

**Forum of Adriatic and Ionian Cities & Towns VIII General Assembly, Koper, Slovenia,
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“Union of the Baltic Cities (UBC) – Aims & Activities”

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HISTORY

For more than 40 years the Baltic Sea Region was a place where the democratic West and soviet East adjoined creating a line which divided the region into two extremely different worlds. After the iron curtain collapsed, those contrasting worlds had to face the clash of cultures, economies and mentalities. The cooperation and exchange of experience and practices were the best ways to diminish existing gaps. Many organisations at intergovernmental level, as well as at regional and local one were established in the BSR in the beginning of 90s. Bearing in mind the traditional links binding the Baltic cities in terms of trade, culture and tourism, 32 cities from 10 Baltic countries decided to create the Union of the Baltic Cities. The founding conference was organised in Gdańsk, Poland in 1991. Since the beginning the number of member cities has more tripled.

STRUCTURE

UBC is a highly decentralized network of cities and provides numerous platforms for meetings between politicians, officials and specialists from cities of all sizes from all 10 countries. The highest level of UBC is the bi-annual **General Conference** which is an important occasion for city leaders to meet and discuss. Between the General Conferences, the political work is carried out through the **Executive Board**, consisting of one city from each BSR country. The current Executive Board approved by the VIII General Conference in Turku consists of: Gdańsk (Poland), Kaliningrad (Russia), Kaunas (Lithuania), Kristiansand (Norway), Liepaja (Latvia), Naestved (Denmark), Parnu (Estonia), Rostock (Germany), Stockholm (Sweden) and Vaasa (Finland). The Board convenes about three times each year. The **UBC President** and the **UBC Presidium**, with three vice-presidents, are the executive organs of UBC. UBC structure is co-ordinated by the **UBC Secretariat**, located in Gdańsk since the beginning.

Most of the practical co-operation between the members is carried out by **11 UBC Commissions**: Urban Planning, Business Cooperation, Environment, Tourism, Transportation, Culture, Health and Social Affairs, Sport, Information Society, Youth Issues and Gender Equality Network. They work very differently and independently, and the main link between them is the UBC Cities network itself. They initiate and implement numerous projects in their respective fields ranging from music festivals and sports events to concrete projects and training seminars.

A new UBC Commission – on Energy, has been under formation since the 45th Executive Board Meeting in Kaunas in February 2006. This Commission will initially work with such interesting areas like renewable energy (hydro, wind, wave and bio-energy), the possibilities of increasing efficiency and reducing the fumes of carbon dioxide within the transport sector and best practices in the field of energy efficiency & savings and the power supply grid including supply security.

INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

The Union has an observer status with the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS), the Parliamentary Conference on Cooperation in the Baltic Sea Area, the Helsinki Commission (HELCOM) and the Council of Europe's Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe (CLRAE), and the Committee of the Regions. UBC has links of cooperation with the European Commission and numerous Baltic and European organisations including Forum of Adriatic & Ionian Cities.

MISSION AND GOALS

If I had to use just one sentence to describe the mission of UBC, I would say that the Union acts and works as one voice of 100 being a forum for exchanging experience, executing joint projects and expressing cities interests, problems and opinions.

But the goals and cooperation area have been evolving and extending quickly to be adapted to the political and economic situation in the region and in Europe.

The primary goal of co-operation was to diminish the barriers and gaps between western and eastern Baltic cities and to contribute to sustainable development of the whole region. Promotion of democracy, human rights and good governance were the main tasks of UBC at first.

The EU enlargement in 2004 caused significant changes in new member states. New financing possibilities for Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland, like EU structural funds, have created a great opportunity to exclude existing barriers and to improve the competitiveness of the Baltic Sea Region as a whole. Also Russian UBC Member cities have been affected by the EU enlargement. Close co-operation with them is especially significant to avoid arising new gaps and dividing lines in the region.

