

## OPENING ADDRESS

Mr Anders Engstrom  
President of the Union of the Baltic Cities

Your Excellencies, Mr Lord Mayor of Gdansk, dear friends,

First I would like to congratulate the city of Gdansk on the Millennium, celebrated this year. Mr Lord Mayor, may I ask you to receive this birthday gift from all your friends in cities around the Baltic Sea. It is made in a well-known glass-factory not far from Kalmar.

Gdansk is a city with great historical importance in the Baltic Sea Region, and plays also today a very important role in our region.

Gdansk also has a great historical importance for the UBC. The first ideas of forming an organisation of Baltic Sea Cities emerged in June 1990 at a seminar in connection with the first Polish local elections. The Solidarity movement had started the inevitable process to the fall of the Iron Curtain, and we could foresee the birth of a new region, where the development would very much be dependent on the development in the cities of the countries around the Baltic Sea. Only a short time later, we could witness the rebirth of the three Baltic states. The UBC was founded, as the first of the present large Baltic Sea cooperation organisations, in September 1991, also here in Gdansk.

Since these days six years ago, the UBC has developed tremendously. We have grown from 32 to almost 80 member cities. The activities of the UBC are numerous, as you can see in the UBC Activity Report. We play a major role as an actor in our region. The Governments pay attention to us, and we are observers in their organisations.

One of our characteristics is that we are a very practical organisation and are oriented to problem solving and implementation. That is of course because our member cities see the concrete problems in their daily activities and also know how the problems should best be tackled.

Now we gather again in Gdansk for the UBC General Conference. This time we will take new steps for a better development. One result of this Conference hopefully will be that all the networks and organisations in the Baltic Sea Region work together even better and coordinate their resources to the benefit of our common region.

I am happy that so many networks and organisations have shown so much interest for this conference. It shows that we in confidence can have great expectations for the co-operation and for the development in our Baltic Sea Region.

I believe The Baltic Sea Region is unique in the world. Nowhere else you can find such an extensive and fruitful cooperation as in our region.

The cooperation is carried out at all possible levels, from governments to local people-to-people contacts in a way that makes this region something very special.

Governments meet regularly on ministerial meetings. The governmental organisations, like CBSS, Helcom, VASAB, play important roles. Also other governmental authorities, everything from environmental authorities to military cooperation, have regular meetings.

Cities and regions meet under the umbrella of UBC, BSSSC and CPMR. Very important are the numerous twin-city cooperations in our region, that involve so many parts of the city authorities, like schools, cultural institutions, and so on.

The economical ties are growing, with increased business investments and new joint-ventures. There are several sector organisations which involve all parts of the society, from universities to ports, commerce and tourism,

Non-governmental cooperation, like all NGO's, is maybe the most important for people-to-people contacts. I have witnessed numerous occasions with everything from chess-clubs to amateur choirs and Rotary organisations, and seen the atmosphere of friendship and togetherness growing.

I believe that you can not find a region anywhere else in the world with such a broad cooperation that has emerged so fast and in such a positive atmosphere. Other parts of the world look at us with envy. Last year I even had a delegation of Japanese mayors who wanted to shape a similar organisation as UBC around the Sea of Japan, with Japanese, Korean and Russian cities. They returned home deeply impressed.

This atmosphere of cooperation in peace and stability, lays the foundation to social, environmental, economic and democratic development. Some experts foresee that our region in a near future will be a major growth region in Europe - maybe a European Tiger?

Dear friends, 1996 was a very important year for our region. Two major meetings, first the Visby summit with all prime ministers from the Baltic Sea Region, and later the Kalmar meeting of the CBSS, where the statement from the Visby summit was formulated into a concrete program. The European Union adapted the Baltic Sea Initiative, which pointed out the most important aims and activities for our Region.

The EU-programs Phare and Tacis have been changed and adapted for the future EU expansion process. They also give co-financing possibilities with new and changed EU-programs such as Interreg, Ecos-Ouverture and BSPF to create EU financing of projects across the borders and the Baltic Sea itself.

Ladies and gentlemen!

As you all have experienced, very often speeches on Baltic Sea issues start with describing the fantastic development during the last six years (I just did the same). True, the development has been astonishing. But let us instead look six years ahead. By then, hopefully, the Baltic Sea Region is an inland sea of the European Union. This creates totally new perspectives that are hard to imagine. Maybe the next six years will bring a still more radical development than the last six years.

Mr Ministers!

In order to facilitate the cooperation in our region, I hope that all the applicant countries will be able to enter the European Union at the same time, and not leave any country to join later. Otherwise many unnecessary practical obstacles would be raised, when cooperating in various projects in our region. But it would also have an even greater psychological impact on co-operation for common goals between neighbours.

Regardless of the actual times for the accessions of new EU member states, it is important that the various actors are well prepared. We have started working with a project, financed by the EU, to prepare our member cities for the future membership of the EU. The project is as important for member cities in present EU countries as for member cities in future member states. One of the activities in the project is a conference to be held November 17-18 1997 in Tallinn. The title of the conference is: "The European Integration in the Baltic Sea Region - Challenges for Local Governments", and I would like to invite all interested cities and organisations. Please mark the date in your calendar already now. Some details you can find in the conference material. I wish you all welcome to Tallinn!

This project, which will last until the Baltic Sea is an inland sea in the EU, is an example of where a co-operation between governmental, regional and local authority level could lead to greater impact.

Dear friends!

I earlier in my speech mentioned the necessity of cooperation. So have also a lot of actors done during the last two years. However, the interaction between the actors have been limited, so far. Of course, it is important to let thousand flowers bloom in the beginning. But the blooming must now be complemented with coordination to be efficient. This coordination must not only come from above. It must be a process where all actors must have influence.

I have earlier mentioned the European integration process in our region as one example where co-operation between all levels is feasible. An other example is the implementation of Agenda 21 in our region. This has already been initiated by the nations, but I am sure that also the local and regional actors are useful as partners in this important task. The Helsinki Commission has already declared the importance of such a coordination.

The Baltic Sea Alliance, which will give access to information between our organisations via the Internet, can be a good example for future cooperation. It is lead through a joint effort by UBC, BSSSC and BCCA and will be available for all other organisations.

Dear Homo Balticus!

This conference is devoted to gather the various networks of the region in order to find better ways of cooperation. Later today, during our workshops, hopefully we will find new ways to cooperate in special subjects. But I would like already now to take the opportunity to propose the formation of a standing committee of presidencies from all interested networks and organisations in our region at all levels, from governmental to regional and local organisations, to meet annually in the future to discuss and coordinate concrete projects. The UBC is ready to invite to the first meeting later this year.

Dear friends, Mr Lord Mayor of our host city!

I would like to thank the city of Gdansk for your generosity to invite UBC to our general conference here in your historical city. I also wish all participants a fruitful and interesting conference.