Human rights protection in the Baltic Sea area
The Commissioner of the Council of the Baltic Sea States on Democratic Institutions and Human Rights including the Rights of Persons belonging to Minorities

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Introduction
The area around the Baltic Sea was, as in most parts of Europe, in recent years the scene of profound and rapid socio-political, economic and ideological changes. The entire society in all its aspects as well as governmental structures and policies was developing more uniformly based upon common principles of democratic values, market economy, respect for human rights and the prevalence of cooperation and mutual understanding over ideological strife and confrontation of the past. All international intergovernmental bodies, e.g. the CSCE and NATO were and still are profoundly influenced by these developments. Moreover, these international changes opened the possibility for new initiatives in the field of international cooperation and the development of democratic societies. This article deals with a new and relatively little known intergovernmental institution for the promotion of democratic development and the protection of human rights in one of the geographic regions of Europe — the Baltic Sea area.

Naturally, the profound changes of the last few years cannot proceed without problems and new challenges in all spheres of life. This also includes human rights. This, in turn, calls for additional care and specific instruments to protect the inalienable rights of individuals, and national and ethnic groups bound to be affected by the process of change. That is why, in addition to the universal protection of basic human rights and freedoms, there is a strong necessity to devise and use more specific instruments to safeguard these rights and freedoms in Europe as a whole and in its smaller geographic areas. The Baltic Sea area, with its long history of cooperation and goodneighbourly traditions, intermingling mixtures of cultures and human contacts is an obvious case in this regard.

This article is intended to illuminate briefly the background of the establishment of the Office of the Commissioner of the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS) on Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, Including the Rights of Persons belonging to Minorities. In addition the provisions of its mandate will be explained. Moreover, the main features and methods of the functioning of the Commissioner will be analysed, as well as the principal issues it is facing. Finally, a number of possible new areas and directions for the future will be provided.

1. Mr. Ole Espersen is Commissioner of the Council of the Baltic Sea States on Democratic Institutions and Human Rights including the Rights of Persons belonging to Minorities.
Background
One of the main features of the European development in recent years is the emergence of new sub-regional intergovernmental organisations, such as the Council of the Baltic Sea States, the Barents/Euro-Arctic Council, the Central European Initiative, and the Black Sea Economic Cooperation. These entities, while not competing with pan-European institutions like the Council of Europe or the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), represent a significant new step in the diversification of cooperation in Europe. In the OSCE Budapest Summit Declaration of 6 December, 1994 and in the context of the OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting in Warsaw, in October 1995, the participating states put special emphasis on the importance of sub-regional organisations in promoting the OSCE’s work. The Budapest Declaration specifically acknowledges the valuable contribution of the CBSS to regional cooperation.

The Council of the Baltic Sea States was established in March 1992 at the founding conference of Ministers for Foreign Affairs in Copenhagen. Its main objective, written down in the Copenhagen Declaration of 5 March, 1992 and in the Terms of Reference of the Council, is to strengthen existing cooperation among the states of the Baltic Sea area and serve as a forum for intensified cooperation and coordination on such key issues as democratic consolidation, development of infrastructure, trade and economy, protection of the environment, as well as other issues essential for the future of the Baltic Sea area. The CBSS has a potential to play a distinctive and long-term role in European affairs in the fields of democracy, human rights standards and contacts between people, as well as the economy, industry, energy and transportation development and environmental protection.

In its own way, the CBSS contributes to the construction of a common and comprehensive security for the Europe of the 21st century which is distinguished by new answers to new and old challenges. One of them is the realization of the fact that the security and well-being of the continent or any part thereof is impossible without upholding the security, freedom and dignity of individuals inhabiting it, in short what is known as the human dimension of the OSCE.

The CBSS consists of the following members: Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Poland, Russia, Sweden and the European Commission. The Council meets annually on the level of Ministers for Foreign Affairs in one of the capitals of the member states. The Ministers actually form the Council which takes all substantive decisions on

3. This feature is dealt with in a recent article by the Director of the Foundation on Inter-Ethnic Relations in the Hague, Dr. Arie Bloed; Arie Bloed, 'The human dimension of the OSCE: More words than deeds?', *Helsinki Monitor*, no. 4, 1995, pp. 23-29.

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