

Speech by Odile Wolfs

for the conference *Practical Approaches Towards Effective European Transfrontier Cooperation*

6 July 2009

2.30 – 3.00 p.m.

Ladies and gentlemen,

This morning I welcomed you to Maastricht as a member of the Provincial Executive of Limburg. I am now going to address you as a member of the Board of the Meuse-Rhine Euroregion.

We often say that border regions are the experimental gardens of European integration. It seems, however, that the average European citizen feels little affinity for European integration. And certainly not if that integration is being dictated by Brussels! Euro-scepticism abounds; Europe is out of touch with its citizens; no one has heard of the European politicians... so what precisely is the present and future added value of Europe?

Politicians are constantly emphasising the primacy of national legislation, under the banner of subsidiarity. But border regions *do* have an interest in closer harmonisation, or at the very least in coordination of national legislation. In the Meuse-Rhine Euroregion, we are confronted every day by the discrepancies between the national laws and systems of three countries.

If we can solve this problem, the added value would be obvious not only for the Meuse-Rhine Euroregion, but for millions of people who live in border regions. And yet, it is becoming clearer all the time that European legislation can no longer be imposed from the top down in present-day Europe, with its twenty-seven Member States. Recent European Directives – such as the Blue Card or the health services directive – give little

cause for optimism. Europe will have to find answers by producing smarter measures that are innovative, appealing and bottom-up in nature.

In its response to the Territorial Cohesion Green Paper, the Meuse-Rhine Euroregion therefore asked for specific pilot regions to be designated. That will naturally not be possible without the goodwill of the relevant Member States. These are the questions, and now the answers...

It would be an important step in the right direction for our region if the three countries – the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany – kept one another informed about new legislation, and if they continued to communicate *after* such legislation is introduced about its unanticipated impact on life in their border regions. The border regions could play a useful role within this context. There has been some discussion in the Netherlands of a “borderland test”, and it would be a good idea for us to consult with our neighbours about using this test in actual practice.

Europe has also made a valuable contribution to transfrontier cooperation with the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation – the EGTC tool – which is now being used in various locations in Europe. It does not solve the problem of discrepancies between national legislation, however.

The core of the Meuse-Rhine Euroregion has a population of approximately two million people living in an area of scarcely forty by fifty square kilometres. It is a highly urbanised area with such cities as Aachen, Heerlen, Maastricht, Hasselt and Liège. How would this region have developed if it had not been divided by three national borders, three language borders and five regional administrative borders? Would the train links in this region have been as inadequate as they now are? Experience has shown us that we can, in any event, improve the cooperation between our police forces, universities and hospitals. Encouraging transfrontier mobility – whether we are referring to businesses, employees, job-seekers, students or patients – is a strategic priority in this region.

By now it has become clear: this is not something that Brussels can impose from the top down. But if not, then how *should* it happen?

It is my firm conviction that border regions like ours will only move ahead if every government tier – from European to local – is prepared to commit to constructive and transfrontier cooperation. European cooperation can take many different forms. There is cooperation between the Member States, for example in combating the financial crisis in Europe; there is cooperation between regions and cities, for example in such areas as innovation or culture. But I believe that the cooperation required by border regions is unique in two respects. It is both transfrontier *and* multi-level. It is multi-level because it requires the involvement of national, regional and local government. When you add in the transfrontier nature of that involvement, you get a truly challenging form of cooperation.

We and our partners in the Meuse-Rhine Euroregion realised two years ago that if we wanted to make actual progress toward closer cooperation and dismantling Europe's internal borders, that we would need the help of our national governments. We therefore installed an advisory committee chaired by an influential person that presented its report to the authorities in The Hague. Fortunately, the national government – in the person of Minister Guusje Ter Horst and State Secretary Frans Timmermans – took the report seriously and took positive, effective action on it, applicable for *all* border provinces. Both of them deserve all our praise. It now looks as though the national governments of our neighbouring countries are also eager to cooperate in these efforts, and I hope that they will actually do so. I also hope that the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany will adopt a joint agenda for transfrontier cooperation within the foreseeable future. Our experimental garden primarily concerns cooperation between these three countries and its border regions, from the Eems-Dollard region in the north to the Meuse-Rhine Euroregion in the south-east and to the mouth of the Schelde in the south-west.

In February, the Dutch Parliament designated the area in and around Limburg as an “Experimental Region”. We see it as our job – and the job of the Dutch Government – to tackle the border problem in a structured and concentrated manner, together with our

neighbours. In this approach, we will not rule out unorthodox solutions. Our strategy is a practical one: we will not ask for any changes in legislation if we can achieve the same result more quickly in another way. It is a strategy entirely in line with the approach taken by Ms ter Horst and Mr Timmermans.

