

Europe for Citizens' launch event

2. Speech Director General Odile Quintin

Introduction:

Jeudi à Bruxelles, nous avons parlé de la citoyenneté européenne active. Aujourd'hui à Rhodes, la citoyenneté européenne est active parce que, vous, les auteurs des jumelages, vous êtes présents et rassemblés dans un même objectif : votre participation pour la réalisation du projet européen.

La Commission a voulu, en votre honneur, jumeler deux événements de lancement du programme "L'Europe pour les citoyens" et relier quelques instants par vidéo conférence les échanges réciproques d'idées et d'expériences.

J'ai moi-même voulu être présente à Bruxelles avant-hier et à Rhodes maintenant parmi vous, d'une part pour vous montrer l'intérêt que je porte à ce que vous faites et, d'autre part, pour vous redire, après le forum de la citoyenneté active en septembre dernier à Bruxelles, ma conviction quant à l'impact européen de votre action et pour envisager avec vous la façon de le développer plus encore.

Je désire adresser tous mes remerciements aux organisateurs de cet événement dont l'ampleur confirme mes premiers mots : merci donc au Conseil des Communes et Régions d'Europe qui est le partenaire de la Commission européenne depuis de nombreuses années, à l'Union Centrale des Villes et Communes de Grèce ainsi qu'à la ville de Rhodes qui accueille cette conférence d'excellente façon.

Rhodes est un lieu hautement symbolique s'agissant de discuter de citoyenneté européenne. C'est en effet ici en Grèce qu'est née l'idée de citoyenneté et c'est ici, sur ces rives de la Méditerranée, que les cultures antiques se sont rencontrées en un dialogue interculturel qui se trouve aux sources de notre héritage européen.

Vous êtes, nous sommes tous, réunis ici pour réfléchir sur l'avenir des jumelages et du mouvement qu'ils représentent. Je suis heureuse d'avoir décidé, dès la première minute, de venir vous rencontrer car le nombre que vous êtes m'encourage dans mon action. Il est clair que les jumelages sont importants pour beaucoup d'européens et cela aux différents niveaux de la vie publique et que les débats menés ces jours-ci à Rhodes sont remplis de signification.

Sur l'invitation à cette conférence, j'ai retrouvé le signe évident de l'impact profond que les jumelages ont sur la vie des communautés et des individus en Europe. Je veux parler de la photographie du signe "jumelages des villes " que je vois à l'entrée des villes françaises que j'ai l'occasion de traverser.

En arrivant dans nombre de villes en Europe, grandes ou petites, nous voyons ces mêmes signes. Nous nous surprenons à examiner quelle est la ville jumelle de celle où nous entrons comme si nous voulions reconstruire une carte de l'Europe en suivant les liens que tissent toutes ces villes entre elles. Je pense que ces liens expriment un élément vital de notre appartenance commune à l'Europe et de notre identité à celle-ci.

Remarques personnelles

Ainsi chacun a, finalement, ses propres souvenirs ou expériences de jumelages. Je n'échappe pas à la règle. Je suis originaire de Lyon, une ville de France dont vous avez certainement entendu parler et, je l'espère, pas seulement pour l'excellence de sa cuisine. Lyon possède une vie remplie de choses intéressantes et, entre autres, j'apprécie que le film tiré du livre de Milan Kundera "L'insoutenable légèreté de l'être" ait été tourné dans la ville. Celle-ci a été choisie vu l'étonnante ressemblance entre le centre historique de Lyon et celui de Prague. C'était bien entendu à l'époque où Prague était loin derrière le rideau de fer et où Milan Kundera était "persona non grata" dans son pays natal.

Je veux illustrer par cet exemple le rôle très important que les cités et villes en Europe ont joué dans la vie culturelle et politique européenne. Après tout, les mots "citoyens" et "cités" ont les mêmes racines linguistiques.

