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**Norway & the EU -
EUSBSR Action Plan enabling neighbourhood
cooperation**

Norway's cooperation within the Baltic Sea Region and the EUSBSR

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Today we find ourselves at the beginning of a kind of a new era. The pandemic has turned our lives upside down and there is a fast growing awareness of a real climate crisis. We agree that covid recovery and climate action must go hand-in-hand.

The EU is showing global leadership in all of this. We appreciate the term “to build back greener and better”. A sound and sustainable future depends on cooperation, sharing best practices, weathering the storm together, but also to use the new opportunities together in a good way.

The Norway - EU relationship is special, comprehensive, but it can be further developed. We intend to cooperate closely in the implementation of the European Green Deal. We have complementary aims with regard to carbon neutrality and green transformation as fast as possible. We are focused on the opportunities and challenges facing us together, EU and Norway as partners, including within the EU's Baltic sea macroregional strategy.

Norway is not a newcomer to the Baltic Sea region. We have been there since the Middle Ages and before. And we have been part of the successful effort to solidify the changes in Europe after 1991. With the EU we share values and a vision of cohesion, integration, stability and peace.

Our interaction in the Baltic sea region has many levels and formats. Norway is an active participant and founding partner in the Nordic Council, Nordic Council of Ministers, Nordic-Baltic framework, the Council of the Baltic Sea States/CBSS, OSCE, NATO, the European Economic Area, the Northern Dimension. EUSBSR and Interreg are also part of the picture.

As seen from a foreign policy angle, the multitude of cooperative frameworks creates challenges, but is also part of a system of redundancy, of crisscrossing contacts which underlines “cooperation and interdependence” as a visible, productive and indispensable fact.

With the new EUSBSR Action Plan new opportunities for a strengthened Norwegian involvement has emerged. We appreciate the aim of mainstreaming neighbourhood

participation in all policy areas and actions, instead of as in the past, mainly within separate horizontal programs.

We'll make sure, and this webinar is part of that effort, to inform and sensitise our Norwegian actors, business, municipal and regional authorities, experts, and central government level. By engaging with the EUSBSR we have an additional opportunity or platform for us to interact with eight EU members states which are our close neighbours, cooperative partners in trade, innovation, green transformation, in international affairs.

The new Action Plan leads us to ask several important questions: What can be the benefit for us (i.e. partners in Norway) – and where and how can we add value to the strategy's work? Which areas/themes would be particularly useful?

The 14 policy areas of the new Action Plan seem to fit us in Norway well. We are not a Baltic Sea littoral state, but we can bring much experience and capacities into the picture, including in such key areas as green shipping, blue economy, climate neutral transport, carbon capture and storage (CCS), renewable energy, everything with the ocean, maritime and marine economy and the environment. These are themes closely linked also to the Green Deal.

We see the EUSBSR as a vehicle to engage the regions, with grassroots cooperation, a bottom-up approach. Initiatives from the field.

EUSBSR's main strength is probably not government-level coordination and cooperation, but releasing the cooperative forces on lower administrative level, civil society, business and expert level, science and education. Interreg ensures that programmes can be financially supported, but it is not enough. We note with interest the process of embedding EUSBSR in larger EU policies and funding programmes.

The EEA and Norway Grants programme financed jointly by Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein, is in many ways complementary to the efforts and intentions of the EUSBSR. The Grants are a tool for working together for a green, competitive and inclusive Europe, and support to the European Green Deal. We bring rather large resources into this program, 2.8 bn EUR in the present financing cycle 2014-21 ending in April 2024, of which almost 40 % for cooperation with Poland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Climate, green transformation, digitalization, competitiveness. Much of this already a matter of successful cooperation with EUSBSR participating countries.

A few words about the Council of the Baltic Sea States: Norway will take over the presidency of the CBSS in July, after Lithuania, for a whole year and then pass the responsibility to Germany in 2022. In 2022 we will also chair the Nordic Council of Ministers, replacing Finland as presidency. Until October this year, Norway is leading the Barents regional cooperation, with Finland next in line.

There are important and active links between EUSBSR and the policies and activities of the CBSS. We will aim at building our CBSS presidency program around the Council's three long-term priority areas, namely fostering regional identity, promoting a safe and secure region, promoting sustainable development and prosperity across the region. It is easy to align all of

this with the Action Plan policy areas, and vice-versa. As in the past, policy areas safe, ship, secure, culture, innovation, energy and others will be central to reaching also the goals of the CBSS.

In other areas, like health or transport, strong links with the Northern Dimension are evident. And this brings me to my last point, namely the broader neighbourhood, including Russia and Belarus.

We know of all the challenges in our relationship with our eastern neighbours. But we think it is a wise decision to declare the EUSBSR (as in the past) open for participation with all the mentioned neighbours, not only Norway and Iceland. By doing so, the EU is not only displaying strategic patience, but also active outreach in engaging Russia and Belarus in areas of importance.

In conclusion, the main objectives of the EUSBSR and the new Action Plan are logical and understandable policy aims also for Norway. The EUSBSR is an important contribution to meeting the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Norway is and will continue to be a partner with the EU in this effort, in the Baltic Sea region and beyond.

We recognise the importance of the Strategy and promise our interest and participation as far as possible in EUSBSR governance, in steering groups and thematic implementation.