For us, the designation as an Experimental Region is a means to an end, not the end in itself. Our real aim is to establish an attractive and international business location climate. This leads us to focus on five themes: the transfrontier labour market; education; healthcare; public transport; and public safety.

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I hope you enjoyed our short pictures. Make no mistake: we are very serious and determined in taking concrete action on transfrontier cooperation.

It is naturally not enough to simply identify themes: the point is to develop concrete transfrontier projects within these themes. I've mentioned a few of them during the film. Right now, we're working on a list of projects that really matter, that really represent a breakthrough, a step forward.

What will help make this strategy a success? The five most important factors are, in my opinion:

- First – something that I mentioned earlier – multi-level transfrontier cooperation between national and local authorities, with the parties involved making a positive contribution;
- Secondly: a structured and concentrated approach;
- Thirdly: flexibility for all the parties in seeking out solutions;
- Fourthly – and very importantly – cooperating on concrete projects;
- And last, but by no means least: an approach based on long-term cooperation.

Once they have taken the initial steps in their experimental projects, it will be up to our Euroregions to make their cooperation a lasting one. We must not forget this. We are therefore considering making use of the EGTC, because it has two clear advantages, as far as we are concerned:

- it makes it possible for the national authorities to participate,
- and it can be applied in a situation involving three countries.

In other words: we believe that the EGTC is the ideal vehicle for ensuring sustainability in the cooperation between national and regional parties in the Meuse-Rhine Euroregion.

And the most important factor of all is to have the necessary political will at all levels, and that is something that cannot be compelled by law. Based on the process that has already begun, I am positive about this. If there is the necessary political will, it will not be a “mission impossible” to dismantle Europe’s internal borders. And why would there not be the political will to do so? After all, it will be to everyone’s benefit. I notice an increasing consciousness at national level for cross-border opportunities and hindrances. There is, for example, the already mentioned agreement between the Netherlands and Flanders to recognise one another’s university programmes without requiring an additional test. I should also mention the third protocol for the transfrontier business park, Avantis, in the Dutch-German tax treaty. Or the agreement between the Netherlands and North-Rhine Westphalia to develop a joint website for border workers. These are all steps that are of great importance for border provinces, and for Limburg in particular.

Ladies and gentlemen, I have spoken long enough. I will now present my recommendations, that I hope to discuss with you.

Draft recommendations/statements by Odile Wolfs (Meuse-Rhine Euroregion)

1. It is in the border regions that the added value of Europe for its citizens is demonstrated, in a bottom-up approach. Border regions therefore deserve the lasting

attention of both the European Institutions and the EU's Member States, but they are responsible themselves for the necessary cross-border initiatives.

In short (DIA): 1 BORDER-REGIONS DESERVE STRUCTURAL ATTENTION FROM BOTH EUROPE AND THEIR MEMBER-STATES

2. Euroregions should not be satisfied spending INTERREG money as their only "raison d'être". They need to focus more on creating sustainable relationships, improving cross-border mobility and collaboration.

In short (DIA): 2 INTERREG IS AN IMPORTANT AID THAT SHOULD BE CONTINUED. HOWEVER IT'S NO GOAL IN ITSELF.

3. No level of governance is capable of both creating opportunities and resolving obstacles on its own. The solution is to be found in new forms of collaboration, in stronger political commitment and in more flexibility, rather than in developing new legal instruments. Long-term cross-border cooperation between border regions and the Member States is needed. We therefore welcome the recent initiative between Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands.

In short (DIA): 3 MULTI-LEVEL CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION BETWEEN BORDER-REGIONS AND THEIR MEMBER-STATES IS ESSENTIAL.

4. Limburg, Maastricht and the Meuse-Rhine Euroregion are willing to strengthen cross-border integration and therefore to overcome national and regional barriers. The Dutch Parliament awarded Limburg the official designation of "Experimental Region" in 2009. We see it as a promising opportunity that fits in well with the above-mentioned initiative at national and regional level. We invite the Euroregions that surround Limburg and their Member States to commit themselves to long-term collaboration based on a shared agenda with concrete cross-border pilot projects. The EGTC might be the right vehicle for this long-term commitment.

In short (DIA): 4 LET'S MAKE A SUCCES OF CROSS-BORDER EXPERIMENTAL-REGIONS IN THE MEUSE-RHINE REGIONS....

5. We would like to ask the European institutions to promote, support and bring together similar examples of national and regional authorities collaborating systematically in border regions.

In short (DIA): 5 AND ELSEWHERE IN EUROPE.

6. Let's think positive: if the political will is there, progress really *is* possible. In short (DIA): 6 STOP TALKING, START ACTING.

Thank you.