

**Intervention by Bertel Haarder,
MP, President of the Nordic Council,**

at the 30th Session of the Baltic Assembly 25 November 2011 in Tallinn

I'm honoured to take part in this session celebrating 20 years of regained independence for the 3 Baltic countries. Back in 1991 I was minister in the Danish government where Uffe Ellemann-Jensen as Foreign Minister was very active in supporting the three Baltic countries. I personally had the opportunity to open Danish Cultural Centres in both Riga and Tallinn in August 1990 – I will always remember that visit one year before independence. Later I was member of the European Parliament and active in the delegation concerned with Estonia, so I have been here in your Parliament a number of times. It was a good experience as minister for European affairs to take part in the EU Summit in Copenhagen in late 2002, which decided that the 3 Baltic countries together with other Central- and Eastern European countries could join EU from 2004. The Cold War is history.

That is not to say, that we don't have problems. All of Europe and not the least the Baltic countries experienced tough years during the financial crisis. Now focus has turned to Southern Europe and the observers tend to forget that both the Baltic countries and Iceland have overcome the worst by strict measures to improve the national economies.

Nordic-Baltic co-operation is still important even if only 6 of our 8 countries are now members of EU. Nordic Council and Baltic Assembly should in any case focus on issues that our citizens consider vital. If we can find solutions from a Nordic-Baltic perspective it will have an added value.

Since 2007 we in common have had dialogue with both the Parliament and the opposition parties in Belarus in four round table seminars. After the Presidential election in Minsk one year ago the situation has worsened. Per-Kristian Foss from our Presidium and your vice-president Saudargas from Lithuania were at least able to have a seminar in Vilnius in October for representatives from opposition parties and Ngo's working in Belarus or in exile in Lithuania. If we want a stable Europe, we should try to get good cooperation with Eastern neighbours as Belarus, Ukraine and Russia. It gives added value that we Nordic-Baltic parliamentarians take our own initiatives, even if it just now is difficult.

In 2012 we will also have cooperation outside the Nordic-Baltic family. In April the Benelux Parliament will host a trilateral seminar in Haag.

Some of us will soon meet again in Reykjavik the first week of December, where The Presidiums of the Nordic Council and the Baltic Assembly will have the annual Summit. An important theme will be maintaining the good Nordic-Baltic co-operation but also updating it to a new situation, where for instance EU matters more for all of us. It is quite natural for the Nordic countries to co-operate with the EU. The Nordic countries work well together but greater dynamism could be injected into our partnership by working even more closely together in the international arena. And it could be fine if we also here could find more themes for Nordic-Baltic co-operation.

I'm sure, that both the Nordic and the Baltic people have learned from the crisis. One lesson is that international cooperation around the Baltic Sea is still very important.