



30TH BSPC: GENERAL DEBATE

Re-starting after the COVID-19 pandemic

Speaker: *Mr Arvils Ašeradens*, MP, Latvia

Dear colleagues,
Dear guests,
Ladies and gentlemen,

I warmly welcome everyone to the GENERAL DEBATE of the 30th BSPC.

This session includes a format that we introduced in 2018.

Three years ago, in Åland, we dared to try out a new format in our Conference - a general debate without restricting the content to allow everyone to contribute what is particularly close to their heart. We further sustained this format during our Conference in Oslo in 2019. The response to this initiative was excellent.

Therefore, we decided to continue it today as well.

We invented this format to open up opportunities – to encourage you to contribute and share your perspective on the issues that are particularly significant from your point of view or that of your delegation.

That allows us to better understand the spectrum of opinions and priorities within the Baltic Sea Region at the parliamentary level.

For that reason, I would like to encourage you from the outset to make use of this opportunity and to get actively involved in the debate.

This year, in particular, there is a wide range of topics to be discussed:

The current situation, mainly the answers we all had to find in our parliaments to the pandemic and still have to give.

How has the situation affected the parliaments and the way they work?

How do we deal with the economic consequences and the resulting burdens on public budgets?

How do we restart after the pandemic? Which lessons have we learned?

Which answers do we give to the current political developments as a whole?

Which problems does this confront us with? Do we already have answers to them, and if so, which are those?

As we have already heard and as we all know, the foreign ministers of the Baltic Sea states adopted the Vilnius II Declaration, an update of the vision for the Baltic Sea Region until 2030, on 1 June within the framework of the digital ministerial meeting.

Where do we want to see ourselves by then?

What do we want to have achieved together by then?

Where do we see the focus of our work?

The primary opening sentence of this vision for 2030 is a principle that we emphasise time and again in our resolutions and have highlighted in this year's resolution:

All countries in the Region uphold the rule of law, democracy, and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.

That must always be the goal of our work, no matter how difficult the overall circumstances may sometimes be.

Here, we also have a special responsibility as parliaments: This corresponds to the principles of our constitutions.

Other visions formulated in the Vilnius II Declaration of the CBSS are:

- The Region has a strong and well-functioning multi-level governance structure for political dialogue, practical cooperation, and people-to-people contacts.

- Young people participate and are represented in a meaningful way in institutions and decision-making processes, giving impetus to efforts to reach a more resilient, gender-equal and safe Region.

The Region also benefits from an active civil society, vibrant and enhanced exchanges between people that help nurture a shared regional identity.

- The ecological health of the Baltic Sea has been restored.

- The Region has recovered from the COVID pandemic by building back better and greener with strengthened resilience across all parts of society.

(That's what we have pointed out in the headline of our programme.)

- A high level of digitalisation and a cohesive digital infrastructure allow all parts of society to profit from digital solutions that adhere to high ethical standards.

That's the issue we have just discussed.

The Region experiences significant progress in regional cooperation in civil protection, especially the prevention, preparedness, and response against emergencies, including oil pollution, forest fires, and maritime search and rescue.

Close cooperation in education, science, research and innovation, and the exchange of ideas and experiences

Cultural networks and tourism tightly link the Baltic Sea regions, municipalities and cities.

In addition to these visions, the subtitle of our general debate - Restarting after the COVID-19 pandemic - raises many questions.

Which responses do the pandemic and overcoming it require in terms of global health, economic recovery, climate, technology, and trade?

Which considerations do we need to make in this regard, particularly for the Baltic Sea Region?

*(Some time ago, the Vice-President of the EU-Commission for Promoting our European Way of Life, Margaritis **Schinias**, said, "The common path forward requires a safe and sustainable approach for the benefit of all Europeans. In lifting restrictions, we must learn the lessons of 2020 and avoid damaging and costly opening and closing cycles.")*

These are some of the issues, topics, ideas, visions, and questions which may be close to your heart and your daily political work.

I think that's enough for intensive discussion and exchange.

Please feel free to touch on any topic to which you want to contribute and discuss from your perspective.

I'm opening the debate.

Please do not hesitate to raise your hand by selecting "List of participants" on your screen and then clicking on the button "Raise hand or just raise your hand visibly on the screen".

We have a first request to speak from our colleague...

Please, the screen is yours:

Contribution...

Furthermore, I have on my speakers' list:

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Thank you all very much for your valuable and interesting contributions and input.

We will consider these in the upcoming work of the BSPC Standing Committee and can continue this discussion next year in June, hopefully in Stockholm.

Having said that, I am closing the General Debate and handing over to Valentina Pivnenko to chair the Third Session.

END OF THE GENERAL DEBATE