

COMEBACK TO EUROPE'S TOP

A SINCERE DIALOGUE WITH BALTIC DEVELOPMENT FORUM DIRECTOR HANS BRASK

Early last summer, the Latvian capital hosted the summit of the Baltic Development Forum, the largest annual rendezvous of government officials, politicians, business people, public figures and scientists from all the Baltic region countries, including Russia.

Since its establishment in 1998, the summits of the Copenhagen-headquartered forum have been a platform for "brainstorms" to supply new ideas for successful development of the Baltic countries. After the recent summit, BDF director Hans Brask answered the Amber Bridge questions concerning Baltic states' interaction and prospects for strengthening their cooperation with Russia. In this interview, the Danish diplomat defined the BDF role in the region, shared interesting views on regional specifics and mentality of its residents and expressed confidence that the member-states, including Russia, would continue to develop their fruitful ties.

What are the results of the 15th BDF summit in Riga?

First of all, the 15th BDF summit showed that Latvia and the Baltic states had returned to Europe's top as they had achieved high economic growth rates. Speaking at the forum, the prime ministers of all the three Baltic states underlined the positive results of their programs that envisioned austerity policies and structural

reforms. It enabled Latvia to meet the targets for joining the euro zone from June 1, 2014, while Lithuania took over the rotating presidency of the Council of the European Union for the next six months.

The Riga summit identified a new positive phase of Baltic states development. After a severe economic and financial crisis, their economies developed at impressive rates, with Latvia showing robust economic growth too. The Baltic states are viewed as a role model in overcoming the crisis and making the region more attractive.

Cautious optimism is the main signal of the Riga summit. It is cautious because the recovery has been slow, and the overall economic situation remains fragile. Nevertheless, public finance in the Baltic states is quite stable: they do not have huge debts and although the unemployment rate has increased, it is still lower than in other European countries.

The key priority on the agenda is to enhance the region's competitiveness. A flagship innovative project would help it keep its high international reputation in this field. The forum outlined the measures to strengthen the countries' leading positions in information technologies and digital economy. Forum participants also pointed out that the development of maritime economy – "blue growth" – was a token of the Baltic Sea region's prosperity.

The Riga summit called for intensive development of neighborly relations with Russia which showed reciprocal bid during the Russian presidency of the Council of Baltic Sea States / CBSS/. Northern Dimension, as a form of interac-

tion, offers untapped opportunities in this area. At the upcoming BDF forum in Turku, Finland, the regional partners will consider including Russia in the Baltic value chain to boost the overall competitiveness of the region. The external dimension of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea region should be strengthened.

Could you tell about the history of the establishment of the Baltic Development Forum /BDF/, the results of its work up to date and its prospects? What are its promising projects and upcoming events?

Over the past 15 years, the Baltic Development Forum has become a well-known platform for high-level fruitful debates over the economic and political development of regional states.

The Baltic Sea region, a zone of tensions and conflicts for the past five decades, has walked a long way. It has come to play a noticeable role because after the end of the "Cold War" many government officials and public figures began to vigorously help resolving Baltic region problems and use the opportunities opening before it.

At present, the BDF which succeeded in bringing together numerous participants and various organizations continues to set forth new objectives for further integration. We managed to establish particularly close ties with the key industrial sectors of the region and business people.

A number of Baltic countries would like to host BDF summits: perhaps, this is our main achievement. Our meetings have won universal acknowledgement for their level, substance and quality. Many participants regard themselves part of our forum, which is very important.

Immediately after the Riga summit, Kaliningrad played host to the 18th session of the

Council of the Baltic Sea States /CBSS/, at which the BDF held a seminar on energy efficiency. On October 3, the Helsinki Commission /Baltic Marine Environment Protection Commission/ will

have a ministerial session in Copenhagen to discuss the pressing problems of Baltic Sea environment, and "green" and "blue" economic growth issues. The annual forum of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea region will take place in Vilnius in November. In June 2014, Turku / Finland/ will host the next BDF forum,



Baltic Development Forum
sustainable growth · innovation · competitiveness

probably the largest regional event.

The Baltic Sea region is one of the most successful in the European Union. If it owes it to regional specifics, precisely what are these specifics? What are the vectors for further development of this success: the optimal forms of cooperation, investment in infrastructure and "green growth"?

Indeed, the Baltic region has turned into one of the most prosperous regions of Europe in a short period. The answer to why it happened is certainly a complex one, but it's obvious that we should turn to the history of the region and its member-states.

