

**Report by Mrs. ĒRIKA ZOMMERE, President of the Baltic Assembly,
at the 26th Session of the Baltic Assembly
*Riga, 24 November 2007***

Ladies and gentlemen,

Excellencies,

Dear colleagues,

It is my great pleasure to address you at the 26th Session of the Baltic Assembly, during which we will assess our Baltic parliamentary cooperation in 2007 and set the priorities and areas of cooperation for the next year. This is the 16th year of our trilateral cooperation, and in my opinion, we have worked honestly and diligently in order to strengthen cooperation among the legislative and executive powers of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

At present, in the closely connected globalized world it is very difficult for a country to remain isolated. Whether we like it or not, the world perceives the Baltic States as one entity. An achievement of one of the three Baltic States is regarded as an achievement of all three, and a failure by one of the three Baltic States is regarded as a failure by all three. We should take this fact into consideration in our decision making and actions because our three countries share a common geopolitical, socio-economic and cultural area.

The Baltic Assembly is a representative and at the same time a practical cooperation organization of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. The Baltic Assembly has experienced high and low tides, rises and falls, praise and criticism. No one will dispute its enormous contribution in regaining and strengthening the independence of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania; in facilitating the return of our countries to the international arena; in accelerating the withdrawal of the Russian troops; and in expediting the integration of the Baltic States into the EU and NATO. The Baltic Assembly is a forum for exchanging our viewpoints and coordinating our positions, a mechanism for representing our common interests and an essential engine for achieving our most meaningful domestic policy and foreign policy goals.

Issues such as our countries' membership in the EU and NATO, the limited amount of human and financial resources needed for promoting Baltic cooperation and uncertainties regarding the development trends of regional cooperation within the context of an enlarged EU sparked political discussions about the need for the Baltic Assembly and the Baltic Council of Ministers, the usefulness and effectiveness of both organizations, their compatibility with the new status of the Baltic States, as well as possible scenarios for their development. The first three years of membership in the EU helped us all to clearly realize that Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are just too small to affect the EU processes by acting alone. Globalization and the challenges it poses, as well as the status of being a small country, are the key words which are frequently reiterated when speaking about Baltic regional cooperation on the parliamentary and executive levels. If we discuss energy strategy, we plainly see that small countries are unable to withstand globalization processes on their own. The resources of the Russian *Gazprom* company, for instance, by far exceed the total energy resources of 100 small countries. Such a large holding company can easily affect small countries. If we speak about EU energy strategy, it is quite clear that Sweden's energy efficiency strategy will differ from that of Spain. Therefore, we as small countries have to find and choose for ourselves the most suitable strategic partners, and these issues have to be discussed within smaller cooperation formats, such as the Baltic Assembly, the Nordic Council and the Benelux parliament.

I do not want to idealize anything and assert that there are no problems in the Baltic States' parliamentary cooperation. One of the greatest problems is the lack of unified political support for this cooperation. Adapting the Baltic Assembly to new conditions and increasing its efficiency depend on the political interest of all stakeholders in their future joint projects. The lack of a common political will is keeping us from developing a long-term strategy for Baltic States' parliamentary cooperation, from projecting a loud and respected voice of the Baltic Assembly, as well as from carefully monitoring the implementation of adopted resolutions. In order for a parliamentary cooperation organization to be effective, it has to clearly define its goals. Each Baltic State has its own national interests; in certain areas we are and will always remain competitors. Nevertheless, we still have common problems, common challenges, and common goals. Energy, the fight against cybercrimes, the labour market, migration, social welfare, development of regional competitiveness, shaping

of a knowledge-based society are only some of the issues to which the Baltic Assembly, together with the Baltic Council of Ministers, is able to provide high-quality and pragmatic solutions.

I am sure that the majority of parliamentarians have been questioned about the need for regional cooperation and the cost-effectiveness of the funds spent on business trips. In August I had an opportunity to participate in the Nordic-Baltic Speakers' Conference, where the role of regional cooperation was discussed. The speakers concluded that it is impossible to assess quantitatively the effectiveness of cooperation because what seems unnecessary, too expensive or inefficient today may turn out to be essential tomorrow. One example is Benelux, whose activity is often criticized. However, we all know that without Benelux there would be no Schengen system. Through regional cooperation we have achieved several tangible results related to the everyday lives of our people. In the above-mentioned conference, the Speaker of the Norwegian parliament stressed that without the Nordic Council there would be no common political culture of the Nordic countries, and there would be no common Nordic area.

