

Visby Conference “Prosperity and Sustainability – Local Cooperation in the Baltic Sea region” arranged by the Swedish Government on August 17-19, 2006.

### Strengthening cooperation between local national and European actors

“The Baltic Sea Region and its cities in a political-historical perspective”

Speaker: 1 st Vice President of the Union of the Baltic Cities and Mayor of the City of Umeå, Sweden, Marie-Louise Rönmark

The aim of today’s conference to create a joint picture, yes sort of a “mental map” over the future development of the Baltic Sea States. Hopefully, we will bear this map with us as a basis for further work that each of us is responsible for. I am going to contribute to the drafting of this map with a retrospective picture of the role cities have played in development; and then even provide a few fitting reflections as applies to work with changing and improving the conditions in our part of Europe.

Since my time is very limited, I will get right to the point and therefore have chosen to highlight a few interesting comparisons that I feel you can learn from when it comes to developing cooperation at all levels in the Baltic Sea States. The examples I have selected are to some degree related to my political involvement, as apart from being the First Vice President of the Union of the Baltic Cities, I am also a local government commissioner in Umeå, which is a medium-sized university city on the Gulf of Bothnia in the northernmost part of the Baltic Sea.

And now, without further ado, I will get on with my reflections.

Today, there are some modern marketing terms that I believe most people recognize: “If you are not visible, you do not exist!” and (therefore) “You have to be on the map!”

“What does this have to do with today’s topic?” Well, for centuries, maps have played an important part in the economic, political and social development of the Baltic area from the time of the Vikings, in the Hanseatic League period, and up to the present. Maps have been the most essential aid for finding your way, both at sea and on land, to new places, new markets and new relations.

But even the decision itself to allow maps to be drawn was also an important way for those in power/the powers that be of each epoch to indicate the extent and importance of their own geopolitical domain. Thus the maps had a symbolic as well as a “marketing” role.

If you study two of the maps from the 1400s, which I will show in a moment, you should pay particular attention to two things. There are significant mistakes on these maps.

What is wrong with my first map? Yes, as you can see the Baltic Sea States are drawn totally incorrect. On the other hand, the rest of Europe is accurately represented. Why? Well, according to modern cartographic research the reason is that there was either a lack of knowledge or a lack of interest in this region. (See *Mare Balticum-2000 år av Östersjöns historia (The Baltic-2000 years)*, Ehrensward et. al. 1995). On the contrary, Italy, Portugal and Holland had well-developed knowledge and methods of cartography. Economic and political aspects provided considerable motivation for establishing more contacts.

The Hanseatic League, which had meant so much for the development of our regions over many centuries, became less and less interested in allowing merchants from other countries to broaden trade and increase competition. Consequently, there was no demand for 'correct' maps of the Baltic Sea under a long period of time. The Hanseatic League used its influence to abstain from fitting merchants and the merchant navies from other countries the 'means' of increasing trade in the regions. Up to the 1500s, it was common practice to use the sailing directions that had been used in King Valdemar's sailing route that dated from the 1300s. I certainly don't deny the great importance of the Hanseatic League had for the development that took place during this period since the Hanseatic League at the height of its power consisted of more than 200 cities and market places. It definitely contributed to the development of the infrastructure of today's society, none the least with the founding of several new cities, of which Copenhagen is one, new canals, and other transport routes. Yes, it essentially exercised great influence in all aspects of society.

What about the next map? What is wrong here? Now, the parts of the Baltic Sea States are clearer, but from the Åland Sea and northward there is not much that is correct. Why? The way the Hanseatic League managed its economic and political interests gradually led to backlashes. The King of Sweden, as part of a trade policy countermove against the Hanseatic League, excluded the Northern and Southern parts of the Gulf of Bothnia from trade for foreign ships and merchants. All trade was to be regulated by Stockholm. The King's coat of arms appears significantly over the sea-approach to our Swedish waters up in the northern part of the Baltic Sea region.

The so-called the Gulf of Bothnia trade restraint resulted in a decline of interest in more exact cartography even here for many years; and, as a consequence, our part of the Baltic Sea region ended up being described in such a way that in practice it was inaccessible.

