

XII BS NGO FORUM

“NGOs Creating an Active and Innovative Civil Society”

2 - 3 June, 2014 in Turku, Finland

Final Statement

The XII BS NGO Forum took place on 2.-3.6.2014. It was organized for the second time in Turku, Finland, within the framework of the Finnish presidency of the Council of Baltic Sea States. 220 participants from CBSS countries attended the event.

The Forum offered a unique opportunity for a wider cross-sectoral dialogue as it brought together representatives of non-governmental organizations, politicians, decision-makers and academia to improve cooperation in the Baltic Sea region by raising the voice of the NGO community on cooperation on the people-to-people level in the region, and by putting every common effort into collaboration on issues of vital importance.

The main topic of the XII BS NGO Forum in Finland was “NGOs Creating an Active and Innovative Civil Society”. Forum participants discussed the importance of inclusion and the extension of the possibilities for NGOs to influence and participate in decision-making in the countries around the Baltic Sea. NGOs are effective actors in developing and strengthening modern societies and their participation in the decision-making process aims at building up and strengthening democratic processes in the Baltic Sea Region making it, thus, highly important.

The Forum’s agenda included **working sessions** on the following themes: Saving the Baltic Sea, Diverse society: Young immigrants’ experience as to obstacles in relation to inclusion, Bringing out the voice of youth, People as the makers of democracy in the Baltic Sea Region, People with special needs and a Roundtable on youth cooperation in the Baltic Sea Region. During the Forum, a Networking Village and several discussion groups during open sessions were also organized.

Plenary meetings during the Forum focused on: NGOs Creating an Active and Innovative Civil Society, EU – Russia regional cooperation, Funding Baltic Sea NGO cooperation, and EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region and Horizontal Action Involvement.

Open discussions on the challenges for the development of a civil society in the countries of the Baltic Sea Region resulted in the following joint outcomes, proposals and recommendations:

The Baltic Sea NGO Forum urges that politicians and governments in the Baltic Sea Countries give a much higher priority to cooperation in the region on all levels, including

people-to-people. The Baltic Sea Region should be a region of peaceful cooperation. The relations between Russia and its western neighbours should not, under the current situation in Ukraine, hamper the relations between civil society organizations in our region. People-to-people relations could become a means for finding democratic and legal solutions to many issues in the region, as they form an area for open debate to prevent conflicts. Despite any tensions at the political level, we are citizens of neighbouring countries and strive to maintain stability and development through dialogue and international cooperation.

Permanent interaction on the people-to-people level plays an important role by making a significant contribution to the stability and favourable social climate in the region, by diminishing the risk of conflict, and by decreasing tensions through promoting traditions of good neighbourhood, mutual trust and tolerance. It is crucial that both civil society organizations and governments work together in supporting and strengthening public diplomacy within regional cooperation.

The Baltic Sea States should recognize and strengthen the role of cooperation on the level of civil society organizations as an important and essential part of the Baltic Sea region's transnational cooperation, as it provides a vast potential for creating a favourable social climate, providing stability and good neighbourhood. It is necessary for the Baltic Sea Council member states to acknowledge a special status for cross and trans-border regional cooperation between NGOs.

The Baltic Sea States should provide overall political and financial support for the international activities of civil society organizations in the Baltic Sea region, as well as to create appropriate financial instruments for NGOs to realize concrete projects within the people-to-people priority area of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region and the Russian Strategy of Social and Economic Development of the North-West Federal District 2020.

The Forum stated that tolerance is a prerequisite for cultural and religious diversity, appreciation and understanding between people of different ethnic origins and acceptance of sexual and gender minorities' rights. Tolerance means the right to practice a minority identity in a majority culture and the freedom to share views and beliefs in society. Respect for all human rights and freedom of speech, assembly and association are guaranteed by the international agreements of the United Nations, the Council of Europe and OSCE; these agreements are binding for all the Baltic Sea States. The Baltic Sea NGO Forum expresses its support to all civil society organizations and advocates who defend human rights and tolerance in the Baltic Sea Region and beyond. We also call on a common effort on enhancing tolerance in the region and counteracting radical and extremist trends. We should strive to find new and effective solutions to make our region a safer and comfortable place for all its citizens.

The Baltic Sea NGO Forum calls for incorporation of civil society and NGOs in official actions aiming at efforts against human trafficking of labour in the Baltic Sea countries.

We call upon all Baltic Sea States to secure respect for democratic rule and democratic development in all Baltic Sea countries that allows contributions from free, independent organisations and a free cross-border cooperation between NGOs around the Baltic Sea. We want the Baltic Sea to be a region of sustainable environmental development, mutual trust and democracy.

The participants expressed the gratitude to the Finnish chairmanship and organizers of the BS NGO Forum and became welcomed by Estonian representatives to the next BS NGO Forum held in Estonia next year.