



30TH BSPC: FIRST SESSION

Cooperation in the Baltic Sea Region

Speaker: ***Ms Ine Eriksen Soreide***, *Minister of Foreign Affairs, Norway,*
Norwegian Presidency 2021–2022 of the Council of the Baltic Sea States
(CBSS)

Ladies and gentlemen,
Parliamentarians

Thank you for inviting me to the 30th parliamentary conference. Congratulations on 30 years of collaboration!

Interparliamentary cooperation is of great importance. The Norwegian Storting had the pleasure of hosting the Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference in Oslo two years ago. These conferences give us the chance to 'check the pulse' of political cooperation and discuss opportunities and challenges facing the region. As a parliamentarian myself for several years, I highly value these dialogue forums.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We live in a time of major change and ongoing challenges.

The overall security policy situation is shifting. Stronger global political rivalries are emerging, and many global fault lines are widening. The impacts of climate change are materialising around us. On top of that, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought serious disruption to our societies.

Various regions of the world are struggling with instability and unrest, exemplified by the present situation in Afghanistan. Combined with deteriorating living conditions in many places, the climate crisis means that we must expect, and should prepare for, new and persistent migration challenges.

The recent report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change is a wake-up call for us all. There is a need for an urgent global response and implementation of the green transition. The green agenda must be viewed as an opportunity for our societies to become more technologically advanced and equitable; as a stimulus for growth, not as a catastrophic burden on our economies and communities.

The green transition is possible. Much is already under way. The European Union is a global leading force, with the Green Deal and Fit for 55 as major platforms for success. I am hopeful that this will have a positive effect across the entire region.

I am, however, more concerned when it comes to the status of democracy and rule of law. A weakening of democracy and its institutions also constitutes a threat to our internal cohesion. Political and economic success stories in the framework of European cooperation, and in our individual countries, have unfortunately not always been accompanied by increased trust in established political processes. Democracy, respect for human rights and the rule of law are values we must continue to fight for – at a time where fragmentation, distrust and polarisation is on the rise in many countries.

We must learn from the past as we focus on the future.

There is a great responsibility resting on all of us, especially as political leaders from governments and parliaments. We must work to counter negative trends by supporting cooperation, seeking compromise, and finding common solutions through strong global governance based on agreed principles.

Despite the many challenges facing us, the Baltic Sea Region is a prosperous region. The 11 countries that make up our region represent an impressive 9 % of global GDP. Eight of our countries are EU members. Trade among these eight and the three non-EU members accounts for about EUR 185 billion annually. This figure is a reflection of a remarkable level of trade, professional contact and other exchanges. Our region is a success. We are probably better positioned to handle the challenges coming our way than any other macroregion in the world.

But we can always do better. And although we are managing well in the security policy area, I think we can do better there too. I am convinced that the EU and NATO remain key platforms for ensuring stability, predictability and prosperity for members as well as their neighbours. The two organisations are of fundamental historical importance for the whole region.

This year, we look back at the events of 30 years ago, when several of our members re-emerged as fully independent states. Parliamentarians were quick to seize the moment, as were governments. Robust cooperation platforms were established, with primary focus on practical issues of importance to the region's citizens.

Norway holds the presidency of the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS) until July next year. On 1 June I took part in the Baltic Sea ministerial meeting, hosted by Lithuania as outgoing president of the CBSS. The meeting adopted a new political vision for the development of the Baltic Sea Region by 2030.

The vision is a distillation of all the good things we aim to achieve in the region, and attaches importance to the rule of law, democracy, equality and inclusiveness, and involvement of civil society and young people. The region intends to remain at the forefront of efforts to promote sustainable development, cross-border cooperation and integration.

This document will also guide the work of the Norwegian CBSS presidency, and it will be important to ensure continuity from the previous presidencies. Our programme targets innovation and green transformation in industry, transport, energy, and the circular economy as special themes. We attach importance to nurturing regional identity and cohesion, and see great value in expanding cooperation with regional and municipal authorities. We intend to build further on the Council's successful mandates on civil protection, children at risk and trafficking in human beings, with a strong focus on organised crime and cyber crime.

The strength of the Baltic Sea cooperation lies in its practical approach to issues, opportunities and concerns shared by 11 countries bound by common international commitments. We should maintain this approach. But at the same time we cannot turn a blind eye to the situation unfolding in our neighbourhood. With regard to Belarus, which is also an observer state to CBSS, it is dramatic to see the use of force to suppress the aspirations and wishes of ordinary people, and to create tension among neighbours as part of the regime's survival tactics. The only way forward for Belarus is through dialogue and agreement with the opposition ending the violence, release of all

political prisoners, and a return to compliance with binding international commitments. I very much regret that Mr Lukashenko is not accepting the assistance that Sweden, as Chairman-in-Office of the OSCE, is offering.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to conclude with a few words about the importance of including young people.

Young people hold the key to the future of the region. We need to hear what our young people have to say as we work to build a resilient Baltic Sea region. Dialogue and contact between young people help to forge a common identity and mutual understanding, as well as create networks that will form a basis for solving common challenges in the future.

This parliamentary conference had its own youth forum on Friday, focusing on the future of democracy, and on climate change and biodiversity. It is vital to engage young people from all our countries in a serious dialogue with us as political leaders, and to listen to their ideas, fears and hopes. We must encourage their participation and be open to their insights.

Numerous meetings with young people have given me many first-hand experiences of how inspiring it is to meet with them directly to discuss topics they are concerned about. The launch of my government's white paper on the Arctic in November last year was one such example. We must listen and learn from them as we work to build a greener, prosperous, and more inclusive Baltic Sea Region.

Thank you.