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25th Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference, Riga, 28-30 August 2016

**Speech at the ceremonial session
marking the Silver Jubilee edition
of the Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference
on 29 August 2016**

**“Baltic sea parliamentary cooperation:
yesterday, today, tomorrow”**

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Ladies and gentlemen!

As you know, the exact date of the 25th anniversary of the BSPC was actually earlier this year, on 7 January.

But our conference is taking place only very shortly after two other important jubilees, on 20 and 21 August. Eight days ago, our host country Latvia celebrated 25 years of independence, with much joy and well-deserved pride. The day before that, Estonia had a national party for the same reason. I would like to offer my congratulations to both countries.

And now here we are in Latvia's capital on the occasion of the 25th Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference. I am happy to comply with the request to make a few remarks before the discussions begin in a session entitled "Yesterday, today, tomorrow".

The word "**yesterday**" makes me think of my first Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference, which was the seventh edition of the event, held in 1998 in the German city of Lübeck.

It also reminds me of a question that a journalist posed before this jubilee conference about whether the Baltic Sea region has a shared identity.

Of course, it's not easy to generate a shared identity in a region that has nine or more ethnicities, eleven languages, and seven currencies, a region that practises three different types of Christianity and is home to very different political cultures. And yet we are connected by the Baltic Sea; its shores unite ten states and nationalities. The Baltic Sea has given us a shared history that is shaped by maritime activity. This includes the Hanseatic League, the development of similar ship and sail types, and the sea shanty choirs that

exist in numerous places on the Baltic shores. There are also similarities in our architecture, with the best known example probably being the red-brick Gothic style particularly favoured for churches and town halls. Perhaps we sense a shared identity when we see old port buildings, renovated in a mix of historic brick and contemporary glass, and modern harbour structures. Such architecture is found in almost all Baltic towns and cities. Other factors contributing to our sense of identity are perhaps the growing numbers of wind farms and Baltic cruise ships. But our shared identity is probably forged most of all by the sea itself, or the “Nordic Mediterranean” as it is sometimes known.

We also have a shared maritime cuisine. Herring is probably a key marker of Baltic identity, second only to amber. It features on almost all menus at cafés and restaurants around the Baltic. Everyone likes herring, be it fried, smoked or pickled. It is called “the silver of the sea” but for some it probably takes gold. In Kaliningrad, you can even dine on “herring under a fur coat”. So, perhaps we can say our identity is based on herrings and amber?

But, joking aside, whatever it is that unites us, I must say that the extremely diverse cooperation structures and organisations on the shores of the Baltic are in themselves exemplary and that, together with the BSPC, they form a key identity marker that may not exist anywhere else in the world. I would therefore like to say: Happy Birthday to the Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference!

Following the fall of the Iron Curtain, on 7-9 January 1991 representatives of the national and regional parliaments in all countries bordering the Baltic met in Helsinki for the first time on the invitation of the Speaker of the Finnish Parliament, Kalevi Sorsa.

Of course, the delegates at that event discussed how good neighbourly relations and stable democracies could best develop on the shores of the Baltic. Until then, the sea had divided rather than united our peoples for the past half century.

The region's foreign ministers didn't come together for the first meeting of the Council of the Baltic Sea States until a year later – on 5-6 March 1992 in Copenhagen.

So that first BSPC meeting in January 1991 gave members of parliament in countries with very different political systems an excellent opportunity to meet and speak together, and to look beyond their customary political horizons. They uncovered common interests and conducted frank and open discussions that led to agreements and new ideas. By critically addressing government actions, forging new contacts and entering into trust-based partnerships, step by step this Baltic collaboration gained a parliamentary dimension. With the invaluable assistance of the Nordic Council, this led to the second Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference in April 1992, held in Oslo. At the event, the BSPC formulated a preamble declaring its intentions:

“To strengthen the common identity of the Baltic Sea Region by means of close cooperation between national and regional parliaments on the basis of equality, to initiate political activities in the region, endowing them with additional democratic legitimacy, and to improve dialogue between governments, parliaments and civil society.”

A quarter of a century later, we are justified in asking whether all that has been achieved.

The BSPPC has increasingly gained autonomy. Over the years a Standing Committee has been built up that works on the basis of consensus decision-making, which it applies to all its votes and resolutions. The Standing Committee functions as the responsible committee between conferences and includes representatives of the European Parliament. The BSPPC also appoints temporary working groups and rapporteurs on specific themes.

