Minutes - Baltic Sea Commission General Assembly 2020

Wednesday 21 October 2020 | 10:15 – 12:15 CET | Online
Approved by the 2021 BSC General Assembly, 23 September 2021

Session 1 Opening Session of the BSC General Assembly 2020

Jari Nahkanen, President of the CPMR Baltic Sea Commission and Member of the Board, Council of Oulu Region gave an opening speech and welcomed participants, noting that the BSC has found new ways of working and has managed well to continue good cooperation during the pandemic. He highlighted that this year has been a great challenge and many sectors have been deeply affected. Innovative ways have to be found to enable a sustainable recovery, boost employment and continue the development of our regions. Political representatives have a huge responsibility in supporting populations and businesses to manage the current crisis and enable the resilience of the Baltic Sea Region. Together with all levels of governance, solutions can be provided for a resilient recovery. Regions must be in the driving seat of recovery and the BSC plays an essential role bringing the regions together, helping to find common solutions and putting the regions’ interests forward in a united voice.

Ilkka Kanerva, Chair of the Managing Board, SouthWest Finland, former Foreign Minister and Member of Parliament, in a video message, warmly welcomed the participants and acknowledged that gathering online is extremely important to bring together regions, experiences, results, better policies and better messages to convey to EU policy-makers. He focused his speech on 3 key issues, the Green Deal, security and stability, and connections and accessibility. He concluded by noting that there is an endless list of issues common to the Baltic Sea Regions and he invited the regions to discuss them during the General Assembly.

Session 2 Statutory Issues

The Agenda of the Baltic Sea Commission General Assembly 2020 was unanimously approved. The Minutes of the 2019 Baltic Sea Commission General Assembly in Gdansk were unanimously approved.

Session 3 The Baltic Sea Commission Secretariat

Annika Sandström, Vice-President of the CPMR Baltic Sea Commission, Region Stockholm, provided participants with an overview of the recruitment process of the BSC Executive Secretary. She pointed out that more information was available in a recruitment report which had been sent out to Member Regions.

Jari Nahkanen thanked Åsa Bjering, the previous Executive Secretary for her tremendous work and presented the new Executive Secretary of the CPMR Baltic Sea Commission.
Lucille Ehrhart, Executive Secretary of the CPMR Baltic Sea Commission, introduced herself and gave participants some background information on her career up to now and her hopes for the future of the BSC.

Jari Nahkanen stressed that the CPMR BSC Work Plan 2019-2021 states that at the 2020 General Assembly, the Executive Committee should present a Region or Regions to host the BSC Secretariat for the 2021/2022 mandate period. In line with this, he confirmed that the Executive Committee presents Region Västerbotten to host the BSC Secretariat for a new mandate period. He thanked Västerbotten and also Norrbotten for having hosted the Secretariat for several years.

The Host Region of the BSC Secretariat for the 2021/2022 mandate period, Västerbotten, was introduced by Tomas Mörtsell, Vice-Chair of the Regional Executive Committee, Region Västerbotten. He also thanked Region Norrbotten for the years of shared hosting and welcomed the new Executive Secretary.

10.40 Session 4 Financial Report, Budget and Membership Fees

The Financial Report for 2019-2020 was presented to participants by Jenny Mozgovoy, Region Norrbotten. She pointed out that in all the financial documents the exchange rate 1 euro = 10 Swedish krona was used, but the real exchange rate has been a bit higher, and many of the payments have been made in Swedish krona, which has been positive for the Baltic Sea Commission. The accounts are balanced and the contributions from the hosting regions have reduced. The accounts for the first 6 months of 2020 are already finalised and legal responsibility was passed to Region Västerbotten in July.

Annika Sandström noted that Region Blekinge has not yet paid their membership fee for 2020. Whilst this is not due until the end of December 2020, she would have preferred it to be highlighted within the first 2 quarters of the year. Lucille Ehrhart confirmed that she had only been informed recently that Blekinge had not yet paid their fees for 2020. Ms Sandström noted that this was still not clear. Johan Sandberg, representing Region Blekinge in the General Assembly meeting, noted that the Region is having discussions whether to participate in the network in the future, due to internal priorities, as mentioned to Annika Sandström several months earlier. Annika Sandström acknowledged that she was aware of the situation in Blekinge, however her question was why wasn’t the Executive Committee informed that a region had not yet paid its membership fees. She stressed that this issue must be dealt with and that it is unacceptable as it risks increasing with more regions not paying and there is no remedy in place for regions that do not pay. Lucille Ehrhart noted that Blekinge has paid its 2019 membership fees which is reflected in the 2019 accounts.

Jari Nahkanen reminded participants of the financial paper with the Forecast Budget for 2021 and proposed Membership Fees, which had been sent to them prior to the meeting. He reiterated that Member Regions want to safeguard a sustainable long-term structure for a strong BSC Secretariat through reform and better finance, and this includes a corresponding draft budget which aims to have the BSC Secretariat staff costs covered by the BSC membership fees. The Executive Committee made the decision in January 2020 to propose to the General Assembly to increase the membership fees to €7,000. This would enable BSC Secretariat staff costs to be covered by the BSC membership fees, with a total revenue based on 20 Members, which would then be 140,000 euros.

