



# Eerste Kamer *der Staten-Generaal*

## **Intervention of the President of the Senate of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, Mrs. Ankie Broekers-Knol, at the Conference of the Association of European Senates, 14-15 June 2018, Bucharest**

*Theme: Current challenges to the economic, social and territorial cohesion in Europe: what role for the Senates?*

### **Cohesion policy - a perspective from the Netherlands**

Dear President, dear Călin, dear colleagues,

Next week, on the 24th of June to be precise, the EU will celebrate 30 years of cohesion policy. Within these 30 years 5 periods of programming have shown that cohesion policy has changed along with changes in the European society: economic, social and - of course - territorial changes, expanding the policy from reducing disparities between the various regions to a more balanced, more sustainable 'territorial development'.

And today, we are here in Bucharest to discuss the role of the Senate when it comes to economic, social and territorial cohesion. I would like to complement the chair for this meeting and on having organised the discussion in this stimulating and challenging way: each session another group of countries take the floor. I am delighted to see the aim of the Romanian Chair is to actively bring more interaction into our discussions, which is something the Dutch parliament has always applauded. So thank you for that!



Let me start by placing the role of the Senate of the Netherlands into the context of cohesion.

In a decentralised unitary state – as the Netherlands is, with an important role for our provinces -, territorial cohesion and unity find expression in the Senate. Through history, as from the 16th century, up until the present day, there has been a relationship between the States-General and the provinces. Currently the representatives from the provinces elect the Members of the Senate of the States-General.

In contrast to a Senate in a federal state, our Members do not formally represent regions. This may sound strange, since the members are elected by provincial representatives. But once elected, they do not represent the provinces; they represent the whole country.

However, Senators live in their provinces and are familiar with the specific needs of these regional areas. In practice, the Members may use the provinces as a soundboard to hear how they regard the feasibility and enforceability of new laws and regulations in their specific region.

I firmly believe that ultimately - and I have said it here before - a bicameral system is beneficial to the functioning of a democracy because of the necessary checks and balances, but also because Senates often have a particular interest in the re-



gions and can therefore bring democracy closer to the citizens in the regions.

An example of this was the particular interest the committee on European Affairs of the Dutch Senate took in the 2017 Communication of the European Commission on *Boosting growth and cohesion in EU border regions*. The committee members repeatedly questioned the government to introduce a so-called 'border test' in this regard.

This means that the government is asked to specifically investigate what influence proposed measures for the country as a whole will have on the regions at the borders of the country, given the regulations in the same field applicable at the other side of the border. For instance specific tax measures on fuel may have the effect that people will buy their fuel where it is cheaper and that can be just a few kilometres across the border, which effects businesses at our side of the border.

This can also apply to other policy areas like sustainable development, agriculture and industrial policy. If a large windmill park is placed at the border, the people across the border might have to face the burdens, but not the energy-benefits. The border-test can help to demonstrate the effects on people in a larger region. A cross border approach of a plan (by both countries involved) could benefit all citizens in the wider region.



Last week the Heads of State of Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg were present at the celebration of the 60th birthday of the Benelux-cooperation. In 1958 Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg decided to work closer together in an economic union next to a customs union they already formed in 1944. The aim of the cooperation is to enhance the welfare and security of its citizens in the three countries. The Benelux tries to reach this aim by taking down obstacles in a variety of policy areas, such as trans-border mobility, social cohesion and inclusion, employment, innovation and a shift towards a low-carbon economy. If and when possible they tune their points of view on EU-issues.

When it comes to the economic and social cohesion of the Netherlands, there undoubtedly is the benefit of a larger territorial cohesion. Once the Benelux countries are able to cooperate in a productive manner in their border regions, this may have immediate effect on the economic and social cohesion. The cooperation within the Benelux on the whole is considered to be sustainable in economics, and through the regional cooperation safe and secure on - for instance - nuclear safety, migration, tax-rulings and health care.

The Senate plays an active role in the Benelux parliament. At this moment the parliamentary assembly is presided over by a Senator from the Netherlands. During its Spring Meeting in The Hague, the Benelux parliament unanimously adopted a resolu-



tion for a generic recognition of professional qualifications in the three countries. This is in accordance with the automatic mutual generic recognition of diplomas in higher education. Not only will this add to a higher employability in the area, it will also stimulate social mobility across the borders.

Social and territorial cohesion also highly benefit from mobility. The Benelux parliament has for many years invested time and energy in taking down obstacles in the railway-system in order to promote the smooth crossing of borders and to bring regions closer together.

The Benelux formula of regional cooperation with a strong focus on cohesion can also be seen in other parts of the EU, such as the Nordic countries, the Baltic states and the Viségrad-4. The parliamentarians from these unions also meet on a regular basis. MPs from the Baltic states and the Nordics attended the spring meeting of the Benelux Parliament. So we see productive cooperation between larger regions of smaller countries within the European Union, which certainly contributes to a better understanding and more unity-oriented policy making in the EU!

Economic and social cohesion, as defined in the Single European Act of 1986, aims to reduce the disparities among regions, in particular rural areas, areas affected by industrial transition, and regions which suffer from severe and permanent natural



or demographic handicaps. In the Lisbon Treaty the element 'territorial' was added to the cohesion policy. Cohesion policy is one of those policies that is built on solidarity: solidarity from one country with others in order to reduce the disparities between them. The key element of future cohesion policy must therefore be that it's integrated into all policy-areas such as cross-border employment, accessibility to transport, healthcare and education across borders as well as cross-border public administration.

As the Multi-annual Financial Framework for 2021-2027 is currently under negotiations, the Netherlands expressed certain views and expectations for the cohesion policy beyond 2020. A more modern MFF in the Dutch view will also mean more structural reforms in all Member States and more flexibility and simpler rules. A focus on research and innovation in the MFF can certainly boost the improvement of the overall cohesion in all regions in the EU. As Senates we have a specific responsibility to look at possible effects of new measures to the regions of our countries and the larger EU-regions, and to our citizens.

Thank you