

Basel, 23rd September 2011

Speech from Dr. Eric Jakob, General Secretary of the REGIO BASILIENSIS, in the occasion of the 40th anniversary celebration of the Association of European Borders, on 23rd September 2011, in Kursk, Euroregion Yaroslavna

Dear Mr. President
Dear Mr. General Secretary
Ladies and Gentlemen,

In 1971, the AEBR was founded, eight years after the creation of the REGIO BASILIENSIS. The REGIO BASILIENSIS is together with the EUREGIO (NL/DE) one of the first organizations in Europe entirely dedicated to regional and cross border cooperation. Together these “pioneer organizations” created the Association of European Border Regions, as an instrument of lobbying to the European Union and national states, as well as a platform between border regions and cross border organizations.

In this first stage, the Association of European Border Regions was boosted by the Rhineland which was then the central European growth region and is still nowadays one of the strongest regions in Europe regarding economy. This Western Europe heartland which extends from the Benelux states through the German-French border till Switzerland had badly suffered from the Second World War but had afterwards relatively quickly recovered. In this region, a new sort of “cross border regionalism” is born:

- it is not resulting from the departure or the secession from the motherland;
- it is characterized by a strong European aspect and insert voluntarily in a multi level European integration
- it tries to benefit from the new perspectives of an open Europe in which hindrances are abolished and the potential of common growth is increased.

Of course from a distance of 40 years, Europe looks very different. Cross border cooperation and the AEBR have changed, they have become bigger, more established and more institutionalized. However, the main idea, this “Western European growth regionalism” is still on the top of the agenda and is the basis of the AEBR’s efforts. The opportunities available at national borders should be exploited. Concrete and close to citizen’s cooperation at borders should provide the cement for the “House Europe”. European macro integration and regional/cross border microintegration should complement each other.

In 2000, I personally made my first experience with the Association of European Border Regions. In June, the REGIO BASILIENSIS together with the Association organized, in Basel, a big conference entitled “Rendezvous of European border regions“. In autumn, for the first time, I took part in a member assembly at the Greek-Bulgar border. At the time, I had got acquainted in the Association, with a circle of personalities who were highly motivated and enthusiastic but also inspired by a deep rooted idealism. An idealism which is based on the conviction that Europe should be bottom-up – not only top-down – built, that Europe should belong to its citizens, border regions and that it have to be built on the daily life challenges. This immediately convinced me as I am a well-known federalist. This Association was and is indeed a sort of family which offers a spiritual and emotional homeland for anyone who is convinced of this idea of Europe of the citizens, practice-oriented and bottom-up approach and is willing to work to achieve these ideals.

In 2011, Europe seems to be at a deadlock. It is hard to see Europe in its current state, also from a Swiss perspective. European discussions are characterized by a lack of orientation and by failed attempts to bail out the Euro and consequently the substance of the European idea. Europe or more especially the European Union already experienced crisis. So far, the EU has always emerged stronger from crisis. The problems that it is currently facing represent particular challenges: such central conquests as the single currency or the right of free circulation within the Schengen Space are put to the test. The spirit of openness has stepped back since the financial and Eurocrisis. Doomsayers and national-populist parties/groupings which nourish also the centrifugal forces, are booming almost everywhere in Europe.

Regional and cross border cooperations – it seems to me – are more and more under pressure. Many things are slower in border regions than what we expected one or two decades ago. The national states hurdles and barriers are higher and more persistent to overcome than expected. The European idea has lost its strength and its object to realize Europe in daily life and directly at borders.

And now, what can we do as border regions when the Association of European Border Regions has only modest resources? I think we have to light another fire. Europe is still a patchwork of nations and regions with overlapping cultures, which can only get lost in an even more global world, if they do not demarcate more from each other. Cross border cooperation directly in the field, at the interface of cultures, at the scars of history, remains on the agenda, sight unseen on how and where the "big Europe" develops. With a growing mobility and globalization, the interdependencies at borders, concerning social, cultural and economical aspects, are increasing. The Association of European Border Regions is – hopefully not the only one – “guardian of the fire” of the enthusiasm for a Europe of Citizens and practice oriented/bottom up approach.

If we accept the mission in the Association of European Border Regions, then we should make space in our minds more frequently from the important and the useful, but also from established and entrenched cross-border cooperation procedures and programs. ETC, INTERREG, EURES und EGTC in honor, however, cross border cooperation is more than that! The Association of European Border Regions should have the courage again to go beyond these procedures and programs:

- to develop and test new and non conventional approaches of cross border cooperation
- to start simulations and pilot experiments in different thematic areas;
- not only react to EU statements but to be proactive developing is own initiatives;
- to consult even more citizens and economic actors – next to politic and administrative ones – und to get involved in our activities in cross border regions;
- to elaborate and promote a new model for a better citizens participation in the European decision-making process.

To finish, as a small gift for this anniversary, a project proposal: we could coordinate and run in parallel in our border regions, an “idea competition” and encourage young people to outline their "desired future Europe". The most original ideas will be presented at an upcoming conference by the young people themselves.

I would like to thank to all the people who were involved in the past, are and will be involved in the future in the Association of European Border Regions!

Thank you for you attention