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Pyry Niemi Addresses Annual Conference of the BSSSC with a Focus on Sustainable Democracy

**BSPC President Pyry Niemi underlined the crucial need for close cooperation on the international and regional level, for a coordinated approach rooted in solidarity and mutual support, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. He further pointed out the focus of the Swedish BSPC Presidency on sustainable democracy and how to face common challenges in a changing world.**

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the 28th Annual Conference of the Baltic Sea States Subregional Cooperation (BSSSC) took place online from 29 September – 1 October, with a primary focus on Strong and Inclusive Cooperation in the Baltic Sea Region for the Future.

The annual conference gathered more than 100 participants from the political and administrative areas (local, regional, national, EU and other international levels) as well as representatives from science, international organisations, NGOs and the private sector from 11 countries taking part in the Baltic Sea cooperation.

The main topics included the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region and Russia’s Strategy for North-West Russia, Interreg achievements and future solutions, the European Territorial Agenda, Culture and Baltic Sea Regional Identity, the State of the Baltic Sea with a particular focus on a Plastic-Free Sea as well as Intelligent Transport and Mobility. The conference specifically offered space to the young generation to present proposals for future priorities and cooperation based on a BSSSC Autumn Youth Event.

BSPC President Pyry Niemi stressed the urgent need for holding events like these annual conferences, pledging the continuation of close cooperation and presenting the priorities of the Swedish BSPC Presidency.

In detail, he emphasised that the COVID-19 pandemic required enhanced cooperation among all levels of society and various stakeholders. As several regions were beginning to deal with the second wave of COVID-19, the parliamentarians had a crucial role in shaping the response to the pandemic, through legislative, policymaking, oversight and advocacy roles.

Moreover, due to the global nature of the crisis, and the deep interconnectedness of societies and economies, close cooperation on an international and regional level was crucially required for a coordinated approach rooted in solidarity and mutual support.

For that reason, BSPC President Niemi was very grateful to Marshal Struk, as Chairman of the BSSSC, for addressing the parliamentarians of the Baltic Sea region with the core concerns and current focus topics of the BSSSC during the BSPC’s annual conference on 24 August. “We are pursuing similar goals and objectives and I am confident that we will make significant progress in these areas through synergies in our approaches.”

As the main results of the 29th BSPC had already been related to the conference, Mr Niemi concentrated on the priorities of the Swedish BSPC Presidency, which were to be discussed at the organisation’s 30th annual conference from 29 to 31 August 2021 in Stockholm.

During their Presidency, he said that Sweden would focus on sustainable democracy and how to face common challenges in a changing world. This emphasis was chosen not only, he explained, because of the Swedish Parliament's celebration of 100 years of democracy.

The Swedish Presidency saw the more than urgent need to address not only the preservation of livelihoods but also the fundamental issues of democratic coexistence due to

– the demanding challenges currently threatening the livelihoods and coexistence in the Baltic Sea region,

 – the rapidly changing communication structures and media landscapes as well as the worrying interventions in the democratic forms of several countries,

– the intensification of violent conflicts and the noticeable increase in human rights violations

BSPC President Niemi extended his best wishes to all those fighting for democracy and more democratic structures in their countries, hoping that they would find peaceful success.

The severe challenges of COVID-19 had also brought fundamental issues of their coexistence with their neighbours into the public debate. For that very reason, Mr Niemi saw the need to continue learning from each other's experiences in overcoming the crisis. Not only was it necessary to keep an eye on their own respective countries, but policymakers had to rely more on best practice examples in the future.

Especially in times like these, he stressed, it was essential to keep reminding themselves what a valuable asset the Baltic Sea region had in its democracies and how important it was to defend their cornerstones. It was impossible to highlight enough the importance of democracy and the need to strengthen the parliamentary dimension in the countries around the Baltic Sea.

Democratic institutions, strong cooperation and environmental and social sustainability were the foundation of the BSPC's work, the president said. Preserving these were clear priorities of the Swedish Presidency.

