

Keynote speech from Karl-Heinz Lambertz, Minister-President of the German-Speaking Community of Belgium, President of the European Association of European Border Regions and Chair of the Governance Committee of the Congress of local and regional authorities of the Council of Europe, about “Cross-border governance in Europe: a new foreign policy?” on the occasion of the Conference “Borders and governance” (Session: Cross-border governance as a micro-diplomacy-tool)



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Ladies and Gentlemen,

I was asked to give a key-note speech entitled “Cross-border governance in Europe: a new foreign policy?” In order to answer that question, let us first look at the definition of foreign policy – from Wikipedia of course... globalization obliges: There it says: “A country's foreign policy consists of self-interest strategies chosen by the state to safeguard its national interests (...). Since the national interests are paramount, foreign policies are designed by the government through high-level decision making processes. Usually, creating foreign policy is the job of the head of government and the foreign minister.” To resume this statement, we could say that (first) foreign policy is steered by high-level national stakeholders and (second) that its goal is to safeguard national interests.

I will come back to those statements at the end of my speech in order to see whether or not cross-border cooperation can be seen as a new form of foreign policy.

If we speak of Governance in the broadest sense, it seems important to highlight the interdependences cross border governance has to deal with. I always like showing the AEBR-map that illustrates how numerous and how diverse the cooperation along borders is in Europe. The complexity can be analysed by means of a clear definition and terminology of cross border cooperation. In the frame of my role as “rapporteur on cross border cooperation“ for the Congress of local and regional authorities within the Council of Europe, I developed a classification of the type of cross border regions based on four criteria.

The first one regards the size of the region we are speaking about. It is evident that macro-region and micro-regions don't face the same challenges.

The second criterion is the complexity reigning within that border-region which can have different origins such as the coexistence of different languages, cultures but also dissenting administrative structures and socio-economic traditions. The Euregio Meuse-Rhine is one example where complexity is mainly due to very different partners and their legal disparity. There is the German-speaking Community as federal entity which is very small but holds a wide range of competences, the Belgian provinces of Liège and Limburg which cannot be compared to the Dutch Province of Limburg and finally the „Zweckverband Region Aachen" as representative for the German Partners around the city of Aachen.

The third criterion is linked to the "type of border" we are dealing with. This is very important when analysing obstacles and asking the question how to overcome them. You will find natural boundaries such as mountains or seas which give a clear distinction to the cooperation in the Baltic sea, the Adriatic or around the Lake of Constance. National borders can be peaceful because well-established or on the contrary conflict-ridden because of changes during history or upcoming hostilities. In these cases, cooperation can be charged of emotions and extremely difficult. You need to hold that in mind, when you want to cooperate on such borders.

The fourth criterion has a strong political relevance: the level of European integration plays an important role even though the phenomenon of cross border cooperation should not be oriented exclusively towards the European Union. A region along the inner European borders cooperates without material borders since the Maastricht Treaty of nineteen hundred ninety two (1992). Border regions changed to new inner borders of the EU after the consecutive enlargements and finally there are border regions along the new external borders of the EU where one can differentiate between those that neighbor with a candidate country and those along countries without adhesion perspective. All these differentiations have an impact on cooperation.

The border itself is a complex and very rich phenomenon, the scientific study of which requires an interdisciplinary approach. The research work done by FARE and Birte Wassenberg in particular is extremely valuable in that respect! During today's conference, we deal with borders and governance. Borders are the subject of cross border cooperation who's main aim is to overcome them or even to make them disappear. The European Union considers border regions as disadvantaged and indeed, these areas had - and still have - to combat numerous and very diverse types of obstacles. Cross border governance is intrinsic multi-level governance: EU-level, national states, regional and local authorities have to work together to solve very complex problems, to overcome obstacles and to push forward the cooperation across borders. Therefore, I approve the concept of horizontal multi-level governance which has been raised by Joachim Beck. It sticks more to cross border cooperation because is not only about politics but also about networks, economy and the civil society. To truly involve these actors in cooperation is one of the big challenges of border regions. The governance set up for the tri-national metropolitan region Upper Rhine is a very interesting model of cross-border horizontal multi-level governance.

If you look at the AEBR-map, you will easily understand that the challenges depend on the obstacles regions have to battle against and these are obviously not the same in the Upper Rhine Region as in the Carpathian Euroregion between Poland, Slovakia, Hungary and Ukraine. The historical and territorial context plays a crucial role in defining the obstacles to cooperation.

In almost forty years of cooperation in the Euregio Meuse-Rhine, during my political career of twenty three years now and especially in my function as president of the Association of European border regions, I kept track of different phases of development in cross border cooperation. In fact one can notice three "generations of obstacles": The first generation is the dismantling of physical barriers. The Schengen Treaty abolished Border controls within the European Union : toll-gates, border posts and other custom authorities suddenly became needless. Citizens could freely cross the border and profit from free movement of persons and goods, a right that was anchored into European law with the Maastricht Treaty nineteen hundred ninety two (1992) and the Amsterdam Treaty nineteen hundred ninety five (1995). This first obstacle in the evolution of cross-border cooperation is overcome when the mobility increases in the extent that it becomes natural part of the daily life of citizens. This aim cannot be reached solely by removing the physical barriers. In fact, many small projects, networks and political action are needed to overcome the barriers that remain present in people's minds.

