

ADDRESS AT THE FOURTH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON BALTIC AND NORDIC STUDIES IN ROMANIA: *EMPIRE-BUILDING AND REGION- BUILDING IN THE BALTIC, NORTH AND BLACK SEA AREAS*, OVIDIUS UNIVERSITY OF CONSTANȚA, MAY 24-26, 2013

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure and honour for me to have the opportunity to attend the Fourth International Conference of Baltic and Nordic Studies here at the Ovidius University of Constanta.

The conference is organised under the theme “Empire Building and Region Building in the Baltic, North and Black Sea Areas” and I have been invited to speak about region building in the Baltic Sea rim area.

Let me start by first casting a quick look backward, and speak about the Nordic Countries. After that I shall describe the issues that are most significant for the future of the Baltic Sea Region.

The longest standing formal cooperation across the Baltic Sea is the Nordic Cooperation. It is composed of five countries: Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland and Iceland plus the three autonomous territories Faroe Islands, Greenland and Aland. We are approximately 25 million people, as a region among the 10 biggest economies globally, and with 8 official languages.

Cooperation between the Nordic countries is one of the most comprehensive regional partnerships found anywhere in the world. It is based on common values and the will to generate dynamic development in a sustainable manner. “United, but not uniform” is the essence of Nordic philosophy. Ours is a region where people can move freely, live under equal conditions and enjoy equal rights.

Our inter-parliamentary body Nordic Council was created already in 1952 and our inter-governmental body Nordic Council of Ministers in 1971. The essence of their work is to create synergies that benefit the region’s citizens. Let us mention

some very important Nordic milestones: Passport union in 1957, Agreement on fully integrated labour market in 1983, Nordic language convention in 1987, Nordic social convention in 1994 and free access to higher education in 1997. The Presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers rotates on a one-year basis, drawing up a cooperation programme. The Council has also international cooperation, in particular with geographically close-by partners.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Nordic countries have had mutual cooperation for more than 50 years, but the situation around the Baltic Sea as a whole used to be totally different. Until only some 20 years ago, during the Cold War period, the Baltic Sea was in fact a Cold War border between two opposing political and economic systems. In those days that today seem distant interaction took mainly place between the Western or Eastern Baltic Sea shore countries. The region was characterized by political and military tensions that prevented genuine interaction and cooperation. The only exception was perhaps the founding of the Baltic Marine Environment Protection Commission - commonly known as HELCOM. The HELCOM convention was signed already in 1974 by the seven coastal Baltic Sea states of those days and it entered into force in 1980.

The situation began to change quickly with the reshaping of the political landscape in Europe that the collapse of the Soviet Union and the fall of the Iron Curtain brought along. The vacuum of interaction and cooperation across the Baltic Sea was filled very quickly with new institutions and cooperation frameworks at various levels. Let us mention a few examples: at the governmental level the Council of Baltic Sea States (CBSS) was founded in 1992, the Parliaments established the Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference (BSPC) in 1991, at the level of sub-regions we saw the birth of the Baltic Sea States Sub-regional Cooperation (BSSSC) in 1993, and the cities of the Region formed the Union of Baltic Cities (UBC) in 1991. A similar development of new organisations and networks took place also in the private sector. Today our region is characterized by a multitude of institutions also between chambers of commerce, trade unions, universities, cultural organisations and so on.

Another major boost that brought the countries of the Baltic Sea Region closer to each other was their accession to the European Union: Finland and Sweden joined the Union in 1995 and were followed by Poland and the three Baltic states in 2004. Eight of the nine Baltic Sea coastal countries became subject to the *acquis communautaire* that integrated them with each other more tightly than ever before.

After its accession to the European Union Finland felt the need to draw the Union's attention to its Northern regions. The concept of the Northern Dimension was introduced at Finnish initiative and its concrete content was outlined during

our first EU Presidency in 1999. After the enlargement of the Union in 2004 the Northern Dimension policy was revised during our second EU Presidency in 2006.

Today the Baltic Sea rim region may look like a jungle of actors and initiatives. With such a multitude of activities it may be difficult to get an overview of it, or to try to manage it. Scarce resources may be wasted due to overlapping work and lack of coordination. On the other hand, the region's manifold cooperation activities and numerous organisations can also be an asset that gives us an advantage with respect to other competing regions. We must of course use it wisely.

The adoption of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region by the European Council in October 2009 was a major move in this respect. It is the first so-called macro-regional strategy of the EU and represents a new way of intensifying coordination and cooperation across different levels and sectors as well as between the countries of the region. It aims at joining forces to tackle the common challenges. At the same time it also strives to full advantage of the opportunities that working jointly in a coherent manner can bring to the citizens of this region as well as to the EU as a whole. It builds upon the already existing versatile cooperation networks and has as its goal the maximisation of their outcome. It provides us with the vision how to enable the Baltic Sea Region to enjoy a sustainable environment and optimal economic and social development.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Not a long time ago the Baltic Sea was a dividing factor in our region, but today we could describe it as the Sea of Cooperation. With such a highly developed cooperation framework and a jointly agreed approach to apply it our region stands in a good position to prepare itself for the future. We have a toolbox and we know how to use it in order to build a prosperous future. But we must also have the necessary ingredients, materials and elements upon which we can construct the success story for the future of the region. Fortunately our region has a number of strengths that we can rely on when preparing ourselves for the future. I shall mention a few of them.

Our region has plenty of innovative capacity. Our educational systems rank high in international comparisons and provide for top-level researchers also in the future. In many parts of our region important resources have been allocated for research, development and innovation purposes already long before such goals were set in the EU 2020 Strategy. Using this innovative capacity to tackle the challenges of sustainable development our region will at the same time strengthen our competitive position in international markets.

Another valuable resource is our people. We have well-functioning education systems, contract-based labor markets as well as democratic decision

making processes. These features do not weaken our economic potential but in fact they are crucial factors for a sustainable success of any economic system.

A third important strength one is our expertise in the environmental field. It is true that our Mare Nostrum is deplorably today one of the most polluted seas in the world, but we have all the reason to believe that it can still be cleaned. Owing to extensive scientific research that has been conducted already over decades we have a fairly comprehensive understanding on the factors influencing negatively the state of the Sea as well as on ways and means to deal with them. Furthermore, we have a concrete plan on which measures and when need to be taken to restore the good ecological status of the Sea.

To ensure a prosperous future for the Baltic Sea Region we must build upon improving the functioning of our internal market – the Baltic Sea Region marketplace. There are still many shortcomings in the functioning of the internal market of the EU. Nothing prevents us, however, from making sure that it truly works at least in the Baltic Sea context. A lot of work has already been done for years to remove all sorts of border barriers between the Nordic countries. The Baltic Sea Region market could benefit a lot from the lessons learnt in the Nordic context. Russia is not part of the EU internal market but the prospects for increased trading with Russia are significantly improved by its membership in the WTO. We are on the right track also in terms of connecting our region, as this is one of the main objectives of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Baltic Sea Region is equipped with everything that is necessary in order to look at the future with confidence. Together we must make sure that the Baltic Sea Region will continue to be – and not only on the map - on the top of Europe. This will require from us hard work and joint efforts. But as long as we keep on building the future on our common values and positive attitudes - such as diligence, equality as well as ability and will to cooperate - we will not only succeed but also show a good model for the rest of Europe.

Thank you.