Highlights from the Baltic Ports Conference 2026

by Andrzej Urbaś, *External Consultant, BPO*

This year's edition of the Baltic Ports Organization's (BPO) Baltic Ports Conference (BPC) was held in the Finnish Turku, on 2-4 September, bringing together maritime leaders, port authorities, and experts from the industry and beyond for high-level discussions. Under the guiding theme One Large Green Shipping Corridor, Day 1 tackled not only core industry transformations but also biodiversity, resilience, and diversity. Day 2 put the spotlight on existing and raising golden-goose opportunities – including wind energy and carbon capture & storage (CCS) – as well as on how modern tech is reshaping ports, terminals, shipyards, and much more.

The event began with a round of welcoming remarks, starting with Piia Elo, Mayor of Turku, and Minna Pirkkanen, the Port of Turku's newly elected CEO, alongside Alan Aleksandrowicz, BPO's Chair, Bogdan Ołdakowski, the Organization's Secretary General, and *Baltic Transport Journal*'s Przemek Myszka, who crafted the BPC26 agenda. Together, they set the strategic tone for the audience's 360-degree journey of the two conference days (September the 2nd was reserved for a welcoming aboard *Suomen Joutsen*, the historical full-rigged ship moored by the picturesque Aura River, a sax-themed party that offered participants a delightful preview of what Turku has in store). Day 1 was expertly moderated by Dominik Landa, an industry veteran who now operates his own consultancy, among other things.

Ports in transition – pressures within, pressures without

Those who wish to lead must get comfortable in the art of thinking the unthinkable. Leena Jokinen, coming from the University of Turku's Finland Futures Research Center, emphasized that maritime futures require genuinely long-term perspectives to drive sustainable development and avoid unforeseen consequences. She argued that maritime industry players must act as catalysts rather than followers to shape upcoming trends within a decades-spanning horizon, navigating industry uncertainties while addressing current sustainable future trends such as environmental clean-up ships, land electricity challenges, transport synergies, energy flexibility, cybersecurity, and defense.

The Port of Turku delivered a strong follow-up, offering a guide to applying theory and taking concrete steps toward a sustainable future. Minna Pirkkanen outlined the seaport's role as a flexible maritime hub with a strong turnaround time and hinted at the company's environmental program. One of its most ambitious points is carbon-neutral port operations by 2029. But the star of the presentation was the new ferry terminal. Nicknamed Fregatti, designed with passenger comfort and adaptability in mind, it'll serve all visiting ferries and feature an automated loading area. Additionally, the project incorporates a battery energy storage system and circular economy practices such as reusing waste concrete.

The port industry faces a plethora of challenges, from strategic to routine. Oscar Egerström LLM, TT Club, highlighted some more hands-on risks ports face in relation to claims, such as fraud and theft, ship-related incidents, infrastructure damage, as well as all the practical risks seafarers and dockworkers are facing. He also directed the attention to the impacts of climate change alongside other escalating environmental challenges, like 2024 being the hottest year on record, a 30% increase in losses from the prior period, and global natural catastrophe losses exceeding $100 billion for the fifth consecutive year. But it is not all doom and gloom. Climate resilience can be strengthened, e.g., by avoiding focusing on a single risk, balancing short- versus long-term measures, or accommodating uncertainty in design.

The internal and external pressures were taken into consideration once again during the following discussion panel. Given that ports face unique disruptions, slow adaptation is no longer viable; tailored approaches are essential. Ensuring resilience and competitiveness requires protecting dual-use infrastructure, frequent policy adjustments for challenges such as drones, and smart dialogue between policymakers and industry to keep sustainability actions workable.

How to make a shipping corridor green – exactly

Linda Styhre, IVL Swedish Environmental Research Institute, defined green corridors as zero-emission routes reliant on net-zero life-cycle fuels, serving as catalysts for large-scale logistics decarbonization, both off- and on-shore. She emphasized that their success depends on three core elements: the route, vessel, and bunker, while noting that high costs, low customer demand, and inadequate policy instruments remain some of the primary barriers to implementation.

Anne Britt Høydal, DNV, went a step further, suggesting that in the end, green corridors lack a single fixed definition and are instead evolving (separate) ecosystems rather than simple port-to-port routes. She noted that achieving success requires aligning diverse stakeholders, including shippers, shipowners, ports & terminals, and financial institutions, all driven by different incentives. Here, seaports can act as future-energy-hub enablers, unlocking funding and securing long-term competitiveness, among other vital functions.

The discussion on the customers' willingness to pay for green solutions concluded with a nuanced 'yes/no' since short-term positive attitudes have somewhat cooled, and maritime customer demand alone probably will not drive industry-wide greening. Panelists emphasized that greening transport requires a collaborative effort. Success does not rely on overcoming a single limiting factor (e.g., a technological drawback), but on creating a commercially viable and opportunity-rich environment.

Jumping the cargo fence – biodiversity, resilience, diversity

While operational knowledge has always been sufficient in the world of

transport and logistics, modern leaders must master the art of future multi-faceted investing, risk assessment, finance, geopolitics, and strategy, treating decarbonization as a leadership test under uncertainty where waiting for ironclad clarity risks arriving too late. Irene Rosberg, Copenhagen Business School, emphasized that maritime leaders have to develop proactive skills to anticipate constant disruption. Furthermore, a sign of a modern leader is one that evaluates the employees based on both merit and skills.

