

Public address by Minister-President Bourgeois

11 July celebration Diplomatic Corps

Brussels, Monday 10 July 2017

Mister Speaker of the Flemish Parliament,
Excellencies,
Colleagues from the Flemish and Federal Parliament,
Dear guests,

It is a genuine pleasure to be able to address you again on Flanders Day.
It is a festive day, ladies and gentlemen, and festive days are there to be celebrated.
Because we are happy and we commemorate how people in the distant and recent past worked together
to make Flanders into the prosperous and dynamic federated state and close community we are today.

Flanders has found the resilience to bring its budget into balance. Economically things are going well.

The number of unemployed has dropped by more than 5% compared to last year, the unemployment rate in Flanders is 4.8%. The number of vacancies is at a record high. The number of start-ups is increasing and there are fewer bankruptcies. Last year we also achieved a record amount of over 300 billion euros in exports to the four corners of the globe and we also convinced 200 new foreign investors to invest in our federated state, the second-best result ever. We are investing heavily in Research and Development, in school buildings and in delivering care. Further to an unavoidable cut-back operation in public spending, we are now seeing favourable results. There are reasons enough for celebration.

But we do not celebrate alone. We celebrate surrounded by and connected with our neighbours, friends and partners.

After all, the positive results, the resilience I just mentioned, may very well be the result of hard work, innovation and entrepreneurial success, all of the above are possible only because Flanders – thankfully - does not stand alone in the world.

Commitment, common values, openness and free trade bring us into contact with others, with new opportunities and ideas, with innovating insights. And with you. Which is why we would like to celebrate all of this together with you.

Flanders, ladies and gentlemen, has a long history as a trading area and a place of encounter on the shores of the North Sea.

As early as the Middle Ages, our region was the central location where traders from the Mediterranean seaboard met their counterparts from the Hanseatic cities in the north of Europe. Bruges was the Venice of the North, and in the wake of traders came artists, scholars, influential thinkers and innovative minds.

From the 15th century, the Great Council of Mechelen was the highest court in the Netherlands, with a strong reputation that stretched deep into the Burgundy empire.

The 16th century was Antwerp's 'Golden Age', which – courtesy of its port - gave us diamonds, Rubens and Plantin.

And today, Flanders and its capital Brussels continue to occupy a central position as a gathering ground and decision-making centre at the heart of the European Union.

Brussels is the second most important diplomatic city in the world.

But the Flemish North Sea ports too occupy a central position that puts the people of Flanders into contact with Europe and the world at large.

As such, it will come as no surprise that, last month, at the North Sea Conference in Göttingen, I called on the EU to work towards a macro strategy for the North Sea.

As far as we are concerned, this strategy should also be part of the Brexit negotiations so that - post-Brexit - we are able to maintain the greatest possible links and cooperation with the UK, in our mutual interest.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Flanders brings people together, connects them.

In order to do so in a modern, smooth-paced and efficient manner, we are also doing this in a physical sense:

Flanders is investing in an international and multi-modal transport network which fits in with the European transport network.

We want to connect and we want to be connected.

Within Europe and with the world.

It will therefore not come as a surprise that a major part of the most important Flemish port and waterway projects under construction - such as

- the New Lock Terneuzen
- the upgrading of the Albert Canal,
- and the Seine-Scheldt link

are integrated into the European North Sea-Mediterranean transport corridor.

In addition to investments in waterways, we also have clear plans to strengthen the railways. We want railways as links in the logistics networks. In doing so, we unreservedly champion the cause of equal standards in Europe so that our trains can ride from North to South and back again without delays.

As I said last year, now is not only the time for a Digital and Energy Union, but also time to lend shape to the European Transport Union.

The Iron Rhine project is an important link in this. In January 2016, a feasibility study into a new route got under way. The study examines three routes in terms of their feasibility in a technical and economic sense and their environmental impact. The German part of one of the routes - the so-called 'dritter Weg' or third way - has been included in the Bundesverkehrswegeplan.

After we welcomed the "Madrid Maersk", which has a capacity of over 20,000 containers, to the port of Antwerp in June, last Friday we also welcomed the first container train with cars from the north-east of China in the port of Zeebrugge. From now on, the train - as part of the 'One Belt, One Road' project – will be delivering the larger Volvo models to Europe three times a week, with the same train taking smaller Volvos built in Ghent and other goods back to China on its return journey.

Along with fellow Minister-President Mark Rutte, last year I was able to announce the successful merger between the Port of Ghent and Zeeland Seaports.

Together we will literally put the 'Low Countries' on the map. We join, we link, we connect.

