

## **Hello Latvia!**

*Article by Denmark's Ambassador to Latvia, Flemming Stender, for Latvijas Avize, 29 November 2019.*

This is the first time, I have the opportunity to write the "Nordic column" in Latvijas Avize. I am the new Ambassador of Denmark to Latvia. Three months ago, on 1<sup>st</sup> September, I arrived in Riga to take up my new post as the Danish Ambassador. I handed over my letter of credentials to the President of Latvia Egils Levits on 3<sup>rd</sup> September, already on my second working day in office!

For many years, I have wished to come back to the Baltic Sea region where I started my diplomatic career more than twenty years ago. At the time, from 1998-2001, I was posted at the Danish Embassy in Estonia, my first posting abroad as a young diplomat. Back then, I followed first-hand the transition of the Baltic States to modern, highly developed European states, and their common way towards accession to EU and NATO. Denmark was a strong supporter of the Baltic States in this process. I became fascinated by the Baltic Sea region. I fell in love with the beautiful and rich nature which is so different from the nature we have in Denmark. And in Estonia, I also met my wife. During those years, I had the opportunity to travel around a lot in the Baltic States. I visited Latvia several times and discovered beautiful Riga, and the wonderful beaches of Jūrmala.

Since then, I have been following developments in the Baltic countries closely. As a private person, I have often been going to the region for holidays, as well as to visit family and friends. And as a diplomat, I have had the chance also to work with the Baltic countries on several occasions.

In December 2002, I was at the European Council meeting in Copenhagen, where the historic decision on the enlargement of the EU with Latvia and the nine other European countries was taken during the Danish EU Presidency. I will never forget this moment. I felt the winds of history, when the then Danish prime minister standing in front of the other European Heads of State and Governments proclaimed that "a new Europe is born". Later in my career, I worked for several years as director of the Baltic Development Forum, a think-tank and platform for Baltic Sea cooperation where I had a close cooperation with many Latvian public and private stakeholders. Many of them, I now have the pleasure to meet again.

Latvia is my first assignment as Ambassador. It has been a good, but also hectic start. As new Ambassador, you have to get to know a lot of people. I drink a lot of coffee these days! My working day is full of meetings with ministers, parliamentarians, representatives of ministries, companies, universities, NGOs, diplomats from other countries, and many many others. It is very easy to get access everywhere I go. I have been received with open arms and warm hospitality from all sides. It is a sign of the excellent relationship and strong friendship between Denmark and Latvia.

As ambassador, it is my job to promote and develop the already strong ties between Latvia and Denmark. The cooperation between the two countries takes many shapes and ways. Through official as well as informal channels. I hope to be able to put my small fingerprint.

I would like to see a stronger cooperation between our two countries in the area of sustainability, green transition and climate change. Denmark and Latvia can learn a lot from each other when

it comes to the transition to a greener society. Latvia is a green country with a rich nature and renewable energy resources. In Denmark, a lot is currently happening on the climate agenda. The new Danish government has set an ambitious target to reduce CO2 emissions in 2030 by seventy per cent (compared to 1990). A few weeks ago, the Danish government appointed a new climate ambassador to strengthen Denmark's role internationally in the green transition. Many other climate initiatives are under way. Denmark wants to be a frontrunner in the fight against climate change. We support a climate neutral Europe by 2050. We want to show that ambitious climate targets are not necessarily in contradiction with economic growth, the creation of jobs, and welfare.

Since my arrival, I have already had a number of opportunities to travel around in Latvia. One of the cities I visited was Jelgava together with my Nordic colleagues, the ambassadors of Finland, Sweden, Norway, and the Nordic Council of Ministers as part of "Nordic days". During our visit, I had the opportunity to meet a class of high school students. Before our meeting, they had watched a Danish youth movie. We then discussed differences and similarities between Latvian and Danish youth, and between Denmark and Latvia. These young Latvian high school students impressed me a lot with their openness and curiosity to the world. I was also amazed how well they spoke English – and how polite they were! They are the future of Latvia! The visit to Jelgava gave me a lot of inspiration to go around in Latvia and also to visit other Latvian schools. I welcome invitations!

As a diplomat, it is important to understand the country in which you are living. To be able to see developments in society, cope with everyday life, follow political discussions, and communicate with people. It is therefore important to have a good knowledge about the language. I have therefore started to take language lessons in Latvian. It is not an easy task! Hopefully, I will be able to get at least a basic knowledge of the Latvian language.

I will look forward to sharing some of my thoughts and experiences with you during my coming years in Latvia. If you have ideas for cooperation between our countries, or just want more information about Denmark, the Danish embassy is ready to help you. My door is always open!