

*Christer Persson*

## Reflections on region-building in the Öresund 20 years after the bridge

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I have decided to focus on what I regard as the most important issue of the region-building process in the Øresund area. I will come back to this soon, but first some general thoughts about the region and its short history. To begin with, the Øresund region has been transformed and enlarged, and is now called the Greater Copenhagen Region, which includes four governing regions and 85 municipalities. What I find is a very heavy organisation where it is difficult to maintain engagement and focus among all these different members.

If we look back at the purpose of the region-building process as it was presented in the mid-2000s, the objective was to create Europe's most integrated cross-border region through strong economic growth, generous social welfare commitments and sustainable environmental policies. This was aimed at attracting residents, businesses and visitors alike.

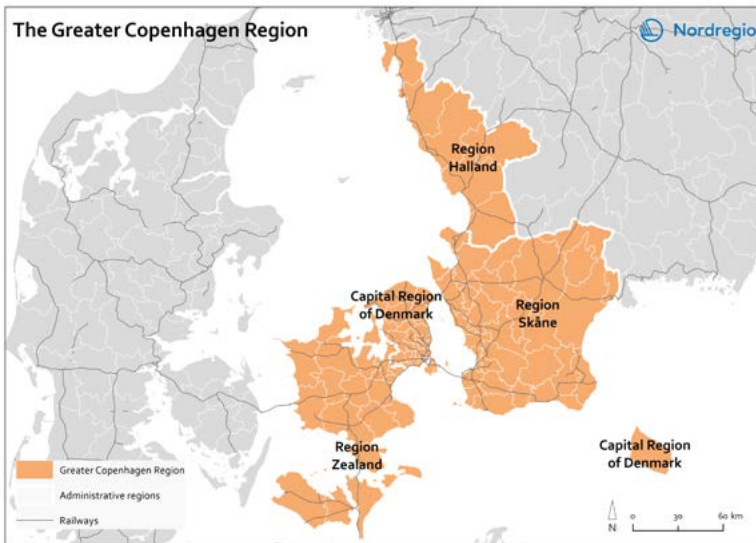
The short story of the region is comprised of four periods:

The years leading up to the opening of the bridge, between 1993 and 2000, was a period for building expectations. Both Malmö and Copenhagen suffered at the time from industrial decline and financial problems. The bridge became a bridge of hope; that is, it was looked upon as the key to solving these problems and as a lever for future prosperity.

After the opening of the bridge, between 2000 and 2004, things did not take off as expected, which raised numerous grievances across many circles. Institutional cooperation took some time, which was quite natural and should have been expected.

The peak years from 2004 to 2010 showed that things were starting to happen. The number of persons commuting across both sides increased heavily, from about 3,000 in the year 2000 up to 24,000 in 2009. People began to discover the advantages created by differences in wages, housing prices, currencies, access to jobs. Swedes invaded the Greater Copenhagen labour market. Danes bought houses in the Malmö area but kept their jobs in Denmark.

Since 2010, the situation has changed radically as the result of three events: the financial crisis starting in 2008, the migration influx of 2015 and the outbreak of the pandemic in 2020. Commuting dropped considerably according to unofficial figures. Swedes left their jobs in the Copenhagen area and Danes started to move back to Denmark. ID checks and border closures hit the Øresund region hard, which is now gradually recuperating.



Greater Copenhagen Region, which consists of 85 municipalities and four regional authorities: the Capital Region of Denmark and Region Zealand on the Danish side, and the regions of Skåne and Halland on the Swedish side.  
Designer/Cartographer: Julien Grunfelder/Nordregio.

These four main periods of cross-border cooperation highlight several important lessons for region-building efforts in the area. The first thing we have learned is that public authorities cannot drive the integration process. The market, or rather the behaviour of people and companies, determine how successful the process will be. Public authorities, sadly, have hardly any economic strategies in place for the Øresund region. Having said that, it is of course important that authorities create the most favourable preconditions for regional development as possible, but this is tricky in a cross-border environment where national laws, rules, regulations, economic principles and political preferences collide. Many of these elements have created obstacles for a smoothly functioning region.



