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Baltic Institute for Regional and European Concern

14th Baltic Sea NGO Network Forum

“Solidarity as a new dimension in Baltic Sea regional cooperation”

10-11/06/2016 Gdansk, Poland

Final Statement

The 14th Baltic Sea NGO Forum took place from 10-11/06/2016 in Gdansk at the European Solidarity Centre. This was the 2nd time the forum was organised in Poland. Gdansk was at the forefront of the development and establishment of an open, democratic society with free elections in Central and Eastern Europe, and acted as the cradle for Baltic Sea cooperation between NGOs. Solidarność, in a broader sense – solidarity – is still a word with great resonance in the Baltic Sea region, the promise of peaceful co-operation between peoples, cross-border contacts and an example of citizen activity, which has continued to appeal to civil society organizations to ensure democratic development.

The Gdansk Forum brought together over 120 representatives of civil society organisations (CSO), the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS), Union of the Baltic Cities and other public authorities and officials from all eleven Baltic Sea countries. The Forum offered a unique opportunity for a wider cross-sector and cross-border dialogue.

The general theme of the 14th Baltic Sea NGO Forum was “Solidarity as a new dimension in the Baltic Sea regional cooperation”.

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Forum participants discussed the importance of wider and deeper inclusion to ensure possibilities for CSOs to influence and engage in decision-making processes in all countries around the Baltic Sea. Its aim was to strengthen the democratic processes in the BSR.

Participants of the 14th Baltic Sea Forum worked in different forms: plenary sessions, panel discussions and workshops regarding the following thematic sessions:

1. Culture and social innovation
2. Civic sector and social problems – self-independent youth
3. Migration processes in Europe

The discussions on “BSR youth social entrepreneurship development” and “The role of the Baltic Sea regional cooperation in the current political context” took place during the workshops and round table during the 2nd day of the Forum.

All workshops resulted in conclusions with accompanying recommendations, which form an integral part of the Final Statement of the 14th BS NGO Forum.

The work of the Forum was focused on the long-term priorities of the CBSS and of the Polish Presidency of CBSS 2015–2016, and on discussions on the implementation of the European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR) and Action Plan.

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 and recommendations:

- The 14th Baltic Sea NGO Forum highlighted the importance of **solidarity among civil society actors**, which we understand as the dynamic, collective process of taking active responsibility for our inter-relationships on a national, Baltic and global level.

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- The Forum participants urge politicians and governments in the Baltic Sea countries to give a much higher priority to cooperation of civil society and people-to-people exchanges in the region at all levels. Our common home should be a region of peaceful cooperation. Despite tensions on a political level, we are all citizens of neighbouring countries and should strive to maintain stability and development through dialogue and international cooperation. Not only politically, but also socially there is a need for greater attention and to improve the social environment for the entire population. Democracy rests on social justice and equal opportunities for all, an approach to be further developed in the Baltic Sea region. **People-to-people contacts** can contribute to achieving this goal.
- People-to-people level cooperation should be an effective instrument for preventing negative tendencies like: nationalism, aggression and propaganda wars. These must be replaced by a political dialogue on the basis of international conventions, respect for human rights and international law and liberal democracy.
- A strong civil society strategy in BSR should constitute an important contribution to a revitalized Baltic Sea policy towards the fight against authoritarianism in social development.
- Our aim is that this Civil Society Strategy should strengthen democracy; by supporting public activities and initiatives; promoting civil dialogue and respect for human rights throughout the Baltic Sea region; enhancing openness and transparency and anti-corruption; strengthening the conditions for participating in the political pluralistic democracy through a free and open public debate and strengthening democratic engagement among citizens.
- The Baltic Sea NGO Forum stated that tolerance is a prerequisite for cultural and religious diversity, appreciation and understanding between peoples of different ethnic origins and for acceptance of sexual and gender minorities' rights. We should strive to find new and effective solutions to make our region a safer and comfortable place for all its citizens.

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- The development of civil society should be stated as a key priority in the official documents of CBSS and each member state. We welcome all concrete steps toward putting these changes into practice. The interaction and synergy between BS NGO Network and other cooperation platforms existing in the region: EUSBSR, ND partnerships, CBSS, BSPC, NCM, UBC and others, dealing with people-to-people level collaboration should be strengthened, by finding the appropriate mechanism for such interaction on a permanent basis.

The Baltic Sea NGO Forum calls upon all States to secure respect for democratic rule and democratic development in all Baltic Sea countries. We want the Baltic Sea to be a region of sustainable development, mutual trust and democracy. CSOs and grassroots actors have huge potential and a large amounts of knowledge and experience and the best practices for the development of civil society around the BSR. The 14th Baltic Sea NGO Forum was one of the places to exchange and use these valuable resources.

The participants expressed their gratitude to the Polish presidency and to the organisers of the 14th Baltic Sea NGO Forum. The participants were welcomed by Icelandic representatives to the next, 15th Baltic Sea NGO Forum to be held in Iceland in 2017.

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