Its collaboration with the Baltic Council has intensified, and cooperation with the European Parliament and other parliamentary organisations in northern Europe has been expanded. Systems have been developed for surveying national governments on the implementation and evaluation of the annual conference resolutions. Some of our member parliaments discuss the annual draft BSPPC resolution in their committees and make decisions on it. Others fully adopt the BSPPC resolutions in their parliamentary decisions and demand implementation and the corresponding reports from their governments.

While the earlier conferences primarily dealt with topics such as the democratic stabilisation of the region and improving the critical environmental situation in the Baltic, in the meantime additional issues are also addressed, such as: maritime policy and economy; green growth; how the Baltic region can serve as a maritime model region; education; minorities, NGOs, labour market and social welfare; culture; healthcare; and tourism.

Following the 16th conference focusing on “Integrated Maritime Policy” in Berlin in 2007, the BSPPC finally attracted the attention of policy-makers in Brussels. Several EU parliamentarians began to see the Baltic region as a macro-region and they developed a special strategy, the first of its kind in the EU: the European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR).

And today?

By now, Baltic cooperation and the work of the BSPP have attained a very high level of development. Parliamentary democracy around the Baltic has gained stability. While only five percent of its shores were in EU countries 20 years ago, today that figure is almost 95 percent. The *Mare Balticum* no longer divides the people that live on its shores; instead it has become an inland sea of the European Union. Largely due to the Northern Dimension policy and the more recent northwest Russia strategy, Iceland, Norway and Russia have become fully integrated BSPP countries.

And the conference itself is taken much more seriously now than it in its earlier days. Presidents, ministers and state secretaries of Baltic countries are frequent speakers and guests. The BSPP is invited to all major international congresses in the region. Its incumbent chairperson is invited to speak at the annual meetings of the Council of the Baltic Sea States. The two organisations also frequently participate in one another's working groups. Workable demands are formulated at each conference, and the members of parliament from each country monitor and work towards their implementation.

But even though the annual conference and the concrete political work that is carried out within the committees are shining examples of international cooperation within a specific region and are thus valuable in and of themselves, it is still worth asking the question "What good does all of it do?"

We should not cloak ourselves in false modesty; we should be happy to proclaim our successes. And that is why I will remind you of some of those now, especially as a new generation is gradually replacing the old.

The BSPC has passed many resolutions calling for the restoration of the good ecological status of the Baltic marine environment. Via decisions taken by the HELCOM Baltic Sea Action Plan (Baltic Marine Environment Protection Commission – Helsinki Commission), these have led to, for example, the International Maritime Organization (IMO) prohibiting new passenger ships from discharging untreated sewage effluent into the Baltic Sea as of 2013, or as of 2018 for existing ships,. Stricter emissions regulations now also apply. The imposition of stricter controls on eutrophication and the funding for the construction of the wastewater treatment plant in St. Petersburg are also partly due to the efforts of the BSPC.

Very early on, the BSPC campaigned to have the Baltic designated as a Particularly Sensitive Sea Area. It has also succeeded in making the principle shipping lanes in the Baltic much safer, particularly the Kadet channel.

Another positive development is the Cleanship concept, which works towards achieving the objective of zero emissions from shipping on the Baltic sea. Twelve major ports are participating in this EU emission reduction project.

The EUSBSR, which was the first “macro-regional” strategy in Europe, is also the result of BSPC resolutions and the commitment of EU parliamentarians in Baltic states to new forms of collaboration and strategic planning in the region. In this way, various partnerships have developed between the Baltic Rim states and their educational institutions, research facilities, administrative bodies, companies and trade unions. The current action plan focuses on marine conservation, improving accessibility, and promoting prosperity.

The activities of the BSPC Working Group on the Labour Market and Social Welfare led to the formation of the Baltic Sea Labour Network, a flagship project of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region backed with 1.8 million EUR of funding. This in turn has meanwhile developed into the *Baltic Sea Labour Forum* as a permanent body for social dialogue in the Baltic region with over 30 employers' organisations, trade unions and other partners.

Social dialogue is about promoting sustainable labour markets, fair working conditions, labour mobility, social security cover for border commuters – this also requires the provision of information centres on cross-border matters, which have meanwhile been set up in some places – and combating youth unemployment. The Baltic Sea Labour Forum is an organisation that serves the region in a way that has yet to be matched anywhere else in the world.

The 21st BSPC, which convened in St. Petersburg in 2012 was one of the first international forums of parliamentarians that responded to the high level of youth unemployment in Europe by demanding the introduction of a European Youth Guarantee. Our aim was to gain government support in setting up programmes to ensure that young people making the transition from leaving school to starting work would not experience longer spells of unemployment. EU funding for projects for this purpose – including education schemes that promote transnational employability – currently totals around 6 billion EUR.