Thus, the Hanseatic League's greatness, power and importance caused governments to make fearless decisions that had long-term consequences for the development of our part of the country. Today, we can hardly imagine the ways that development in the North was actually affected.

Let us then take this lesson about economic and political strategies and their long-term consequences with us into the future, as I wish to conclude with something proactive. Something that can "put our region on the map again"; and by that I specifically mean a "mental map" that shows how countries around the Baltic Sea will form a joint strategy for development.

My fundamental point of view about the European cooperation is that cooperation must be built and implemented with a bottom-up approach if this cooperation is going to be democratic. Only then will we be able to persuade those who are sceptical and who are somewhat negative to the vision of a unified and forceful Europe.

People, businesses and organizations must have time to realize at their own pace why cross-border cooperation and communication are important. Acceptance and proactive participation in continued development will first be achieved when the fundamental relationships that exist between our countries are realized and understood. (You only need to consider what is happening in the Baltic Sea States. Who could have imagined all the effects of integration that we now see taking place every day?)

My example for how local and regional development work can be given a Baltic Sea dimension comes from the project *Via Baltica Nordica* (VBN).

The picture I am now showing illustrates how we have systematically worked over the past 10 years to tie together local and regional development projects in several countries. Our objective was to form a common vision for continued work. In this way, we have contributed to the joint map that the countries of the Baltic Sea Region should create.

How have we worked to get to where we are today?

In short, first we have worked out a strategy for how the transport corridor in our own county could be the base for development of a large part of the industry and commerce in the municipalities concerned. Thanks to contact through the years with Norway, Nordlands fylke and Mo I Rana, and Finland, Österbotten and Vaasa, we have realized that all of us are equally dependent on a strong highway route so that we can be tied together and at the same time reach markets and make new contacts.

Now the Norwegians are building a tunnel through the mountains in order to guarantee communications to the East. In Finland, the organization Via Finlandia is currently overseeing development cooperation along the E-12 route. We have cooperated with this during the current program period and have implemented one of the largest INTERREG-funded development projects in our part of Sweden-Finland.

In Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, there has been development work for many years with the *Via Baltica*. We see direct similarities and the structural links that can be established in the Baltic Sea States if we are joined together. We are going to do just that in the coming years. If we succeed, then the development corridor, which I have just shown, will have been established that is based on the local ambitions and motivation. We gain the identity and links through being acknowledged in the Baltic Sea States' own vision. Legitimacy can be achieved through financial funding from the Baltic Sea program and the EU's other programs for European regional development and growth.

What about the cities? Have I forgotten about them? No, I almost forgot to mention that through all the epochs there has existed an organized and administrative ability in the cities that have accounted for the uniting force behind most of the development initiatives. And so it is today. We, who are the local government leaders, have no difficulty making contact with and being entrusted with the task of managing development projects in partnership. And this we do in partnership with local businesses, organizations and other actors.

Since I have already shown our ability to link these ideas for development to a greater and broader geography that make us more aware of the links and opportunities that exist in the Baltic Sea States as well as in European cooperation in general.

Consequently, our "mental map" of the future must show the opportunities and express desire to open up cooperation. If we don't, history shows us that it is easy to make mistakes that can delay development. And this is something I don't think any of us in this room want to happen.

## 16. **My summary:**

- Base the integration of the Baltic Sea States on development initiatives that are locally established, where there is insight into the need for joint development work. That which can improve an understanding of regional, national and European links also confirms legitimacy for our efforts in the Baltic Sea States.
- Throughout history cities have shown the ability to be good organizers and motors for many different development interests. Urban networks are also an effective tool for regional development in the Baltic Sea States. The Hanseatic League had its 200 cities, UBC has thus far slightly more than 100 cities that work together and carry on development projects in almost every area of society.
- Interconnected communications and transport corridors create distinct functional links. They are also the means for reaching new markets, establishing new contacts, and gaining new perspectives. Here engenders the ability to comprehend economic, social and environmental relationships.
- The future map for the Baltic Sea States must show the opportunities that are available. It must show our intentions. And it must extend an invitation to participate in long-term cooperation across all borders. The infrastructure should be the primary step, then the natural transportation solutions, energy and environmental connections, the social aspects should follow. Yes, in short, every aspect of the living environments for businesses and people around the Baltic Sea.

Thank you for your kind attention.