Baltic region: initiative to inforce the regional cooperation

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-OBJECTIVE : The initiative set out in this document is designed to strengthen political stability and economic development in the Baltic Sea region. In particular, it proposes the intensification of the regional coordination implemented under the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS) and focussing on priority areas to take full advantage of existing cooperation and programmes. -SUBSTANCE : The initiative builds on the Commission's 1994 Communication entitled: 'Orientations for a Union Approach towards the Baltic Sea Region' and in its 1995 report entitled: 'Current State of and Perspectives for Cooperation in the Baltic Sea Region'. The initiative,which is closely linked to the preparation of the 'Visby Charter' to be approved by the Council of the Baltic Sea States (of which the Commission is a member) is characterized by the following points: (a) enhancing democracy and political stability: the Commission intends to support enhanced cooperation within the CBSS thanks to the establishment of contacts between public and private institutions, public administration reform, the completion of projects in the area of civil society (PHARE and TACIS) and defence of human rights, improving coordination between NGOs, strengthening measures designed to defend minority rights, etc. It also intends to participate more actively in CBSS working parties set up to fight organized crime, to give early warning of environmental disasters and the development of systems for asylum to prevent illegal immigration; (b) promoting economic development: the measures to be taken by the Community in the economic sector largely form part of the pre-accession strategy. The Commission is particularly ready to support the establishment of a Baltic Free-Trade Area, the establishment of a customs union by 1998 and liberalization of trade between the three Baltic States and Poland. It also intends to assist in speeding up the approximation of regulatory frameworks and to consider the possibility of cofinancing integrated trade networks, combining infrastructure products. At the same time, substantial progress has been made in privatizing and restructuring undertakings, but measures still need to be taken in the field of privatization (financial services, SMUs, etc.). The Commission also intends to enhance coordination of international aid by systematically using Community programmes to support larger international investment projects. In particular, it proposes the preparation of a framework of assistance for the region, identifying objectives, sectors and projects to be implemented by the various members of the CBSS. That plan would leave each provider of assistance free to act but would coordinate their activities. As regards the priority aid sectors, the Commission refers to the following areas: *transport infrastructures with a series of projects to be integrated into the trans-European networks, *improvement of energy efficiency and nuclear safety: oil and gas pipeline projects crossing various countries are provided for, together with other sectoral measures, *environment, with transboundary water management projects, reduction of hazardous waste from chemicals and other forms of marine pollutants and stricter legislation on environmental protection, *tourism: principally on the eastern seaboard of the Baltic Sea; (c) developing regional cooperation and cross-border cooperation: a series of measures are provided for with a view to encouraging cooperation not only between States in the region, thanks to funds provided by the Structural Funds PHARE and TACIS for infrastructure projects, but also between regions (thanks to the INTERREG Programme) and between people by encouraging personal contacts and contacts between municipalities and cities in the region. Further projects are designed to facilitate border crossings; (d) reinforcing the role of the CBSS: given the complementarity between the work of the CBSS and the EU, the Commission takes the view that cooperation should be strengthened between those institutions and proposes to provide the Baltic Joint Programming and Monitoring Committee with a permanent secretariat which will liaise with the CBSS and make the CBSS into a form for assessing regional needs and priorities.