During the upcoming year, Sweden would focus on four areas related to achieving sustainable democracy:

**First of all**, the joint work of the BSPC would be concentrated on peaceful and reliable neighbourliness and intense cooperation built on participation and trust in the democratic system.

That is why the BSPC had reaffirmed in its resolution the urgent call and the expectation that all Baltic Sea States would continue to make every effort to ensure the Baltic Sea region maintain its close and intense cooperation. The BSPC had underlined that the basis of its collaboration – international law, mutual understanding, trust, democratic values, the rule of law, human rights as well as equal opportunities for all - was of particular importance.

All around, various new forms of political engagement were coming into play, and the Swedish BSPC Presidency would focus specifically on youth and the role of civil society.

The president was glad that these aspects were also at the heart of the BSSSC's work. With current challenges decreasing trust in traditional democratic mechanisms, the BSSSC had pointed out the demand for an even more active and concerted approach. Mr Niemi also appreciated very much that the BSSSC had already realised a seminar on democracy and a youth event back-to-back to its annual conference, involving young people in the parliamentarians’ consultations even more strongly and topic-oriented. He explained that the BSPC was looking at similar steps.

The BSPC considered the BSSSC in terms of youth involvement - through board meetings, youth camps and back-to-back events for the annual conference - as well as the Nordic Youth Council as best practice examples of youth work in the Baltic Sea region.

BSPC President Niemi expressed his optimism that the current focus of the Lithuanian CBSS Presidency on youth inclusion and the Baltic Youth Platform - established by the CBSS - would bring about significant progress in the representation of young people in institutions and decision-making processes in the Baltic Sea region. The BSPC had repeatedly called for that.

**The second theme** Sweden wanted to explore in greater depth during their Presidency was the issue of democracy in a changing media landscape. Digitisation, disinformation and fake news were playing an increasingly important role in everyone’s daily lives. So, it was now more important than ever to protect free media and freedom of speech.

**The Swedish Presidency’s third focal point**would be adaptation to new demographics and challenges to the welfare model. He noted that the demographic situation in the Baltic Sea region was changing. The question was how best to adapt to these changes and how they would challenge the current welfare model. The president asked how urbanisation, an ageing population and labour shortages were connected to trust in public institutions, social and regional equality and young people's opportunities. This led to the question of how the Baltic Sea region could tackle these challenges sustainably and democratically.

**The fourth pillar** was a theme where the BSPC had a long tradition of commitment and engagement: the environment. For many years, the BSPC had repeatedly addressed far-reaching demands to their governments to protect the region’s natural life resources in the best possible way. He underlined that the Baltic Sea was uniting the people around its shores, and the BSPC had continuously called for it to return closer to a good ecological status.

Much had been achieved in this regard over the years, President Niemi said but added that developments had been so rapid that it was necessary, again and again, to take new and more far-reaching measures to move closer to these objectives.

For that reason, the president appreciated that the BSPC would focus during the next two years on the issue of climate change and biodiversity in a BSPC working group chaired by his fellow Swedish parliamentarian Cecilie Tenfjord Toftby.

BSPC President Niemi underlined that the Swedish Presidency wanted to concentrate not only on the environmental side of climate change and biodiversity but also on innovation, technology and further economic aspects.

In concluding his speech, the president noted his delight that the two institutions of the BSSSC and the BSPC had mostly similar or identical priorities for the coming year. This showed that they were focusing on strategically fundamental challenges. Sharing the same basic views in many respects helped both to find similar and joint contributions to solving the current problems. Those synergies allowed them to meet the present challenges in the best possible way and to strengthen peaceful cooperation and democratic values in the Baltic Sea region, to enhance prosperity further and to make the Baltic Sea region a more attractive place to live. To that end, he saw the long-standing cooperation of both organisations as a good foundation. With that, the president brought his speech to an end.

In the run-up to the conference, BSPC Secretary General Bodo Bahr had informed the BSSSC Board Meeting about the key results of the digital 29th BSPC.

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