Mais de façon plus importante, Lyon possède un réseau très riche et très actif de partenariats avec diverses cités en Europe et d'ampleur mondiale. Parmi celles-ci, nous trouvons Barcelone en Espagne, Birmingham au Royaume-Uni, Pécs en Hongrie, future capitale européenne de la culture en 2010, Lodz en Pologne, Francfort sur le Main en Allemagne, Craiova en Roumanie, Milan et Gênes en Italie.

La valeur des jumelages

Cependant, ce ne sont pas juste des villes de la taille de Lyon qui se trouvent au centre du mouvement généré par les jumelages. Je voudrais insister sur le rôle des petites villes et sur celui du niveau local où les citoyens européens sont devenus les artisans de ce mouvement en organisant des rencontres, en recevant des visiteurs d'autres Etats membres chez eux, en s'intéressant à d'autres cultures et à d'autres vies locales, en appréhendant avec ouverture d'esprit et volonté de compréhension la vie quotidienne de leurs interlocuteurs jumelés. Sans leur engagement enthousiaste, le jumelage de villes ne serait pas devenu ce qu'il est aujourd'hui.

C'est au niveau local que le projet politique de l'intégration européenne rencontre une réponse entreprenante de milliers d'Européens et que les grands objectifs politiques sont, à l'inverse, traduits dans un contexte local.

Si nous regardons juste derrière nous, nous constatons que les jumelages ont pu réagir de façon adéquate aux défis sociaux et politiques de notre époque avec des solutions créatives et efficaces. Plus loin dans le passé, ils ont été l'un des instruments clés de réconciliation après la tragédie de la deuxième guerre mondiale. Les jumelages ont enfin contribué grandement à la réunification en Europe pour parcourir les distances mentales et émotionnelles fortes existant entre les anciens et les nouveaux Etats membres, distances qui ont été créées par la guerre froide et par des décades de divisions artificielles sur notre continent.

Our challenges:

Today we look towards the future and our ambition is to identify the new challenges to which town twinning has to respond. The nature of the answer will have an impact on the town twinning movement as regards both its content and its structure.

Let me outline some of the key challenges Europe faces today:

1. The pressure of globalisation and corresponding need to create knowledge based economy. This is one of the issues on which we have a large consensus in Europe. We need an economy which foundation is the knowledge and competences of the people and we have to develop it together. This is a challenge which concerns all of us.
2. The demographic change is a huge challenge for us in terms of assuring and developing social cohesion and equal opportunities for all in our societies.
3. The growing diversity and fragmentation of our societies presents the challenge and need for intercultural dialogue, and also the challenge of developing new adapted possibilities for civic participation.

We don't have one single response to these challenges. They must be tackled by a multitude of relevant answers and actions.

Potential of Town twinning

Our question now is: can the potential of town twinning be capitalised to face these challenges and if yes, how can it develop relevant responses?

Concerning the first challenge: knowledge based society requires life long learning. I think it is evident that town twinning can contribute to this. Town twinning can promote innovation and creativity through the knowledge transfer and exchange of experience. Town twinning can also contribute to the development of key competencies. For example it can motivate language learning. It can also be a catalyst to mobility and it can provide small businesses with impulses to network internationally.

In a way town twinning is a "learning through doing process" where individual citizens or their association take part in designing, implementing and evaluating local events. They develop important social skills through interacting with their European counterparts who in spite of coming from the European Union have different cultural and social traditions.

As far as the second challenge is concerned town twinning provides local communities with excellent possibilities for transfer of best practices. At this conference you have had the opportunity to see one of very striking example of this: it is the case of Polish town Ostrow Wielkopolski which together with its twinned partners in Germany and Italy initiated a series of high quality conferences on the role of women in the local life

You can also go further and get from exchange to co-operation: between educational institutions, professional and civic associations, and between local authorities themselves.

As regards the third challenge town twinning can make a very interesting contribution by providing an opportunity for active civic engagement at local level but in European context. In this way town twinning can significantly contribute to the promotion of a sense of common identity and belonging together in Europe. Town twinning can also become an important forum for inter-cultural dialogue in Europe.

It can also be a very good tool for developing a European public space in all corners of the Europe. In this regard I would like to mention another interesting example we have seen here in Rhodes at the exhibition of networks of twinned towns. It is an example of St. Alban and its idea of establishing a network of "European schools" – debates and meetings with national and European politicians and officials on European Union affairs.

