

Baltic and Mediterranean Cooperation Is Becoming Important. Interview with Tuomo Melasuo and Katarina Runesson

Esa Aallas. Journalist and writer

When Finland and Sweden became the new members of the European Union in 1995, the political cooperation and dialogue between Nordic countries and the Mediterranean region increased rapidly. Esa Aallas has interviewed two personalities from Northern Europe emphasising the necessity of Euro-Mediterranean cooperation. According to Finnish professor, Mr Tuomo Melasuo, the growing importance of seas is a common issue: for instance, how do we solve environmental and energy policy questions in the sea areas? Moreover, during the Swedish Presidency in the second half of 2009 the new Baltic Sea Strategy will be presented to the European Union. Modern immigration provides one link to the Mediterranean, says Mrs Katarina Runesson, International Coordinator at National Museums of World Culture in Gothenburg, Sweden. In terms of internal diversity and intercultural dialogue, mostly Lutheran but rather secular democratic Nordic countries have new challenges, such as the visibility of Islam.

The Greek historian Starbo, born in Asia Minor in the first century BC, described the uncivilised North as uninhabitable because of the cold weather and also a place where men were warriors and courageous in opposition to the civilised and urbanised South. According to Aristotle, peoples in the North are products of a cold climate, courageous but not particularly skilled or wise. But they were independent and unable to rule others. People in the South were very skilled but not very courageous. Those days are gone. Today the North has welfare,

but this is not so throughout the South. Today, migrants and refugees are travelling from South to North, including to the Nordic countries. Today cooperation between the Baltic Sea and the Mediterranean is becoming more and more important.

Professor Tuomo Melasuo works as Research Director at the Tampere Peace Research Institute, including Mediterranean Studies, at the University of Tampere, Finland. He also coordinates the Finnish National Network of the Anna Lindh Foundation.



Esa Aallas meets Tuomo Melasuo.

Esa Aallas: Finland and Sweden are Nordic countries but at the same time non-coastal Mediterranean countries. Are there any historical connections between these countries and the Mediterranean?

Tuomo Melasuo: From Antiquity until today there has been a continuity of contacts between Sweden/Finland and the Mediterranean, even if their number has always been modest. It is not known if the geographer Pytheas from Marseilles entered the Baltic Sea four centuries before our time. And more than one thousand years later, several Arab geographers wrote on Nordic and Baltic countries. Moreover, Ibn Khaldoun, the famous North African his-

torian and father of sociology, dealt with this subject in his famous world history. In the Middle Ages, Nordic, including Finnish, pilgrims travelled, first of all, to Santiago de Compostela, but also to Rome and even to Palestine. Mr Olof Rudbeck (1650-1702), Rector of the University of Uppsala, argued that Sweden (Svea) was the reincarnation of the lost Atlantis and Swedish the original language of Adam and Eve. His theory definitely connected Northern Europe with Mediterranean mythologies. At more or less the same time, North African corsairs, who were often of Danish and Dutch origin, sacked the city of Reykjavik taking many hostages for twenty years. Finnish women travelling down to Tunis in order to buy the freedom of their

beloved husbands is another example. Even in the early 1930s, a Finnish author, Eetu Vuorio, published an oeuvre arguing that the Finns are originally from the Mediterranean, from Crete or from North Africa.

E.A.: Why does the Mediterranean matter in Nordic countries in spite of the fact that Scandinavians do not belong to the “inner Mediterranean circle” on the map drawn by French President, Mr Sarkozy?

T.M.: Since 1995 Sweden and Finland have wanted to be full members of the European Union. This implies that we are active in all the domains which are important for Europe. Europe needs the Mediterranean world to reach its own goals and vice versa. Similarly: if the Nordic countries want the Southern European and Southern Mediterranean countries to understand and support our ambitions in the North, we must be active and creative in the South. Apparently Mr Sarkozy has a limited knowledge and understanding of history and international relations. It is more and more necessary for even Mr Sarkozy to learn to appreciate Finland and Sweden as non-coastal Mediterranean countries. It is a little similar to the way France wants to join the Baltic Sea Council, formed in 1992 with eleven member states (France made its application in 2008).

E.A.: Finland’s Prime Minister, Mr Matti Vanhanen, said during the Union for the Mediterranean meeting in Paris in July 2008 that Finland must be active in the Euromed process for securing the interest of others in the Baltic Sea and the North. Do you agree?

T.M.: There are practical, political and, in a certain way, even global reasons why Baltic and Mediterranean cooperation is becoming more and more important. On the global level the importance of seas and sea areas is increasing.

