

News from the Black Sea

Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation

Permanent International Secretariat (PERMIS)

BSEC

Dear Readers,

We are publishing this 12th issue of our *“News from the Black Sea”* with a small delay and under circumstances that we would have considered unthinkable just a few months back: the sudden and overwhelming outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic is wreaking havoc on our planet and taking countless lives throughout the entire world, showing us once again how vulnerable we humans are, despite our huge technological and other advances. We hope that as a global Community we will be able to share the means for defeating this pandemic in the near future.

We in PERMIS, as many other institutions, have chosen to work “home-office” for the sake of the well-being of our staff and for standing in line with the recommendations provided by the Authorities of our Host Country. Though we had to cancel some BSEC meetings, as listed on <http://www.bsec-organization.org/events>, we did not sit idle during these last months, pursuing the everyday activities of the Secretariat and the implementation of the aims and objectives of the BSEC Organization: each and every one of our staff members is following and contributing without interruption to the daily work of the PERMIS. We will also continue and expand the use of holding meetings online, following the growing trend during these trying times. You can, therefore, continue to contact us for any issue of interest; kindly visit the BSEC website for further details <http://www.bsec-organization.org/>.

We hope this difficult period will soon come to an end and we will all return to normal life, however changed the latter might prove to be! Until then, dear Readers, please #stay home #stay safe!

Ambassador Michael B. Christides
Secretary General

LATEST UPDATES ON BSEC AREAS OF COOPERATION DURING THE CORONA VIRUS LOCKDOWN PERIOD

PERMIS proposal in confronting the Covid-19 Pandemic, within the BSEC Region.

Regional cooperation in emergency situations like the Covid-19 outbreak has often proven to be very helpful in addressing some of the challenges. With the above in mind, the BSEC PERMIS initiated consultations with the Romanian BSEC Chairmanship, in order to explore the possibilities for any common action, like exchange of information concerning critical medical equipment and supplies, systematic briefing on the prevailing situation, so that BSEC Member States know exactly - and from official sources - what is happening in their neighboring countries.

Energy

On the occasion of the 75th Anniversary of the United Nations the *Energy Policy and Development Center* (KEPA) of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, which has been recently designated as the global *UN Academic Impact* (UNAI) Hub for SDG 7, proposed in its capacity as the coordinator of the *BSEC Green Energy Network* to celebrate the above Anniversary by having each BSEC Member State plant 75 trees in their respective territories. So far four BSEC Members States have already expressed their interest to contribute, while other Members are expected to announce their readiness for joining the initiative.



Environment

First Meeting of the Steering Group of the Common Maritime Agenda (CMA) for the Black Sea (Sofia, on 17 February 2020).



The meeting was chaired by the Republic of Bulgaria, as the first Coordinator of this Group and was attended by several contributors, including BSEC Member States and the BSEC PERMIS; participants discussed the work program and the priorities for 2020.

Among other, the future *Black Sea Assistance Mechanism* (BSAM) was mentioned as a useful tool, which will provide expertise and logistical support to the Steering Group, as well as to the stakeholders for the CMA implementation. The BSAM is projected to start operating as of September/October 2020 and it will last for two years.

Raising awareness about opportunities in the Blue Economy.

BSEC PERMIS submitted in January 2020 a project proposal under the *Executive Agency for Small and Medium-sized Enterprises* (EASME) Call for proposals "EMFF-IBA-BS-2019", which was accepted for funding to the amount of 99.210,43 EUR. The Secretariat will create and manage the **Black Sea Virtual Knowledge Centre** (BSVVC), starting from the beginning of June 2020. The BSVVC aims to provide the necessary means to disseminate information, ensure

synergies and raise awareness about opportunities in the Blue Economy. It also aims to provide regular updates on progress in the implementation of the **Common Maritime Agenda for the Black Sea**.

"BRIDGE: Advancing Black Sea Research and Innovation to co-develop Blue Growth within Resilient Ecosystems".

BSEC PERMIS, together with thirty other international entities, submitted in January a project proposal under *Horizon 2020* Call for Proposals "BG-11-2020" under the above title. PERMIS will be a key partner in this project, especially in supporting Work Packages 8 and 9 related to Policy and Public Engagement, as well as to Education and Capacity Building.

