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A decisive year for regional cooperation within the Council of the Baltic Sea States

Ministers of foreign affairs and other high-level representatives of the members of the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS) met on May 25, 2022, in Kristiansand, Norway, for the first CBSS Ministerial Session in nine years. A summary of Norway's Presidency (July 2021-June 2022) and an assessment of the impact that Russia's invasion of Ukraine is having on the Baltic Sea Region (BSR) were made. In addition, Federal Foreign Minister of German Annalena Baerbock presented priorities as Germany will assume its one-year presidency of the CBSS on 1 July 2022, including the importance of offshore wind energy for the security of the region and the need to discuss the future of the organisation.

Norwegian CBSS Presidency (2021-2022): green transition, youth and civil protection. Norway, which assumed its presidency of the CBSS on July 1, 2021, was faced with the task of implementing the objectives of the Vilnius II Declaration, "A Vision for the Baltic Sea Region by 2030", adopted on June 1, 2021, at the end of Lithuania's CBSS presidency (see ["IEŚ Commentaries", no. 286](#)). In the spirit of the provisions of this document, Norway's chairmanship in the first six months focused on three issues. Firstly, on accelerating cooperation on green transformation, with an emphasis on innovation and promotion of best practices in industry, sustainable transport and clean energy generation. The importance of a circular economy and changing consumer habits were also highlighted. It was noted that the desire of states and local governments to increase the importance of this form of economy, evident for example in public procurement policies, supports the green transformation of the BSR at the state and regional level.

Secondly, the Norwegian presidency paid particular attention to increasing engagement and participation of young people in activities in the BSR and the need for civil society organisations to be involved in developing the basis for policy decisions and implementing projects in line with them. This will enable the promotion of identity building and the development of regional cooperation centred around this priority, including through the co-organisation of the Baltic Sea Parliamentary Youth Forum (BSPYF) and cooperation with young people, civil society, and city and sub-regional authorities across the BSR.

Thirdly, Norway has focused on supporting the mandates of working groups, renewed in recent years, which organise regional cooperation on civil protection (especially children at risk) and anti-trafficking policies, with a focus on organised crime and cybercrime. Their importance increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, which created a serious and far-reaching challenge for security in the BSR. In particular, the resilience and openness of societies were threatened because the national restrictions introduced severely strained mutual trust. Regional cooperation was also severely undermined by the uncoordinated actions of states in 2020 during the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic (["IEŚ Commentaries", no. 321](#)).

The BSR states' reactions to Russia's withdrawal from the CBSS. The Norwegian presidency was carrying out its planned tasks and preparing the organisation to celebrate its 30th anniversary until Russia – one of the CBSS Member States – invaded Ukraine (which is one of the Observer States). On March 3, 2022, after quick consultations, a consensus was reached between the foreign ministries of the ten CBSS Member States and the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. Pursuant to this, Russia was suspended from the organisation (["IEŚ Commentaries", no. 561](#)). Thus, three days before the major anniversary (30th) – in the face of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, which stands in clear contradiction to the norms of the peaceful coexistence of states – the BSR states decided to isolate Russia.

Russia's objection expressed by Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova, who called the decision a "hostile act" and threatened to withdraw Russia from the organisation, did not change the position of the CBSS members. Anniken Huitfeldt, Norway's foreign minister, stressed that the suspension will remain in force until cooperation becomes possible again under international law. Instead of discussing the achievements of regional cooperation and building political dialogue, the CBSS bodies focused on the issue of coordinating assistance to refugees from war-stricken Ukraine who began to arrive in the BSR states. A separated Russia decided to leave the CBSS, as announced by Sergey Lavrov, minister of foreign affairs of the Russian Federation, on May 17, 2022. On the same day, the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation decided to leave the Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference.

However, the suspension of cooperation with Russia within the CBSS made it possible to hold the 19th Ministerial Session, the first since 2013. After the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the occupation of eastern Ukraine, the CBSS Member States refused to continue meetings at the highest level. On May 25, 2022, foreign ministers and other high-level representatives

of CBSS members met in Kristiansand to discuss the consequences of the war, support for Ukraine and the future of regional cooperation without Russia and one of the Observer States – Belarus. These themes were reflected in the signed political declaration, which also highlighted the enormous progress the CBSS has made over the past thirty years. As far as the immediate future is concerned, the Council has decided to continue its work and, as much as possible, to implement projects without the participation of Russia. This is possible in all three long-term priorities of cooperation ([“IEŚ Commentaries”, no. 53](#)). In addition, Russia’s exit from the organisation makes it possible to expand cooperation or deepen it in areas that have so far been blocked by Russia (e.g. energy or civil security).

The German CBSS incoming Presidency (2022-2023): energy security and the future of the CBSS. Presentation of the priorities of the next state to take the CBSS presidency is customarily one of the points on the agenda of the meeting that summarises the past year. This was done in Kristiansand by German Federal Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock, who indicated that the presidency wants to develop cooperation between the BSR states in the energy sector, especially in offshore wind energy. Expanding interconnections and increasing the importance of renewable energy in the region is currently an important security policy issue. Given Russia’s war in Ukraine, these measures are not only in line with the EU’s European Green Deal, but also make an important contribution to combating climate change and reducing Europe’s dependence on oil and gas supplies from Russia.

Annalena Baerbock also highlighted the achievements of the CBSS, which is perceived as a useful regional forum for addressing many issues directly affecting the societies of the region. In this regard, the German presidency will promote youth exchanges in the region and increased cooperation to address the problem of munitions and chemical weapons dumped at the bottom of the Baltic Sea after the end of World War II ([“IEŚ Commentaries”, no. 343](#)). Germany will assume responsibility for the BSR at a crucial time, as the future of cooperation within the CBSS will be discussed over the next 12 months.

Conclusions and projections.

- Russia’s invasion of Ukraine created a new situation for the CBSS, which, having completed its reform, was about to embark on the next stage of its activities, based on the continuation of regional political dialogue, project implementation and structural cooperation with other institutions in Northern Europe. Faced with an unjustified attack by Russia, the remaining members reacted clearly and immediately – by suspending cooperation with the aggressor.
- Thirty years after the creation of the CBSS, the organisation is once again at a critical juncture, as some member states question the legitimacy of its existence. However, experience shows that the organisation has been effective in responding to and adapting to changes in its environment by modifying its plans of action, accompanied by the institutionalisation of cooperation ([“IEŚ Policy Papers”, no. 11/2021](#)).
- Although one of the added values of cooperation in the CBSS was Russia’s membership, which enabled a holistic view of regional affairs, the country’s withdrawal from the organisation does not mean that the institution should be dissolved. All long-term priorities remain valid. Moreover, the long-term challenges in the region identified by young people and parliamentarians (climate change, demographic problems, biodiversity loss) have also not been solved. In this situation, preserving/modifying the existing institutional framework, which already has a long tradition and institutional memory, would facilitate overcoming the existing challenges.
- One of the main reasons for establishing the CBSS was the desire to create a regional platform for cooperation after the upheavals that occurred at the end of the Cold War. Maintaining this organisation would also simplify Russia’s future reintegration (subject to its compliance with international law) into the regional community.