Public space is not only debate, it is also action: and in this respect town twinning has a strong record. In reality the organisation of the very smallest citizens meetings – say for example a visit of fire fighters - require rather large and divers civic engagement within the local community: host families, local associations, speakers, cooks etc. Citizens who engage themselves in these actions together with their European fellows act in fact within the European public space!

So, in my opinion town twinning has a considerable potential to contribute to not only of political cohesion but also of the social cohesion of the European Union in the future.

The challenge is to structure the individual town twinning activities in order to achieve a stronger effect.

Making most of the potential

How can we do this? The European Commission's response to the situation I have just described comes within the Europe for Citizens programme. Here you can see that we have made the best of efforts to strike the right balance between preserving the direct involvement of citizens at the local level (thus respecting the profoundly democratic character of the town twinning) and at the same time injecting a structuring effect into the existing town twinning activities.

This will be especially achieved by underlining the thematic focus. Together with stakeholders we have identified priority themes to help the project promoters to develop the European dimension of their projects. This applies for all activities, including the smallest citizens' meetings. Furthermore we encourage more strategic thematic networking between twinned towns and as of 2008 there will be a possibility for multi-annual projects for networks of twinned towns.

We believe that these new features will allow the participating municipalities to structure their activities and to focus on important thematic issues which are relevant on both a local and a European level, thus bringing a certain degree of new intellectual dynamism and creativity to the town twinning field.

Therefore, the main elements of the European Commission's answer to the question "What Twinning for tomorrow's world?" are threefold:

1. It has to continue to make most of citizens' involvement and voluntary engagement.
2. It needs to strengthen thematic focus linked to the major social and political developments we face in today's world and contribute to the strategic objectives we have lately set for ourselves especially those outlined in the Lisbon agenda including the creation of knowledge based society which will remain inclusive and competitive in tomorrow's world.
3. It has to be structured to achieve critical mass and to make a real impact on our societies.

As I have already stated and as it has been demonstrated by a number of examples I included in my today's intervention, town twinning has a very solid base and an exceptional track

record. I have no doubt that it will seize the opportunity of the new context for its further expansion and for the benefit of European citizens.

Town twinning enriches the tapestry of European civil society and sparks the enthusiasm of individual European citizens to become engaged in Europe's social and political life for a common purpose and for the common good.

It is one of the a key instrument of creating a true European public space in which Europeans can meet, think and act together. Our debate today is a contribution to and an example of one of the steps leading towards the achievement of this very idea.

I wish you all the best of success to this aim and I would like to reassure you that the European Commission will remain behind you in your endeavours to bring Europe closer to its citizens and to respond to the challenges they find critical in our fast evolving world.

Defensive points

Will the introduction of new measures mean the end of support to smaller projects?

The introduction of these new elements in the new programme is by no means designed to end support to smaller projects – especially town twinning citizens meetings. The new elements are complementary to those already in place. The new programme is very much based on the continuity with the preceding programme for the period 2004-2006.

The new measures have been introduced to help to structure the town twinning action, so that better effect can be achieved and an opportunity is given to those municipalities and their networks who want to embark on more strategic and structured co-operation.

The new programme has very ambitious goals but the programme budget is limited – what is the outlook for the future?

The current budget is the maximum possible under the financial perspective as it has been negotiated in 2006. However a review will be carried out in 2009 and there is a possibility to negotiate budget increase. This will to a large extent depend on the valorisation of the results of projects implemented by then.

Eligible countries in "Europe for Citizens" programme

The Programme is open to the 27 Member States of the European Union.

The Programme can also be opened to other countries, namely the EFTA countries which are parties to the EEA Agreement, the candidate countries and countries from the Western Balkans, provided that certain legal and financial obligations are fulfilled.

Some countries have already expressed their interest in participating in this programme as of 2008 (the EFTA countries members of the European Economic Area, The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Croatia), and the procedure to sign a Memorandum of Understanding has already started.