**Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference. Oslo 26. august 2019. Innlegg ved åpningssesjonen.**

**Statssekretær Audun Halvorsen.**

**Framework conditions for cooperation in Northern Europe**

Members of Parliament, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me first of all welcome you to Norway on behalf of the Norwegian Government and the Minister of Foreign Affairs. Your conference is an expression of the strong commitment to cooperation that we see in the Baltic Sea Region and on the part of parliamentarians from all Member States of the CBSS and the European Parliament observers.

This is in truth a region with a broad and varied web of cooperation structures. Some of them with a long history, such as the Nordic cooperation going back 70 years. Others are more recent, representing important political initiatives for economic and social development and integration across former dividing lines: the Barents Euro-Arctic Council and the Council of the Baltic Sea States have both played significant roles for cooperation in our region. The enlargement of the European Union, as well as the creation of the European Economic Area, which encompasses a large part of our region remain of tremendous importance, politically and economically. The Northern Dimension brings together the EU, Iceland, Norway and Russia for concrete cooperation in a number of areas. The Arctic Council offers a unique platform to discuss Arctic issues within the group of eight member states but also with a number of observers from inside and outside our region.

So, given this plethora of formats, my first point when assessing the framework conditions for cooperation in our region is the following: This network of cooperation structures is a strength. But it also represents a challenge, when it comes to to coordination, the potential for overlapping efforts, and the need for strong prioritisation. We need to make sure that our work within these different fora is efficient, effective and that we create synergies and avoid duplication.

Cooperation in our region covers a number of areas, ranging from culture, education and research, through labour and migration issues and economic and social development, to dealing with the global challenges of the environment and climate change. In order to achieve improved coordination and better synergies, we should be ready to discuss priorities both within and between the different cooperation structures which all have their own characteristics and that each may add value in their own way.

Such coordination is obviously a responsibility for the governments. Improved synergies were among the elements discussed in the reform process within the CBSS that was concluded at the high level meeting in Latvia in June. We must now make sure that we follow up these intentions, in the CBSS and in the other bodies. Your parliamentary conference, with political participation from all the states in our region, may also contribute to this objective.

So, when it comes to the substance, I will not venture into any oversight of all the import areas of regional cooperation. But, in the spirit of clear priorities, let me briefly highlight one issue which your conference focused on at your session in Åland last year and which once again is high on your agenda this year: safeguarding the oceans. Of course: Regional sustainability and the protection of oceans and marine resources was one of the driving forces already 27 years ago, when the Council of the Baltic Sea States was established. The balance between harvesting from our oceans and protecting them is even more important today - both in our neighbourhood and globally.

We need multilateral cooperation and international alliances to push the global community to take action to ensure that our oceans will remain healthy and rich. This is the reason Norway’s Prime Minister last year established the High-Level Panel for a Sustainable Ocean Economy. The panel consists of 14 serving heads of state and government from ocean and coastal states representing all continents. With input from experts, the private sector and civil society, the panel will present a roadmap for action to the UN Ocean Conference in Lisbon in June 2020.

In October this year, Norway will host the “Our Ocean Conference” here in Oslo. The conference will highlight the importance of knowledge as the basis of all our actions and policies to achieve sustainable economic growth.

I know that you will hear thorough presentations on these issues later today, so let me just underline that this is a key priority area for Norway both in a regional and a global perspective, and an example of the importance of regional and multilateral cooperation.

And that cooperation, as we see it today in all its different formats, is part of a strong, well developed network of multilateral structures that has been created over the last 70 years. When discussing framework conditions for cooperation, we cannot ignore the fact that this multilateral cooperation, its institutions and norms, is currently under pressure. We see that certain influential countries have chosen to place less importance on multilateral cooperation than before. In many instances there seems to be a reduced willingness to meet challenges and solve problems through negotiations and multilateral instruments that take into account the interests of all – including the smaller states. Other actors attemt to shape or coopt established structuresor norms and language to fit their own purpose. We believe these trends give reason for concern. It is important that we all – governments and parliamentarians alike – do our part to defend and further develop multilateral cooperation in general. For Norway, this is another key priority in our foreign policy. The Norwegian Government just recently published a white paper on multilateral cooperation. I think your conference in itself is an expression of a similar appreciation.

Finally, let me underline the importance we attach to the interaction – so characteristic of cooperation in our region – between practical, project-oriented cooperation and political dialogue. Over the years, we have seen important results of our cooperative efforts, results that have benefitted the life of people and contributed to economic and social development and to meeting common challenges. Political dialogue has been and remains a core condition for agreeing on common objectives and priorities. At the same time, concrete cooperation projects facilitates political dialogue and mutual understanding.

In times of regional tensions and multiple international challenges the political dialogue is particularly important. In such times it is equally important that we are able to uphold the most important conditions for political dialogue as well as for practical cooperation: the respect for international law, for the rule of law, and for human rights and individual freedom. When considering the question of framework conditions for our cooperation, this is my final and most fundamental point.

Thank you!