**Contribution by Mr Trivimi Velliste,**

**former President of the BSPC and the Baltic Assembly, Estonia,**

**at the session**

**„Baltic Sea parliamentary cooperation: yesterday, today, tomorrow “**

*Monday, 29 August 2016 at 16:00*

Ladies and gentlemen, dear friends and colleagues,

First of all, please allow me to congratulate you all on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the parliamentary cooperation in our Baltic Sea region. I would like to go back in time and recall some of the origins of this achievement.

Lennart Meri, a writer, a film-maker, also a former President of Estonia, has described an interesting episode in his well-known book “The Silverwhite”. The episode is a description of the arrival of the first Estonians at the Baltic shore more than five thousand years ago. Indeed, the first encounter of the unknown – the endless see – is amazing. What is it? Is this a friendly or a hostile phenomenon? Is this water going to divide or unite people?

Since times immemorial, the Baltic Sea has been both. We recognize this when we recall the Viking age. This is equally true when we think of the Hanseatic League – a paragon of the modern European Union. *Das lübische Recht* was certainly one of the most impressive bridges ever built across the Baltic Sea.

As we all know, the Baltic Sea played a special role in World War Two which was crowned by drawing an iron curtain across the sea. I remember vividly a slogan which read *The Baltic Sea – the Sea of Peace.*  That slogan was displayed in public space of my country in the years of the Cold War. And I must admit – that *peace* was rather cool.

When the Berlin Wall finally fell down there was unforeseen hope. There was a widespread feeling history was going to end. Every new avenue seemed promising and rewarding. This was certanly true about most of the nations living around the Baltic Sea.

For 25 years we have now furthered our co-operation and provided a useful forum for open debate and exchange of information between Parliaments and other bodies of the Baltic Sea Region. This cooperation started due to a fundamental geopolitical change that had taken place.

The historic meeting held at Ronneby, Sweden, on 2 – 3 September 1990 was the first summit of political leaders around the Baltic Sea since World War Two where representatives of some States could again sit behind their own national flags.

The Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference which had its first convention in January 1991 was among the very first Baltic Sea cooperation forums to be established after the end of the Cold War. It predated the founding of the Council of the Baltic Sea States.

As to the latter, I would like to seize this opportunity to revive my own personal recollections in my capacity as former Foreign Minister, in order to reiterate the warmest feelings of the Estonian people addressed to Mr. Uffe Ellemann-Jensen who – alongside with Mr. Hans-Dietrich Genscher – worked and acted in those days with unparalleled commitment and dedication.

By initiating cooperation among eleven countries of the Baltic Sea, we opened a promising window of opportunity and embarked on a determined course towards stability, security and prosperity in the Region thus fostering step-by-step rapprochement among our nations.

The very existence of the forum as such is a crucial precondition for a dialogue around the Baltic Sea. The end of the Cold War opened up totally new avenues to build our common future. Unfortunately, we have not always been able to meet the new challenge. This is particularly true in the recent years.

However, there are some important practical areas where considerable progress has taken place. The Baltic Sea environment as a particularly sensitive issue has always been in the centre of our attention. It is true that environmental protection and maritime safety are of highest priority for all of us.

The endeavours of the BSPC have substantially contributed to cross-border, economic and interregional cooperation, to social integration of the region as well as to enhancing security of its citizens.

We should always bear in mind the fundamental objectives of the Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference as spelt out in our Rules of Procedure – strengthening the common identity of the Baltic Sea Region, initiating and guiding new political activities, endowing them with additional, parliamentary authority.

One of the unique features of the BSPC is that it includes representatives from both national and sub-national parliaments. This pattern makes our forum quite heterogeneous. At the same time it is an asset that offers added value in terms of widening and deepening the concept of democracy. Different political levels can interact and complement each another. The dialogue becomes more comprehensive with additional dimensions.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I strongly believe the Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference should further its cooperation with the Council of the Baltic Sea States. It should in every possible way cooperate in the context of the Northern Dimension, taking advantage of the Action Plan of the Baltic Sea Strategy.

One of the best qualities and values we can offer each other in the framework of this cooperation is our identity – historical, geographical, cultural. Despite all the difficulties we may face today, we have to preserve our identity, our traditions as they are the most important bridge from nation to nation, from the past to the present and from the present to the future.

Once again, my dear friends, my warmest congratulations on this great occasion!

Thank you for your kind attention!