The project-oriented modernisation of north-west Russian territories near the Baltic Sea agreed by the Council of the Baltic Sea States in 2012 is a further success story. Known as the Pilot Financial Initiative (PFI) – the scheme is designed to give good projects swift access to funding opportunities.

In 2014 the CBSS ministerial meetings were cancelled by the other member states in response to Russian activities in the Ukraine. In its resolution last year, the BSPC declared that we “expect all Baltic Sea States to make every effort to ensure that the Baltic Sea region will continue to be a region of intensive cooperation and good, peaceful neighbourliness.” For this reason we also called for a resumption of the Council’s ministerial meetings as they foster dialogue and strengthen cooperation.

We are therefore very pleased that Council-level talks of all culture, science and deputy foreign ministers were resumed during the recent Polish CBSS Presidency.

The BSPC also succeeded in convincing the Commission to retain “health” as a policy area eligible for funding as part of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea beyond 2016.

These success stories are something to be proud of. It is a direction we must pursue, even if the circumstances have become more difficult.

So what could “**tomorrow**” mean for us today?

First and most importantly it means confidently continuing to develop cooperation and an international approach to the great challenges of our time. It means consolidating that which has been achieved, without isolating ourselves or retreating to a purely national context.

Secondly, it means putting key future opportunities and questions on the agenda and working on them together. Perhaps the most important issue on this front is the responsible use of our beautiful Baltic landscape. The Working Group on Sustainable Tourism is elaborating recommendations on this

issue for the 26th BSPC. We also need to focus on further developing the *Green Growth for a bluer Baltic Sea* project together with BALTIC 21 and quite literally giving fresh wind to renewable energies, energy conservation and efficiency together with the *Baltic Sea Regional Energy Cooperation* (BASREC). Further issues on this agenda include transport and logistical strategies for land and sea and the Baltic Sea as a model region for “health” in the broadest of terms.

Of course we have worries of our own. But as one of the world’s richest and most competitive regions, it is our common duty to treat and receive refugees seeking protection from terror, death and war in our countries in a way that does justice to the humanitarian ideals we share.

Education, culture and youth are key factors in developing a sustainable regional identity. More emphasis should be placed on developing and expanding Ars Baltica – one of the most important multilateral cultural networks in the region. I, for one, think it would be an excellent idea to complement the existing cooperations between the universities and research institutes in the Baltic region – over 100 in total – with a similar network of partnered schools.

We must also tackle the most serious issues facing society today. International terrorism is a threat and a challenge to us all. Ensuring civilian security and protection in the event of a disaster must also be a part of our agenda. The same applies to the tensions that have recently developed within Europe. We should make bilateral efforts both here and in the OSCE to ensure that the military activities in the Baltic region do not turn into a new security risk in northern Europe. Transparency, refraining from any form of military or rhetorical provocation, the use of hi-tech security systems like Transponder in military aircraft and dialogue are essential here.

Active citizens engaged in political parties, organisations, associations and institutions are the life and soul of every democracy. An event like the Baltic Youth Conference to precede the BSPC, which we suggested some time ago and which has still not become reality, is just such an initiative. The idea is to give young delegates the opportunity to articulate their political ideas for the future development of the region and present these to us afterwards. Perhaps it will be possible to implement this exciting idea in the coming year in the form of an individual initiative.

Non-government organisations and civil society should also play a greater role in Baltic cooperation. And finally: a real test for the quality of our democracy is in the way in which we treat minorities. The particular history of our region has resulted in the emergence of national and ethnic minorities in practically every country. But not in every case has there been a successful transition from hostility to co-existence and community. Good community relations do not happen by themselves, but are the result of a long and patient process. So this is an issue that also belongs on the political agenda of the BSPC. For who knows? Perhaps our good example might inspire other regions in Europe to follow suit.

There is a lot of work to be done. We must work within our own countries to increase social cohesion and across our borders to create good framework conditions that enable as many citizens in our region to meet, mix and exchange ideas.

Some of you may say things used to be easier. Some of you may look back with longing at a time whose challenges seemed less overwhelming, or a time when we all felt safe. But let me tell you: nothing happens by itself. And nothing lasts forever. It is our responsibility as politicians to make everyday

life better for people in the Baltic Sea region – step by step – and work to shape a better future that people can believe in.

I am convinced that our shared history of the past 25 years has created a solid foundation that gives us the strength and the confidence to meet these challenges.

As all sensible people in the region will **know** – our ability to achieve these aims depends on dialogue, compromise and cooperation. **We need each other!**