**Address at a dinner at Rundāle Palace, hosted by Prof. Dr. Jānis Vucāns, President of the BSPC, in honour of the 25th anniversary of the Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference**

28 August 2016, 18:55

[Salutation]

Welcome to Latvia – the host of the Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference on its Silver Jubilee. As the Chairman of the 25th Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference, I am very proud to be your host tonight, as well as during the conference. I am all the more honoured that we celebrate our organization’s 25th anniversary in Latvia.

It has truly been a journey full of inspiration since the first BSPC took place on 7-9 January 1991 in Helsinki, and even since we hosted the 5th conference 20 years ago - in 1996 in Riga.

The BSPC is a very visible actor in Baltic Sea affairs and has established itself as the main parliamentary body of the entire Baltic Sea Region. The BSPC has initiated and guided political activities, endowing them with additional democratic legitimacy and parliamentary authority, and it will continue to do so.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We pushed for designating the Baltic Sea as a Particularly Sensitive Sea Area. We also achieved improved safety on the main routes through the Baltic Sea, especially in the Kadet fairway.

It was an important step towards the prevention and control of shipping accidents, as well as the safety of ships and navigation in one of the busiest fairways in the Baltic Sea.

Most recently, the IMO Marine Environment Protection Committee has agreed on a concrete timetable for implementing the prevention of pollution by sewage from ships. The BSPC has urged the governments to support and fulfil the regulations under the relevant MARPOL Annex since its resolution at the 23rd conference in Olsztyn, Poland.

These are only two examples that show just what can be accomplished if our countries cooperate. This is all the more astonishing if we consider that at the core of our cooperation is the body of water that used to divide our countries during the second half of the 20th century: the Baltic Sea.

In 1991, when our conference was established, it could not be foreseen that it would become such a success. It was an era of political upheaval: things once considered to be set in stone suddenly started changing or even disappeared altogether. Then, it was far from certain that the east and the west would come together in a manner that would allow us to sit together and discuss issues of common interest, let alone in such an institutionalized form that we have come to take for granted.

Certainly, opinions do tend to differ and we cannot ignore this. But the BSPC has proven that we can do both: address different opinions and discuss issues of common interest. The fact that we have always managed to arrive at a consensus proves that we are willing to look beyond politics. This is the great strength of our parliamentary organisation.

We are gathered here tonight at Rundāle Palace to remember these 25 years that have been so interesting. People from the Baltic countries, (Finland,) Scandinavia, Poland, Germany, Russia… We are all here because we have participated in actively shaping these past 25 years. And because we want to take inspiration from the past to shape our common future.

Ladies and gentlemen, there is no better place to do that than here at Rundāle Palace. You toured the Palace earlier this evening. You have seen and heard that the history of the estate is closely linked with the history of Latvia over the past three centuries. You can find traces of German, Russian, Polish, French, and Latvian cultural heritage here. Therefore, it is only fitting that Rundāle Palace has been chosen as the site of our celebration of the 25th anniversary of the Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference.

Now I would like to wish you a pleasant dinner, after which we will be able to enjoy a concert in the Palace Gardens. I invite you to absorb this moment and perhaps take a minute to reflect and find here inspiration for our future work together.

Thank you.