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CULTURAL COMMITTEE

Statement by Mr Jens Gabbe,
Euregio Representative,
to the meeting of the Cultural Committee
on 28 October 1981



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Mr Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen,

1. May I start by thanking you warmly for your invitation and for giving me the opportunity to tell you about Euregio.

2. I should point out that I am speaking not only on behalf of the Euregio, in which 30 Dutch and German municipalities, boroughs and districts co-operate in transfrontier projects concerning cultural and social affairs, economics and infrastructures. I am also speaking as a member of the Bureau of the Association of European Border Regions which has observer status at the Conference.

3. National frontiers are the lines along which the European cultures meet: in some cases indeed they cut through cultures without definitively splitting them apart. Mr Hotz, a previous member of this committee, expressed this fundamental idea in a report on transfrontier cultural co-operation about two years ago. It would be a welcome move for work on this topic to be resumed as soon as possible and taken beyond the initial stage, since there are a multitude of cross-frontier cultural activities, above all in the Euregio, which were not included in the report.

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There is growing awareness in all the frontier regions of Europe of the fact that transfrontier planning and regional policy are of tremendous importance for the future. At the same time it is obvious that these things cannot be done against the will of the citizens, but only with their co-operation. This means that every aspect of social life, not merely economic but also environmental and even more importantly cultural issues, must be involved in the process of transfrontier development. People must stop turning their backs on their neighbours across the border, they must look outwards. This is indeed a cultural task in the widest sense of the word.

4. Starting from these premises, Euregio has developed as a transfrontier association of municipalities from the grass roots, from the bottom up. The principle underlying our work is that neither organisational structure nor practical action can be imposed from above: development must be decentralised, and generated at the base. To our way of thinking this means that it is for the local level in Germany, the municipalities, boroughs, and districts, to initiate practical action, particularly as they have sufficient financial leeway to act in financial matters.

About half Euregio's work is concerned with the economy and infrastructure; the other half concentrates deliberately on the cultural and social aspects of co-operation. Priority is given to personal contacts, between young people, the elderly, families, sportsmen and women, employment officials, waterboard officials, civil servants, participants at seminars, etc. Every year several tens of thousands of citizens get together to meet their immediate neighbours and learn about their problems. An important feature of these contacts is that they encourage people to learn their neighbours' language, which is particularly important for the "minor" language, Dutch. Only by understanding the language can people gain a deeper insight into the political, social and cultural life of the other country. The Euregio language qualifications and our encouragement of improved language teaching at all levels of schooling are among the ways of achieving this.

Co-operation with schools is a further step in publicising Euregio. A first stage has been the publication of a wall map for schools, in 3,000 copies. The results of this soon became visible, when it became necessary to print more than half a million copies of this map, reduced to A4 format. Meanwhile, Euregio teaching materials are being prepared for different types of schools and should come into use in schools from the end of 1981, with the approval of the ministries of culture concerned. The success of this work is due to preparatory meetings with school management authorities and in-service courses for teachers.

Euregio has also concerned itself somewhat with social questions and specifically the problems of cross-border commuters. The 4th edition of a comparative description of the German and Dutch social security systems (pensions, sickness and unemployment insurance) is now in preparation.

After eight years of work, and thanks to a great deal of support from parliamentarians, identical tax arrangements were obtained in 1981 for Dutch cross-border commuters. Recently an exchange of ideas has been taking place on the subject of the so-called "Gastarbeiter" (migrant workers) in the hope that experience in the neighbouring country may point the way to solutions.

For the past six years fire brigades on either side of the 150 km long common border have co-operated, with co-ordinated action plans and crossing points over the so-called "green border".

There are still many unsolved problems in the social field, nonetheless. One is that the catchment area for social facilities (hospitals, kindergartens, old people's homes, schools) does not extend across the border, which often results in unprofitable or duplicated investments or alternatively in social amenities not being provided or else being actually withdrawn. It is regrettable, too, that when accidents occur there is no co-ordination between hospitals and rescue services as there is between fire brigades. So far Euregio has only succeeded in providing unbureaucratic help in very specific individual cases, through good personal contacts with hospitals, laboratories and customs authorities.

The picture of Euregio's cultural activities is rounded out by:

- co-ordination of theatre seasons
- the Euregio arts group
- Euregio orchestra, jazz band, music festival
- Euregio library and adult education college
- school music competitions
- support for public recreational and leisure activities (associations, sports clubs, etc).

These activities provide several thousand "rank and file" citizens of Europe with an opportunity for genuine human contact in areas of interest to them in their leisure time,

irrespective of their nationality. In addition there are many official town twinnings, as well as a wealth of permanent contacts which are deliberately kept at an informal level because the towns involved do not want to restrict their contacts across the border to one particular "twinned" town.

5. The method of financing Euregio activities requires that local funds must be made available before help can be expected from higher up, whether from the German Federal Government or the Land, or from the Netherlands Central Government or Province. The German and Dutch municipalities, boroughs and districts currently raise about 450,000 DM from voluntary contributions amounting to about 0.26 DM per inhabitant. This is used mainly to fund administrative expenses and cross-border economic and infrastructure projects. In addition the Euregio receives between 350,000 and 400,000 DM annually from the Federal Länder of North Rhine-Westphalia and Lower Saxony, the Netherlands Central Government and the provinces of Gelderland and Overijssel. This money is intended exclusively for cultural and social activities, and is not, as in other border regions used to cover part of the administrative expenses. The Euregio budget covers approximately one-third of the costs of organising cross-border events of a cultural or social nature. The remaining two-thirds must therefore be found by the local authorities and participants on a voluntary basis.

Every year the local authorities decide not only on the level of their contribution, but also on the need for such transfrontier activities. The personal contribution enables individual citizens to proceed in the same way, which means that individuals must equally be convinced that their money is being spent to good purpose. As a result, the use of the Euregio cultural budget succeeds in mobilising funds about three times its own size for organising such meetings.