**Franz Thönnes, Member of the Bundestag, former parliamentary state secretary**

**Report at the 26th Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference in Hamburg as Rapporteur for “Labour, social welfare and the Baltic Sea Labour Forum” on 4.9.2017**

Esteemed Presidium!

Esteemed colleagues!

Ladies and gentlemen,  
  
as I present my report to you today in my role as Rapporteur for “Labour, social welfare and the Baltic Sea Labour Forum”, I am speaking about one of the core success stories of the Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference (BSPC) and therefore also of our work as Members and those who have supported us in this role.

In 2007 the Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference set up a working group on the topic of “Labour and social welfare”, which primarily dealt with the issues and challenges associated with labour mobility and thus with the topic of border commuters and youth unemployment, and of which I acted as chairman.

At our conference in Nyborg two years later I presented the group’s final report with recommendations on labour market and social policy issues. These included the suggestion to allow a Baltic Sea Labour Network (BSLN) to be created, which, with strong support from the German employer association *Nordmetall* and the *DGB Nord* trade union confederation along with a European Union grant of 1.8m euros, subsequently became an EU flagship project as part of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region, working for two years on topics regarding the labour market, border commuters and youth employment and training.

At the end of the project phase, the Baltic Sea Labour Forum (BSLF) was founded in November 2011 as a result of the positive experience. The Forum currently has 30 member organisations – 17 trade unions, 11 employer associations and two international organisations. These are joined by several organisations with observer status. This is a unique coalition within Europe!

Topics which the BSLP has examined at its steering committee meetings, held two to three times a year, and at an annual Round Table, have included fair working conditions, the promotion of labour mobility and support for employers and border commuters who live in one country and work in another. There are over 150,000 such individuals in the Baltic Sea region. The shared goal of all member organisations was the removal of obstacles for border commuting, along with ensuring social security in matters relating to pensions, accidents, illness, employee rights and combatting youth unemployment.

Following a clear orientation, these topics were developed intensively into clear common positions with objectives, and then published. “Politics means wanting something”, the former Prime Minister of Sweden Olof Palme once said. This is precisely what has always characterised the BSLF.

The fact that we can really bring about change with the BSLF is demonstrated particularly well by the following example.

At two steering committee meetings in Malmö and St Petersburg this spring, we drafted recommendations on labour market policy issues. We took these recommendations to Berlin in June. For the first time in the history of the CBSS, a meeting was scheduled between the labour ministers of the Baltic Sea States for 15 June 2017. Representatives of the BSPC and the BSLF were also invited. Bodo Bahr represented the BSPC as Secretary General, while I represented the BSLF.

While the invitation to the meeting could already be considered a success, this was certainly amplified by the fact that the labour ministers adopted all of our recommendations on labour and employment in principle in their statement and also highlighted the significance of the BSLF. The recommendations were accepted in the following individual sectors:

* promotion of closer cooperation in labour and employment to improve the competitiveness of the Baltic Sea region
* labour mobility
* youth employment
* labour market research and development prognosis
* demographic challenges and the
* integration of those born abroad

In addition, a request was made to the Committee of Senior Officials of the CBSS to examine whether an ad-hoc working/expert group should be created, in conjunction with the CBSS secretariat and the BSPC, the Northern Dimension Partnership on Health and Social Wellbeing and other organisations working on these matters.

Now, this coming Friday, this working group is to be approved at the next Senior Officials meeting of the CBSS in Stockholm! This meeting will be led by the new Swedish CBSS presidency and Ambassador Hans Olsson, who I wish every success in this role, and ask him to support the unanimous suggestion of the labour ministers.

In addition to the aforementioned topics, the six selected focal points also include knowledge supply, youth employment, migration/integration and the inclusion in the labour market of vulnerable people including persons with disabilities. Close cooperation is recommend with the BSPC and the working group migration/integration, to be formed at this conference.

The first working group meeting should take place at the end of October/start of November at the latest.

This development is a tremendous success for the BSPC and the BSLF, thanks also in no small part to the fantastic preparation carried out by Senior Adviser Daria Akhituna at the CBSS, where the BSLF administration is currently located.

Many thanks are due to the CBSS Director General Maira Mora and her deputy Bernd Hemingway for their support too. These thanks extend to Ander Bergstrom of the Norden Association for the Baltic Leader Program and our Secretary General Bodo Bahr.

The story of the BSLF is thus an excellent example of sustainable and successful long-term work by the BSPC.

Creating a working group active for two years, the adoption of its recommendations 24 months later at the BSPC including the suggestion to create a project, receiving support from the EU as an EU Baltic Sea Strategy flagship project, two years of intensive project work as the “Baltic Sea Network” followed by the founding of the BSLF, which has been working for five and half years, drafting positions and recommendations for the first labour ministers meeting in June 2017 including invitations to representatives from the BSLF and BSPC, highlighting the importance of the BSLF, the discussion and adoption of the recommendations along with the creation of another ad-hoc working/expert group, to which the BSPC and the BSLF are to be invited to contribute to – these are things to be proud of !

That is why I would also like to thank Ambassador Gudmundir Arni Steffansson from Iceland, which held the CBSS presidency for the past twelve months, and the representatives from the *Nordmetall* employers’ association and the *DGB Nord* trade union confederation for their involvement.

After eight years, this is my final report as Rapporteur for “labour and social welfare and the BSLF” at the BSPC, as I am not standing again as a candidate in the next Bundestag elections.

I wish to say thank you for the trust placed in me and the support shown to me over this period. This also applies equally to all those who worked in the BSLF in the past.

Yesterday the Standing Committee of the BSPC elected our colleague Pyry Niemi from the Swedish *Riksdag* as my successor as Rapporteur. Please give him the same support that I have been able to rely upon so well.

The BSLF has proven that parliamentarians can play an impressive role in shaping policy through international cooperation, too. Please continue to help the BSLF achieve ongoing success in the future!

Thank you for your attention!