The financial papers and increase in membership fees were unanimously approved.

Session 5 Update of BSC Activities

This session was introduced by Jari Nahkanen, who thanked the Chairs, Vice-Chairs and Regions for their continuing hard work throughout the year, and updates were given by the Chairs of the Working Groups:
Bosse Andersson, Chair of the Transport Working Group, Councillor Stockholm Council firstly thanked Åsa Bjering for all her support and welcomed Lucille Ehrhart. He noted that the goal of the Working Group is to promote sustainable connectivity and accessibility. He gave details of the activities organised over the past year including the very successful TEN-T guidelines expert meeting and Open Forum. The Working Group has also produced a report gathering examples of transport projects involving Baltic regions. The BSC Transport Working Group has also remained active in the CPMR Transport Working Group to ensure that the interests of the Baltic Sea Regions are taken into account. Looking forward, the Working Group will continue to work on the TEN-T and CEF and will work to promote sustainable transport in the Baltic Sea Region. He concluded by inviting participants to the next meeting of the Working Group on 27 October 2020.

Lucas Bosser, CPMR Director on Transport, thanked Bosse Andersson, and reacted on two points:
- The report, and this kind of initiative is why it is so important to have the geographical dimension within the CPMR, and invited Bosse Andersson to present the report during the next meeting of the CPMR Transport Working Group as it would be perfect if the other Commissions could take inspiration from the BSC and carry out a similar initiative within the other sea basins;
- He thanked the BSC Transport Working Group for the contributions made to the CPMR Transport Working Group and congratulated them on their efforts.

Richard Sjölund, Chair of the Energy and Climate Working Group, Vice President of the Board, Regional Council of Ostrobothnia, recalled the history of the group, and highlighted the LARS project. The Green Deal is top of the Working Group’s agenda. Mr Sjölund gave an update on the activities of the group over the year and noted with regret that some had to be cancelled due to the pandemic. It is hoped that the events can be rescheduled for a later date. He emphasised that the Green Deal cannot be implemented without practicing EU principles and the techniques of smart specialisation. He gave details of the Policy Position Paper which would be discussed and approved later in the meeting.

Marku Markkula, Helsinki-Uusimaa Region, noted that the Committee of the Regions is now very much focusing on the different support mechanisms, so as to integrate the Commission’s work especially on the broad spectrum of the different elements of the Green Deal, with the work of cities and regions. It is important that the Committee of the Regions plays a crucial role as a channel between the Commission and the cities and regions. He would be happy to link the work of the Baltic Sea Commission with the work of the Committee of the Regions.

Jerker Johnson, Ostrobothnia Region, discussed a policy note on the LARS project which addresses the challenges from a regional perspective, as it all comes down to the regions when the Green Deal becomes a reality. He also asked for reports from relevant projects, such as the LARS project, to be disseminated to the member regions.

Tiina Perho, Chair of the Maritime Working Group, Member of the Board Southwest Finland stated that the Working Group has remained active during the year. She reminded participants that the Working Group’s main goal is to promote a globally competitive sustainable growth in the Baltic Sea region, and it also focuses on the policy areas of maritime industry and sustainable tourism, which has been given a special twist this year with COVID-19. Both these policy areas support the implementation of the blue growth agenda and relate to the localisation and regionalisation of the sustainable development goals. She informed participants of the recent work with the European Parliament’s SEArca intergroup and of the Working Group meetings held over the past year. She concluded by inviting participants to the final Working Group meeting of the year, on 1 December.

Wolf Born, Head of Unit “Baltic Sea Cooperation”, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, gave a presentation of the history, outcome and perspectives of the BSC Task Force on the EUSBSR. He noted that a stakeholder forum was held online the previous day and he gave an update on the EUSBSR action plan which is still
waiting final approval by the Commission. His PowerPoint presentation can be found here. He concluded by giving some recommendations for future actions and thanked everyone for their involvement.

The BSC Activity Report 2019-2020 was unanimously approved.

Session 6 BSC Policy Messages

Kaarin Taipale, Vice-Chair of the BSC Energy & Climate Working Group, Board Member, Helsinki-Uusimaa Regional Council, presented the main messages of the Policy Position from the BSC Energy and Climate Working Group. Her PowerPoint presentation can be found here.

Due to some regions having to leave, the decision was made to move directly to agenda item 9.1 and then return to this session.

Session 9 Baltic Sea Commission Elections

Wolf Born, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, asked for a secret ballot.

Lucille Ehrhart explained how the elections would proceed, in accordance with the internal rules.

There were two candidates for the position of President, Jari Nahkanen from Oulu Region was seconded by Juha Rostedt from Päijät-Häme Region and Annika Sandström from Region Stockholm was seconded by Jesper Skalberg Karlsson from Region Gotland. The candidates were then given the floor to present their candidatures.

The voters were then called into an online voting room for the election of the President of the CPMR Baltic Sea Commission.

