

Speech by Flemish Minister-President Geert BOURGEOIS

New Year's reception for the diplomatic corps

Brussels, 22 January 2018¹

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Dear Guests,

It is a great pleasure to greet you in such numbers here today at the start of the new year. My official residence, Errera was unfortunately too small to receive all of you. But no worry: today, I can welcome you to the Herman Teirlinck Building. With its E-level of 31, this building is at this moment the largest passive office in the country. After solar panels have been installed, this E-level will drop even further, to 23.

First of all, I would like to wish you and all your loved ones a healthy, happy and prosperous 2018. May you enjoy good fortune in both your professional and private lives.

The Roman poet Ovid at the beginning of our era wrote: "Circumstances are not always favourable to me but I never lack hope." I find this optimistic idea an excellent motto with which to start this new year. There are many indications and facts that engender hope. The European economy is on its way in 2017 to achieve its highest growth in ten years with 2.3%. The European Commission forecasts that this growth will continue in both the eurozone and the EU with 2.1% in 2018 and 1.9% in 2019. Investments are once again being made and the government deficit and debts are gradually beginning to decline. The job engine too is running faster and the European unemployment will drop this year to 7.3%, the lowest level since 2008.

¹ Check against delivery

Flanders is also in a better position than a year ago.

- The Flemish budget closed 2017 with a small surplus.
- There has been an uninterrupted 29-month decline in unemployment in all provinces and in all age groups.
- The number of job vacancies is now at a record level.
- There are more start-up companies.
- In 2016, our export broke through the barrier of 300 billion euros for the very first time. In absolute figures, this makes Flanders the thirteenth largest exporter in the world.

The four Flemish ports are major driving forces for export. I would like to refer in this connection to the merger at the end of last year of the Flemish port of Ghent and the Dutch port of Zeeland.

The result is that this merged port known as the North Sea Port is now one of the top ten European ports. This shows perfectly that borders need not be an obstacle to close cooperation.

The Government of Flanders can show a positive balance sheet but this must not lead to complacency. On the contrary, we want to increase our efforts to do things even better. And we are doing this by targeted investment

- in research and development and innovation;
- education;
- mobility;
- health care;
- and school buildings.

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We must do everything to sustain this favourable evolution and do so despite Brexit. The unpredictability of how that process will end impacts on important matters on the European agenda such as:

- the future long-term financial framework;
- the power of the European trade policy;
- the European climate and energy policy;
- the deepening of the monetary union;
- the European security agenda and so on.

Yet here too, hope is justified. It can never be the intention to lower an Iron Curtain stretching from the Shetland Islands to Cornwall. Nobody would benefit from that. That is why I am delighted that the European Union and the UK have reached an agreement to start the next stage in their negotiations about their future relationship. It is difficult to overestimate the impact of this for Flanders.

After Ireland, Flanders will be the most seriously hit in the event of “no deal”.

- Worldwide, the UK is our fourth largest market.
- 87% of the Belgian export to the UK comes from Flanders. That is more than our share in the world market which is 83%.
- The share of Flanders in the British import to Belgium is even 89%.

It will demand great statesmanship and smart diplomacy to reach a new trade agreement that matches these figures let alone exceeds them. And so, at the start of the second stage of the negotiations, the Government of Flanders will be arguing for a trade-friendly Brexit. This would include:

- zero tariffs and avoiding as far as possible non-tariff obstacles;
- the most far-reaching customs cooperation with a third country;
- maximum retention of a “level playing field” and avoiding regulatory divergence. That means that we must also reach clear agreements about state aid and competition law more in general.
- guaranteeing sufficient protection of investments and intellectual property rights.

The Government of Flanders is also striving for broad cooperation with the UK in the area of

- agriculture and fishery;
- research and development (successor to Horizon 2020);
- education (Erasmus+);
- mobility and transport;
- environment and energy;
- Interreg;
- Europol and the Common Security and Defence Policy.

We are thus pressing for the most comprehensive “PLUS” cooperation with the UK in the post-Brexit era.

The Flemish vision statement for the Brexit negotiations, a copy of which can be found at the entrance, also argues for the expansion of a macro-regional strategy for the North Sea, which must allow all nations around the North Sea to cooperate with each other. The twenty first century will after all be the century of the oceans. This strategy must be a “confidence building tool” for the future relationships between the EU and the UK.

