

Stockholm Oct 19th 2008

CBSS Secretariat 10 years...

Uffe Ellemann-Jensen, Chairman Baltic Development Forum

When we saw the Iron Curtain and the Berlin Wall disappear less than 20 years ago, the optimists saw this as “the end of history”.

Others were less sanguine but recognized the unique opportunity to do away with a part of our common history that had led to so much suffering and waste.

This was certainly the case in our part of the world – the Baltic Sea Region: For half a century this had been a troubled corner of Europe – a blind alley on the political map – divided and filled with threats. A far cry from the glorious past, when our region had been one of the most prosperous one could imagine, with free flows of people, goods, capital and ideas.

But now we suddenly saw the prospect of restoring what had been lost – and find our natural position “on top of Europe”.

Hopes and ambitions were running high those days among the political leaders in the countries around the Baltic Sea – but most of us were realists as well. We knew that the new situation was fragile – that we needed political structures to deal with all the dangers rising from the very troubled past that was still influencing the possibilities of the present.

And that is why the Council of Baltic Sea States was created.

The seeds to this organization were sowed at a meeting in Rostock on October 22nd 1991 where Hans-Dietrich Genscher had invited me to a discussion of the future of our region together with the German and Danish ambassadors from the countries around the Baltic Sea.

You have to remember what it was like in October '91: Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania had been free again less than two months, the Soviet Union still existed, but had only a few weeks left – so of course the whole situation was rather dim – but it was clear to both of us, that we were faced with a window of opportunity, and that we should take an initiative to strengthen the cooperation in the region. The next step was the

conference in Copenhagen five months later, when the CBSS was officially established.

In the beginning it was just a name and a loose structure. But the *raison d'être* with this new organisation was very clear – and had been excellently expressed by Winston Churchill much earlier: “*To jaw-jaw is always better than to war-war*”: We should create a place where former adversaries in this tense region had to sit together and discuss matters of mutual interest.

The situation in our region was very fragile indeed: The three Baltic countries and Poland had only recently escaped from the claws of Soviet oppression and were scared and touchy – and Russia was a very new and shaky entity – so there were lots of pitfalls in the situation that might turn over the positive development we had seen with the end of the cold war.

Therefore we established a “talking shop” where all countries around the Baltic Sea should sit down together and *talk* about common problems – and common possibilities. And as all of you know the agenda was soon filled with a lot of matters that called for regional solutions.

It took some years before the CBSS got its own permanent secretariat – and competition was fierce when the site should be chosen. Stockholm won. And I see a symbolic value in Strömsborg – situated in the middle of a whirling stream that feeds right into the Baltic Sea, and has become such a clean source of water that salmon is once again going this way...

Last year the question was raised whether the CBSS had outlived its original purpose. Since the creation of the council we had seen the political map of the region change rapidly – most significantly when the EU had brought in as members first Sweden and Finland, and then Poland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. The latter four had joined NATO as well. High economic growth as well as peace and stability characterized the situation around the Baltic Sea. So perhaps there were no longer any sensible use for a thing like the CBSS? Or so the argument went...

Well – once again we have witnessed how fast things can be turned upside down in the World.

The international situation has changed dramatically in the last two months – first with the war in Georgia, then with the financial crisis that at a point threatened to

develop into a meltdown of structures that had been the basis for the high growth. The war in Georgia has raised new fears in our region – or rather: *old* fears have returned – and at the same time the impact of the financial crisis will be immensely felt in our region.

With regard to the new insecurity there has been some talk of the need for a new security structure in Europe. I believe that if all countries would live up to their old commitments this discussion would be superfluous. The Helsinki Process that ran for so many years gave us a set of rules on how states should treat each other as well as their own citizens. This is the kind of structure I wish to see respected not only in our region but in Europe as a whole. I do not want to see a return to a situation where big countries regard it as their right to establish “spheres of interest” around their borders by instigating fears among smaller neighbors. That kind of behavior belongs to the past. And it should be challenged wherever it happens. This is not the time to gloss over facts for the fear of ruffling feathers and sensitivities. This is the time to speak out in support of democracy and the rule of law as a necessary basis for continued growth and stability.

The financial crisis should remind all of us how deeply rooted the interdependence has become – not least in our part of the world. An important element of the crisis is lack of trust – be that trust in the solidity of a bank or trust in the way in which a state deals with its international obligations – and this again should be a lesson to take the utmost care in nurturing confidence – and restoring it when it has been damaged.

And *confidence* is established through jaw-jaw – not through war-war – to paraphrase the remark of Churchill that I referred to earlier.

We need to *talk* together in order to build positions that establish trust rather than fear. And the CBSS is one of the fora that can be used to keep the lines of communications open in a time when too many are talking about breaking contacts.

Our region has so many possibilities. And it is faced with so many problems that demands cooperation.

The fate of the Baltic Sea itself is one of the most pressing: The threats against the environment of our beautiful sea has become visible. The call for common energy solutions as well – whether it has to do with getting rid of outdated technologies or with finding new ways of producing and distributing energy. All this is not new. It has been on our common agenda for quite some time. But what *is* new is that we

have to deal with all these challenges from a much weaker economic basis than we had only a few months ago. And one of the new dangers is that the political leaders chose to put these concerns in the background in order to deal with short-term issues.

I sincerely hope that the visions for common regional solutions – in an atmosphere of mutual respect and understanding – can be restored.

The CBSS has a role to play in this.

And on this 10 years anniversary of the CBSS Secretariat I want to express the hope, that you will be able to add your good services to the tasks ahead of us all here on Top of Europe.