius, outlined the status of the project and gave information about the talks held by the Lead Partner with the Joint Secretariat on the reallocation of the budget and the change of partners in BEN. According to the request of the JS, the real number of project partners, 35, will remain, but in the official project documents new partners will be just added to original list, so it will become list of 37 partners.

New initiatives within the BEN project were presented: a new project has been approved between the Country of Lakes and the Lake Chudskoe Project, and a new cooperation agreement will be signed between Karelia and Zemgale during the Final Conference in Latvia.

Concerning the budget of the BEN project, a certain under-spending was mentioned as an unwelcome side effect of the project: the coordinator foresees a final realisation of the budget of between 70 - 80%. It was also proposed to produce an additional publication on the project results and on the recommendations of BEN on spatial planning proposals.

The draft on the future strategy of BEN was presented by the Strategy Working Group. It was decided to take a vote on the Strategy document on 8 October.

The LP presented a new project idea for the BEN network: "Roadmap of Cross Border Obstacles in the Baltic Sea Region".

A presentation by Mr. Peteris Timofejevs (CBSS) gave an overview on the preparations for the BEN final conference, taking place during the 24th-26th of October 2007 in Jelgava, as a joint event for BEN and BEN-EAST projects. Mr. Timofejevs also presented the status of the preparations for the Best Practice Handbook of BEN.

Mr. Pavel Petrov, coordinator of the BEN-East project informed the SC regarding BEN-East Activities. After the conclusions of Mr. Teppo Heiskanen, and his quotations from the Holy Bible, the final SC meeting was closed.

By: Madis Kanarbik, based on the minutes from Reet Kokovkin



Estonians Continue to Spread Their Experience in Self-Governance to Pskov Region Local Authorities; 24-28 September, in Valga, Estonia

Within the framework of the BEN project, lecturers of Valga County Association of Local Authorities continue to train their Pskov Region's colleagues. The first seminar, dwelling on the theoretical aspects, took place at Spizino, Gdov District last autumn. The aim of the last seminar in Valga was to give an overview of practical aspects and solutions in the work of local municipalities in Estonia.

During one week, some 20 civil servants representing Pskov, Sebez and Pechory districts, as well as Pskov Region Administration, had a chance to listen to the Estonian lecturers and also to visit municipal organisations and facilities in Valga City and Valga



County. The lectures were held on nearly all the issues the Estonian municipalities work with: the system of educational training, social welfare and health care as well as work with youth issues and leisure; public technical service; development of IT technology and provision of countryside people with access to the Internet, etc.

The Russian colleagues were especially interested in the Estonian experience in privatisation of the former state-owned living spaces and forming of apartment associations. "According to the Federal Law No 131, Russian local authorities obtained responsibilities for the former state-owned dwelling spaces and now the majority of flats are private and belong to the people living in them," said Vladimir Naushkin, Deputy Chairman of Pskov Region Administration Committee of Local Authorities. The Estonian experience in forming apartment associations might work as a model how to continue development in Pskov Region. Leonid Trifonov, Councillor on Humanitarian Issues of Pskov Region Governor, was much impressed by the development and wide use of information technology on the local level.

The guests from Pskov Oblast also visited some public establishments and municipal facilities such as schools, kindergartens, social support providers, a youth leisure centre, sports facilities, water supply and sewerage plants, etc. The evening programmes included study trips to Otepää Municipality and to Tõrva-Helme region.

"We are ready to continue collaboration with our Pskov Region colleagues in the framework of our Euroregion Pskov-Livonia," stated Madis Gross, Chairman of Valga County Association of Local Authorities, in conclusion.

By: Rainer Kuutma

BEN and BEN-East project summer school “Cross-border cooperation to support environment and sustainable development in the Baltic Sea Region”; 20 - 25 August in Tartu, Estonia

The Cross-border cooperation summer school brought together 40 participants from Estonia, Austria, Belarus, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Russia, representing local and regional authorities, NGOs and educational institutions.

Experts in cross-border cooperation shared their knowledge and experiences in planning, preparation and implementation of cross border cooperation activities. The summer school included lectures, hands-on training sessions and work in small groups to develop new ideas and proposals for new CBC projects. CBC experts, students, NGOs representatives from different countries worked together for a week and developed ideas for cooperation that could be later transferred into successful cooperative projects.

The social programme included a trip on an ancient barge on the Emajõgi River, an excursion to the Estonian - Russian border and meeting border guards, visiting Setu Open Air museum, a nature reserve and other exciting summer events.

