



**Federal President Joachim Gauck
at the Presidential Function hosted by the German
Presidency of the Council of the Baltic Sea States
on 24 April 2012
in Berlin**

Yesterday saw the "Cultural Kick-Off" of the Baltic Sea Days, an event inspired by the words once sung by Hildegard Knef: "Gib mir den salzigen Wind meiner Ostsee" – which can be literally translated as "Give me the salty wind of my Baltic". And indeed, a light sea wind has made it all the way to Berlin – it has come with you, our visitors from the Baltic Sea region.

Under normal conditions, the German Baltic Sea coast is to be found a bit further north. I myself was born in Rostock. I went to school there, studied there, and worked there for most of my life. Rostock and the Fischland, east of the city, were where I spent my formative years.

Like many of you, I have since my childhood felt a special affinity for the Baltic Sea and its chequered history. Until 1990, our Baltic was a closely-guarded sea. Indeed, it was so well-guarded that we, the coastal inhabitants of the Baltic Sea countries, sometimes felt like prisoners. And yet, when we stood on its shores, it gave us an inkling of what far off places, wide open spaces and freedom might be like. For we knew that the Baltic Sea region stretches far beyond the Sea itself; it reaches across national and cultural divides. And so we yearned for this distant world beyond the sea, a world that was in reality not so very far away. The *mare balticum*, as it was christened by Adam of Bremen, an 11th century chronicler, gave us the space to dream for just a moment.

Many of these dreams have now come true. Our longing for distant shores has been superseded by a fascinating new world – in which travel, cultural coalescence and mundane business contacts between the Baltic peoples are the norm. The hopeful, tenacious

circling of the gulls on the Baltic Sea shores that Hildegard Knef sung about has brought its reward.

It is not only recently that freedom has played an important role in the history of the Baltic Sea region. Freedom of navigation and free trade have long been the area's defining characteristics. There is evidence that connections existed even in Neolithic times, particularly through the trade in amber. And later, when more people settled in the region, the ground was laid for the rise of the Hanse. In the course of the centuries some 200 cities belonged to this commercial association that spanned much of northern Europe. From its base in Lübeck, the Hanseatic League created a mercantile empire that cut across political borders and gave rise to a flourishing of urban culture. Back then there were merchants who were so rich they lent their money to kings. Some consider the red-brick Gothic architecture of the late Middle Ages, found across Northern Europe, to be a reflection of regional identity. Be that as it may, the Hanse's thriving maritime trade left a lasting impact on the Baltic Sea region and on markets far away – from Russia to Flanders, from Iceland to Venice.

But it is not only trade that has left its mark on the Baltic. Power politics and traumatic conflicts have also left their traces – in places where we can now come together and recall a shared thousand-year history. In some places it can now be re-examined and reappraised. At various times, different groups and peoples rose to become the predominant power in the region – at one stage it was the Danes, at another the Swedes, not to mention Poland-Lithuania. From the 18th century onwards, the Prussians and Russians also played a major role.

The Baltic Sea area has repeatedly been a central theatre of war, especially in the 20th century. The Battle of Jutland, the largest naval battle of World War I, was fought in the North Sea by the Skagerrak, which links the Baltic and North Seas. World War II was started when the Germans attacked Westerplatte in Gdańsk. The cultural heritage of the Baltic Sea region was just one of the many things misused by the Nazis for their own evil ends. The Third Reich's racist mania came to an end, only to be followed by the Cold War, which further pushed the region onto the political sidelines of Europe. The Iron Curtain ran straight through it. It was still open to shipping, but the military cordon was almost impassable. Of the 6500 and more East Germans who tried to escape to the West via the Baltic Sea, only around 900 ever arrived.

It was only after the political revolutions of 1989, 1990 and 1991, the Unification of Germany and later Europe, and the independence of the Baltic States, that things changed. The Baltic Sea is no more a sea of confrontation, no longer a barrier to movement. It can finally be true to its character as an inland sea. The Baltic Sea has become a sea of freedom.

I consider it a stroke of luck that this new freedom was accompanied by a new coalescence around the region. For this we have political decision-makers and institutions such as the Council of the Baltic Sea States to thank. Let us recall the tensions of 1991 and 1992. The political situation was precarious following the declarations of independence by the Baltic States, there was great uncertainty regarding the future of Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and there were fears about what would happen if a power vacuum were created in the region.

It was against this background that the Foreign Ministers of Denmark and Germany, Uffe Ellemann-Jensen and Hans-Dietrich Genscher, decided to act. It was on their initiative that the CBSS was established in 1992, twenty years ago, as a bridge between East and West. And indeed, as it says in the German Presidency's programme, it became a "pioneer of cooperation". It managed to overcome the fears generated by uncertainty and helped the newly free littoral states make the transition to democracy and a market economy. This success shows us what a firm belief in Europe can achieve in uncertain times.

Now again, we are called upon to "think European" to forge closer ties within Europe. For only by overcoming fears will we live up to our responsibility for Europe. Only so can we counter the loss of confidence we have suffered since the financial and economic crisis struck.

The CBSS, too, has lived up to its responsibility of facing up to new challenges. Since the eastern enlargement of the European Union in 2004, it has adopted a more project-oriented working style and focuses on fewer priorities. The CBSS is also a very important link between the EU member states and Russia, Norway and Iceland.