"Blueing the Black Sea"

Following the recent visit of a **World Bank** delegation to the BSEC headquarters, PERMIS started discussing with the Bank's offices in Washington a possible cooperation for developing a *Global Environmental Facility International Waters* (GEF-IW) Project, entitled "**Blueing the Black Sea**". Deliberations between the two sides continue and are a further proof that the BSEC PERMIS is today considered as a trustworthy partner, whose experience and knowledge for the Black Sea region can be successfully utilized for the implementation of various regional environmental projects.

Strengthening the project implementation capacity of the BSEC Organization.

The BSEC PERMIS will receive a **direct grant of 400.000 EUR** under the EU *Regional Action Program*, with the aim to strengthen its project implementation capacity and its role as facilitator of dialog and cooperation in the region.

Areas of work will address Tourism, Transport, environmental protection and youth entrepreneurship. Preparation for the implementation of the relevant projects continues.

ITC - New Action Plan for the Working Group on Information and Communication Technologies

The Ministry of Transport, Information Technology and Communications of the Republic of Bulgaria elaborated the new Action Plan of the WG for the next two years, starting from 1 January 2020. Among other, the Plan defines the goals, objectives and measures for a closer cooperation in the field of ICT among BSEC Member States. Special attention is given to the exchange of best practices on long-standing issues, such as women in ICT, child online protection, bridging the digital divide and high-speed connectivity in remote and sparsely populated areas.

Project Development Fund (PDF)

After receiving the contribution of 20,000 USD from the Republic of Turkey and the pledge from the Hellenic Republic for a contribution of 30,000 EUR, the Council of Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the BSEC Member States instructed the Steering Committee of the BSEC **Project Development Fund (PDF)** to restart its operations and proceed with the launching of respective calls for proposals.

Transport



Coronavirus and its impact on supply chains and mobility networks.

The BSEC transport partners BSEC-URTA and IRU, are closely monitoring the situation across the wider Black Sea region and globally evaluate the pandemic's impacts on commercial road transport. Their aim is to maintain the supply chains for food and medical products in safe conditions for drivers and all involved actors, in full respect of the current governmental decisions and orders. BSEC PERMIS communicated to the Organization's Member States the relevant documents concerning COVID-19 and its impact on road transports, especially in the Black Sea region.

Border Crossing Facilitation

The BSEC PERMIS hosted in February an extraordinary meeting with representatives from BSEC-URTA, IRU, the International Secretariat of

the Parliamentary Assembly of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (**PABSEC**) and from the International Transporters Association (**UND**) of Turkey.

Participants exchanged views on the serious problems that truck-drivers face at most border crossing points and along the main transport corridors connecting the BSEC region with EU countries, the Middle East and Central Asia.

Apart from the resulting considerable delays, which heavily burden all stakeholders, the above problems expose drivers, trucks and their cargo to serious security risks; not least among them are the desperate efforts of illegal immigrants to hide in trucks, in order to cross border check-points.

The first Technical Meeting on the E-PERMIT Project

The First Technical Meeting on the e-PERMIT Project, organized at the initiative of the Republic of Turkey, was held *in Ankara on 10-11 March 2020*, as a follow-up to the decisions of the last Meeting (13 November 2019, BSEC HQs) of the BSEC Member States participating in the Project «*BSEC Permit System*». It was agreed to initiate the elaboration and implementation of the e-PERMIT Project at a bilateral level between the interested BSEC Member States; the representatives of the IRU and BSEC-URTA expressed their full support to the project and their readiness to contribute to its full implementation.

Tourism

Impact of COVID 19 on Tourism - PERMIS efforts to further strengthen and enhance Cooperation among the BSEC Member States.

Tourism is the sector most affected by the COVID-19 outbreak, as it is based on interaction amongst people more than any other economic activity with social impact. According to the UNWTO estimates, global international tourist arrivals in 2020 could decline between 20-30%, down from an estimated growth of 3% to 4% forecast in early January 2020. BSEC PERMIS is following closely the activities and guidance of the UNWTO and it recently reminded all BSEC Member States of the importance that the latest Recommendations published by the UNWTO have in supporting governments, the private sector and the international community for better addressing this unprecedented social and economic challenge.

