

Nordic Baltic cooperation helps our economies to recover from Covid-19

Cooperation between the Nordic and Baltic countries is important for all of the participating countries. Last year we celebrated the 30th anniversary of our NB8 partnership.

A few years ago, the Nordic Council of Ministers did a survey on the views of the citizens in Baltic States on cooperation with the Nordic countries.

When evaluating the most important base for cooperation with the Nordic countries, the majority of the respondents replied that small countries have a need to cooperate with one another. The geographical proximity was named important for the cooperation, but also sharing the same values and having cultural similarities. The most important sectors for cooperation with the Nordic countries in the survey were economy, education and science, tourism, culture, innovation and new technologies. The respondents believed that the benefits of the cooperation were clear: the possibility to learn from each other, to increase trade and competitiveness and to move around for studies and work were highlighted.

Starting on January 1 and lasting the whole year, Finland has assumed the chairmanship of the Nordic-Baltic cooperation, succeeding Estonia on whose good work in 2020 we look forward to building upon. Finland will also be chairing the Nordic Council of Ministers (NCM) and the Nordic foreign and security policy cooperation (N5). Finland's aim is to seek synergies between the different agendas and avoid overlapping.

Recovery of the economies and alleviation of the negative shock due to the pandemic is a crosscutting theme of the Finnish NB8 program. We will touch upon the theme via **digitalization, innovation and climate policies.**

The cooperation between the NB8 countries has been close, efficient and timely at all levels throughout the difficult COVID-19 crisis. This has included regular exchange of COVID-19 - related information on e.g. epidemiological situations and travel restrictions. We look forward to continuing these regular exchanges.

Surviving the ongoing pandemic, possible future shocks - whether they are man-made or natural - and getting our economies rapidly back on track will require even deeper cooperation in our region. Benefiting from our geographical proximity and the deep links with each other could make supply chains both shorter and more reliable, and our economies would greatly benefit from these Nordic-Baltic industry clusters.

Health security and health technology are very important sectors of cooperation for NB8 countries. Processing health data digitally and securely is an area where we can develop our

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region as one of the best in the world. Finland will be keen to share our best practices and learn from others.

We are already planning to increase the flexibility and mobility of everyday life between the Nordic and Baltic countries through digitalization by exploring common solutions such as electronic prescriptions and patient records.

Health technology is a field that will grow rapidly in the future and this growth will create more jobs. As with technology sector in general, it suffers from a shortage of skilled workers. This is most pronounced in finding highly skilled programmers, which I believe is a challenge for all of our countries. We should work together to tackle this obstacle by creating high quality information technology education and further strengthen our universities' cooperation.

Other excellent areas of cooperation in recovering from the COVID-19 crisis and achieving climate goals are **innovations that both make our industrial production more efficient and help developing solutions to tackle the ongoing climate and environmental crisis**. Finland has extensive expertise in developing sustainable and green solutions for energy, agriculture, forestry and transport, which we are happy to share in our NB region.

The Finnish government has just drawn up a new **strategic program for circular economy**, which aims to improve wellbeing while reducing the consumption of natural resources. At the core of this economic model are the reuse and reproduction of goods, digitalization and services. New solutions and businesses are to be supported by a tax reform that encourages sustainability at all levels.

Digitalization is an integral part of the circular economy. Without data, material flows cannot circulate efficiently and safely, and it is hard for this new paradigm to succeed. Here too, new skills are needed. This calls for a reform of the education system and working life skills. For example, the program suggests that the circular economy as a new basis for the economic system should be included in the curricula of different schooling levels.

The public sector needs to design and procure low-carbon circular economy solutions for construction, mobility, and energy and infrastructure projects. Partnering with the private sector will be vital here. We believe that the cooperation between the NB8 countries would greatly benefit from the development of circular economy through sharing of our different expertise. It would be another concrete example of our close cooperation while at the same time benefiting both our economies and climate.