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New hopes for enhanced cooperation within the reformed Council of the Baltic Sea States

On May 19th, a meeting of foreign ministers of the Council of Baltic Sea States (CBSS) was held. The virtual meeting (videoconference) was organized due to the COVID-19 pandemic. During the session, the ministers approved the CBSS reform, as well as raised issues of cooperation in the Baltic Sea region during the COVID-19 pandemic, while other issues involved youth involvement in the region, climate change and the fight against organized crime. The meeting was also to summarize the Danish presidency, which lasted from July 1st, 2019. In the light of the adopted documents, the CBSS should remain the center of political dialogue in the Baltic Sea Region (BSR).

Virtual meeting. In the BSR states, the situation concerning the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic was in large part under control in the second half of May. However, despite the introduction of subsequent stages of loosening restrictions in individual countries, including first permits to cross borders between Baltic Republics (more on this subject: [“IEŚ Commentaries”, No. 191](#)), conditions were still far from normal. For this reason, the meeting of foreign ministers, initially planned in a traditional form on Bornholm, took place in cyberspace (the decision to change the format of the meeting was made in the first half of April). Thanks to this virtual meeting the full participation of all 11 of the Baltic Sea Region’s Foreign Ministers (including Germany and the Russian Federation) as well as the Secretary General of the EU’s European External Action Service (EEAS) was possible. The main task of the ending Danish Presidency (July 2019 – June 2020) was to complete the CBSS reform process based on previous arrangements between its Member States (more on this subject: [“IEŚ Commentaries”, No. 53](#)).

Reformed CBSS is still desired... The Danish Foreign Minister, Jeppe Kofod, opening the videoconference, stressed Denmark’s commitment to resuming political dialogue within the CBSS (established on the initiative of the Foreign Ministers of Denmark and Germany). In his opinion, the CBSS added value to the development of the BSR derives from, inter alia, the importance of intergovernmental dialogue and practical cooperation between all states in the region. The representatives of other states expressed in a similar vein, highlighting the need to maintain a flexible format of regional political dialogue that would complement other activities. In addition, Norway’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ina Marie Eriksen Søreide, drew attention to strengthening multilateralism through various institutions of regional cooperation. Thus, she referred to the campaign promoting Norway’s candidature for the UN Security Council 2021-2022 as a non-permanent member. The CBSS can add value to regional cooperation by facilitating mutual understanding, building trust and stability, and promoting direct contacts between communities, which was emphasized in a statement by Helga Schmid (EEAS). The Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Sergei Lavrov, was also positive on the possibility of cooperation under the CBSS. He called on other MFAs to “re-open” cross-border dialogue. Member States agreed on the content of the main implementing documents defining the future scope of the CBSS as well as the competences of the CBSS Permanent International Secretariat in Stockholm. Therefore, the two-year reform process of the organization, initiated by Sweden in June 2018 was completed.

...mainly in the areas of non-military threats to international security... The traditional area of cooperation between states within the CBSS is linked with non-military security challenges that are focused on the economic (including energy), ecological and social levels. They define issues of expert groups and task forces complementing the regional political cooperation with a sectoral dimension. While cooperating in these areas, states must not forget about military threats, as emphasized by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Poland, Jacek Czaputowicz, who pointed to military incidents, expanded military capabilities in the Kaliningrad Oblast or



hybrid actions (disinformation, cyber-attacks and hostile rhetoric). Within the context of the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, regional cooperation in crisis management has also become particularly important. Urmas Reinsalu, Estonia's Minister of Foreign Affairs, said that the current crisis highlighted the need for increased regional cooperation on civil protection, as well as that it gives impetus to digitization in the region. The COVID-19 pandemic was also included in other foreign ministers' statements, e.g. Guðlaugur Þór Þórðarson (Iceland) pointed out its potential negative effects on children and adolescents. Therefore, the extension of mandates of the existing working structures – the Expert Group on Children at Risk and the Task Force against Trafficking in Human Beings – should be seen positively, especially since effects of their past operations are appreciated beyond the BSR. Finally, Edgars Rinkēvičs (Latvia) emphasized that although the long-term priorities of the CBSS (regional identity, sustainable and prosperous region, safe and secure region) are still valid, they should be supplemented by new areas, e.g. cooperation in scientific research.

...but several challenges remain for the Council. An essential element of the CBSS reform is to increase its flexibility and pragmatism. Meetings at the level of the heads of state and government (the so-called Summits) will be organized only if the weight of the decision would require it (after the annexation of Crimea, Member States suspended the organization of the Summits in an alternating cycle with ministerial meetings). In the light of new arrangements, the importance of the CBSS Permanent Secretariat in Stockholm will also increase. Its tasks have been extended, inter alia, by the possibility of initiating activities, promoting objectives and implementing priorities agreed upon by the Council (after approval of the Committee of Senior Officials). Therefore, it will be crucial to use regional synergies and conduct a structural dialogue with other cooperation formats in Northern Europe (mainly regional intergovernmental councils – the Arctic Council and the Barents Euro-Arctic Council). The new Director General will also have an important role after the term of office of Ambassador Maira Mora expires at the end of August 2020.

The BSR does not operate in isolation from cooperation within the EU, that's why the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Finland, Pekka Haavisto, referring to the European Green Deal, pointed to the necessity to strengthen the cooperation efforts in relation to the circular economy, climate change and sustainable development. These should be a driving force of economic recovery after the COVID-19 pandemic. Linas Linkevičius, the Lithuanian Foreign Minister, also spoke in the same vein. Moreover, he briefly introduced future activities of Lithuania, which will take over the CBSS presidency in July 2020, and said that they will be focused on sustainable development, 'green' industry and ecological tourism in the BSR. Altogether, these issues will become particularly important to relaunch the regional economy and strengthen the resilience in crisis situations. There is so much to gain on this level, thanks to the synergy effect from cooperation with other organizations, which was emphasized by the German Foreign Minister, Heiko Maas. He referred particularly to Germany's two-year chairmanship of the Helsinki Commission (HELCOM), which begins on July 1st. Additionally, H. Maas noted the involvement of young people in the political affairs of the region, which was also emphasized by Ann Linde, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Sweden, as well as Urmas Reinsalu.

Conclusions. For the first time since the annexation of Crimea, the CBSS ministerial meeting was held, attended by foreign ministers of all the CBSS Member States, including S. Lavrov and H. Maas. Representatives of the Member States welcomed the CBSS reform which was completed during the Danish presidency and stressed its importance for regional dialogue. Political cooperation will complement the practical dimension but will be based on a more flexible and pragmatic formula, taking into account the current state of relations. The CBSS Secretariat will gain more significance, the tasks of which are not only related to project implementation within the EU Strategy for the BSR, but also to facilitate and initiate intergovernmental dialogue in the region.