Signing of a “Letter of Intent” with the EPA on Cultural Routes.



It is a source of particular satisfaction that during the coronavirus epidemic PERMIS was able to conclude the signing of the “Letter of Intent” concerning its cooperation with the Secretariat of the *Enlarged Partial Agreement (EPA)* on Cultural Routes of the *Council of Europe*, that entered into force on 6 April 2020.

Ongoing projects

PERMIS reaffirmed its support for the BLUEMED project (concerning the protection and promotion of underwater cultural heritage sites), initially introduced during the last Meeting of BSEC Ministers responsible for Culture. PERMIS invited interested Member States to consider developing a pilot project at one or more selected sites; these pilot projects can help expand at a later stage the BLUEMED project in more locations of BSEC countries. One State has already answered positively.

Another project on the horizon is about wine producing in the wider BSEC Region. BSEC PERMIS was invited to partner in a consortium applying under an **Anna Lindh Foundation** Call for proposals on *Intercultural Dialog Initiatives*. PERMIS will cooperate with ICBSS and other institutions from Greece, Montenegro, Poland, Italy, etc. The project proposal titled "**In the beginning was ... the wine**" will be focused on wine producing and will promote intercultural dialogue.

Black Sea Project Promotion Facility (BSPPF) Projects

The number of projects financed by the BSPPF, established through a voluntary contribution of 1 million US Dollars by the Russian Federation, is increasing.

“Black Sea Cuisine Development and Promotion Program”



The implementation of the above project was successfully completed through the active involvement of the Federation of Restaurateurs and Hoteliers of Russia (FRIO) and the contribution of experts from Bulgaria, Turkey and Ukraine.

The objective was to build-up a coherent data base storing identified common dishes and local products with Geographical Indications, specific ingredients, spices and sauces, as a basis for the eventual elaboration of the “*Black Sea Cuisine*” profile. The relevant Data Base of almost 600 items covers all of the Black Sea coastal area. A website was launched which is constantly enriched with new content. The plan is to formalize the “*Black Sea Cuisine*” profile as a particular branch of world gastronomy and reach for its recognition among the world’s top-15 most desirable cuisines.

An *International Black Sea Cuisine Cluster* (IBSCC) was created to attract interested stakeholders from restaurants, hotels, manufacturers of regional products, wineries, tour operators and from other small and medium-sized enterprises.

Furthermore, a «*Black Sea Cuisine*» documentary film was awarded the First Prize in the Tourism category at the 2019 International Tour Film Festival.

Project to facilitate e-commerce and stimulate the export capacity of SMEs in the Black Sea region.

The “*E-Commerce Opportunities for SMEs: Boosting Exports and Opening New Markets*” project, implemented by the *Global Rus Trade LLC* (Russian Federation), has reached the final stage of its realization. The *Global Rus Trade LLC* is an electronic platform which brings together almost 2300 registered companies from 106 countries.

The main outcome of the project is the establishment of an electronic suppliers' base of export goods and services from the BSEC Region, mainly for small and medium-sized businesses, which will be able to use this platform free of charge.

Since the launching of the project the number of companies from the BSEC Member States registered at GlobalRusTrade.com electronic data base, thus presenting their products and services, has witnessed an impressive increase, while companies from the Region and beyond have begun to actively use the platform sending their B2B requests. An important pillar on the course for full implementation of the project will be a wide-reaching seminar for small and medium size exporters and importers from the BSEC Region, which will be organized in Istanbul, most probably in September 2020.

The “Feasibility Study for a Black Sea SDGs Observatory” project.

Upon the initiative of the BSEC PERMIS and after the endorsement by the BSPPF Steering Committee a Grant Contract was signed in February 2020 between the Facility and the *Aristotle University of Thessaloniki* (AUTH) on the implementation of the above project. Its general objective is to thoroughly study all different challenges that need to be analyzed prior to the formation of a *Black Sea SDGs Observatory*, so that this can effectively contribute to the achievement of the overall goals of the *Black Sea Chapter of the Sustainable Development Solutions Network* (SDSN) – **SDSN Black Sea** – that is hosted by the AUTH.

