

New impulsion for the European Straits Initiative

The members of the European Straits Initiative gathered in Vlora (Albania) on 8th October 2015, on the invitation of the Regional Council of Vlora. Two elected members of Pas-de-Calais County Council participated to the political conference (Pas-de-Calais County Council is co-lead partner of the Initiative launched in 2010 with Kent County Council): Sophie Warot-Lemaire (President of Pas-de-Calais Tourism agency) and Bertrand Petit (Vice-president in charge of promotion and tourism).

Four years after the first meeting of the Initiative, this political conference was a great opportunity to give a new impulsion to the work undertaken so far, with the **creation of three thematic commissions** to enhance the exchange of experience and foster the recognition of the straits specific issues at European level:

- **“Transport and mobility”** commission, chaired by Harju County Government (Estonia – Gulf of Finland)
- **“Tourism, natural and cultural heritage”** commission, chaired by the Regional Council of Vlora (Albania – Strait of Otranto)
- **“Environment, biodiversity and climate change”** commission, chaired by Kent County Council (United-Kingdom – Dover Strait).

A special time of exchanges has been dedicated to **the issue of migrations** and the debate ended with the **adoption of a joint statement**, the content of which highlights the key role of straits as maritime passageways in migratory roads and offers to create a fourth commission on this topic.

Joint statement of the members of the European Straits Initiative of 8th October 2015

Since the beginning of 2015, the European continent has faced a migratory wave which constitutes a major humanitarian challenge. While dramatic situations unfold before our eyes, and beyond the topicality of the phenomenon only, the members of the European Straits Initiative, gathered for their political meeting in Region Vlora, wish to demonstrate the opportunity that is the network of straits.

Indeed:

- *Although local challenges are not everywhere similar, the movement of refugees escaping from areas of conflict and people looking for a better life is a **shared challenge** for all the territories bordering European straits.*
- *These areas have always been **privileged waypoints**, which have played a major role in the migration of women and men. The Strait of Bering, from where the Indians of America came from, is an example.*

- *With the progressive closing of terrestrial borders, **maritime borders become new pathways.***
The pressure on departure territories and hosting territories is growing.

*Confronted to this challenge, the European Straits Initiative expresses a conviction: the issue of migrations is faced at European and national scales, but its local impact is **a challenge for local authorities** bordering European straits; it is their responsibility to:*

- *Find human, fair, innovative and sustainable solutions to this challenge, in the field of their competencies.*
- *Use this human mobility as a way of reinforcing cross-border governance of straits.*

This is why the European Straits Initiative proposes to exchange and analyse practices of departure and hosting territories bordering straits, for a better answer to the migrant challenge, by establishing a commission to propose solutions to practical issues to the European community and implement them.

List of signatories present in Vlora: Kvarken Council, Helsinki-Uusimaa Regional council, Harju County Government, Lolland Municipality, Pas-de-Calais County Council, Regional Council of Fier, Regional Council of Vlora, Region of Ionian Islands, Province of Lecce.