



30TH BSPC: OPENING

Speaker: ***Mr Pyry Niemi***, *President of the BSPC 2020-2022*

Ladies and gentlemen,

Two years have passed by since we all met in person in Oslo. The COVID-19-pandemic and the restrictions imposed to stop the spread of the virus have affected us all not only in our daily lives, but also in the framework of our parliamentary cooperation. I am convinced that we are all looking forward to being able to meet again to engage in conversations not only during the Conference but also in the important sidelines.

With that said, I am very proud that the work of the BCSP has permanently continued during the pandemic. With online meetings, seminars and deliberations, we have done our best to work for a better future for the Baltic Sea region together – not letting the pandemic interrupt our intense cooperation and contacts.

The current Swedish Presidency goes under the title *Sustainable Democracy* and focuses on how to face common challenges in a changing world where new circumstances have emphasised the need to preserve and protect what is good and address the challenges that lie ahead by adapting to changes. Democratic institutions, solid cross-border cooperation and environmental and social sustainability are cornerstones of the BSPP: preserving these have been our priority throughout the year.

Since it was founded in 1991, one of the stated goals of the BSPP has been to support and strengthen democratic institutions, and we need to continue in this direction. This year, it was 100 years ago that women were given the right to vote in Sweden. The Swedish Parliament's celebration of 100 years of democracy reminds us that democracy is nothing that we can take for granted: we need to strive for democracy and democratic values every day.

The spread of COVID-19 and the fight against the pandemic is yet another reason to safeguard democratic values and this has also given us reason to appreciate and safeguard the strong cross-border cooperation at the heart of the BSPP. Many of our

challenges in the region go beyond borders, and our cooperation and intention to find solutions must do the same.

At our online standing committee meeting in November, we discussed the topic of democracy more intensively – with expert presentations on democracy and political participation and how this has changed over time. We also discussed how young people can be involved in the decision-making processes in the region.

At an online seminar in connection with the standing committee meeting in February, we continued these discussions with expert presentations on democracy in a new media landscape: digitalisation, combating disinformation and fake news, as well as protecting free media and freedom of speech – a discussion that we will continue here today.

At the standing committee meeting in February, we discussed the COVID-19 pandemic with particular regard to the situation and progress on vaccination with presentations by the World Health Organization as well as the Northern Dimension Partnership in Public Health and Social Well-being. This is also a topic that will be addressed today.

In May we once again held an online standing committee meeting. In connection with this meeting we discussed other challenges with the pandemic such as youth employment and challenges to the welfare system in a digital age. Demographic changes, labour shortages and an ageing population were other topics on the agenda.

Another challenge that lies before us, as was recently shown in the IPCC Report, is climate change and how it threatens biodiversity in our region. The current working group, chaired by my esteemed colleague Ms Cecilie Tenfjord-Toftby, is focusing on these issues. Protecting the environment and safeguarding our Baltic Sea have for a

long time been a top priority for our organisation and is still a core issue for the BSPC. We will hear more about the results of the working group later on today.

An important aspect of our cooperation are our relations with others. The increased and improved relationship with the CBSS and other Baltic Sea region organisations also strengthens the common identity of our region. People-to-people contacts and relationships between citizens – this is the real backbone of our cooperation.

Another aspect of our parliamentary cooperation is evident in our partner organisations. We have for example continued to fill our memorandum of understanding with the PABSEC with life even in times of the pandemic. In November we had a joint meeting with the standing committees of the BSPC and PABSEC where also the esteemed Minister Linde participated. During the meeting with PABSC we discussed issues such as oceans, climate and democracy, issues that do not stop at national borders but also call for solutions in supra-regional cooperation. Another example is the strengthening of our relation with the Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean and the aim to sign a Memorandum of Understanding this fall.

Traditionally, ever since our organisation was founded, we have had intense, close and, in every respect, productive and fruitful relations with other regional organisations. I am therefore happy to see that many of you are attending today's Conference.

We often talk about the future of the Baltic Sea region – and what is the future if not our younger generation? Youth participation in decision-making processes has been an issue high on the agenda for several years. This Saturday, a Baltic Sea Parliamentary Youth Forum was held. About 100 young participants from our eleven countries attended and showed commitment, engagement and creativity in the discussions both on democracy and on climate and biodiversity. I am very proud to have been a part of this successful event and I am also proud to say that we have three representatives of the youth forum with us here today who will share some of the main conclusions from the Forum with us.

At today's Conference, we will also celebrate 30 years of parliamentary cooperation. For 30 years, parliamentarians have directly and indirectly been making a decisive contribution to realising what the people who elected them primarily regard as the most important aim: stabilising and guaranteeing the peaceful coexistence of all people and countries in the region and, on this basis, achieving the highest possible level of prosperity and sustainable use and protection of the natural foundations of life.

During a ceremonial session at this Conference, we will discuss and remember what we have accomplished and deliberate on what lies ahead when it comes to cooperation in the Baltic Sea Region today, yesterday and in the future.

The BSPC has built its cooperation on contact between people, personal dialogue and a familiar and friendly atmosphere. Even if this – due to the pandemic – has been difficult to achieve during the last one and half years, I am very proud to say that we, in the BSPC, were successful in continuing undiminished and have even succeeded in deepening our work by shifting to an online format. We have maintained and intensified the parliamentary dimension of international cooperation in the Baltic Sea region.

However, a digital format cannot beat meeting in person. It is therefore my great pleasure, together with the Swedish delegation to the BSPC, to also host the 31st Conference, which is planned to be held in Stockholm on 12–14 June 2022.

Finally, I would like to congratulate the Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference for 30 years of parliamentary cooperation and wish us all a successful Conference!

Let me now give the screen to the BSPC Vice President Johannes Schraps for the first session of the Conference.