Kirsti Tarnanen-Sariola, the Finnish Ports Association, outlined her organization's Port Biodiversity Roadmap. This initiative aims to increase awareness of seaports' impact on nature, both positive and negative, toward establishing measures for the protection of local biodiversity. In Finland, this is a teamwork, as several seaports are brainstorming their own as well as the overall roadmap.

The closing panel made it clear – bio- and gender diversity isn't a footnote anymore; it's a rising asset driving transport and logistics forward. Panellists noted that implementing solutions requires strategic timing, choosing whether to wait for industry-wide standardization or act as a frontrunner. Embracing broader aspects of diversity, such as gender, age, and culture, fosters new perspectives, out-of-the-box problem-solving, and other organizational advantages.

Wrapping up the first day, a partner spotlight featured a round of presentations by conference sponsors, beginning with Pål Espen Nordhaug, Hallgruppen, discussing flexible warehousing and bulk storage solutions for modern port logistics. The session continued with Riika-Maria Iljin from Forlog presenting industrial logistics and packaging solutions, and concluded with her brother, Lauri Iljin, Turku Stevedoring, highlighting the company's role as the main crane and break-bulk operator in the Port of Turku.

September 3rd wrapped up in style with an evening dinner at the wonderfully atmospheric Ruissalo Boatyard (Åbo Båtvarf) – once the biggest in the Nordics (and still bursting with character!). Guests cruised in by river ferry, soaking up a late-afternoon sunshine ride down the Aura River that felt like a mini holiday wedged into the conference schedule. With great food, drinks, history, and music, it was the cherry on top – the perfect, delicious finale to a jam-packed-with-insights day.

Wind, carbon, and digitalization

As the BPC26 entered its second day, moderated by Przemek Opłocki from the *Baltic Transport Journal* and its newest spin-off *Port Gear*, industry leaders shifted their focus from immediate green transitions to the operational and structural shifts reshaping the maritime sector. Joke Bamps, European Commission, missed her Day 1 flight but was fortunately able to join us. She brought forward the EU Ports Strategy. Built on pillars of competitiveness, energy transition, security, social skills, territorial cohesion, and investment, the Strategy intentionally avoids a one-size-fits-all model by serving as a flexible toolbox that accommodates diverse port profiles. Key thematic priorities include strengthening critical infrastructure against disruptions, advancing military mobility through dual-use infrastructure investments, and carefully evaluating foreign investments.

"We did it simply because the customer asked for it." This was naturally just a 'hook,' as Jesper Bank, Port Esbjerg, dove into his seaport's path to developing a logistics solution for CCS – after becoming the prime spot for anybody seriously thinking about erecting an offshore wind farm in northern Europe. Operating with a highly diversified and robust business model, the port avoids pursuing funds for a narrow purpose, focusing instead on versatile, multi-user infrastructure – additionally attributed on a flexible, current demand basis. To this, Baris Dolek, Northern Lights, added how to establish a working CCS value chain, including liquid CO_2 carriers and permanent undersea storage, for large-scale customers.

The day concluded with a session dedicated to explaining why pen-and-paper operations simply do not cut it anymore these days, with speakers and panellists having the chance to share the whys and hows of implementing digital processes. It started with the presentation of another BPC26 partner, Weasel Software, carried out by Hanna Roihuvaara and Mike Karjagin. The duo set the stage for the discussion, leveraging their extensive hands-on experience in modernizing complex operational environments, including, naturally, ports (with a particular focus on streamlining ferry operations). The topic was then further explored during a panel as other experts joined Hanna and Mike to share some practical examples of both developments and challenges.

New BPO Board Deputy Chair – elected

In all the chaos that is the Baltic Ports Conference (deftly controlled by Nikoletta Karpińska who successfully organized her inaugural event, kudos!), all the panels, presentations, evening festivities, and networking, it is easy to lose sight of some key events in the life of the BPO. As such, it's our pleasure to announce that Ulrika Prytz Rugfelt, Chief Communications & Sustainability Officer, Copenhagen Malmö Port, has been elected as the new BPO Board Deputy Chairperson. "I am very pleased and honored by the confidence placed in me as Deputy Chair, and I look forward to continuing the Board's work within BPO together with my fellow Board members. An important part of this work is, of course, to listen carefully to the wishes and priorities of our members and incorporate these into the strategy that we will finalize this fall," Ulrika commented.

All good things come to an end…

BPC26 is over, but what a ride it was! The agenda was beautifully packed, the audience more than eager to pitch its remarks, and the hosts more than we could have ever asked for. We would like to thank the Port of Turku and its team for the fantastic support at every step of the journey leading to this year's event. *Kiitos*!

"It has been truly inspiring to see the broader Baltic and European maritime community come together once again with such remarkable energy and engagement. As we look ahead, cooperation and collaboration remain the cornerstones of a strong, resilient Baltic maritime community, and I want to extend my deepest thanks to the City and Port of Turku for being such a wonderful host for this year's conference," Alan Aleksandrowicz praised the event.

We would also like to thank all the sponsors, honorary partners, and media friends for their support. It was a pleasure to work with you – and we hope to do it again!

… but a new journey's on the horizon!

The 2027 edition of BPC will take us to Riga! In his invitation, Ansis Zeltiņš, the Port of Riga's CEO, mentioned the challenging times lying ahead of the port industry in the Baltic and beyond. He also pointed out that seaports have stopped being the slow-movers they used to be. The sector has proven to be every bit as adaptable as others – if not more! Join us in the capital of Latvia on 8-9 September! ■