Other News

Working visit to Bucharest.

The BSEC PERMIS Secretary General Ambassador M.B. Christides paid a working visit to Bucharest on February 6, 2020 and had a series of meetings with various dignitaries on BSEC issues of mutual interest. He was also received by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Romania and BSEC Chairman, H.E. Mr. Bodgan AURESCU.



Discussing the role of the BSEC Organization as a point of reference in the geostrategic Black Sea region

The *Center for the Black Sea and Central Asia (KORA)* of the *Middle East Technical University (METU)* in Ankara, hosted a series of seminars on issues related to the wider Black Sea region and to the Organization of BSEC. Ambassadors of BSEC countries accredited to Turkey were invited to present their perceptions regarding the Black Sea region and the participation in the BSEC Organization. The BSEC PERMIS Secretary General was invited to open the above series of lectures before a numerous group of graduate students and academics of the METU; he also answered to their many questions concerning the functioning and the effectiveness of the BSEC Organization in promoting economic cooperation among its Member States and in establishing a culture of dialogue and understanding among them.

Ambassador Christides met with the President of the METU Prof. Dr. Mustafa Verşan KÖK and discussed how to further promote the scientific cooperation between BSEC PERMIS and the METU. The two entities already cooperate in the implementation of projects promoting the Marine and Maritime Research and Innovation in the Black Sea.



Visit of a World Bank delegation to BSEC Headquarters (10 February, 2020)



The World Bank has identified jointly with the European Commission new priorities for the Black Sea basin and develops a long-term, multi-sectoral investment Program, with the objective of assisting countries to sustainably develop their maritime economies. In the framework of the above efforts, the possibilities of establishing close cooperation for the promotion of maritime and blue economy issues, especially the environmental pollution, were discussed by the World Bank representatives and the BSEC PERMIS.

As mentioned elsewhere, the deliberations between the two sides continued also during the Covid-19 lockdown via 3 video-conferences and the prospect of their successful conclusion in the near future is very possible.

Promoting security, stability and economic growth in the OSCE area by preventing and combating corruption through innovation, increased transparency and digitalization

BSEC PERMIS participated in the **First Preparatory Meeting of the 28th OSCE Economic and Environmental Forum**, organized by the Albanian OSCE Chairmanship on 17-18 February in Vienna; during the 2-day event OSCE Member States, international organizations, business and academic communities discussed challenges and ways to prevent and combat corruption through digitalization, as well as by enhancing good governance through transparency and innovation. The discussions revealed that a continued and enhanced dialogue is needed for combating corruption, a major prerequisite for the implementation of the UN Agenda 2030 SDGs.



82nd Session of the UNECE Inland Transport Committee (ITC) (Geneva, 25 - 27 February 2020)

The PERMIS Secretary General participated in the high-level policy segment of the above Session entitled “*Environmental challenges for sustainable inland transport*”; among other, he underlined that the overall implementation of the “*BSEC Climate Change Adaptation Strategy for the Black Sea*” during the last years was not satisfactory and that the PERMIS is looking forward to the support of the UNECE ITC, in order to amplify efforts and facilitate the accession of BSEC Member States to international legal instruments promoting the sustainability of inland transport solutions.



Visit of the OSCE Minsk Group to BSEC PERMIS headquarters

A delegation with the Co-Chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group paid a working visit to the PERMIS headquarters in Istanbul on 3 March 2020. The aim of the visit, as the Group dignitaries explained, was to be briefed on the latest activities of the BSEC Organization, given the importance the latter has gained as a point of reference for cooperation in the wider Black Sea region. The PERMIS colleagues provided their interlocutors with a general, comprehensive overview of these activities, along with information on various sectoral areas of cooperation under the BSEC umbrella.