In this regard, I would like to emphasize that any organization which is willing to participate in shaping internal and foreign policy has to continue perfecting itself. However, we should not be blind and think that everything is perfect. We have to define a multifaceted and target-oriented approach to cooperation by emphasizing the flexibility of our regional organizations. We cannot use them only for the purpose of coordinating actions and representing our interests within the EU. Rather, we can use these organizations to solve the region's problems while promoting and defending our own national interests.

After assessing the activities of the Baltic Assembly's organizational units, as well as the joint activities of the Baltic Assembly and its cooperation partners, we conclude that the Baltic Assembly is not useless. We have to understand that if we want to have a globally visible Baltic region, we have to ensure adequate resources for implementing the means that would enable us to achieve our important goals. Therefore, the Presidium of the Baltic Assembly has called on the speakers of the Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian parliaments, as well as the chairmen of their foreign

affairs committees, to organize a joint meeting next year and address the strategic, conceptual and organizational basis and goals for the Baltic Assembly's activities. Every year the Baltic Assembly assumes new tasks, every year the Baltic Assembly is approached by new regional partners, and every year the scope of its priorities expands. But at the same time, it is essential to ensure the support of our national parliaments and to ensure that the Baltic Assembly's decisions reach the standing committees of the national parliaments.

Dear colleagues,

Let me remind you of the specific areas in which the Baltic States cooperated during this year. First, the BA Environmental Protection and Energy Committee actively discussed the joint energy policy of the Baltic States and the Baltic Sea environmental protection issues. Second, the BA Education, Science and Culture Committee elaborated on issues concerning higher education, cultural heritage and creative industries. Third, the BA Social Affairs Committee worked on solving labour market issues. Fourth, the BA Legal Affairs and Security Committee worked on legal and illegal migration issues, as well as aspects of Baltic air space surveillance. Fifth, the BA Economic Affairs, Communications and Informatics Committee was engaged in issues regarding the development of rural tourism and *Via Hanseatica*. During this session, the committees will report on specific measures and decisions taken. The diversity of our cooperation is based not only on geographic factors but – as you can see from the aforementioned areas of cooperation – on logical and pragmatic factors. Namely, this year, we worked on issues and problems that cannot be solved by using one country's means and resources but that can be successfully solved only by using regional cooperation.

In today's Europe, we cannot constantly think only about our state's national interests. We also need a sense of responsibility concerning our neighbours. The European Union is interested in the stability of its new neighbours, and the Baltic States, by virtue of their geographic location and their common historical experience, can provide the largest input with regard to launching the European Union's New Neighbours Initiative. With regard to integration into the European Union, the sharing of Baltic States' experience in implementing various reforms is regarded as the most important contribution of these countries in implementing the European

Neighbourhood Policy. Just as the Nordic countries – including the Nordic Council and the Baltic Council of Ministers – almost twenty years ago assumed responsibility for the Baltic States by making an essential contribution to the development of democracy, the economy, education and science, foreign affairs and regional cooperation, so we have to be conscious of our responsibility to share the experience we have acquired. I believe that the time has arrived for us to assume the same responsibility as did the Nordic countries, the Benelux countries and our other international partners.

I would like to stress that discussions during yesterday's conference clearly indicated the direction for our parliamentary cooperation – namely, we must not only strengthen the trilateral cooperation of the Baltic States but also be ready to share our experience and provide support to the new neighbour countries of the European Union. The success story of the Baltic States' regional cooperation and their development is seen as an encouraging example for others. On 18 May this year, Mrs. Nino Burjanadze, Speaker of the Georgian Parliament, took part in the theme conference of the Baltic Assembly. The Speaker of the Georgian Parliament stressed that cooperation with the Baltic States as a whole and with the Baltic Assembly as an organization for cooperation among the Baltic parliaments is essential for Georgia. Keeping in mind that the Baltic Assembly has no mandate for cooperation with individual national parliaments but rather with interparliamentary organizations, the Baltic Assembly Presidium initiated implementation of the European Neighbourhood Policy in cooperation with the GUAM Parliamentary Assembly, which represents Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.

