



30TH BSPC: OPENING

Speaker: ***Ms Ann Linde***, *Minister for Foreign Affairs, Sweden*

- reported speech -

Ms Linde thanked the president and her audience for the opportunity to address them on the very day the BSPP was also celebrating thirty years of fruitful parliamentary cooperation. The main theme of the Swedish presidency of the BSPP – Sustainable Democracy – was very timely. Democratic backsliding, challenges to human rights and the undermining of the rule of law were trends they had witnessed for several years. It took time – sometimes generations – to build up stable and independent democratic institutions but they could be dismantled very quickly. Over the past year, they had witnessed how the respect for human rights had been seriously challenged, both in their neighbourhood and elsewhere. Members of parliament had an important role to preserve and protect democracy and human rights. The COVID-19 pandemic had had a clear and negative effect on the respect for human rights, democracy and the rule of law. Restrictions imposed to limit the spread of the virus had to be fully in line with international law. It was necessary to follow this closely. It was also necessary to pay particular attention to the gender perspective. Women and girls had been much more exposed during the pandemic than men. The Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference and the Council of the Baltic Sea States were important partners in highlighting and tackling these challenges. Sweden was a strong voice and actor for the promotion and protection of human rights, democracy and the rule of law globally. These were also key to Sweden's OSCE chairpersonship and a reminder that all the BSPP members had made a commitment to respect these values and principles. It was the Swedish side's firm belief that democracy was the best foundation for a sustainable society.

Yet democracy was in decline across the world. That was a deeply worrying trend, Minister Linde underlined. At the same time, aspirations for democracy were still strong in many parts of the world. It was necessary to ensure that those fighting for democracy were supported and defended. Since 2019, Sweden had pursued a full foreign policy initiative called The Drive for Democracy, with the aim to provide a counternarrative to the global trend of democratic backsliding and the shrinking space for civil society. For most people, the case for democracy was clear: It provided political accountability and therefore a mechanism for correcting mistakes and doing better. Democracy also ensured transparency and access to information and enabled everyone to make their voice heard and get involved in building their common future. Through diplomatic activity and the series of events, the Swedish Drive for Democracy aimed to promote and strengthen respect for human rights, democracy and the rule of law. Other aspects also supporting sustainable democracy were also included, not least equality, participation, sustainable development, inclusive growth, governance and security. Democratic societies depended on the respect for freedom of opinion and freedom of expression. These were fundamental conditions enabling several other freedoms and rights and thus served as the foundation of a functioning democracy. However, Ms Linde cautioned that attacks and restrictions on free and independent media and civil society were often used as tools to undermine democracy, human rights and the rule of law. This was also true for trade unions, demanding human rights in the world of work. There was therefore a great need to draw attention to and strengthen freedom of expression in a wider sense – both to protect freedom of expression as such but also to support the ones acting for human rights. The threats and challenges these actors face worldwide had to be addressed, she underlined. The pandemic had shown how vulnerable and interlinked societies were, making cross-border cooperation even more necessary. Climate change was another challenge in the region for the citizens

and their safety, best met in cooperation with neighbours. Much of the strength of the Council of the Baltic Sea States lay in its ability to function in a concrete and practical manner, even in times of difficult international relations and when everybody had been strongly affected by the pandemic. This cooperation had a proven track record of successful results of tackling cross-border challenges, such as climate change, youth unemployment, social and gender inequalities and the protection of children at risk.

Minister Linde saw four areas where there was a particular need and indeed an opportunity to reinforce this cooperation: First, people-to-people contacts in cooperation, particularly between young people. This bound people together and served as a platform for building long-term relationships. Such contacts made lives richer and increased understanding which made the Baltic Sea region more secure. The outcome of the Baltic Sea Youth Forum on 28 August and the Baltic Sea Youth Platform were valuable contributions to this end. The minister had heard that the youth forum on Saturday had been very good, with good dialogue. Cross-border cooperation between schools on different levels should also be encouraged. Second, the fight against international organised crime, closer ties between the Baltic Sea taskforce on organised crime – where Ms Linde herself had been the personal representative of the prime minister when she had been Vice Minister of Home Affairs – and the CBSS should increase their ability to fight organised crime, including trafficking human beings for sexual and labour exploitation. Third, cross-border cooperation in civil protection. Their efforts in this area had to be flexible and wide-ranging, covering everything from dealing with the effects of the pandemic to wildfires. It was necessary to strengthen cooperation and networks to ensure that adequate resources were available in the region. Fourth, the environment. The Baltic Sea was heavily polluted, the updated Baltic Sea Action Plan was a promising step in dealing with this common challenge, but more concrete action was needed to achieve sustainable results. As part of their efforts, it was also required to support sustainable shipping and ports.

To conclude, Minister Linde said she was convinced that the recently agreed direction of CBSS activities would prove valuable and help the organisation to deliver concrete results to the benefit of the member states and people of the Baltic Sea region. She was looking forward to continuing their robust support and cooperation with Norway.