

OPENING

The Lithuanian BSPC Presidency 2019-2020



Mr. Valerijus Simulik
President of the Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference

Excellencies, colleagues, government representatives, observers, guests and friends of the BSPC,

It is a great honour for me to welcome you all online today here in this virtual 'Plenary Hall'. Of course, we would very much have preferred to welcome all of you in our Parliament in Lithuania and to show you the beauty of our capital city, Vilnius.

The preparations for this were well advanced by March of this year.

Our Presidency and the activities of the BSPC have been overshadowed since March by the COVID-19 pandemic along with the restrictions and measures associated with it in all our countries.

Nevertheless, we have succeeded in mainly realising the strategy and work programme that we set out in August last year.

By March, we had advanced and put together our regular programme. But even after that, we were able to move forward our work digitally and online.

What has suffered since then is the direct exchange within the framework of conferences and events with our partners and friends. At first, that was because all physical events were cancelled. Only gradually, via digital formats, has the opportunity for exchange become available once again.

We held our planned Standing Committee meetings both in Berlin in November and Brussels at the beginning of March and dealt intensively with the topics we had set ourselves.

This included the issue of ammunition dumps in the Baltic Sea in November in Berlin but also in March in Brussels. In these discussions, the increased risk potential and the dimension of the problem became evident to us all.

That is why we will also be dealing with this issue more intensively at today's conference, as the topic also plays an increased role under the current HELCOM Presidency.

In March, we also dealt in-depth with the protection and sustainable use of the oceans in Brussels. I am therefore very grateful that this issue has been addressed today at the political level by EU Commissioner Virginijus Sinkevičius. Once again, many thanks for this.

And even if there will be changes concerning the financial packages currently underway and the budgetary discussions influenced by the pandemic: it was important to look again at current developments and perspectives in the field of European territorial cooperation and macro-regional strategies in Europe in greater depth and to have the CBSS inform us about its key issues. That is why I am also very pleased that we

are hearing contributions today from the previous Danish CBSS Presidency and that Foreign Minister Linas Linkevicius, who currently represents the Lithuanian CBSS Presidency, will address us immediately afterwards.

Last autumn, we deepened our cooperation with our parliamentary partners in the Black Sea region and will continue to do so in this autumn. We also took part in the Conference of Mediterranean Parliaments and other events of theirs.

Our Migration and Integration Working Group has continued its work vigorously. Despite the pandemic situation the group has drawn up its final report and several recommendations for action. The report will be presented afterwards by the chairman of the working group, Hans Wallmark from Sweden. Many thanks to all those who have made this possible.

Our Standing Committee meeting planned for the end of May in Vilnius was cancelled. However, in mid-June, we met online and discussed the issues at hand. We had an intensive exchange of views on the development of the pandemic in our countries, the work of the parliaments during this period and the measures they have taken. Furthermore, we received additional statements by our member parliaments about the development of the COVID-19 pandemic. These reports also provide information about the effects on the work of parliaments and interparliamentary organisations as well as on legislative measures to deal with the consequences of the pandemic. We have published them on our website, and it's a unique compilation of the development in the Baltic Sea countries.

It was with great regret that the Lithuanian Parliament had to cancel the 29th BSPC in Vilnius. At that time, the measures taken in our countries would not have allowed the conference to be held with the participation of all. With great uncertainties looming over us, it was not possible to guarantee the physical holding of the conference in Vilnius.

Against this background, we then decided, after thorough discussions in mid-June, to hold this conference in a reduced form, compared to our usual annual conferences. I am very, very grateful that, despite the particular difficulties that this entails, you are all present today, that our member parliaments are represented much as in previous years, that we have a number of our observers and fraternal organisations in our midst and that we can deal with the core issues that we wanted to address today.

I would also like to thank in particular the representatives of my home country Lithuania, first and foremost the President of the Republic, the President of our Parliament and our Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs for their willingness to attend this conference at the level initially planned and, through their contributions today, to underline and strengthen the parliamentary dimension of international cooperation in the Baltic Sea

region.

By agreeing on our resolution and taking a clear position on important issues, we are emphasising the parliamentary dimension of international cooperation in the Baltic Sea Region, even in times of crisis such as these. We show that not only governments are acting, but parliaments are also continuing their work unwaveringly.

That is a crucial factor in the overall structure of international cooperation.

At the beginning of the crisis, all countries were focused first of all on combating the spread of the pandemic, keeping the consequences as small as possible and cushioning the economic impact by using financial volumes never thought possible before. That was the time of priority concentration on the work in our own countries. The work of government was at the forefront everywhere.

The parliaments were called upon, above all as budget legislators, to provide the financial resources considered necessary to mitigate the crisis. In the meantime, international cooperation has taken on a much stronger role again. And it is precisely in this phase that it is fundamentally crucial that the parliaments once again make their steering capabilities much more robust and visible in international cooperation as well.

That is why it was important that the World Conference of Speakers of Parliament took place digitally a few days ago.

That is why it is just as important that we should be holding our conference here today, with the basic theme of a vision for 2030, however much we envisioned it differently six months ago. It is vital for us to ensure that the urgent issues and the directions that we see as appropriate are given to the governments as guidelines for their actions.

That the governments in all our member countries are responding to our resolutions and our recommendations for action was again clearly underlined by the governments' statements on our resolution in Oslo.

Let us work today on a vision for 2030.

Let us talk about the development of the pandemic and ways out of the crisis,

let us highlight the importance of international parliamentary cooperation,

let us work on the priorities and future issues that prevailed before the pandemic and which we need to move forward – regardless of the pandemic.

In our difficult situation as a result of the pandemic, it is important that we make even more substantial and faster progress than previously planned in areas such as environmental protection and maritime policy, migration and digital cooperation.

I wish all of us that we can do this as much as possible during these hours and that we can return as soon as feasible to direct encounters to continue our work in a more

familiar way. But we should also continue to use and expand the opportunities that have arisen from current developments so that in the end, overcoming all difficulties, we can achieve by 2030 what we have been striving towards for years:

A safe and prosperous region, characterised by an intact environment.

May we succeed in restoring the Baltic Sea, which is a key feature of many of our regions and home to many people, to an intact ecological status and maintain it.

Let's continue - as we want to point out in our resolution - to make every effort to ensure the Baltic Sea Region remains a region of peaceful and close neighbourliness as well as intense cooperation - based on mutual understanding, trust, democratic values, the rule of law, human rights as well as equal opportunities for all.

Thank you.