Dear colleagues,

On behalf of the Baltic Assembly Presidium, I would like to inform you about its activities during this year. In total, the Presidium members had 11 meetings in which we reviewed issues of substance and organizational matters regarding the Baltic Assembly, as well as issues concerning cooperation with the Nordic Council and the Benelux parliament. First of all, I would like to inform you about cooperation with the Benelux parliament. On 23 March 2007, the renewed Common Declaration of Parliamentary Co-operation between the Baltic Assembly and the Benelux Interparliamentary Consultative Council was signed in Luxembourg. We agreed that

the overall goal of cooperation between the parliaments of the Baltic States and the Benelux countries is to facilitate democracy and socio-economic and cultural development in the Baltic States and the Benelux countries, to protect common interests in the European Union with regard to particular issues, as well as to ensure political support for regional cooperation in a wider European perspective. I often hear the following question: what can possibly unite two parliamentary organizations – the Baltic Assembly and the Benelux parliament – given their considerable geographical distance, different levels of economic, political and social development in their respective countries, as well as different degrees of regional cooperation? At first that might seem to be true. However, reality shows that the status of Benelux countries as small countries, their European Union membership, common problems, as well as common goals and ideas, are unifying factors. Although we are separated by several thousand kilometres, we cannot turn a blind eye to the fact that crime, climate changes, the labour market, energy policy and other issues that are discussed during the joint meetings of our organizations transcend national borders.

Second, the Presidium in its meetings has considered the issue about cooperation with the Nordic Council. This year, the most topical issue regarding our cooperation with the Nordic Council was undoubtedly climate changes. Together with the Presidium of the Nordic Council, we have drafted the work plan for 2008, which sets forth the common priorities of both organizations, as well as committees' priorities and areas of activity. The following issues have been set as priorities of parliamentary cooperation between the Baltic States and the Nordic countries: energy policy, the labour market and social welfare. I believe that strengthening cooperation with the Nordic Council is the Baltic Assembly's priority because the labour market, legal and illegal migration, protection of the environment, as well as education, science and energy, are issues that the European Union leaves to the individual member states. We are dealing with these issues not just on the national level but also on the level of regional cooperation between the Baltic States and the Nordic countries.

- Third, I would like to inform you about the statements of the Presidium of the Baltic Assembly that we have adopted during this year. On 9 February 2007, we adopted the Statement of the Presidium of the Baltic Assembly on the Support to the Republic of Latvia Regarding the Signing of the Latvian – Russian Border Agreement. In this

statement, we jointly emphasized that the Latvian – Russian Border Agreement will serve as a positive signal that the relations between both countries are stable, give a positive impetus for solving border-crossing-related issues, as well as facilitate the economic growth of the entire Baltic Region. On 3 May 2007, the Latvian and Lithuanian delegations to the Baltic Assembly adopted a joint statement supporting Estonia with regard to the relocation of the Bronze Soldier monument in Tallinn. Both delegations sharply condemned the violent riots and looting in the streets of Tallinn and emphasized that Estonia as a sovereign state is entitled to make decisions about relocating the monument, and other countries have no right to interfere with these decisions. Finally, on 30 October 2007, the Presidium of the Baltic Assembly adopted a statement addressed to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe regarding critical comments on the observance of human rights voiced by the President of the Parliamentary Assembly during his visit to Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in September. In this statement, we emphasized that the Baltic States are pursuing an integration policy which conforms with the PACE norms and principles and called on the members of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe to observe official PACE decisions and positions.

Dear colleagues,

Today, Europe has to deal with many urgent issues; in order to do that, Europe has to be capable of acting. An action-capable Europe is our common goal. It has been and still remains a common dream of several European generations. The French writer and thinker, Antoine de Saint Exupéry, once said: “If you want to build a ship don't herd people together to collect wood and don't start assigning tasks, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea.” While working together and shaping Europe, we, the people of Europe, have to feel a common longing for a united Europe. It is a lofty goal, and one hard to achieve; nevertheless, it is a goal that is worth fighting for. I am convinced that cooperation of the Baltic States in spheres such as education, culture, science, the labour market, environment, as well as in other areas, will contribute to realizing the common dream of several European generations about a united and powerful Europe.

I wish us all a productive Session and successful discussions about Baltic parliamentary cooperation.