1st International Conference on Blue Growth in the Black Sea Region: Ecosystem Services on River & Sea Macro-ecosystems, Ovidius University of Constanta, 9-10 March 2020

The event was organized by the Ovidius University of Constanta and the Secretariat of the *Black Sea Universities Network (BSUN)*; the BSEC PERMIS Secretary General was one of the key welcoming speakers; among other, he informed participants on the multifaceted efforts of PERMIS and the BSEC Member States to promote sustainable development solutions in the region by trying to implement the 2030 UN SDGs. He further underlined that the establishment of the *BSEC Green Energy Network* and the adoption of the *BSEC Climate Change Adaptation Strategy*, as well as that of the *BSEC Green Energy Strategy* played a significant role in the above efforts.

In a live video connection with **Professor Jeffrey SACHS PhD**, Special Counsellor to the UN Secretary General and Director of the UN *Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN)*, the latter underscored the important role that the BSEC Organization and the BSUN can play in further motivating Member States and in coordinating their relative efforts for achieving the best possible results in the region. Professor SACHS also referred to the usefulness of cooperating with the Chinese Belt & Road Initiative.

Visit of the Ambassador of Finland to the BSEC PERMIS headquarters

H.E. Mr. Arı Maki, Ambassador of Finland accredited to Turkey, paid a visit to the BSEC Headquarters on 6 March, where he was received by the PERMIS First Deputy Secretary General, Ambassador Mrs. Ebru Barutçu Gökdenizler.

Ambassador Barutçu Gökdenizler informed the visitor about the history, organizational structure and activities of the BSEC Organization. An exchange of views took place on the prospects of establishing cooperation relations between BSEC and the Government of Finland, including the possibility of the Latter becoming an Observer or Sectoral Dialogue Partner.

It was also noted that given the similarities, reviving the efforts for cooperation between BSEC and the Council of Baltic Sea States (CBSS), where Finland is a member, could serve to be of mutual interest and benefit for both regional organizations.



Preparation of the 3rd Edition of the Workshop for Young Diplomats from BSEC Member States

On March 3 the BSEC PERMIS Secretary General and the responsible Executive Manager met with the Head of the Turkey Office of the *Konrad Adenauer Foundation* (KAS) Mr. Walter GLOSS and Mrs. Arzu YÜZGEÇ, Project Coordinator, in order to continue the preparations of the above event which this year will be focused on “*Sustainable Development in the Black Sea Region*”. It was agreed that the Workshop will take place on 11 - 14 October 2020 and will be hosted in Tirana, Republic of Albania, in an effort to involve capitals of the BSEC Member States in this important initiative.

Postponement of scheduled BSEC Meetings:

- The Meeting of the Working Group on Organizational and Legal Matters, scheduled to be held at the BSEC Headquarters on 26 March 2020.
- The Meeting of the Working Group on Science and Technology, scheduled to take place on 3 April 2020.
- The Meetings of the Task Force on Intermodal Transportation and the Steering Committee on Facilitation of Road Transport of Goods in the BSEC Region, scheduled to be held at the BSEC Headquarters on 6-7 April 2020.
- The *Meeting of the Working Group on Banking and Finance*, scheduled to be held on 15 April 2020 at the BSEC HQs. The new dates of the Meeting will be communicated in due course.
- The Meeting of the Committee of Senior Officials (CSO), scheduled to be held at the BSEC Headquarters on 27-28 April 2020.
- The *27th Meeting of the PDF Steering Committee*, scheduled to be held at the BSEC Headquarters on 29 April 2020.
- The Meeting of the Working Group on SMEs, scheduled to take place on 14 May 2020.
- The Joint Meeting of the BSEC Ad Hoc Working Group on Massive Forest Fires and of the Ad Hoc Working Group on Floods and Torrents (scheduled for 20 May 2020), as well as the Meeting of the Ad Hoc Working Group of Experts in Seismic Risk (scheduled for 21 May 2020).
- The Meeting of Ministers in charge of Transport, tentatively scheduled to be held in May 2020.
- The Meeting of the Working Group on Cooperation in Emergency Assistance and that of the Liaison Officers of the *BSEC Network on Emergency Assistance*, scheduled to be held on 3 June 2020 in Athens. The BSEC PERMIS is exploring the possibility of holding instead a video conference with the participation of representatives from the relevant line Ministries.



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