Jari Nahkanen was elected President of the Baltic Sea Commission by absolute majority.

There was one candidate for the position of Vice-President, Tomas Mörtsell from Region Västerbotten, who presented his candidature.

Tomas Mörtsell was unanimously elected Vice-President of the CPMR Baltic Sea Commission.

The new members of the Executive Committee were then nominated as follows:

Estonia
- A decision will be made on 10 November 2020
Finland
- Full Member: Sami Virtanen, Kymenlaakso Region
- Alternate Member: Otto Meri, Helsinki-Uusimaa Region
Germany
- Full Member: Wolf Born, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern
- Alternate Member: Merten Barnert, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern
Sweden
- No members presented themselves from any Swedish region

Jesper Skalberg Karlsson from Gotland apologised for the misunderstanding and noted the Swedish delegation would like extra time like Estonia to confirm the names of their representatives.

Jari Nahkanen suggested that Sweden be given until the end of November to submit the nominations to the Secretariat for the positions of Full Member and Alternate Member. This suggestion was agreed.
Session 6 BSC Policy Messages Continued

Jari Nahkanen thanked the Working Group for the hard work and for seizing the opportunities of the Green Deal Agenda to take a position.

Lucille Ehrhart presented the proposed amendment from Värmland. The amendment was approved unanimously.

Nils-Olov Lindsfor, Norrbotten Region, noted that it is very important in the text to define what a carbon sink and carbon storage is. It is also necessary to bear in mind the importance of bringing in forestry to a greater extent regarding climate change. He stressed the importance for carbon capture and carbon sinks in forestry to increase the productivity of forestry management, and that the cutting of forests is in line with the increased productivity of forests.

Richard Sjölund requested that the original text be kept in the Policy Position Paper.

Markku Markkula reiterated that the point raised by Nils-Olov Lindsfor is very important and we should look at the whole issue across different parts of Europe. He noted that temperatures are increasing in the north much faster than in other areas, which means that the snow and ice is melting at an unprecedented rate. He asked if it was possible to add “circular and bio-based” economy in the document.

Kaarin Taipale noted that the amendment proposed by Mr Lindsfor was already included in the paper.

The amended Policy Paper was approved unanimously.

Jari Nahkanen introduced the Baltic Sea Commission Resolution, which is a strong message from the Member Regions not only to EU institutions, but also to external partners. Each Working Group and the Task Force provided input and Member Regions had the possibility to submit amendments to the Resolution until 15 October. No proposed amendments were submitted.

The Resolution was approved unanimously.

Session 7 Membership

BSC Member Jämtland Härjedalen was presented by Elise Ryder Wikén, Regional Councillor. Her PowerPoint presentation can be found here.

Session 8 Presentation of the Candidate for CPMR Presidency

It was noted that Cees Loggen, Candidate for the CPMR Presidency, Province Noord-Holland, had left the meeting due to a prior engagement and would not be able to give his presentation.

Lucille Ehrhart provided participants with information on the CPMR General Assembly, to be held on 29 October 2020 and which will be divided into two policy sessions. In the afternoon, the CPMR Political Bureau will take place and it will elect a new President of the CPMR (1 application: Cees Loggen), elect the Vice-Presidents and make decision on documents, including the Final Declaration.
Session 10 Concluding Session

Lucille Ehrhart provided information on the upcoming meetings of the Baltic Sea Commission. The newly appointed Executive Committee will meet on 27 January 2021 in Satakunta (or online). There will be a Baltic Sea Commission meeting to discuss a contribution to the public consultation on Arctic Policy on 26 October, and the Transport Working Group will meet on 27 October. The Maritime Working Group will meet on 1 December.

Annika Sandström congratulated Jari Nahkanen on his election. She informed participants that she has had 6 years on the Executive Committee, and it is now time to say goodbye. It has been 6 interesting and challenging years for her personally and also for Region Stockholm, but she would now say goodbye and so would Region Stockholm. She stated that by January 2021, after 25 years as members of the Baltic Sea Commission and the CPMR, Region Stockholm would no longer be a Member.

Jari Nahkanen replied that he was saddened to hear this news and he hoped that Region Stockholm would reconsider this decision. He then gave a closing speech as newly elected President of the CPMR Baltic Sea Commission, noting that the fact there was 2 candidates demonstrates the regional commitment to the organisation. He stressed it was now time to move on as one team. He thanked Annika Sandström and Cezary Cieślukowski for the years of working together. He noted everyone, every region, and every country, needs to work together to move forward. It is time to decide on new priorities to put on the agenda, and regions have expressed an interest to work on innovation and smart specialisation, and bio-economy is another issue that could be addressed in more depth. This could be a new direction, whilst at the same time not forgetting the traditional policy areas and new working groups could be considered. Now more than ever, the Baltic Sea Commission needs to be united, to work together, to listen to each other, to appreciate each other and work to keep this ship sailing in the tail wind. He thanked everyone who had supported him in this election and promised to do his utmost for the organisation.

End of proceedings