

XIV UBC General Conference Växjö, Sweden, 24-27.10.2017

*Piotr Grzelak
Deputy Mayor of Gdańsk
UBC 25th Anniversary Session*

Dear members of the Union of the Baltic Cities,
Honourable Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Union of the Baltic Cities (UBC) was founded in 1991 in Gdańsk upon the initiative of the twin cities: Kalmar and Gdańsk. After the Iron Curtain collapsed, the traditional links of cooperation across the Baltic Sea could be re-established and the Baltic Sea once again could serve as the unifying factor.

The commitment to face and solve the problems inherited from the past decades expressed in 1991 at the UBC Founding Conference in Gdańsk laid a solid foundation for continuous works for the sustainable future of the cities, and the region and outlined the cooperation between different stakeholders.

For 26 years the UBC has been actively working to mobilize the potential of its member cities for a democratic, safe, sustainable and smart Baltic Sea Region. It has created a friendly forum that inspires and enhances the cooperation and cities' development. The City of Gdańsk is proud of taking part in this important process hosting the UBC Secretariat since the beginning.

For the City of Gdańsk its membership in the UBC opened a window through which we can closely observe how democracy works on the local level. Poland is a country where democracy is still quite a new phenomenon and we are still learning how to live in this new system, and what its basic principles are. Membership in such international organisations as UBC, EUROCITIES, The Hanseatic League or ALDA has given us the chance to learn following the best examples and best practices from the countries and cities where democracy is already well-established. I would even say that you helped us on our way to membership in the European Union.

Throughout this learning process we have not only met a lot of great people and experts but numerous life-long friendships have been made. This proves that such organisations have some important added value as the cooperation and friendships initiated at the professional level still continue to last and grow on private basis. This, in turn, contributes to a peaceful and sustainable development based on mutual understanding.

In Poland, at least at the local level, we are trying to do our best to put democratic rules into practice and secure the fundamental European values. We have already learned through our own mistakes and are now ready to educate the others offering them some guidance on their path to

democracy. Therefore we turn to the east, towards our closest neighbours – the Eastern Partnership countries. UBC is also trying to reach outside the boundaries of the Baltic Sea Region and broaden the scope of their cooperation by intensifying ties with the Black Sea Region and the EU.

As you know Eastern Partnership is a program defining the eastern dimension of European Union policy within the framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy. It was initiated by Polish diplomacy in cooperation with Sweden and launched in Prague in 2009, during the Czech presidency.

All these activities that we all currently undertake happen in the face of extremely dynamic changes that take place not only in the remotest parts of the world but also on our local European playgrounds. Europe needs to respond to these political changes. All changes always produce both risks and chances. It is our task to avoid and wisely tackle the risks and to discern and use the chances. I believe, Eastern Partnership serves as a good example here. The 5th Eastern Partnership summit that takes place in Brussels on 24 November this year will certainly provide a good platform for further discussion on how to transform the risks into opportunities and thus further strengthen cooperation with and between Eastern Partnership members.

Dear Friends, I am sure that some of the conclusions that we will reach during the debates held within the framework of this UBC Conference might make a valuable contribution to the EaP summit discussion.

What UBC has also been doing (and with success!) throughout these past 26 years is emphasizing the role of cities as leaders in promoting the European values of freedom, democracy, equality, openness, tolerance, solidarity and diversity. Just to give you one example. A few years ago UBC has set up a Working Group on Gender Equality thus making cities and local governments realise that, as being closest to the citizens, they have a key role to play in the works for gender equality. This is just one of many examples that proves that UBC moves with the times and can quickly and appropriately respond once the fundamental European democratic values are being threatened.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As members of UBC we are about to sign *The Appeal on Tackling Rising Populism and Euroscepticism*. Growing populism, radicalisation and nationalism are phenomena which until recently were totally unknown to us, living in stable, safe, and thoroughly democratic Europe. The current situation in Poland, unfortunately, proves that these tendencies start to prevail. We cannot stay indifferent. I believe that in the face of these challenges that Europe encounters today, I mean the rising populism and nationalism, we as city leaders have to take matters into our hands and openly and earnestly defend the fundamental European values. This *Appeal* is our unanimous voice and let it be heard!

Democracy has not been given to us once and for good. We all do understand it. Democracy is a process that demands constant learning and every day we need to strive towards it. Therefore we should put strong emphasis on education. Organisations such as UBC can be a great education tool as they not only reach across the geographical borders but cut right through the political ones. And this incredible ability of UBC to find unity in diversity is its most powerful weapon. Therefore, we are obliged to use this potential in order to build not only a stronger, better and more sustainable Baltic Sea Region but a stronger, better and more sustainable Europe.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I honestly believe that the friendly forum of the UBC member cities that was launched back in 1991, and has been successfully growing since then, will continue to inspire and enhance further cooperation and the cities growth thus contributing to a sustainable and peaceful development of Europe. We are lucky to have organisations, such as UBS, that guard and promote the values of democracy, freedom and solidarity and we do still have the freedom to belong to these organizations. I hope this freedom will never be taken away from us and we will be able to meet in this group and work together for a better future.