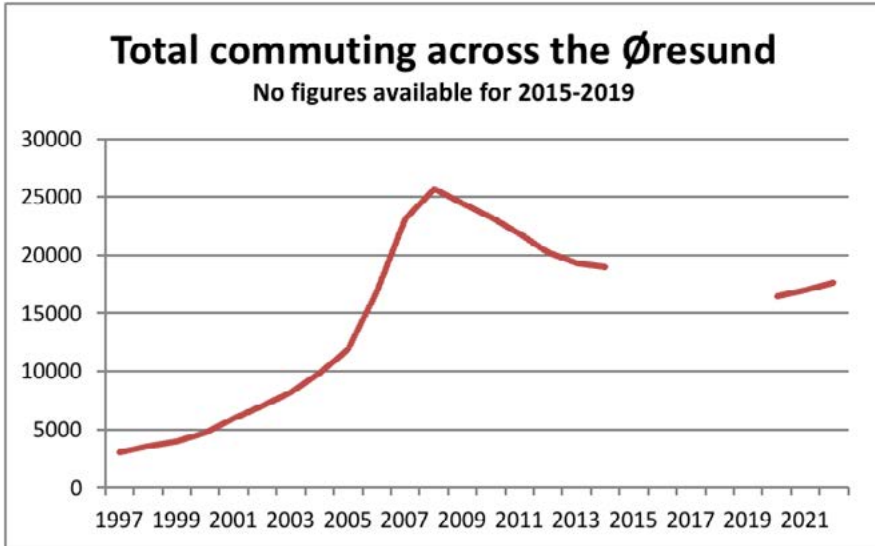
Foto: Johan Nilsson/Scandpix, TT.

The key issue is that governments need to have a more active role in defining the nature of regional integration efforts. To promote integration, we need governments to acknowledge that the cross-border region has added value for both countries from different perspectives – the general economy, the labour market, the housing market, the environment, etc. The main problem is that, over the past 10-12 years, the Swedish and Danish governments have lost interest in the Øresund region. These years are rather a clear example of nationalistic behaviour including competition with, and criticism of, each other's policies that have taken precedence over cooperation. In such an unfriendly environment, it is quite difficult to get a cross-border region to evolve and flourish.

The underlying and most problematic issue is that the governments have never thought to form a common vision, strategy or action plan for the Øresund region. Prime ministers, regardless of the party they represented, have never really been involved in talks about the Øresund. We have hardly ever heard about Øresund in local, regional or national elections. Instead, the Øresund portfolio is given to lower-ranking ministers whose main responsibilities focus on other political topics.

As long as this situation prevails, local and regional politicians will have limited scope to act, despite continued efforts to cooperate over infrastructure, labour market, environment and life science development. This can only be seen as preparatory work while waiting for governments to act – and that is of course both good and important. In my opinion, so-called cooperation today is mainly marketing for Greater Copenhagen, while the Swedish side is more or less overlooked, which explains some of the lack of interest from the Swedish government.

Regarding the future, I would like to point to two important issues. The first is the big question concerning when the next fixed link between Sweden and Denmark will be built. There are three different alternatives and a lot of money is at stake. Who is going to pay? Which connection will win the competition? Can the Swedish and Danish governments come to an agreement over the plan itself? Can the regional authorities



agree on which alternative to pick? These questions have to be answered sooner or later, preferably quite soon.

The second issue has quite another bearing on the region. Having experienced both the migration wave and the pandemic with its heavy restrictions on travelling across the Øresund and having to deal with the obstacles that remain, how will people act in the future? Are they still ready to live on one side and work on the other and commute on a daily basis? Or, is there a lingering worry that new restrictions will occur and the existing ones not be removed, thus affecting people's willingness to expose themselves to an unsecure future of travelling across national borders.

#### ILLUSTRATIONS

The photograph on page 29 is by Oskar Falck, Malmö stads mediabank.