Alongside the waterways and railways, we are also innovating to optimise our roads as links in logistics networks.

At the "European Truck Platooning Challenge", a number of automated trucks covered a route across the European Union, which also took them onto Flemish roads.

Truck platooning offers possibilities for better road use, time and fuel consumption gains and a reduction of carbon dioxide emissions.

We are also continuing to innovate within the conventional modes of transport.

Moreover, there is no denying that the Oosterweel project for which the Government of Flanders concluded an agreement with the citizen committees earlier this year is vital for strengthening international links and, as such, for deepening the internal market of the European Union.

As you can tell, ladies and gentlemen, Flanders is investing in the physical links that unite people.

We are doing so on several fronts at the same time and multi-modally, as this will enable us to reach the international customers of the nearly 800 European distribution centres located in our region even quicker and even more efficiently. Despite Brexit, and despite emerging protectionism around the world,

Flanders is looking to the future with great confidence. A future in which we want to invest. Invest a lot. In 2017, we are investing an extra 195 million euros into research, development and innovation.

Never before has Flanders invested as much as it is in the current financial year, all of which comes at a time of austerity at that.

By the same token, the Government of Flanders is making additional investments into the Flemish knowledge or research institutions, such as Imec, VIB, Vito and Flanders' Make.

These state-of-the-art centres have all become internationally renowned players and are crucial in building our future economic fabric.

All of which places Flanders as one of the ten most innovative federated states in the European Union.

We are already investing 2.69% of our GDP into Research and Development.

Which means we are well on the way to achieving our target of 3%.

Ladies and gentlemen, as you just heard: Flanders is investing in its future.

However, the investments in our infrastructure I referenced are causing concern.

Unlike the usual economic depreciations for infrastructure investments, the European Accounting Rules currently require us to charge these investments to the public spending accounts over a period which is allowed to be spread over the period of construction at most.

This is not realistic. Certainly not for EU member states.

I am therefore calling for greater flexibility to be set out in the European Stability and Growth Pact for once-only, exceptional, strategic, sustainable, and growth promoting investments.

I think it is perfectly possible for the European Commission to develop criteria so that strategic investments that are ultimately to the benefit of the internal market are made possible.

I raised this proposal last month during my meeting with Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker and defended it, together with colleague Bart Tommelein with Commissioner Pierre Moscovici.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In addition to the physical connections I have mentioned here, we are perhaps increasingly connected with each other via the digital highway. The demand for more, budget-friendly and more frequent availability has come a step closer this summer in the European Union. The consumer was pleasantly surprised with the abolition of the roaming fees within the internal market. If you ask me, a fine example of how the European Union can instigate a positive *schwung* and a new dynamism.

This is an example of the real added value of the Union for our citizens. But we see, just as in the real world, that rogue elements are present in the digital world which threaten our security. Malware, payware, spyware our security demands ever stronger, faster and firmer instruments. The European Union is clearly the appropriate policy level to protect us against the forces that wish to erode the foundations of our society.

And although when we read news reports we may have the feeling that some countries again see salvation in turning in on themselves, we can only conclude that on the 60th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome, the European Union has brought more prosperity, stability and peace than in the 60 years before.

That is why we, in Flanders, are Europeans.

Ladies and gentlemen,

To achieve a coherent whole of knowledge, infrastructure, innovation and internationalisation, the special dynamism of a cluster is needed.

In Flanders, citizens and companies will be given more opportunities from now on with the renewed cluster policy.

This new policy stimulates partnerships between innovation-conscious Flemish and foreign companies and inquisitive knowledge centres.

Here too we connect, bring together and provide an extra dimension.

The Government of Flanders is now preparing its future and in its Vision Paper 2050 highlights seven priorities as answer to the challenges of the future and as a road to opportunities for the future.

In addition to the 'leap to an Industry 4.0', the other six transition projects are:

- life-long learning and a dynamic life career,
- smart housing and living,
- high quality health and welfare care;
- a smoother and safer mobility system,
- a circular economy
- and a low-carbon energy system.

The Flanders Foreign Affairs Department ensures that each of these transitions are embedded in an international context and the opportunities offered by the European Union to develop these further.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Flanders wants to assume its European and international role to the full.

We feel supported in this by our partner countries, our 'valued neighbours', our diplomats and economic representatives, and of course their rich network of which you are all part.

It is therefore a special honour for me, on this summery Flanders Day, with all of you, the diplomatic corps in our country, to raise the glass to togetherness, commitment and friendship. notre pays, à la fraternité, à la solidarité et à l'amitié.