For better organisation of next year’s summer school the organisers asked participants to complete the evaluation forms. Of course, the participants mostly liked excursions, especially a trip on an ancient barge



on the Emajõgi River and the excursion to the Setu museum and to the Koidula border point. All the participants were very happy and thankful for the possibility to spend such a hard working week in classrooms, and even the weather was mostly warm and sunny. One of our participants sent an e-mail with the text „ Above all, I would like to thank you once more for the brilliant week in Tartu. I must applaud you for creating and coordinating such a smooth and well rounded programme! I loved the social events such as our trip on the ancient Peipsi barge, the trip to the nature reserve (complete with a dip in the river!) Many of the lectures were very insightful”.

The summer school 2007 was organised within the support of BEN and BEN-East projects. Additional support is provided by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung through Forum Balticum.

By: Karin Kruusmaa

BEN project final conference; 24-26 October in Jelgava, Latvia

The three-year project Baltic Euroregional Network BEN is in at the finish. The project was designed to establish the network of cross-border regions in the Baltic Sea Region (BSR), so called Euroregions as well as to prepare recommendations for improving social and economic situation in the border areas. The results of the BEN project were presented at the final conference on October 25-26 in Jelgava, the capital of project's partner Zemgale region. The Conference was organized by two project partners - the Zemgale Planning Region and the Secretariat of the Council of the Baltic Sea States.

The conference started with the basketball tournament "BEN Friendship Cup" at the Sport Centre of Jelgava District followed with the awarding of the winners. The conference speeches highlighted main results of different workpackages; sustainability of BEN project and the follow-up projects were also presented. Two already on-going follow-up projects are: the project between Euroregion "Country of Lakes" and NGO "Chudskoj project" on environmental education and the BEN-EAST project.

The Cooperation agreement between two other BEN partners – Zemgale Planning Region and the Association of Local Authorities of the Republic of Karelia – was also signed in Jelgava.

"The project's finish will mark the achieved results. The network of Euroregions is established and unites all the Baltic Sea region countries, the administrative capacity of cross-border structures is improved and recommendations for regional and central governments are prepared. Despite the fact that the project comes to the end, the network will continue its activities and will implement new projects. It becomes even more important now, when the new EU member states prepare to join the Schengen Area", - Šarūnas Radvilavičius, the project coordinator comments the results.



Strategy for the future of the Baltic Euroregional Network

All good things have the tendency to come to an end too soon. This is also the case with the BEN project, which has lasted for three years. In the course of the project the network participants have become well acquainted with each other, have made useful contacts and received valuable information during a great number of seminars. Thus, there is a wish and need to keep the contacts alive and also continue cooperation in the years to come.

In April 2006, a strategy working group was convened to think about the ways of continuation and the future perspectives for the network. Therefore a questionnaire was carried out among the BEN partners to find out the most crucial issues for Euroregions or cross-border cooperation (CBC) structures and to receive ideas for addressing the problems. Based on the questionnaire and meetings with a partner a document has been completed which discusses the main challenges for CBC structures in the future. Following the discussion, a model for the future network is presented in the strategy as well as ways of how the BEN will address future challenges.

BEN partners have expressed the opinion that they would like to see the BEN as an informal network, which is partly coordinated and financed by one of or both regional organizations in the Baltic Sea Region – the Nordic Council of Ministers (NCM) and the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS). Close cooperation and coordination could additionally be developed with the Association of European Border Regions (AEBR) where not all the BEN partners are members. An advantage of this model for net-working is that it would create the contact point where information can be sent to, and from where it can be distributed to all members of the BEN network. Certain elements of the network will be continued by some of the project partners: e.g. Peipsi Center for Transboundary Cooperation (Estonia) will maintain the BEN E-Library, organize CBC summer schools and issue CBC news.

The continuity of the network will also be guaranteed by emergence of new projects among the partners of the network. Already a new environmental project has been approved which is a result of cooperation between two CBC structures, which met under the BEN project: NGO "Lake Chudskoe Project, Pskov" and Euroregion "Country of Lakes" (Latvian office).

Two other BEN partners – Zemgale Planning Region (Latvia) and the Association of Municipalities of the Republic of Karelia (Russia) are in the phase of discussions on possible cooperation in the field of science and innovation.

As part of the strategy the members of BEN network have agreed to address the CBSS and the NCM with a proposal to establish the position of network coordinator responsible for match-making, linkage, and updating information tools. The partners of the network are encouraged to have a contact person in their organization responsible for the BEN.

The network is not meant only for the present partners of the BEN project but it will remain an open consortium for other Euroregions and organizations to take part in, if they wish.

