

The future of cross-border cooperation in Europe

(Brussels, 13 November 2015)

Opening speech

Gudrun Mosler-Törnström

Ladies and gentleman

It is an honour to be here and a pleasant surprise to see so many familiar faces.

Let me begin with a warm message of thanks to Karl-Heinz Lambertz and to the AEBR for inviting us to participate in your conference. But I should really say “our conference” since this is a joint event and the Congress is very pleased to be working in partnership with AEBR, the European Commission and the Committee of Regions on such an important subject, which today has taken on a dramatic new dimension.

Meeting here today, we are very much aware of the philosophy that has inspired us and brought us here today.

I will come back to this. But at the same time we are also very conscious that the current refugee crisis in Europe poses a

serious threat to this project. It is a crisis for which we are still desperately seeking solutions. It risks setting our crossborder cooperation work back years, decades even.

But let's remind ourselves of the roots of our cooperation. Although we are meeting today in Brussels and celebrating 25 years of Interreg, I would like to remind you that the Council of Europe, working closely with AEBR, has been at the forefront of European transfrontier cooperation for over 40 years now.

The first European Conference of Border Regions was in Strasbourg in 1972 and the second, also organised by the Council of Europe, took place in my own country, in Innsbruck three years later.

We have come a long way since then, but if I begin on a historical note, it is because this was no accident. Very early on in the Council of Europe we realised that effective cross-border cooperation was a key to European integration, it goes to the heart of the European project.

It is at the heart of that post-war spirit that led to the creation of the Council of Europe – the 'never again' spirit, determined that relations between European states would henceforth be characterised by peaceful cooperation based on democracy, rule of law and respect for human rights.

It goes to the heart of our belief in and understanding of the benefits of international cooperation – of mutual enrichment

– not just in terms of better understanding and improving neighbourly relations – but in the obvious issues of improving public services – sharing infrastructure – schools, universities, hospitals, emergency services and airports.

It was in this spirit that Strasbourg was chosen as the seat of the Council of Europe – The capital of Alsace – a region that had been so much fought over – was considered a hugely symbolic choice for this new European project.

Strasbourg – and the Upper Rhine Region – have continued to be an important centre of efforts to develop this cooperation. Strasbourg and its neighbour Kehl and the surrounding regions are continuing to increase the coordination of their infrastructures and services, through the creation of the Strasbourg-Ortenau Eurodistrict, and soon the Strasbourg tram will be crossing the Rhine to Kehl.

The bridge over the Rhine is always busiest when people are going to work, transfrontier workers moving in both directions. Some of the earliest Council of Europe treaties were drawn up to address the issues that such workers faced.

So we are at the heart of cross-border cooperation. It goes to the heart of our belief in international cooperation. We are convinced of the benefits and mutual enrichment of such cooperation, not just in terms of better understanding and improving neighbourly relations, but in the obvious issues of improving public services, sharing infrastructure, our schools, universities, hospitals, emergency services and airports.

It is that vision of mutual enrichment across borders that risks being completely undermined by the current refugee crisis. We cannot close our eyes to this. The situation is very serious.

In my own region in Salzburg, and in many other places in Europe, we are seeing national boundaries being reinforced, making transfrontier cooperation more difficult.

We now have thousands and thousands of refugees on the border between Salzburg and Bavaria, a region which has until now been a showcase of crossborder cooperation.

This is causing huge problems with regard to our economy and infrastructure. Trains are no longer crossing the border any longer, and increased checks are causing long delays at border crossings, which is disrupting the delivery of goods and public services.

National boundaries should not constitute obstacles to cooperation. Border areas do not have to be poorly served simply as a result of being on the periphery of a nation state. The opposite can be true, they can be all the more richer from getting the best of both worlds.

Crossborder cooperation conferences often focus on cooperation between a small number of Western European states.

However, it is fundamental to our experience and understanding that this cooperation is for all, whether you

are in the EU or not, whether you have access to Interreg funding or not.

Some of the most promising crossborder cooperation for us has been in the post-conflict zones of the Balkans, with its patchwork of peoples, cultural, ethnic and religious minorities. The Congress has initiated important work in this respect with regard to the establishment of Local Democracy Agencies.

Much of this work focuses on reconciling different groups and communities, bringing them together and promoting the benefits of diversity and intercultural cooperation.

We have come a long way since the Madrid convention was launched some 35 years ago. The development of this convention and its three protocols demonstrate how transfrontier cooperation is continuing to evolve, with the first protocol recognising the right of territorial communities to conclude transfrontier agreements, the second protocol extending the Convention to non-neighbouring countries and now the third Protocol, providing for the establishment of “Euroregional Cooperation Groupings”, bridging the gap between EU and non-EU countries in crossborder cooperation and facilitating the implementation of the EC Regulation on EGTCs at national level.

While the first such Euroregional Cooperation Grouping has yet to come into existence, we are confident that these bodies will be important actors in future territorial cohesion.

Crossborder cooperation, and our understanding of it, has evolved rapidly, becoming more realistic, more focused, more practical. The last 20 years have witnessed a boom in inter-regional cooperation in Europe, fuelled by developments in globalisation, improvements in communications, low-cost travel and the easing of visa regimes.

But as we shift from 'soft' activities of reconciliation and cultural exchanges, into the harsher realities of economic and project-based cooperation, it is clear that the obstacles facing us remain huge, whether these be barriers of bureaucracy, lack of political will or the complex administrative structures that can differ so greatly from one country to another.

We are conscious of the need to increase capacity in this area and we have proposed to establish a pool of expertise on transfrontier cooperation issues, to coordinate research in this area and to encourage the development of capacity building and training programmes.

Ladies and gentlemen,

To conclude, as president of the Chamber of Regions of the Congress, it is clear to me that we need to do much more in

this area. We need a seismic shift in political will to ensure that the resources are found and that the actors at all levels of government are mobilised so that we can we move from good intentions to getting practical results and begin to unlock and harness the huge potential that our borders represent.

But our biggest and most pressing problem is the current refugee crisis, which threatens to paralyse our efforts to move forward in this area and could even take us backwards and unravel all the painstaking work of territorial cohesion that we have spent so many years working to achieve.

This conference is a great opportunity for us to address these issues. Let us use this time together to reflect on the new challenges that we face and see how, by pooling our experience and expertise, we can move forward on this and continue to reap the benefits of crossborder cooperation.

Thank you.