This is due to three different factors: firstly, the growing maritime transport in general; secondly, the increasing importance of ecological and environmental reasons for climate change where seas play an important role; and, thirdly, the quest for natural resources of which the new competition in the Arctic Sea is a clear sign. Specifically, equable new transport and port facilities can share the same logistic and technological experience and make progress together, and both sea areas are planning to construct “maritime highways”. The North Stream Gas Pipeline from Russia to Germany through the Gulf of Finland and the Baltic is just now on the agenda, for instance, like those from Algeria to Spain and France. The same kind of quest for sharing new technology is valid in the different attempts to solve environmental challenges.

E.A.: You mentioned that Mediterranean and Baltic cooperation is also important politically. Would you like to comment on that in more detail?

T.M.: Both sea areas are moving towards major changes. A new Baltic Sea Strategy will be presented to the EU during the Swedish Presidency in 2009, and Euro-Mediterranean cooperation will have some kind of new beginning with the Union for the Mediterranean decided by European leaders in Paris in July 2008. Both sea areas need cooperation in order to strengthen their own role in European politics. One strategic question is how Southern Mediterranean partner countries could benefit from Baltic cooperation and vice versa. This cooperation with Nordic countries might be a kind of guarantee in their relations with their immediate neighbours in Southern Europe. Mediterranean and Baltic cooperation is also necessary to reassure the importance of both areas – Europe and the Mediterranean – in the world. It can only strengthen their roles and

positions in terms of major challengers such as the US, Russia, China and India, for instance. Only a Euro-Mediterranean community can be a global player.

E.A.: Finally, could you mention some examples of Anna Lindh Foundation activities in Finland?

T.M.: Personally, as the Coordinator, I am particularly proud of our performance during the Euro-Mediterranean Dialogue Night in May

with two major events together representing the cultural landscape of today's Finland very well. Firstly, all the winners of the multicultural song contest "Ourvision" participated in the evening at the Caisa Cultural Centre in Helsinki, showing the cultural importance and richness of the people who have arrived relatively recently in Finland. Secondly, the late afternoon session on "Mika Waltari and the Mediterranean" with very substantial public participation to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the most Mediterranean author of 20th century Finland.

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Katarina Runesson is the Coordinator of the Swedish National Network of the Anna Lindh Foundation. She also works as International Coordinator at National Museums of World Culture in Gothenburg, Sweden. These museums also include the Mediterranean Museum.

Esa Aallas: What role can culture play in the new diverse Swedish reality?

Katarina Runesson: Culture helps us shape and enforce our image of ourselves. Cultural policy therefore plays a role beyond the mere regulation of activities: it is a source for overcoming differences and strengthening unification. For this reason, Swedish cultural policy focuses on creating conditions for all to benefit from and participate in cultural life. A crucial factor in the success of this policy is the promotion of intercultural meetings both on a local and an international level, such as that between Euro-Mediterranean partners. Such encounters have proven enriching as well as challenging.



Katarina Runesson.

E.A.: Last year Sweden was among the European countries that received the most immigrants. Migration to Sweden has been fairly constant over the years. Thus, the influence of other cultures has been historically present.

K.R.: After the Second World War, most immigrants came from Italy, Greece, Yugoslavia and Turkey in order to contribute to the Swedish workforce. Also, modern immigration still provides us with links to the Mediterranean region, with new Swedish citizens from Lebanon, Syria and Kosovo. In relation to our population (9.2 million), the Swedish Muslim community is very large, encompassing about 100,000 people.

E.A.: How are migrants integrated into your country?

K.R.: There are a number of challenges. Cultural differences often get the blame, when in reality it is prejudice that allows a less nuanced reflection of religious and cultural practices. As a result, media and other channels of information construct a notion of culture through images of cultural identity that confirm stereotypes and hinder social participation. This creates the tendency to identify cultural reasons as the cause of social problems.

E.A.: You observe that in spite of Sweden's historical links and friendships beyond country borders, we are facing a society divided along cultural, religious and social lines.

K.R.: As a secular society, Sweden has difficulties approaching a world view strongly linked to religion, which causes barriers in dialogue between groups, also on a local level. At the same time, there are wonderful examples of the opposite: a more inclusive education system, multicultural entrepreneurship, broadened horizons and recognised influences as young people of different backgrounds are finding opportunities to work together. Our new diverse reality should be perceived as a rich multiplicity, yet it is too often seen as a massive commerce of voices, where too many speak and too few listen. The real messages will not be delivered in the political arena, but through actual meetings between actual people through informal channels of communication.

E.A.: Do you have in mind an example of Anna Lindh Foundation activities in Sweden?

K.R.: There are several, but one in particular that I would like to mention: "Vox Pacis" (Voice of Peace). This project received funds from the Anna Lindh Foundation to create workshops leading up to a concert that brings together voices and music from the different world religions (www.voxpaxis.com).