

## Speech by Mr Pyry Niemi

### President of the Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference (BSPC)

<b>30 September</b>	<b>BSSSC Annual Conference</b> <b>Strong and inclusive cooperation in the Baltic Sea Region – Now more than ever</b>	
	10:00 – 10:10	<p><i>Introductory Session: Setting the scene: European and Baltic Sea Region perspectives.</i></p>
		<p><i>Moderator <b>Ms Krystyna Wróblewska</b>, BSSSC Secretary General</i></p>
		<p><i>Welcome by BSSSC Chairman, <b>Mr Mieczysław Struk</b>, Marshal of the Pomorskie Voivodeship</i></p>
	10:10 – 10:20	<p><i><b>Mr Linas Linkevičius</b>, Minister of Foreign Affairs Republic of Lithuania (recorded)</i></p>
	10:20– 10:30	<p><i><b>Mr Pyry Niemi</b>, President of the Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference</i></p>
	10:30 – 10:50	<p><i><b>Mr Grzegorz Poznański</b>, Director General of the Council of the Baltic Sea States Secretariat</i></p>
	10:50 – 11:10	<p><i><b>Mr Normunds Popens</b>, Deputy Director General in DG Regional Policy, European Commission</i></p>
	11:10 – 11:30	<p><i><b>Mr Sergey Petrovich</b>, Deputy Director of the Second European Department, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation</i></p>

*Check against delivery*

Dear Marshal and Chairman of the BSSSC Struk, excellencies, colleagues, government representatives and friends,

It is a great pleasure for me to address you all online today. Of course, I would very much have preferred to be meeting all of you in person and face to face.

I am happy that the current pandemic situation is not stopping us from holding events such as the annual conferences of our organizations. Especially now, when we can hardly predict the implementation of large events in the long term due to the increased infection rates, it is all the more necessary that these events take place.

The COVID-19 pandemic requires enhanced cooperation among all levels of society and various stakeholders. As several regions begin to deal with the second wave of COVID-19, we have a crucial role in shaping our response to the pandemic, through legislative, policymaking, oversight and advocacy roles.

Moreover, due to the global nature of the crisis, and the deep interconnectedness of societies and economies, we crucially need close cooperation on an international and regional level for a coordinated approach rooted in solidarity and mutual support.

That is why I am very grateful to you, Marshal Struk, as Chairman of the BSSSC, for addressing the parliamentarians of the Baltic Sea region with the core concerns and current focus topics of the BSSSC during our annual conference on 24 August. We are pursuing similar goals and objectives and I am confident that we will make significant progress in these areas through synergies in our approaches.

Since you know the main results of the 29<sup>th</sup> BSPC from yesterday's meeting of your board, I would like to concentrate

today on the priorities of the Swedish BSPC Presidency, which we want to discuss at our 30th annual conference from 29 to 31 August 2021 in Stockholm.

During our Presidency, we will focus on sustainable democracy and how to face common challenges in a changing world.

We do not only want to emphasise that because of the Swedish Parliament's celebration of 100 years of democracy.

We see the more than urgent need to address not only the preservation of our livelihoods but also the fundamental issues of democratic coexistence due to

- the demanding challenges currently threatening our livelihoods and our coexistence,

- the rapidly changing communication structures and media landscapes as well as the worrying interventions in the democratic forms of several countries,

- the intensification of violent conflicts and the noticeable increase in human rights violations

We wish all those fighting for democracy and more democratic structures in their countries that they find peaceful success.

The severe challenges of COVID-19 have also brought fundamental issues of our coexistence with our neighbours into public debate.

For that very reason, we should learn from each other's experiences in overcoming the crisis. We should not only keep an eye on our own countries but rely more on best practice examples in the future.

Especially in times like these, it is essential to keep reminding ourselves what a valuable asset we have in our democracies and how important it is to defend their cornerstones.

We cannot highlight enough the importance of democracy and the need to strengthen the parliamentary dimension in our countries.

Democratic institutions, strong cooperation and environmental and social sustainability are the foundation of the BSSC's work. Preserving these are clear priorities of the Swedish Presidency.

During the upcoming year, we will focus on four areas related to achieving sustainable democracy:

**First of all**, we want to concentrate our joint work on peaceful and reliable neighbourliness and intense cooperation built on participation and trust in the democratic system.

*That is why we have reaffirmed in our resolution the urgent call and the expectation that all Baltic Sea States continue to make every effort to ensure the Baltic Sea Region maintains its close and intense cooperation. We have underlined that the basis of our collaboration – international law, mutual understanding, trust, democratic values, the rule of law, human rights as well as equal opportunities for all - is of particular importance.*

Around us, we see various new forms of political engagement, and during our Swedish BSSC Presidency, we will focus specifically on youth and the role of civil society.

I am glad that these aspects are also at the heart of the BSSC's work. With current challenges decreasing trust in traditional democratic mechanisms, you have pointed out the demand for an even more active and concerted approach. I also appreciate very much that you already realised a seminar on democracy and a youth event back-to-back to your Annual Conference, to

involve young people in our consultations even more strongly and topic-oriented. We are looking at similar steps.

We consider the BSSSC in terms of youth involvement - through board meetings, youth camps and back-to-back events for the annual conference - as well as the Nordic Youth Council as best practice examples of youth work in the Baltic Sea Region.

We are optimistic that the current focus of the Lithuanian CBSS Presidency on youth inclusion and the Baltic Youth Platform - established by the CBSS - will bring significant progress in the representation of young people in institutions and decision-making processes in the Baltic Sea region. The BSPC has repeatedly called for that.

**The second theme** we want to explore in greater depth during our Presidency is the issue of democracy in a changing media landscape. Digitisation, disinformation and fake news are playing an increasingly important role in our daily lives. So, it is now more important than ever to protect free media and freedom of speech.

**Our third focal point** will be Adaptation to new demographics and challenges to the welfare model.

The demographic situation in the Baltic Sea Region is changing. The question is how to best adapt to this and how this will challenge our welfare model. How are urbanisation, an ageing population and labour shortages connected to trust in public institutions, social and regional equality and young people's opportunities? How can we, in the Baltic Sea Region, tackle these challenges sustainably and democratically?

**Our fourth pillar** is a theme where the BSPC has a long tradition of commitment and engagement: the environment.

*For many years, we have repeatedly addressed far-reaching demands to our governments to protect our natural life resources*

*in the best possible way and that the Baltic Sea that unites us returns closer to a good ecological status.*

We have achieved much here over the years. But developments have been so rapid that we must, again and again, take new and more far-reaching measures to move closer to these objectives.

That is why I am glad that we will focus during the next two years on the issue of climate change and biodiversity in a BSPP working group chaired by my colleague Cecilie Tenfjord Toftby.

We want to concentrate not only on the environmental side of climate change and biodiversity but also on innovation, technology and further economic aspects.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am delighted that our two institutions, BSSSC and BSPP, have mostly similar or identical priorities for the coming year. That shows that we are focusing on strategically fundamental challenges. Sharing the same basic views in many respects helps us to find similar and joint contributions to solving the current problems. Those synergies allow us to meet the present challenges in the best possible way and to strengthen peaceful cooperation and our democratic values in the Baltic Sea Region, to enhance our prosperity further and to make the Baltic Sea Region a more attractive place to live.

Our long-standing cooperation is a good foundation for this.

Thank you for your attention. I hope that we will all be able to meet face to face again in person as soon as possible.