*By: Katri-Liis Lepik, Helsinki-Tallinn Euregio,
chair of the strategy working group*

Cross Border BENefits

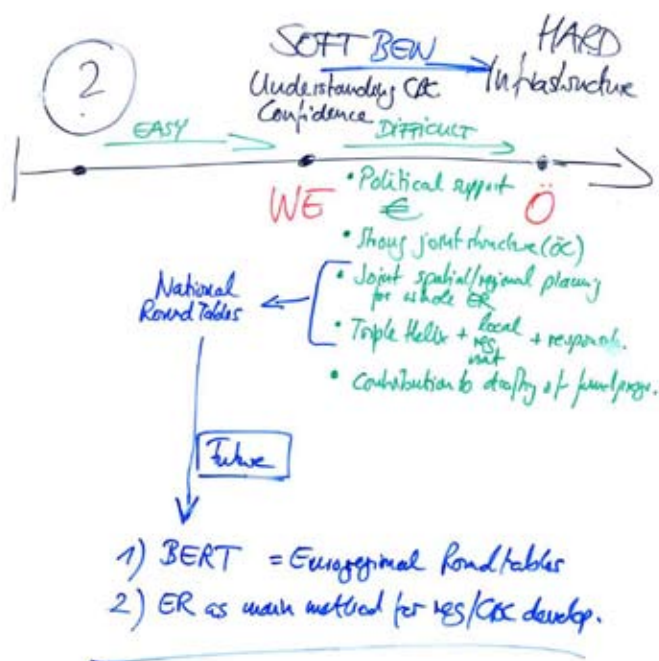
BEN publication: *For the BENefit of Cross-Border Cooperation in the Baltic Sea Region*

A border can represent a line, a division, a separation. However, a border can also represent a meeting point, a connection, and an opportunity. This is how the EU Commissioner for Regional Policy, Prof. Danuta Hübner envisages the nexus of cross border cooperation; an opportunity. With the culmination of the Baltic Euroregional Network in the form we have come accustomed to know it and with the experiences shared at the Final Conference in Jelgava, Latvia - as a network we hope to meet the new frameworks provided in 2008 with open arms.

In connection to the future, BEN is pleased to announce and introduce its new publication *For the BENefit of Cross-Border Cooperation in the Baltic Sea Region* edited by Ms. Eglė Dorelaitė, Mr. Anthony Jay and Mr Šarūnas Radvilavičius. The publication represents a broad overview of the network and its partners over the last couple years and draws upon best practices in the format of a handbook. It is an 88 page full colour book with all 35 BEN project partners represented with their own page. The book will be published in both English and Russian (the Russian version will follow shortly) and there are useful chapters outlining the lessons learnt from each of the thematic work packages and activities.

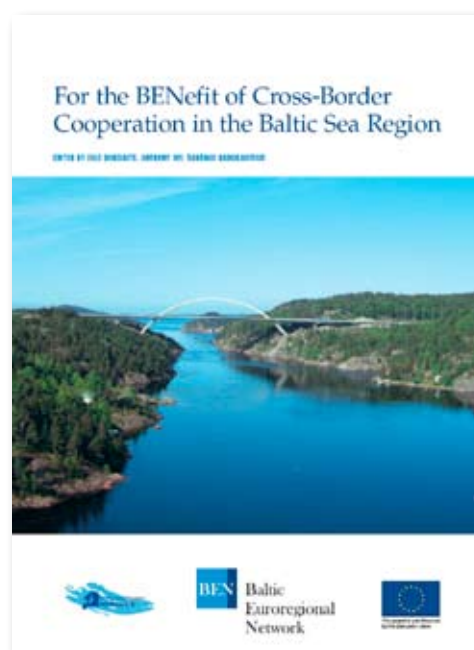
There is also a specially commissioned lead article by the former Secretary General of the Association of European Border Regions (AEBR), Mr. Jens Gabbe, who explains the added value attached to such cross-border activities. He also defines the concept of Euroregions and places networking in a broader perspective.

Ms. Dorelaitė and Mr. Radvilavičius guide us through the intricacies of each of the work packages and provide insights into what can be achieved from such cooperation.



as possible and see it as something tangible that we hope the project partners are proud to distribute. BEN as a project is complex – it has 35 partners from 9 countries, different languages, different histories, different understandings of those histories and different institutional capacities. What we wanted to accomplish was a *package* that brings this complexity into some kind of understanding, some kind of whole. The printed copies of the book will be made available upon request to all partners through the NCM office in Lithuania and all partners will be expected to provide further lists for distribution.