The second generation of obstacles appears when this new mobility brings people to work, spend their leisure and benefit from services on the other side of the border. Doing so, there are confronted with different laws, administrative structures, cultural and linguistic barriers. This diversity is one of the unique selling points of Europe but for commuters it mainly brings up very complex questions on taxes, pension, insurance and social security. I like comparing those obstacles with a virus, that permutes. Always when you think that one problem is solved, new obstacles appear! In the Euregio Meuse-Rhine and in the Greater Region we have created the "Taskforce Grenzgänger" to help commuters by analyzing these obstacles for people's mobility and by working on suggestions to change legislation where needed. This naturally involves the national legislator. Keeping in mind that border regions represent forty percent (40%) of Europe's territory and thirty percent (30%) of Europe's population, national governments cannot hide behind the argument that it only affects a minority. So changes to the national legislation are sometimes necessary. I am actually convinced that some of these efforts could be avoided if new regulations were automatically run through an impact assessment that tests the compatibility of new national legislation with the situation in cross-border regions.

The third generation of obstacles is a recent tendency of experienced cooperation areas such as the upper Rhine, the Greater Region or the Euregio Meuse-Rhine to develop towards cross-border integrated areas. Beyond project level, this level of cooperation involves the joint spatial planning and a more functional view of the territory of the border area. A coherent regional development strategy is needed to be seen as competitive and active actor on the European level. A common cross-border regional development strategy is a big challenge. It requires a high degree of integration and long lasting cooperation tradition between the partners. In the end, that's where cross-border governance plays a crucial role in deepening the cooperation. The desire for integration is an important driving force for cross-border cooperation. However, too high a degree of integration might be in contradiction with European diversity.

Let us first have a look at the pre-conditions for successful cross-border cooperation: Firstly, partners must want to cooperate. So there must be an interest for both partners and there needs to be an added value for each of them. Moreover, it is not always easy to cooperate across national but also linguistic and cultural borders!

If all partners want to cooperate, they also need to be allowed to. This is actually not always the case. I could tell you several examples where partners wanted to cooperate but were thwarted by their "national capitals" which were suspicious about what was going on at the border – so far away from the capital and seemingly out of their control. So sometimes, the geopolitical or domestic circumstances make cooperation across borders impossible.

If you want to cooperate and you are allowed to, you also need to be able to. This prerequisite may seem a bit strange but believe me cooperation very often fails because partners simply don't understand each other. In fact, you need a great deal of intercultural communication competence to foster a working cross-border cooperation. And this does not only involve understanding your partner's language. You also need to understand the other's cultural, political and judicial systems in order to find solutions for your common problems.

So to start a cross-border cooperation, you generally need a great deal of endurance and courage. But we all know that it is worth the trouble! Many have understood that and this is why cross-border cooperation (whether within the framework of the twenty eight member states of the European Union or of the forty seven member states of the Council of Europe) is not a recent phenomenon and has steadily increasing in importance. Whereas borders were for a long time considered peripheral in every sense, the process of European integration and globalization have drawn them into the centre of attention. As I mentioned before, there was a time when cooperation at the borders seemed suspicious to central governments. But today they become more and more aware of the opportunities on the other side of the border and the role of border regions as testing ground for European integration.

Cross-border cooperation is also a priority for my home region, the German-speaking Community of Belgium and in the same goes for many other countries and regions in Europe. In some countries such as in Switzerland and in the Netherlands, this tendency was even underlined by the nomination of a special ambassador for cross-border cooperation.

I wish to conclude by inviting you to have a look at the two aspects of foreign policy we defined before: One was about the actors involved and the other was about the purpose of foreign policy.

As for the actors involved, we can definitely say that cross-border cooperation has nothing to do with traditional foreign policy which is mainly steered by high-level politicians in a country's capital. We have seen that support from the national level is very important for functioning cross-border cooperation but we have all experienced that efficient cooperation very often develops on a regional or even local level. Border-regions definitely play the most important role in developing this type of interaction between the European people. So whereas traditional foreign policy is more based on a top-down approach, cross-border cooperation has a strong bottom-up approach.

As for the second aspect (the purpose of foreign policy), the definition spoke about "the pursuit of national interests". I think that you would all agree with me that the most important interest of a nation is the wellbeing of its people. And we also all have experienced how cross-border cooperation directly improves people's lives on each side of a border. It helps solving day-to-day problems that range from trivial things such as buying your Christmas gifts across the border to livelihood questions linked to job-mobility. And cooperation can even be a question of life and death as it is the case with emergency

medical aid. So the answer is YES! Cross-border governance does provide new means of safeguarding national interests and therefore constitutes a new form of foreign policy! And I would even go further by saying that cross-border cooperation ALTERS the very notion of national interests: Before, it was defined as a country's self-interest. But we have all experienced that this is no longer true. A paradigm-shift has occurred in Europe and this shift was born in the various border-regions of our continent. People no longer turn their back towards one-another. They look each-other in the eyes and perceive their neighbours as part of their home-environment. Therefore, self-interest is now inseparably linked to the interest of your neighbour. This is an incredible evolution in the history of Europe. And I am convinced that the next step in the European integration will be fuelled by all these border regions. They are not only a laboratory but also an important motor for a deepening European integration!

Thank you very much for your attention.