

**Opening Statement by Ambassador Michael B. Christides, Secretary General of  
the BSEC PERMIS  
(Webinar on 19 May 2020)**

I wish to thank colleagues from the ICBSS and its Director General for embracing so eagerly our proposal to co-organize this Webinar. I believe it is a pertinent and very timely event.

I also wish to thank our moderator, Professor Tzogopoulos for accepting this delicate task!

Last, but certainly not least, I wish to express my gratitude to the distinguished speakers of today's event, some of whom are also good friends: Minister Mitov, who showed great interest in the BSEC during his term as MFA of Bulgaria, Minister for European Affairs of Romania and today Ambassador of his country to the Hellenic Republic, Mr. George Ciamba with whom I have served in the same city so many times in the past, and, of course, Ambassador Yenel, who apart from his deep knowledge on EU issues has also an extensive BSEC PERMIS experience, since he served as its First Deputy Secretary General for some time. I also welcome to our company Dr. Sergey Zabelin, from Russia.

Let me say that the idea of organizing this Webinar matured after the first month of the Coronavirus lockdown, which brought us all back to our homes, with much more time to think and reflect. As the Secretary General of a regional International Organization which prides itself in promoting the economic cooperation among its Member States, I was asking myself how this cooperation could be implemented under these dramatic conditions, in order to address some of the most crucial challenges all Member States faced, like, the supply of vital health provisions, the exchange of important information concerning the Pandemic, keeping the transport of food and medical supplies open, etc.

My initial observation was that the unforeseen magnitude and overwhelming rapidity of the Pandemic's outbreak surprised most of the countries, which immediately tried their best to take measures and address the urgent issues **at home**. This was an understandable expression of **instinctive self-preservation**. Even our rather modest suggestion to have an exchange of vital information concerning the Virus's outbreak among Member States was politely overlooked, due, exactly, to the overwhelming occupation of all national resources for solving the internal issues, which is perfectly comprehensible.

As the Commissioner for Neighborhood & Enlargement of the EU said in a recent Webinar, even the EU remained **very introvert** at the beginning of the Pandemic. In fact, In a very interesting Report of the **European Policy Institutes Network** the introduction reads as follows: *"The Covid-19 crisis has shown how difficult European cooperation can be. At first, all member states were inward-looking in their reactions, unilaterally closing borders and focusing on crisis management at home. European solidarity has largely been absent"*.

I believe this was also the case with the BSEC Member States!

Yet, today things start to look different: I am happy to say that we are already preparing two very important video-meetings in the very near future:

- (a) one will be among high-level representatives of the Ministries responsible for Tourism from our Member States, in order to explore ways for working and agreeing on a concrete **framework of joint measures and action**, in order to gradually allow Tourism to resume among our Member States, as almost all of them managed to contain the spread of Covid-19 with success.
- (b) The second will be **an informal video-meeting of the Steering Committee on Facilitation of Road Transport of Goods in the BSEC Region**, with the purpose to discuss and possibly resolve the most urgent issues related to the road transport of goods, especially of food and medical supplies.

So, as you see, we are moving into the right direction.

In conclusion, and in more general terms, it is obvious that the Coronavirus outbreak has dramatically exposed previously existing fractions and tensions around the Globe, no need to name them here; it has certainly also put **multilateral cooperation** to a new, severe test.

I believe that the COVID-19 crisis has shown **the need** for more cooperation and coordination not only **between** States, but **within** States as well. I also believe that this crisis provided several lessons for how world leaders should approach **other issues of global scale**, such as climate change.

Some analysts say that in the end **international cooperation** will come out stronger and with more solid structures to support it. This is also our hope in what concerns regional cooperation, and especially cooperation among the Member States of “our” BSEC Organization.

I am confident that the discussion among our distinguished and knowledgeable speakers can offer valuable ways and ideas to achieve this goal. So, I give the floor back to you, Mr. Moderator. -