

Draft speech by the Cross-border Ambassador at the pre-conference in Maastricht, 6-7 juli 2009

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am very grateful for the opportunity to be here today and to address you all. This conference is important and valuable, since the next few days will be devoted to the subject of cross-border cooperation between the border regions. As a former Queen's Commissioner for the Province of Zeeland, a former member of the Congress of the Council of Europe and a former member of the Committee of the Regions, this subject is of great interest to me.

As Mr Timmermans said, he and the Minister of the Interior recently appointed me Chair of the cross-border cooperation task force (GROS). I think it was a good move – not because they chose me, although I am very pleased to be taking up this challenge. No, I am thinking above all about the practical implications for cross-border cooperation.

You know – probably better than anybody else – that there are many instruments which aim to promote and improve cross-border cooperation. We have the EGTC facility, which is mainly for big infrastructure projects within the EU member states. And providing that the Committee of Ministers give their consent this Wednesday – the Council of Europe will be getting a new general form of cooperation for local and provincial authorities, the Third Protocol for Euroregional Cooperation. And there is plenty of scope for other, tailor-made forms of cooperation, of which the Benelux is a good example. For instance, the Benelux partners are planning to update the Benelux Agreement on Cross-border Cooperation, especially as it affects local and regional authorities. Mr Van Laarhoven will be saying something about that later today. And finally, there are many initiatives that have been developed by the border regions themselves, of which the EUREGIO is possibly the most striking example.

To my mind, the establishment of the GROS task force is a new approach which ties in well with the possibilities I have mentioned. The innovative character of this approach is that it aims to remove legislative differences in the border regions – more so than in the past. The task force zooms in on problems generated by the border and looks for solutions. These are issues that affect the daily lives of people and businesses along the borders. By solving the problems in these areas, we hope to give the general public and the business community tangible evidence of the advantages of European integration. In my opinion, that is a significant bonus.

The government has set up the task force because all these problems have one thing in common: they cannot be solved by individual regions alone. The help of central government is needed. And the input of the central, federal and regional governments of the Netherlands, Germany and Belgium is needed in order to jointly identify and solve the problems in consultation with the border regions. The challenge here is to bring central government and the border regions closer together.

We already have a list of 21 problems and potential solutions for the Dutch regions, based on the priorities they have drawn up. They concern water, cross-border public transport, cross-border commuting, security, economic development, education and culture, policy on nature and the environment, and mobility. The task at hand is to work these out in terms of a common agenda with neighbouring countries. And also to find solutions to a number of important points through the nine working groups which come under the task force. They are responsible for the following policy areas: labour, INTERREG co-financing, education, safety regions, disaster control and crisis management, water, Natura 2000, health care, crime prevention, public transport and Europark. The progress of the working groups is monitored by the task force.

And that's where I come in as independent border consultant. As chair of this task force, I have to meet the challenge of getting results. On the Dutch side, it is our job to ensure the involvement of the various line ministries and to shorten the distance to the regions. And as chair of the task force, I also have the task of getting support from our neighbours Germany and Belgium in solving the problems. And, in turn, helping to solve the problems which are important to our neighbours. After all, these are not purely Dutch problems. They affect all of us and we must shoulder them together. We must reach a consensus about which problems we want to tackle and then identify solutions which will be supported by all stakeholders. So I am aiming for a partnership which represents the various tiers of government in all three countries.

Fortunately, we already have plenty of examples of successful cooperation between the various levels of government: the collaboration between Kerkrade and Herzogenrath in Eurode, the Dutch-German police force in Dinxperlo, the multidisciplinary disaster drill centre in Weeze and the AVANTIS Dutch-German business park. Tomorrow we will be visiting Eurode and AVANTIS, to see for ourselves what cross-border initiatives mean in practice.

However, many of our problems will require a great deal of hard work in the coming year. I would like to use the first six months in order to achieve concrete results in a number of important areas. I will need the involvement of all our partners: central government, the regional authorities, neighbouring countries and the border regions. That will facilitate a tailor-made solution that is in the interests of the border region in question. That is my ambition, and I am counting on your commitment so that we can achieve some impressive results by December.

These results will then form the basis for consultations between the Netherlands, Germany and Belgium. After 2009 the focus will be on making the solutions effective in the long term. And that is where you come in.

Ladies and gentlemen, I have two final points. First – a request to you all: we are embarking on a joint process in which it is extremely important to learn from one another. Please come forward and share your examples, best practices, success stories and also the daily problems that you encounter with cross-border cooperation. I think sharing best practices is particularly important, because it enables us to inspire each other. My second point is this: I am convinced that cross-border cooperation is not just about territorial cooperation. It is a state of mind – a willingness to actually push the boundaries!

Ladies and gentlemen, I wish you all a very successful conference.

Thank you.