

I regard myself as a son of the Baltic Sea

by Antti Peltomäki

I was born in Helsinki and spent my childhood in Kotka. After a spell inland during my school years, I returned to the Baltic Sea, first to Turku to do my military service and then to Helsinki to study, to talk politics and to work. Although I have nothing particular against Riihimäki and Brussels, I really feel at home only when I see, smell and taste the sea.

For a little boy the Kotka harbour was the most exciting place in the world. In the Finland of the 1960's there was no other place you could experience the international atmosphere as vividly as in Kotka. The crews of the ships that were taking on cargo in the harbour or waiting to dock monopolised the roads, pubs and football pitches – maybe even the girls – for several weeks at a time.

However, as a little boy I never travelled very far on the Baltic Sea. The furthest I got was Kaunissaari – that is as far as the janitor's boat took us. At that time I knew nothing about Suursaari, which had been ceded to the Soviet Union. The southern coast of the Baltic Sea seemed to lie further away than the islands in the South Sea, which I dreamt of sailing to when I grew up. I still haven't made it to the South Sea, but I did make several boat trips to Sweden and once even all the way to Denmark and Germany with my parents.

At the end of the 1970's, when I came back to the coast after my school years spent inland, the sea of adventures of my childhood had become a very political sea. During my time as a politically active student, the East-West confrontation was ever present and we Finns were very keen to ease the tension. I remember having participated in some kind of a Peace Cruise myself on a ship called Konstantin Simonov. We travelled all the way to Tallinn and Riga, but I suppose that, instead of bringing about love and peace, we just managed to get a massive headache.

In the late 70's and early 80's, I travelled to Poland on the Pomerania a couple of times on my way to continental Europe. Those trips opened my eyes and ears even more. In those days Poland was already different, and it was not just a question of courageous protest by the Solidarity movement. Having met ordinary young people from Poland and East-Germany, I started for the first time to believe that change was possible.

When the Estonian activists started to visit the secretary of international affairs and many other colleagues of mine in the offices of the National Coalition Party almost on a weekly basis, I knew that a historic day was about to dawn. The southern coast of the Baltic Sea could become closer to us than the South Sea islands – or not. Although official Finland was very careful in its comments, many Finns were very enthusiastic about the possibility of following and sharing the historic moments on Estonia's, Latvia's and Lithuania's road to independence. I was one of those Finns, too.

The biggest watershed in the history of Europe were undoubtedly the fall of the Berlin Wall and the disintegration of the Soviet Union. These events created a completely new political situation in Europe, but in the Baltic region their effects could even be compared to the Big Bang. They did create a certain amount of political instability, but above all they

generated a huge amount of economic and human dynamics in the area of the Baltic Sea, Russia included.

Now that Poland and the Baltic countries have joined NATO and the European Union, the political, military and economic situation differs radically from that of my childhood's Kotka. The little boy's sea which ended in Kaunissaari is now the whole Baltic Sea, from coast to coast.

I still have not had the opportunity to take a boat to Suursaari. Nevertheless, I am more than happy when I stand on the deck of my friend's sailing boat on our way from Kotka to Tallinn and see all the ships plying back and forth between Finland and Estonia. I even cannot seem to be worried about the oil tankers heading west from the Koivisto harbour or about the cargo ships arriving at Kotka harbour from Germany with luxury cars on board for wealthy Russians. Although I do understand the various concerns about gas pipelines and electrical cables going under the Baltic Sea and maybe even a tunnel between Helsinki and Tallinn in the future, I like these projects – simply because they bring together countries, businesses and people in the Baltic Sea region.

When we look at the economic development of the Baltic region during the last decade, we have to conclude that there are tangible results to be seen and that there is an enormous amount of potential still to be exploited. The Nordic countries are at the top of the class in implementing the EU's Lisbon Strategy, each in their own way. The economic development in the Baltic countries has been extremely rapid, and the investments the Nordic businesses have made in the Baltic countries and in Poland have increased the economic integration in the Baltic Sea region notably.

The giants of the Baltic Sea, i.e. Germany and Russia, have tended to overlook the Baltic Sea, failing to see the possibilities it can offer, but I am sure that they will follow the smaller countries when they learn to look closely enough and to see clearly enough. Even if Moscow and Berlin do not always understand the significance of the Baltic Sea, it is enough for us to see that St Petersburg, Hamburg and Rostock are aware of its potential.

This is what a little boy from Kotka wants to say!

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