

20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of BPO

# From coaching to communication



**At the beginning of the 1990s the Baltic region saw new actors willing to become a part of the free market. The more experienced tutors – and natural partners – were on the other side of the Baltic Sea and, as a result, the Baltic Ports Organization was established. On its arena the East met the West and the first lessons in ‘port reality’ in a market economy took place.**

“Previously, the management of ports in the Baltic countries had been centralised to Moscow and after becoming independent ports no longer had this kind of competence available,” recalls Heikki Nissinen, managing director, Port of Helsinki.

The first steps were taken under the auspices of the Port of Copenhagen, which together with the ports of Tallinn and Rostock formed the Baltic Ports Organization in October 1991. The first chairman was Peeter Palu (Sea Trade Port of Tallinn), whereas Per C. Schmidt (Port of Copenhagen) held the position of secretary general, with the assistance of Gert Nørgaard. Copenhagen was the organization’s first domicile, later taken over by Stockholm. Since 2006 the headquarters have been placed in Gdańsk, with Julian Skelnik (in those days vice-president, today marketing and development director of the port), as chairman (since 2007), and Bogdan Ołdakowski as secretary general.

“The establishment of such an organization was a big event back then,” underlines Bogdan Ołdakowski. The aim was to create a platform where Scandinavian and Eastern European ports could exchange their experiences. Knowledge and know-how was transferred from West to East on a large scale, contributing to the rapid growth of Eastern

European ports. According to Bogdan Ołdakowski, if it weren’t for BPO, the development might not have been that fast.

Twenty years after its establishment, BPO gathers 40 Baltic ports, including the biggest ones, and constitutes an important communication platform between the ports from nine countries.

## Europe’s new maritime highway

The organization’s objectives, as was written in its bylaws, were ambitious. The most important one underlined the necessity of rapid, yet rational development of maritime transport in the Baltic Sea region. That development had a dual purpose: firstly, to boost economic growth of the states in the region and secondly, to create an efficient gate for transfer of passengers and cargo within the BSR. Among other purposes there were: exchange of information, technology transfer and port management services, education and training of port employees.

Furthermore, BPO aimed at cooperating with various international organizations (International Maritime Organization – IMO, Helsinki Commission – HELCOM, Baltic Development Forum, European Sea Ports Organisation – ESPO) and it was to present the members’ joint stand on matters

discussed in these forums. Another important element of BPO’s involvement, connected to the one previously mentioned, was the promotion of the Baltic Sea region as a strategic way for transport and logistics services. In the mid-1990s, a slogan was created: “The Baltic Sea – Europe’s new maritime highway.” By taking part in debates and discussions at an international level, BPO contributed to a raised international awareness of the Baltic Sea’s problems and potential.

## The environment matters

Gert Nørgaard, Strategy and Planning Manager at the Copenhagen-Malmö Port, recalls: “The main issues during the first years of BPO were to get to know each other, education in environmental issues and exchange of ports’ statistics. During the years, the environment in the Baltic Sea became the main matter, especially regarding waste reception facilities.” Indeed, environmental problems were and still are one of the most important issues the organization deals with. Already in 1998, BPO formulated the Environmental Policy, which included inter alia guidelines on environmental planning, waste management and education in that field. Moreover, the organization is an observer to the Helsinki Commission

and it actively used this status especially in the first stage of its membership, for example, by participating in the HELCOM project on ship-generated waste in port reception facilities (MC-REFAC). In 2010, BPO took a firm stand on the new IMO regulations, which limit the sulphur content in ships' emissions and established Sulphur Emission Control Areas. The organization's view was formulated as a conclusion of a thorough debate among BPO members, ports, shipping lines, R&D institutions and other stakeholders organized in Copenhagen in January 2010. BPO's stand on the matter was presented, among others, to the European Parliament.

### Evolution

Twenty years ago the situation was far different from the present. "Back then, the distance between ports in the former communist countries and the ports in Sweden, Finland and Denmark was enormous," says Julian Skelnik, BPO chairman. "At the very beginning, BPO members experienced problems with cross-border movement, customs or diverse stages of development in different parts of the BSR."

But, the world was changing, and so was BPO and its members. At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century big differences between an Eastern and a Western European port were already unlikely to be noticed. "The ports of the early 1990s are no longer recognisable as the same ports physically or operationally. Especially ports in the Baltic countries, which used to have a highly specified task as part of the Soviet Union's transports, today provide services to a much more diversified traffic flow, even though Russia's transit traffic is still an important part of their traffic," explains Heikki Nissinen. "Operations of all ports are currently more businesslike than in the beginning of the 1990s," he continues. "Private actors are practically responsible for almost all service production and ports operate mainly according to the landlord principle." Nowadays all Baltic ports have started to face similar problems, for example the environment or security protection, social dialogue, economic and stability crisis. Therefore, the hitherto working formula of BPO needed to be changed. This is how the organization went from teaching lessons in port reality to establishing a platform of cooperation, communication and exchange of information. Ever since ex-communist countries (except from Russia) joined the European Union (2004), most international regulations regarding the Baltic Sea were

decided in the EU. According to Gert Nørgard, since then BPO has become more and more of an organization where ports and other stakeholders can meet and share their opinions on various matters.

The new strategy of BPO is primarily to constitute a networking organization, which represents and secures BSR's interests on the European arena. Promotion of the Baltic Sea – "Blue Maritime Highway" – for the transport industry remains a core activity as well, together with campaigning for the sea as the most efficient and eco-friendly way of transporting goods and passengers. Furthermore, a bigger emphasis is put on cooperation and stronger relations with partners in Asia, the Americas and Africa.

"Today BPO is to a great extent a networking channel," explains Heikki Nissinen. "One great and important form of operations is organizing conferences on such topical subjects that influence the operations and future of Baltic Sea ports as well as the Baltic Sea transport in general. BPO also aims to actively influence the issues pertaining to the special status of the Baltic Sea in Brussels with ESPO as its partner."

### Dreams for the future

What do the BPO decision-makers dream about? "I wish to activate Russia, in the first place," says Julian Skelnik. "Moreover, I hope we will create a platform for exchange of knowledge connected specifically to ports, the

port business and its operations." Among other dreams mentioned by the BPO chairman is a larger number of members. Ahead there is also the ambitious task of lobbying in the EU, with the aim of distributing its financial support to the region more evenly; to create a fund which will suit the Baltic Sea needs more than the existing ones.

As BPO grows and evolves with its members, the strategy for the future is written by the Baltic ports. However, with over 800 mln tonnes of cargo handled, 90 mln passengers and 300,000 calls at member ports it is almost certain that BPO represents a unique potential, which will hopefully flourish for the next twenty and more years to come. ■

**Martyna Bildziukiewicz**

Baltic Transport Journal is preparing a special publication for the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of BPO, which is to be issued in July, together with this year's fourth edition of our magazine. We would, therefore, be very grateful for your contributions. If you have any comments on BPO's work or the process that Baltic ports have gone through over the past 20 years; if you'd like to share your memories with us or have unique photographs documenting the work of Baltic Ports Organization, please do not hesitate to contact our editorial office at [editorial@baltic-press.com](mailto:editorial@baltic-press.com) or call us at +48 58 627 2394.



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