My hope and wish is that the difficult Brexit negotiations will lead to an honourable agreement for all parties. We are all confident in how Michel Barnier will handle this. “No deal is a bad deal.”

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

2017 has also unfortunately been a year of bloody conflicts, some of which have raged not far from the European borders. It is one of the greatest tragedies in human history that justice and peace can often only be achieved through the clamour of arms.

Dialogue, mediation and rapprochement are the only good recipe for avoiding new conflicts. The European Union proved this in a Europe plagued by wars for centuries. The Government of Flanders has made that respect for fundamental rights and freedoms a corner-stone of its foreign policy. Also in the years ahead, we shall base our relationships with countries abroad on this.

This is why my Government is supporting the initiative to institute a regular “rule of law” peer review in the Council of the European Union.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As you know, the Government of Flanders has considerably expanded its diplomatic network in recent years. This year we are again focusing on expansion and deepening:

- since the first of January, Flanders has a new General Representative at the Council of Europe, the OECD and UNESCO.
- I took also the decision to expand the jurisdiction of our representation in London so that we are also represented in Dublin.
- Our representative in Geneva can now also fully represent Flanders in Switzerland.
- There is also a procedure under way for the opening of a new Flemish diplomatic post in Rome in 2019.

The foreign network of the Flemish export and investment agency, Flanders Investment and Trade, offers access to more than one hundred offices across the globe. The most recent additions to this network are Vilnius, Houston, Lima and Yangon (in Myanmar). Flanders Investment and Trade will shortly further reinforce its presence in Africa with an office in Ghana and in Nigeria. In China, investments are being made in an additional branch office.

Flanders Investment and Trade together with the Foreign Affairs Department therefore defend and promote the international interests of Flanders throughout the world. As the third most open economy in the world, we are susceptible to geopolitical shocks. It is thus important to remain constantly active in an increasingly connected world. In Flanders, 34% of our economy or some 850,000 jobs depend on export.

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

At the start of this new year, I am both hopeful and optimistic but the Realpolitik teaches us that we can do little without foreign partners. Throughout the history of the world, isolationism and protectionism have only led to poverty and misery and to endless, destructive and divisive conflicts.

This year, we are commemorating the end of the First World War, the Great War, which dragged the whole continent to the edge of destruction. In 2018, the Government of Flanders will once again actively focus on that commemoration. It will thus build further on the efforts of past years. We are developing a programme of events around 11 November 2018 with a variety of players in the field. This programme will closely reflect one of the three pillars of the Flemish commemoration project: expressing the idea of peace, reflecting about war and peace together with former enemies.

The 11 November lecture will, in addition to a cultural aspect, reflect the message of peace, which the Government of Flanders wants to convey in response to the armistice and the end of the commemoration period.

This year, we shall also pay special attention to the World Heritage nomination dossier. Together with Wallonia and France, Flanders has submitted a file to UNESCO applying for recognition of the burial and memorial sites along the western front. My hope and wish is that a positive decision will be made in the summer of this year. Such a decision would be a fine international recognition of the efforts made by the Government of Flanders in previous years to create a sustainable commemoration and peace message for the generations that follow us after 2018.

Excellencies,

Diplomacy is the art of reconciling what seems irreconcilable. All of you here have a role in this, one which cannot be overestimated. Searching for mutual interests across borders, containing

and where possible, resolving conflicts and engendering and maintaining sustainable international relationships; these are the core tasks of diplomats.

That is why I am planning to organize an international conference before the end of the year. This conference will not only make up the balance for the Flemish foreign policy but also and particularly, present our future international policy. It goes without saying that our international partners will be involved in this. In the months ahead, we will inform you further about the progress of this initiative.

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The British philosopher and Nobel prize winner, Bertrand Russell, wrote: "Man needs, for his happiness, not only the enjoyment of this or that, but hope and enterprise and change."

I would like to add that such progress and change can only be stimulated by international cooperation. I have that hope and I am confident that we will all work on it together and derive considerable pleasure from it.

And with that thought I would like to offer a toast. Let us raise our glasses to the work we have already done and to our on-going fruitful cooperation.