



BULLETIN

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COMMENTARY

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Baltic Sea Action Summit

Lidia Puka

The Baltic Sea Action Summit organized in Helsinki at the initiative of Finland has been exploited by Russia to force through its current commercial and political interests, in particular promotion of the Northern Gas Pipeline. Another of Russia's goals was to demonstrate the growing significance of the basin in its foreign policy.

At Finland's initiative the Baltic Sea Action Summit (BSAS) was held on 10 February in Helsinki and was intended to increase the level of involvement of private entities in maintaining the ecological balance in the basin. The factor that made the summit important from the political point of view was the attendance by the Russian prime minister. While it was no surprise that Scandinavian leaders attended, as they regularly attend regional meetings, Vladimir Putin's presence was not a routine event. Poland was represented by a deputy prime minister and the minister for the economy, while Germany was represented by the minister for the environment.

In political terms the attendance by the prime minister of the Russian Federation was intended to show the rise in the importance of the Baltic Sea region in Russia's foreign policy. In recent years the basin has become one of the most important transit corridors for Russian exports, above all crude oil. Also, Russia was able to use the summit to emphasize its sensitivity towards ecological issues, in order to promote the Nord Stream project. The meeting came at a crucial time for the project, just before Finland's anticipated final decision to consent to the construction of the pipeline across the Finnish exclusive economic zone. There is no doubt that Putin's attendance was also intended to bring pressure to bear on the Finnish authorities. The decision was given two days after the summit, and there was a further expression of support for the project by Finland when it was conceded that construction could start before the decision is finally binding. The company Nord Stream AG made also use of the opportunity to present the private projects at BSAS, in order to counteract criticism of the Nord Stream project and demonstrate that it has taken all possible measures to minimize potential harm to the environment. To achieve this it has offered to hand over the results of many years of tests of the Baltic seabed free of charge to HELCOM, the governing body for the Convention on the Protection of the Marine Environment of the Baltic Sea Area. Russia will continue its diplomatic activity in the region at the Moscow HELCOM ministerial meeting in May, at which it is to present a summary of Russia's two-year rotating presidency of the organization.

The construction of the Nord Stream will not cease to be controversial among the Baltic States, especially in view of the possible harmful ecological effects if the chemical weapons sunken on the seabed are disturbed. It was this that prompted Lithuania to announce at the BSAS that this autumn it will submit a draft resolution at the UN General Assembly forum regarding this matter and will demand that the EU take action to remove these weapons from the Baltic.

Additionally, Prime Minister Putin used his presence at the summit to hold talks with Norwegian Prime Minister Stoltenberg regarding the 40-year old dispute concerning the border between the exclusive economic zones in the Barents Sea. This was to be a meeting to prepare for the first visit of the president of Russia to Oslo in eight years, planned in the spring.