**Speech of the Parliamentary Secretary of the**

**Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia**

**Dr Zanda Kalniņa-Lukaševica**

**at the 25th Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference**

**session** “**Cooperation in the Baltic Sea region**”

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President of the Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference Dr Jānis Vucāns,

Excellencies,

Dear Ministers,

Distinguished Participants,
Ladies and Gentlemen!

It is a great pleasure and honour for me to participate at the 25th Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference here in this beautiful new building of the University of Latvia. First of all I would like to congratulate the participants of the Conference as it is celebrating its Silver Jubilee.

Since the early days of the restoration of independence, Latvia has been actively involved in many regional frameworks, be they political or practical. Regional cooperation is crucial for unlocking development potential and sustainable growth in the region. It helps to achieve our main goal – democratic and prosperous society, based on common values. Investments in human capital, education, labour, entrepreneurship and regional infrastructure along with the strength of regional cooperation will determine the future growth and development.

Since the beginning of the 19-90s, the countries of the Baltic Sea Region have built up close cooperation among each other. We have made the region one of the most intensive cooperation networks in Europe. Nowadays we see that the Baltic Sea Region is in a leading position in terms of socioeconomic development, education and innovations in Europe.

The spirit of cooperation in the Baltic Sea Region has always been inspiring. Several regional frameworks, such as the Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference, the Council of the Baltic Sea States, the Northern Dimension, the European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region, and the Nordic-Baltic Eight are providing a platform for broad level discussions, and instruments to facilitate further prosperity of the region. We could fully enjoy it a year ago when Latvia had the pleasure to host the Sixth Annual Forum of the European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region in the beautiful city of Jūrmala. The great number of participants, the energetic exchange of opinions, as well as the new initiatives for common projects once again proved: we are willing and ready to work together to make our region safe, prosperous and connected.

This year Latvia has the honour to hold the Presidency within the framework of the trilateral cooperation of the Baltic States – the Baltic Assembly and the Baltic Council of Ministers, as well as coordinate the dynamic Nordic-Baltic Eight format. In view of the current geopolitical challenges in Europe and across the globe, Latvia has brought forward the strengthening of security in the region as the main priority in these cooperation formats.

Ladies and gentlemen!

As regards the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS), I am pleased to see that it has become a very proactive and project-oriented organisation. I am convinced that Latvian Ambassador Madam Maira Mora, who was appointed new Director General of the CBSS Secretariat and has a vast experience with governmental institutions and funding instruments, will significantly contribute to the further implementation of the CBSS long term priorities – regional identity, sustainable, prosperous, as well as safe and secure region.

I would like to underline that great work was recently accomplished by our Polish colleagues in building synergies among the regional cooperation frameworks. They brought together experts at a joint working level from the CBSS and the European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region. It is a wise thing to do. Networking on the expert level is one of the driving forces and values of the regional cooperation.

When talking about the CBSS, I would like to point out the valuable input of one of the first and well-known CBSS projects in the field of higher education – “EuroFaculty”. As well as there is the “BalticLab” programme for young entrepreneurs in creative and business industries, and the CBSS Summer University. And there is a recently adopted project “Bridge It!”. It is an educational programme targeted at the involvement of youth in the development of our region’s civil society and social well-being.

In the context of the numerous CBSS initiatives, we can already appreciate the first fruits and success of the projects, which are funded by the organisation’s Project Support Facility. Since 2013 more than 20 projects have been implemented in the areas of long term priorities of the CBSS. I am particularly glad to note that these CBSS activities serve well in the promotion of regional cooperation and identity, and go in line with the central priority of the Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference this year – high quality education and labour.

It provokes us to reflect once again what a high quality education means. I believe – good teachers and good students are the same today as they were once-upon-a-time when the youthful Plato was engaging in dialogue with his teacher, Socrates. Socrates did not lecture his students; he engaged them in conversations. So the art of teaching, Socrates and Plato knew, is not about pounding in some ideology or drumming in one way or another of thinking; it is about facilitating growth, encouraging the hunger for knowledge and the desire for excellence, and helping people to learn to think for themselves. It is about “causing to lead out” and unpack the potential within. That is the meaning of the Latin word “*educare*” and, on some fundamental level, this is what we mean by European thinking – thinking in support of freedom of thought and freedom of expression.

Ladies and Gentlemen!

We are all aware of the challenges our region is facing. To mention a few: ups and downs in economies, migration, environmental issues, demographic changes and considerable changes in the geopolitical arena, not to forget our common threat – terrorism. In the face of these challenges we have to ask ourselves – what steps should be taken to ensure an open and secure region? What should we do or should not do – to enjoy mutually trustful relations all around the Baltic Sea?

There are no easy answers to these questions. But we have a great opportunity to use the potential of the regional cooperation to address these issues together. For instance, migration crisis cannot be addressed by countries alone and requires joint efforts. Through close cooperation of our border guards and other law enforcement agencies we can combat illegal migration and organised crime, such as human trafficking. We must use our most successful cooperation mechanisms, exchange of best practices and above all – an open and constructive dialogue – to strengthen our region and safeguard our core values and principles. Only firm regional cooperation and close, trusted partnership among all the countries around the Baltic Sea can contribute to stability and security of the region.

Let me say in this regard – that each of our regional frameworks provides good instruments for a wider, stronger cooperation, which, if used wisely and thoughtfully, can result in faster achievement of our goals.

I do believe that there is room for improvement and potential for further successful development of the Baltic Sea Region. However, we have to bear in mind that one of the crucial assets to reach this is through a comprehensive cooperation that is based on the respect to human rights, freedom, democracy, self-determination and the rule of law. Only then we will be able to make our region politically, economically, socially, and environmentally sustainable and secure.

Ladies and gentlemen!

I hope that today’s debate will encourage us to broadly reflect on the opportunities and future that lay ahead of the Baltic Sea Region.

George Bernard Shaw said: “The people who get on in this world are the people who get up and look for the circumstances they want and if they can't find them, make them.”

And this thought from George Bernard Shaw could be applied to people who work to facilitate a close cooperation within the Baltic Sea Region as well as develop innovative ideas and implement forward-looking projects to create safe and sustainable future for the countries in the region.

I wish a very successful tenor of the 25th Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference!

Thank you!