What should cooperation in the Baltic Sea area focus on? The EU's Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region and the priorities Germany has set for its Presidency of the CBSS give us some useful pointers. We are increasingly coming to view this common space as a macroregion. It is due to institutions, shared infrastructure and networks in business, science and society that the region functions. None of the states bordering the Baltic can move ahead to their own advantage unless the same goal is also pursued by others.

The people of the region have succeeded in reviving their long tradition of intensive exchange. Almost a third of Europe's GDP is now generated on the shores of the Baltic. More than 2000 ships ply its waters every day. The new Öresund Bridge embodies and greatly benefits the dynamic metropolitan region around Copenhagen, Malmö and Lund.

The CBSS represents one of the greatest economic hubs on the planet. It also stands for ever closer cooperation with a view to tapping the potential of the region in a wide range of fields – in business,

science and civil society. The German Presidency, and the Russian Presidency after it, both have a great opportunity to advance this cooperation. Continuity is vital if new initiatives are to have a lasting impact.

I also think it is crucial for the Baltic to be viewed again as a common space for science and education. It is home to more than 100 universities and research institutes. Some of the oldest universities on our continent are to be found in the region. The university in my home town of Rostock was founded in 1419. Greifswald University dates back to 1456 and Uppsala University to 1477. Scholars have long travelled around the region, thereby fostering cultural convergence. Copernicus, Kant, Niels Bohr and many others did research in the Baltic Sea region. Albert Einstein helped improve the Kiel gyro compass – and was also a keen sailor.

A Baltic “scientific region” can only be created if scientists, universities and businesses all consider themselves part of the same community. There are places where this attitude already prevails and encourages innovation. For example, the area around the Öresund and down to Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania has attracted a considerable number of modern biotech and medical companies and institutes. Several states in Sweden and northern Germany are working together on projects designed to ensure that the Baltic region assumes a leading position in material science. The Free and Hanseatic City of Hamburg in particular is also a vocal advocate of greater cooperation in the sphere of education.

Indeed, a lot of important projects have been driven by the regional authorities in northern Germany. This can be illustrated by the initiatives taken by Hamburg and the two German states bordering the Baltic Sea, Schleswig-Holstein and Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania. Schleswig-Holstein is behind a virtual Baltic Sea history project, whilst Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania has focused on tourism. It has, for example, worked with the Polish voivodship of Western Pomerania to create a seafront promenade on Usedom that links resorts on the German side of the border with Swinoujście.

Another key issue is energy security. In this field in particular it is vital that we develop strategies and solutions without regard to national borders. I am delighted that the CBSS is also active in this area. It is the obvious forum in which to discuss issues such as energy efficiency, safety standards and opportunities for renewable energy. We can all learn from each other on this subject, for several Baltic Sea states have set themselves high targets for extending the use of renewable energies. At the same time, Europe’s two prime energy suppliers – Norway and Russia – are also at the table. The CBSS thus provides a forum for open dialogue on these key issues for our future between all interested parties.

Russia assumes a special role in cooperation around the Baltic Sea. Ever since the time of Peter the Great, the Baltic region has been a "window to Europe" for the Russians. It is here that Russia's history is intertwined with that of northern and western Europe. In the present day, we all seek to make the region an area of peace and good neighbourliness. Initiatives such as those proposed by Russia are a step in the right direction. These include joint airspace surveillance and the "hotline" between military command in Kaliningrad and the states along the Baltic Sea coast. The simplified visa rules are very important for people-to-people contacts, making it easier for tourists arriving by boat in Russian Baltic Sea ports to enter the country.

The Kaliningrad Oblast, too, has a special position in Baltic Sea cooperation. Following the eastward enlargement of the EU, the area has become an exclave in the EU, bordering Poland and Lithuania, and of course, the Baltic Sea. It is thus all the more important that a number of joint projects have been established in Kaliningrad. One success worth mentioning is the EuroFaculty programme to train university staff in the faculties of economics, management and law.

As you see, it isn't enough to raise Baltic Sea issues within the EU alone. We will only get real answers if we discuss the issues with Russia. Poland and Denmark in particular keep reminding us of this key aspect of Baltic cooperation.

The integration of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania was no doubt crucially aided by the Scandinavians. Thanks to the contacts between the Baltic Republics and the Nordic Council of Ministers, partnerships were soon established that helped integrate these states into EU structures, and which remain beneficial to all sides. Indeed, we all benefit from these links, as citizens of an ever closer Europe.

Cooperation in the Baltic Sea region is a model for other regions around the world. People everywhere are on the lookout for examples of macroregional cooperation. The stakeholders involved, especially around the Mediterranean, along the Danube and on the Black Sea, are able and willing to learn from the Baltic Sea experience.

However, the prime lesson to be learned from the Baltic's history is to "think European". Cooperation around the Baltic is so successful today because people were not guided by their fears following the collapse of the Iron Curtain, but acted to make their dreams of new freedom come true. Let's abide by that principle, even today, as partners in the European Union and throughout the Baltic Sea region. Let's recognize these countless valuable links – visible to all during these Baltic Sea Days – as the great opportunity that they are. Let's continue down the path of building Europe together!