

**Mr Örtengren,**



### **Development of town twinning since 1989**

We have approximately 15.000 municipalities in Europe engaged in twinning today. I have also seen the number 30.000 mentioned. Whichever number is correct it is impressive. It is no wonder that this impressive web of contacts and networks represents an important asset in our ambitions to create a Europe which is truly for citizens who have a common European identity and a common view on what our Europe is and where it should be heading.

And yet, town twinning is a modern phenomenon. Basically it belongs to the period after the Second World War although it has been claimed that the first case of twinning was started in 1930 between one German and one Austrian partner. With some justification you can say that the foundations of twinning had been laid when the war broke out, but this was no more than a foundation. In the Nordic countries we witnessed quite a few twin town relationships being started during the 40's, but for us, like for other countries in Europe, town twinning really took off after the war. A twinning movement was born. It was a peace movement and the keywords were reconciliation and solidarity.

From there on twinning developed steadily but not dramatically until those fantastic days when the Wall came down and the countries in Central and Eastern Europe regained their independence. At the same time we saw the beginning of Community support for twinning which the European Parliament voted in 1988. The combined effect was a new impetus to twinning. A new phase began, characterized by dynamism and innovation. Once again words like solidarity och building bridges were given a strong meaning in Europe and there was Community support to back it up.

I will not tell the full story of twinning. I will rather go for lessons and conclusions.

But let me start with a few observations with respect to twinning and the experiences of Sweden's municipalities and regions during some 60 years of twinning. I believe that they are representative for most of the Member countries.

The first observation is that they are many. Sweden has 290 municipalities and 21 county councils or regions. All of them have twin towns and if you add them up they have more than 1500 twin towns.

Second, there is a strong regional focus. In 1990, Swedish municipalities maintained twinning relations with their Nordic counterparts and, with a few exceptions, that was it. Today we also have more than 250 twinning relations with partners in the Baltic countries and Poland and yet another 65 with Russian municipalities. Thus, it is clear that the map of twinning has changed for Sweden, but the regional focus remains. We are talking about ripples on the water, but the leaps are few.

This is also representative of town twinning in Europe today. They are many: At least 15.000 town twinning relations as I said, an impressive figure which makes it a truly Pan-European movement. Just to mention a few figures from the websites of national associations of municipalities and regions: close to 4000 in France, 2000 in the UK, 900 in Denmark, 1400 in Finland, approximately 1500 in Sweden and so on. However, the regional focus is as strong for the rest of Europe as it is for Sweden.

The power of twinning is however not just a question of numbers. It is also a question of content. The essence of twinning has remained people meeting people for better mutual understanding and in order to forge links across borders. However, it is being increasingly recognized that twinning also represents a vehicle or platform for other things and that it can contribute to the solution of other issues in a powerful way.

Let me mention a few: Let us for instance why we are here today, that is the program "Europe for citizens". Twinning is recognized as an instrument to reach out to the citizens of Europe and to help us build an active European citizenship and a common European identity. Another example we can find in the way twinning has developed around the Baltic Sea and in other parts of Europe. It has become the starting point for a mutually beneficial deeper cooperation around municipal core activities, democracy and good governance. Yet another example of twinning as a vehicle for development is the potential to build on twinning relations to further contacts and cooperation between local business communities.

Now to the lessons:

Lesson number 1:

The concept of people-to-people has been the backbone of twinning. This was clearly demonstrated after the Second World War and once again during the 90's.

Lesson number 2:

Twinning is not about top-down but rather bottom-up and building on the commitment of individuals. This also means that twinning must allow individuals to make a difference through their commitment and initiative.

Lesson number 3:

Giving room for individuals also means that small is fundamental for twinning and the need to keep bureaucracy and red tape to a minimum. Nothing can kill individual initiative and commitment like bureaucracy and red tape.

Lesson number 4:

Developments during the 90's have shown how twinning also can be a vehicle for deepened cooperation och for contributing to a wide range of issues. It has fostered cooperation around democracy, good governance, regional development, and so on.

Lesson number 5:

Town twinning has to be seen as relevant and worthwhile to citizens and, let us not forget, local media. We must have good answers to the question "Why should you use my tax money for this purpose?" I think that one lesson from that is that external finance for twinning is very important.

Then to the challenges: Twinning has a fantastic potential but we have to give it a content and direction which appeals to our citizens.

Challenge number 1:

The perspective raised by *Europe for citizens* is exciting and important. How can we make it concrete and meaningful. It has to build on mutual respect for each others culture and traditions and it should generate curiosity. This can not be achieved through handing down a message to our citizen from above or to "inform" them until they embrace these ideas. It is a matter of communication where listening is as important as informing. We must recognize the voice of the twidders.

Challenge number 2:

Since we are talking about individual commitment we must not fall into the trap that to be visible it has to be big and that small is not visible. Many small activities carrying a common message is much more powerful and visible.

Challenge number 3:

We need to recognize the contribution that twinning can make to solving other problems. With this I mean that we must overcome the notion that there is a contradiction between the concept of people-to-people and a deeper cooperation around municipal core activities or for that matter regional development. On the contrary there is a complementarity. Can twinning make a contribution to the Lisbon and the Göteborg agenda? Of course it can. To acknowledge that does not imply undermining the meaning of twinning. As a consequence we should seek to broaden the participation in twinning to include academia, business and so on.

Challenge number 4:

Widen the perspective! If we look at the pattern of twinning it is clear that to a large extent it has a regional perspective. The Nordic countries have twinning relations with the Nordic countries, Poland and the Baltic countries; France with Germany and UK; and UK with France and Germany. A challenge is to make twinning a truly Pan-European movement. Can we reach a situation where the Nordic countries have as many twin towns in Southern Europe as they have in Northern Europe?

Challenge number 5:

Reach out to the rest of the world. We talk about solidarity and building bridges. We all know that there are enough places where we would love to see more of that. I am convinced that twinning has already proven its potential in this respect so let us try to build twinning relations across the external borders of the European Union and beyond that.

So let me turn the perspective on its head. I started by looking backwards. The title of the speech was developments since 1989, i.e. 17 years ago. Let me instead look 17 years ahead to 2023. What kind of twinning do I see?

Europe for citizens has become a reality. We have a Europe which is truly for the citizens and where links between towns and municipalities in the form of town twinning vibrate from a joint commitment of all parts of our local communities. A web of town twinning relations exists across all Europe and is also recognized as a corner stone in our good relations with neighboring countries and why not even beyond that.

I am convinced that we can get there and that the program Europe for citizens has the potential to make a crucial contribution provided that we can build on the initiatives and commitment of citizens.

Let me end with a message from Anders Knape as the chair of the Twinning Working Group of CEMR. Twinning has proven that it has the potential to make a contribution to the program Europe for citizens. We are happy to build on that and give the town twins of Europe a voice in a continued good cooperation with the European Commission. Together is a keyword in twinning and we strongly believe that together also must be a key word for promoting twinning and a Europe for citizens.