In the first place, there was ubiquitous will to eliminate the injustice committed during and after World War II. As I mentioned, cooperation in the Baltic Sea region involves an impressive number of people. In other parts of Europe, politicians and governments find it very difficult to mobilize people for active efforts in establishing

crossborder ties to overcome the dismal heritage of the past.

The Baltic region practices an approach to problems from the particular to the general. To an outsider, it might seem confused and chaotic, yet it is the key to successful regional development. It will collapse if you are too rational or systemic. Incidentally, Germany's recent presidency of the Council of the Baltic Sea States began with a bid to rationalize this cooperation. It is a typically German way epitomized in the set phrase "Ordnung muss sein" which translates as "there must be order." We all could look up at Germany to emulate its efficiency. But the lesson of the German presidency is that Baltic cooperation functions effectively without government control. I believe it an important contribution by northern Europe to the multi-party regional cooperation concept.

Pragmatism is also part of the "northern contribution": we cooperate only in the areas where this cooperation makes sense and yields good results. For example, "green growth" cooperation is reasonable because the Baltic Sea is one of the most polluted in the world. "Green growth" interaction in energy and ecology is important, too, as climate changes are another major international challenge.

Lastly, the Baltic region is home to both developed and developing countries which are gradually getting stronger. It includes small and very large states, such as Russia, Germany and Poland. For all of us, they are large sales markets. The developed but small economies need effective and quick ties with large markets, which



means they need infrastructure. There is much diversity in the Baltic Sea region and this diversity explains its remarkable complexity.

How does the BDF interact with other regional bodies and projects, such as the CBSS, BEAC, and the Northern Dimension? What do you think about the regional international foundations and do you support these relations?

The Council of Baltic Sea States, the Barents Euro-Arctic Council and the Northern Dimension are the key formal bodies in the region. They focus us on the future and protect from unnecessary parallelism. We seek close cooperation with the CBSS, maintaining a very good dialogue with the Stockholm-based secretariat of the organization. Together with the Finnish foreign minister, the BDF aims to closely interact with the Northern Dimension. Our forum is the leading partner in developing the energy project in Kaliningrad which is a party to environmental protection partnership within the scope of the Northern Dimension. We have many

close friends in this Russian city. We also actively work with many international foundations. Regrettably, they are few in Russia, and we would be happy to establish and base such ties on common objectives and interests.

The BDF operates within the framework of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea region, which excludes Russia. How does the BDF arrange cooperation with Russia and what do you think of it? Does this cooperation involve the whole Russia or just its northwestern region?

Drawing the document on the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea region is a most significant regional event in many years. I believe that even our Russian friends acknowledge that its implementation intensified cooperation significantly. Nobody wants to make Russia an outsider in regional interaction: it would be a stupid thing to



do. The BDF is making constant efforts towards close regional integration with Russia, especially with the partners in Russia's northwest. The forum participates in a majority of regional conferences. Recently, we attended one such conference in Pskov which deserves far more attention within the scope of Baltic cooperation. We believe it is a very positive factor that Russian authorities developed the Strategy of Socio-Economic Development of the Northwestern Federal District until 2020, which interfaces well with the European document. It is just one of the examples of how our interests and needs could be brought closer. The BDF has a positive opinion of Finland's plans to give priority to cooperation with Russia during its upcoming CBSS presidency. Our forum will work together with Finnish friends towards new progress in cooperation with Russia, Russian business and regional organizations.

During the recent ceremony to launch the newsWave website, it was mentioned that developing regional Baltic identity would be one of its objectives. Recently, researchers announced genetic affinity between the peoples of northern Europe, including Russians. Could you elaborate on the idea of Baltic identity and self-awareness?

The key objective of the newsWave website is to promote information exchange and crossborder communication between countries of the region, especially between the countries which are part of the Baltic macro-region of the European Union. Information and communication are crucial in the efforts to shape a distinctive regional identity. At a recent meeting in Berlin, workers of culture underlined that information and news exchange was an important factor in strengthening and promoting the Baltic identity concept. The number of "clicks"

on our website and posts from newspaper and magazine publishers in Baltic region countries clearly shows that the stories about "everyday life" and "things they talk about in town" are precisely what people want from us.

Until recently, the Baltic Sea region had no independent mass media outlet for dedicated coverage. Our website is the first such regional platform for communication and news exchange. The website daily reports on the pressing Baltic topics, e-mailing them or distributing through Facebook and Twitter to the interested mass media in the region. Some might call this initiative idealistic or pilot, while others note that it is only through constant testing of new forms of integration that we can get closer to the goal. Hence we constantly seek new sources and means of communication. The Russia-based Amber Bridge foundation which makes a useful contribution to crossborder communication in the Baltic Sea region could be one of our partners.

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