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FOCUS SECTION:
COOPERATION IN THE BALTIC SEA REGION

**The Role of International Organizations in Strengthening
Human Rights Performances in the Baltic Sea Region**

By Ineta Ziemele*

A. Introduction

European States have been very active in developing their cooperation within the framework of different regional organizations.¹ Today, all States of the Baltic Sea area are members of at least three of the four following organizations: the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE); the Council of Europe; the Council of Baltic Sea States (CBSS); or the European Union (EU).² The aim of this

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Views in this article are expressed in a strictly personal capacity.

¹ Without prejudice to the work of the other international organizations, this article will focus primarily on European organizations. The use of the term 'regional organization' in this article has to be understood with the necessary flexibility, allowing for forms of an inter-State cooperation which, from a legal point of view, may not qualify as a typical regional organization, such as the OSCE or the EU.

² The Nordic Council has also played an important role outside the Nordic hemisphere and in the Baltic States more specifically, but it will not be dealt with in this article. Similarly, bilateral contacts between the States of the Baltic Sea area will not be addressed. In 1991, the three Baltic States created the Baltic State Council which was a useful tool to pronounce a common position on their independence at that time. It has provided a good framework for parliamentary cooperation and a forum for the three governments to enhance free trade in the region and the other economic cooperation. It is the view of the author that the Baltic State Council could have been developed into a more useful self-help mechanism. This has not taken place partly because cooperation within this forum was in competition with the cooperation in the

article is to look at the different ways and methods in which these organizations operate with respect to their member States while pursuing the aims and principles of the organizations and the whole of Europe. The article will focus on the States of the Baltic Sea region and the Baltic States, in particular, with some references to the neighboring countries.

The challenges faced by the enlargement of these organizations will also be touched upon during this discussion. It could be mentioned, by way of introduction, that the main challenge for these organizations has not been the enlargement in terms of numbers. The main challenge was, and continues to be, the application of their standards and methods of work on societies with very few or perhaps no democratic or human rights traditions.

The other challenges seem to derive from the very fact that Europe itself has such a high density of international organizations. Mr. *Toomas Savi*, Speaker of the Estonian Parliament, at the Conference of the Interparliamentary Union (IPU) has argued that there are too many organizations and that, instead of cooperating, they compete for funds and influence. He also mentioned that some have become obsolete. For small States, the presence in all these forums presents a considerable burden, especially when their work results in one more legally and politically vague declaration.³ Are such opinions justified? What has been the response of international organizations to these concerns which have been expressed by different people on different occasions? It has to be recognized that the many organizations certainly encounter situations of overlap and competition in their daily activities.

It should be noted at the outset that all of these organizations carry out multiple tasks. This article will focus primarily on the role of the organization in strengthening democracy and human rights in the Baltic Sea region. The article cannot give an exhaustive and comprehensive analysis of the work of these organizations in carrying out their tasks even in this field and in meeting the mentioned challenges. It will, however, provide some information and comments which could be useful for further study and discussion on these questions.

A certain chronological order will be maintained in the presentation of the organizations beginning with the OSCE, which was the first organization to invite the Baltic States to join in 1991.

other European forums. For the analysis of the other issues which have prejudiced the cooperation between the Baltic States, see *Hain Rebas*, *Barriers to Baltic cooperation – opportunities for surmounting them*, in: *Tālavš Jundzis* (ed.), *The Baltic States at Historical Crossroads*, 1998, 319 *et. seq.*

³ For a survey of these arguments see *Ole Espersen*, *The Commissioner's Column*, *Mare Balticum*, No. 11, October 2000, 2.

B. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe

Despite the term ‘organization’ in its title,⁴ the OSCE does not constitute an international organization in the classical sense, with a statute, and with the requirement of the statute’s ratification by States upon their becoming members. Nevertheless, when the Baltic States were invited to join the CSCE on 11 September 1991, the heads of the respective States had to sign the 1975 Helsinki Final Act. This signature confirmed their acceptance of the political principles of the OSCE.

The OSCE deals “with a wide range of security issues, including arms control, preventive diplomacy, confidence and security building measures, human rights, election monitoring and economic and environmental security.”⁵ Since 1992 the OSCE has been especially active in strengthening its institutional structures. The creation of the Parliamentary Assembly, the Office for Free Elections, the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights and the High Commissioner on National Minorities are the main examples.⁶ Among the methods of work in the field of strengthening democracy and human rights, the following should be mentioned: the development of principles within the framework of the ‘Human Dimension’; the work of the High Commissioner on National Minorities; and cooperation and assistance within the framework of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights based in Warsaw.

I. The ‘Human Dimension’

The 1990 Document of the Copenhagen Meeting of the Conference on the Human Dimension of the OSCE was one of the most important statements in this context.⁷ For the first time since the work on the development of the human dimension began within the OSCE, it was stated that “the protection and promotion of human rights is one of the basic purposes of government and that their recognition constitutes the foundation of freedom, justice and peace.”⁸ The Copenhagen Document contains a more detailed list of human rights and freedoms than found in previous lists. In particular, it introduces far-reaching commitments with regard to national

⁴ Until the Budapest Summit of 1994, the name of the forum was the Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE).

⁵ General information on the Organization’s work is available at: http://www.osce.org/general/gen_info.htm.

⁶ See the 1992 Charter of Paris for a New Europe, reprinted in: *Göran Melander/Gudmundur Alfredsson* (eds.), *The Raoul Wallenberg Institute Compilation of Human Rights Instruments, 1997*, 221, 231.

⁷ 1990 Document of the Copenhagen Meeting of the Conference on the Human Dimension of the CSCE. *Melander/Alfredsson* (note 6), 205.

⁸ *Id.*, 205.