By: Anthony Jay



The publication is framed by three high level prefaces; in the main by Prof. Hübner but complemented by the Secretary General of the Nordic Council of Ministers Mr. Halldór Ásgrímsson and the former Chair of the Council of the Baltic Sea States and Latvian Foreign Minister Dr. Artis Pabriks. In these introductions each of them provides their own ideas of what makes cross border cooperation special and necessary. As editors we would like to see the book utilised in ways, which raise the visibility of the project and provide the necessary knowledge to build a platform for further integration, project development and dialogue. We have tried to make the publication as accessible and attractive

REGION IN FOCUS

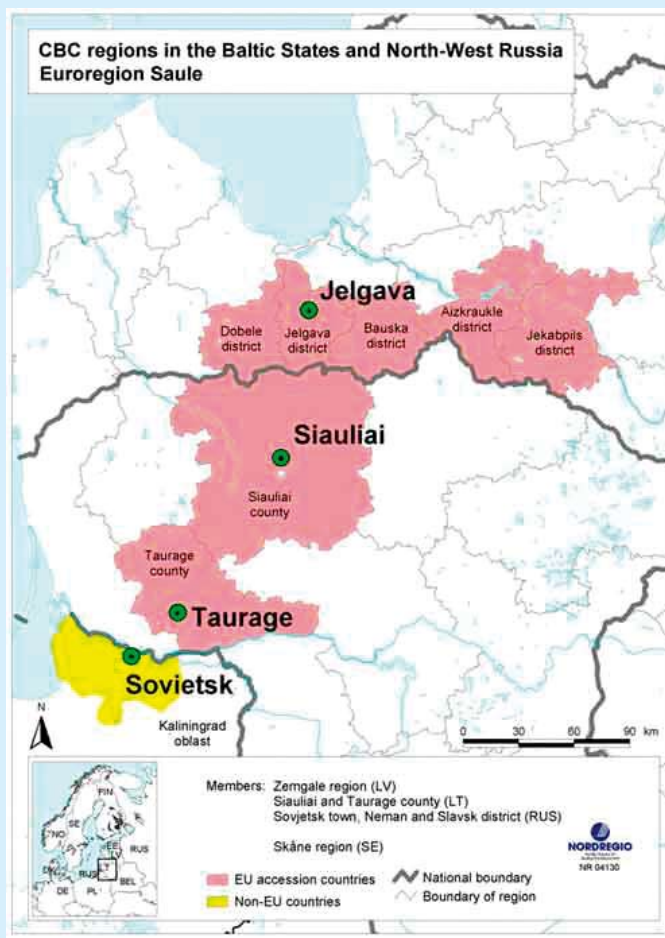
EUROREGION “SAULE”

The Euroregion “Saule” was established on 2 July 1999 in Šiauliai in the Republic of Lithuania. Its incorporators were state institutions from Lithuania, Latvia, Russia and Sweden. In 2003, the planning region of Zemgale from Latvia, and Taurage County Pagegiai District Board from Lithuania, joined the Euroregion.

The territory of the Euroregion, “Saule”, covers 25 000 km². About 900 000 people live there. Approximately 45% of them reside in rural localities, and the rest – in towns and cities. The biggest population is in the Lithuanian part of the Euroregion - about 57% and Latvian part about 32.6%. In the territory of Kaliningrad region there lives around 10.4% of residents of the whole Euroregion.

In 2006, Mrs. Inta Savicka, the chairwoman of Jelgava District Board (Latvia), was elected as the president of the Euroregion “Saule”. Henceforth, the functions of the general secretariat were transferred to Latvia, to Jelgava District Board.

The Euroregion “Saule” was one of the first to prepare its strategy. The Euroregion participates actively in project activities. For example, some later and most important projects are: “Development of the Baltic Tourist Network in the Via Hanzeatica Development zone” (INTERREG IIIB), “RAIL BALTICA – Transitional Integration through Coordinated Infrastructure and Regional Development” (INTERREG IIIB), Development of biking routes in the territory of the Euroregion “Saule” (PHARE CBC) etc.





In 2007, the bureau of the Euroregion "Saule", together with its partners, implemented the project "Regional Marketing of the Euroregion "Saule". During implementation of this project, the marketing programme was created. The marketing programme distinguished, not only the advantages and the disadvantages of the Euroregion "Saule", but possible trends of activities are also forecasted: to consolidate organisational activities, formation of image, organisation of events, infrastructure marketing, advertising and communication and etc.

The Euroregion "Saule" is ready to implement the most ambitious plans striving for social-economic development of the cross-border development. The rate of future works is determined by the vision of the Euroregion.

