

XIV UBC General Conference **Växjö, Sweden, 24-27.10.2017**

Per Bødker Andersen
UBC President
UBC 25th Anniversary Session

Distinguished members of the UBC, distinguished guests

26 years ago we all experienced a sort of euphoria in the Baltic Sea Area. What had seemed so far, far away just a few years before, suddenly became a reality. Iron curtains had vanished and people again had the opportunity to go abroad - to visit neighboring countries and cities – and most of all: to participate in decision making in their own cities and surroundings. Free elections, the right to express themselves, to communicate, to form parties, all the things we expect of a modern, humanistic and democratic society.

But give it a thought – it is not more than 26 years ago. At that time both national and local politicians were very much aware of the difficulties that lay ahead. The need for skilled public servants at all levels for society to continue to deliver basic services to the citizens. And being realistic enough, they also anticipated, that a big number of the old employees would have to leave office in a new way of organizing local society.

That was what led to the creation of The Union of the Baltic Cities. Ministers, Mayors and Council Members from the “western part” of the Baltic devoted themselves to help their new neighbors with the necessary capacity building, offering exchange of civil servants in different areas – but note: not to have them copy the western way of doing things – but to present examples, that might be “translated” into the surroundings, where should be used.

The first President of the UBC, Anders Engström, former Mayor of Kalmar, literally drove around the Baltic Sea, offering this help on behalf of the founders of the UBC.

Does it sound like a fairy tale? Maybe. But then remember, that in fairy tales we normally see a lot of trouble before the happy ending.

During the more than 26 years that have passed, countries and cities have met a lot of challenges. Not every step has been an easy one. But we have all followed the positive development of each unit as it went along.

Although we are now – almost all – members of the EU, we still respect the founding Ideas, namely respect for democracy and democratic rights independent of belief, nationality or ethnic heritage. We still base our cooperation on respect for our common – but also different history in the Baltic Sea Area. And we cherish the diversity in culture, in language and in nature.

It was necessary to start working with very small funds. The result was, that no big political secretariat was the first to be established. Instead different commissions with participants from different countries and cities exchanged experiences for free.

We have been true to this way of working and creating results to the benefit of all member cities. One could put it like this: The more you participate in commission work – the more you get for free! And also today our commissions are the cornerstones of our work. But of course they have developed and are now often partners in other international projects – like the ones you are presented with at this Conference.

EU and UN projects. University to city cooperation – and not to forget the may be most important of them all – the very heart of the UBC: City to city cooperation.

I am happy to be able to welcome our guests, and I find that it underlines the respect of the work of the UBC, that you are here today.

I welcome The President of the European Committee of the Regions, Karl-Heinz Lambertz.

And Krista Kampus, Senior Advisor and Head of the Sustainable Development Unit – Baltic 2030, Council of the Baltic Sea States

And I thank my colleagues from the board – Piotr Grzelak from the founding City of Gdansk.

Jaanea Simula Chair of the UBC Cultural Commission

And Jørgen Kristiansen. Deputy Mayor of Kristiansand

For their enthusiastic work for the UBC, and Piotr for hosting the UBC secretariat since the very beginning.

Thank you also to our Moderator: Alan Atkisson that you dare do this 😊

And last but definitely not least.

Thank you LordMayor Bo Frank for hosting us in you beautiful city of Växjö.

You and you staff have done an exceptional effort to make this become an event to be remembered.

Let us all work hard and determined for the UBC to let that happen.

Thank you for your attention.