

Innovation, climate and policy discussed at the BPC 2021

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The Port of Tallinn hosted this year's Baltic Ports Conference (BPC). The future shape of the maritime sector and ports' role as entrepreneurs, innovation drivers, and alternative energy hubs were among the topics discussed. The event also marked the Baltic Ports Organization's (BPO) 30th anniversary, celebrated by looking at the evolution of the port sector over the past decades.

It wasn't an easy choice to move BPO's most important annual meeting to the online realm. Still, the event proved a great success, gathering a broad audience and staying true to its tradition of providing a stage for some of the port sector's most influential representatives.

Towards a green future

It won't surprise anybody that the topics related to environmental issues were very present throughout the day. As the European Commission (COM) continues to push for the whole transport industry to become greener via initiatives such as the Fit for 55, it becomes increasingly crucial for ports to plan accordingly. Measures intended for the implementation, including shore power facilities, can't be a burden the ports have to bear alone. Especially the smaller ones may struggle in this regard as the proposed regulations equally apply to TEN-T Core and Comprehensive Ports.

Multiple speakers and panellists participating in the BPC 2021 kept using one word: cooperation. Ports may take the role of facilitators of change. Yet, the involvement of all parties making up the port ecosystem is crucial if the industry wants to meet the ambitious goals set by the COM.

The role policymakers play in the process is also critical. The proposed emission cuts need to be achievable technically and economically, considering the diversity that characterises the port industry. No two ports are the same, differing in size, location and the types of traffic they attract.

Geopolitical aspects also become more and more impactful as the EU moves forward with its green policies. Taking the Baltic Sea region as an example, the fact that not all countries in the area are obliged to adhere to the rules proposed by Brussels may directly impact the overall competitiveness of Baltic ports in the decades to come. A possible shift of business towards ports from outside the EU is a valid concern. The idea of equal rules for everyone must be considered in a broader geopolitical context.

Driving innovation

Thankfully, ports, traditionally seen as somewhat stagnant and conservative, are wholly different today. While the complex nature of a port ecosystem brings a set of challenges that make rapid shifts in their development plans difficult, it is also one of their strengths.

It is becoming increasingly common for ports to take up the role of innovation drivers and orchestrators of actions that transform themselves and the surrounding body of companies. As the crossroads between land and sea, ports are the perfect testing ground for new technologies that may also help the maritime transport sector prepare for and achieve the goals set before them.

Policymakers focusing on onshore power and alternative fuels, such as hydrogen, shouldn't come as a surprise to an industry that has been implementing the former for many years in the Baltic Sea region alone, similarly with gas-based

alternative fuels. Experience and knowledge gathered during the still ongoing development of the Baltic liquefied natural gas (LNG) bunkering network will come in handy during the green transition.

Then there's also the digitalisation process. The conference's host serves as an excellent example for utilising digital tools to increase efficiency and reduce the port's impact on the climate and environment. The crucial point is that legislation needs to be future-proof and stand the test of time. Technology is moving forward; the maritime industry is ready to make use of it, but port development and investment plans are long-term affairs and must be understood as such by all parties involved in sketching the transport sector's future.

See you in Gdynia!

The BPC will return on 7-8 September 2022, taking us to Gdynia. Hopefully, with a bit of luck, it will offer the opportunity to finally meet in person and raise a glass to commemorate BPO's 30th anniversary. And next year will mark an important date for the host of the BPC 2022, the Port of Gdynia, celebrating its 100th birthday.

Please head to [BPO's LinkedIn page](#), where you can see how its Members have changed and evolved during the years and re-watch the BPC 2021 stream for some extraordinary visual impressions of the history of the Baltic port sector. There is still more to come this year, so make sure to keep an eye out for future publications commemorating BPO's history. ■