One of the main strategic aims of the UBC is now to transform the political, economic and financial potential that is connected with EU enlargement into reality. European dimension has recently dominated the UBC activities. The Union:

- Expresses opinions / statements on the EU policies concerning the Baltic Sea Region and, if possible, takes part in decision-making processes on the policies and programmes which affect the region and local authorities in particular;
- Carefully follows the development of EU funding programmes for the period 2007-2013 within the new Cohesion Policy; UBC lobbies for introduction of an instrument enabling cross-border cooperation across the maritime borders of the Baltic Sea.
- Supports the creation of the "Lisbon Agenda for the Baltic Sea Region" to improve the competitiveness of the region and therefore to ensure that the objectives of the EU Lisbon Strategy are successfully implemented at the local and regional level;

As it has been already mentioned, the UBC is a platform which enables people to meet, talk, exchange views, opinions and ideas. As a result, many common projects were introduced. The largest on-going projects are the Managing Urban Europe - 25, the BUSTRIP and the SUSTAINMENT, led by the UBC Commission on Environment, which are the most important tool in the implementation of the UBC Agenda 21 Action Programme. At the moment, several projects are running within the programme and the mobilised budget already exceeds 10 MEUR.

ABC - Alliance of Baltic Cities is a project run by the UBC Commission on Urban Planning and supported by BSR Interreg III B with 255.957 EUR. The project has involved 27 cities and engaged city planners and architects working in municipalities. In the project

there were six common seminars with 50 participants, working each five days at every seminar with such issues as: local circumstances in the host city and country, advices on how to solve local city planning problems, discussing specific common planning items such as developed urban management, cities as regional engines, and renewal of city districts.

Other projects include for example good practice exchange and also partnerships beyond the Baltic Sea Region, with Lake Victorian as well as Adriatic and Ionian municipalities.

The UBC and its member cities and other partners contribute core resources for the different projects and basic network activities. Most of the funding, however, comes from different EU funding instruments such as INTERREG programme.

One of the latest UBC political initiatives is ***Joint Statement on European Cohesion Policy***. UBC with other Baltic organisations signed two statements on the new European Cohesion Policy 3rd objective – the European Territorial Cooperation. The statements were sent to European Commission and to the governments of the Baltic Sea countries.

The UBC also takes part in consultations on the Programme for Transnational Cooperation in the Baltic Sea Region for the new programming period which aims at *strengthening competitiveness of the Baltic Sea Region, its territorial cohesion and sustainability of its development by connecting potentials over the administrative borders*.

To be closer the European policies and institutions, the UBC will be soon officially represented in Brussels. On the 1st of October 2006 UBC will open an antenna office in Brussels in order to lobby for our cities interests even more effectively.

Recent months have been full of other political activities of the Union. ***The Maritime Logistics Policy Paper*** was prepared and sent to member cities as well as to the European Commission, organisations and maritime institutions and Baltic states' governments. As the Baltic Sea transport is developing very dynamically, a need to create a policy that would cover the entire scope of maritime logistics in the region has become obvious. The UBC policy concerns i.a. the development of transport and infrastructure, safety and the environment and logistics information technology in the region. It tries to define and highlight the most important areas for development in maritime logistics in the BSR and offers common guidelines for dealing with maritime logistics issues. This document will help UBC to take part in consultations regarding European Union maritime policy.

The need for common actions is also significant when we are facing the global social problems. The UBC Board upon the initiative of the city of Umeå signed ***the Statement against trafficking***. The UBC Statement defines trafficking as a trade of human beings for sexual exploitation closely connected with national prostitution. The trade with women and children is not only an affront to human dignity but also an infringement of international human rights regulations. The document commits the UBC members to undertake all possible efforts to prevent this problem.

Dear Friends: The Cities of the Baltic Sea Region look forward to more exchange and cooperation with you, for the benefit of our citizens living around our beautiful seas.

Thank You for your attention.