Vision:

The Euroregion "Saule" shall be a harmoniously developed territory near the Baltic Sea, where the welfare of people, qualitative life environment and competitive industry prosper. The region is characterised by huge intellectual potential, unique cultural heritage, active interstate cooperation and wide range of communication selection.

Interview with President of Euroregion "Saule", Chairwoman of Jelgava District Council (Latvia), Inta SAVICKA

Why Euroregion Saule was established and how it has promoted development of the region?

Europe is characterized not only by its diverse, often shared culture and history, but also by its many borders. Different policies on each side of the border, especially concerning law, administration, economics, social affairs, supported transformation from state borders into actually noticeable barriers between states. The cooperation objective for border and cross-border regions is to create cooperation structures, procedures and instruments that would contribute



to diminishing any barriers or dividing factors. Also Euroregion "Saule" was established for that reason. To describe the development of territory we can stress that during the recent years number of inhabitants has increased in several authorities and amount of investments is increasing gradually.

Since setting up the Euroregion "Saule", local and regional authorities of Euroregion have collected valuable experience in developing and accomplishing several significant projects regarding:

- elimination of risk factors in cross – border cooperation, solving problems related to catastrophe medicine ("Consideration of Risk Factors of Jelgava Region and Siauliai Region", PHARE; "Cross-border initiative for creation of emergency management system of disasters in neighboring regions of Latvia and Lithuania", INTERREG),
- female employment ("Trainings of Women in Entrepreneurship", Phare, 2001),
- carrying out studies of further development opportunities of the international highway Via Hanseatica ("Historical studies and analysis of further development possibilities of the highway Via Hanseatica", Phare Credo),
- elaboration of the development strategy ("Development of Strategy for the Euroregion Saule", Phare, 2001) and marketing program as well as the image creation of the Euroregion "Saule" ("Regional marketing for Euroregion Saule", Interreg).

What are the main problem areas in you Euroregion?

Regarding the main problem areas of Euroregion "Saule" there can be mentioned: disparities between regions, underdeveloped cooperation in some sectors

(for example, entrepreneurship, tourism). One of the factors hindering the elaboration of common projects for the whole region is the specific shape of Euroregion`s territory, which is divided into two parts when talking about the territorial cooperation programs, since only the Zemgale planning region and the Siaulai region belong to the Latvian – Lithuanian cooperation program. Activities in the Euroregion are conditionally divided between Jelgava and Siauliai, Taurage and Kaliningrad.

Cooperation with Euroregion "Saule" members from Kaliningrad oblast is still slightly difficult, but the situation has started to improve since the opening of a Consular section's chancery in Kaliningrad.

How did you benefit in participating in BEN project, what are your follow-up plans (projects) after termination of BEN?

We consider BEN project as a platform of cooperation, networking and dialogue covering all the represented levels – local and regional authorities, NGOs, Euroregions and other CBC structures, state authorities. Share of experience and best practices can be mentioned as one of main benefits from this project. The sustainability and development of this network is our hope and wish.

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Project summary

BEN project activities

Work Package 1: Thematic exchange of knowledge and experience

Objective: To increase and to deepen the institutional capacity of Euroregions through exchange of best practices in CBC issues.

Work Package 2: Targeted capacity building for specific regions

Objective: To increase the knowledge and capacity in specific Euroregions on issues arising directly from specific needs.

Work Package 3: Strengthening the dialogue between Euroregions and central authorities

Objective: To increase the dialogue between the participating Euroregions and their central authorities for the development of the border areas.

Work Package 4: Network durability tools

Objective: To ensure the smooth flow of activities in WPs 1-3 during the project, and to guarantee the continuity of the network after the project.

Results and outputs

The project is expected to result in a strong network of Euroregions actively engaged in spatial development within the BSR, with increased and deepened institutional capacity and strategic planning capabilities. In addition, the project expected results and outputs include the following:

- An increased and deepened dialogue between the Euroregions and the central authorities in their countries;
- Experience gained in cooperation between Nordic and Baltic countries to be transferred on to the Russian and Belarusian sides of the participating Euroregions;
- A strategy for further cooperation within BEN network will be developed;
- More than 500 representatives of members of Euroregions participating in the activities;
- More than 30 seminars, conferences, meetings or roundtables;
- A permanent website for the project;
- Electronic library of CBC publications;
- Best-practice handbook in English and Russian;
- Info-sheet and 6 newsletters;
- Recommendations for increasing of role of euro-regions in the spatial development process in the BSR.

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