

SPEECH/28/09/06

Mr Ed WEBER

PRESIDENT OF THE DOUZELAGE – EUROPEAN TOWN TWINNING ASSOCIATION

"From 12 to 25"

Public lecture at the Europe for Citizens Forum

Brussels, 28/29 September 2006

Mr Commissioner,
Dear representatives of the European institutions and bodies,
Dear representatives of the Member States,
Mr Chairman,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a big honour and a pleasure for me to address this important audience on behalf of the Douzelage, the European Town Twinning Association I'm proud to represent.

First of all I would like to thank the European Commission for giving us the opportunity to take the floor at the occasion of this "Europe for Citizens Forum".

From 12 to 25 is the title of the speech I am called to deliver. Don't be afraid, I'm not going to talk about the foolish pranks I made in my adolescence, but I will briefly try to present the association I'm chairing and outline the impact of the new "*Europe for citizens*" programme on its daily work.

There are many twinnings; most are straightforward partnerships between towns or villages within Europe. Others combine cities, counties, departments, regions and several span even different continents. But there is only one 'Douzelage', only one twinning that specifically sets out to link every Member State of the European Union at the grassroots level. Its uniqueness lies both in this and in the nature of its dynamism and the wide range of its activities.

The Douzelage was founded in 1991, based on the idea of a visionary French journalist, Monsieur André Poirier whose aim it was, as opposed to the political top down approach, to rather build Europe bottom up and to help give people an idea of their European identity in addition to their national individuality.

The strange name of Douzelage was coined from the French words Douze (twelve) + jumelage (twinning) = douzelage, as the kick-off twinning included twelve towns, one from each of the countries of the European Union in 1991. Although the number of member states and the number of our member towns has grown in the meantime, as the EU is sticking to its twelve stars, we are sticking to our original name: Douzelage. It has been carefully preserved, because it has become well and widely known in the meantime.

What we understand to be the key feature of our twinning is that local people of all ages and from all walks of life should be involved through cultural experiences, school exchanges, sporting events and exchanges of experience regarding practical issues such as environment, local services, local democracy or involving citizens in the decision-making processes.

The Douzelage received highest European recognition in 1993 when it was awarded the "Golden Stars of Town-Twinning" for its efforts and commitment in favour of a unified Europe. Many illustrious guests from the European Commission, Members of the European Parliament, Nobel-Price winners as well as many national politicians honoured our efforts during all these years of hard work.

Since 1991 two major enlargement processes of the Douzelage have been achieved. As the EU of 12 became the EU of 15 in 1995, the Douzelage proceeded to its first enlargement process in 1997 with Finland, in 1998 with Sweden and in 1999 with Austria.

Enlargement of the Union to 25 member states has gone ahead after the collapse of the Berlin Wall. In a first step 5 new towns from the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia and Poland, joined the Douzelage in 2004 in harmony with this European enlargement process.

In a resolution taken in 2004 the Douzelage members reiterated their common intention to continue the Douzelage extension process stepwise trying at the same time to keep the organisation adapted to the potential of its resources, available to manage this kind of impacting process. Today the Douzelage counts twenty member towns and will be undergoing a further enlargement process in the next future.

Over more than fifteen years now, since 1989, when the first budget to promote twinning actions was accepted, twinning has considerably developed and its scope of activity has largely widened. This is an absolutely positive assessment, but the question is: "What will be the role and function of partnerships between towns today and in the future?"

This question is especially crucial for twinings between small towns and a question of survival for twinings comprising one town per country of the European Union as for example the Douzelage.

In addition to its size, the strength of twinning can be measured by the duration of the ties. We can be proud that the Douzelage has now existed for over 15 years, a period of time that has enabled us to increase the range and quality of exchanges as well as our common experience.

The twinning size of three towns, five or even ten, is quite practicable. But the administrative and organisational load and effort require a considerable involvement by all the committed and convinced volunteers carrying out the practical, invaluable amount of work as soon as the twinning grows larger.

It has been recognized, and justly so, by recent developments and incidents, that there is an urgent need to bring the EU closer to its citizens. The need to bring this process substantially forward has been even more identified since the enlargement start-up and the EU constitutional crisis, prompted by the disruption of the political development process of the EU and suspended by the referenda on the Constitutional Treaty in France and the Netherlands. There is indeed a huge almost monumental task which urges us to keep involved and strengthen the commitment on the various levels, national, regional, local and with a particular responsibility also the European level. Further to the public sector the involvement of the private sector with its organisations at all levels in the various domains are of utmost importance.

In a Union of 25 – soon 27 – the Commission and especially the Directorate General for Culture and Education as well as the Committee of European Municipalities and Regions play a vital role. If the 30.000 town twinnings across Europe, which stem from the idea that a peaceful and successful Europe can best be built from its base and by its citizens are called to be successful in the future, the European decision-makers must ensure the necessary financial and policy support for the town twinning movement.

For large twinnings of small towns, like the Douzelage, I see in particular three major requirements the new programme has to meet:

- First: Rules should be clear and transparent, procedures and applications must be comprehensible and easy to handle.
- Second: Financial support should integrate appropriate scaling and sizing aspects and must be accessible without excessive bureaucracy.
- Third: Links between DG EAC, the CEMR and the twinning partners must be close and permanent.

I believe that I speak on behalf of many of the town twinning actors when I say that we highly appreciated the Consultation Forum concerning the future action programme 2007-2013 organised by the Directorate General for Education and Culture as well as the public online consultation from December 2004 to February 2005. The fact that over a thousand responses were received shows the very high interest and the absolute need for a constructive dialogue of all involved actors.

We also welcome that the decision-makers have taken in consideration the experiences of the actors in the field. Many very promising ideas as for example the introduction of multi-annual projects or the establishment and development of trans-European networks raise hopes for large organisations which can expect a strengthening of their consideration and a greater level of financial stability and security enabling a more strategic approach to important twinning issues.

I am confident because many of the actors underlined in the consultation discussions that applications must be comprehensible and not only be made for EU “insiders” because most of the smaller towns see their twinning managed by amateurs full of enthusiasm and good will. For the EU to become a reality in citizens' lives, it really must work hand in hand with these citizens and must be easily understood and speak the citizens' language.

Especially for small towns, in our case 20 European municipalities with an average population of 13500 inhabitants, twinned in a perfectly working network, financial security and support are essential and a question of survival. For our local authorities resources to support their international partnership are the most important issue.

Also support must be calculable. If grants are uncertain or selection procedures and criteria are too vague, this can have dramatic consequences for organising towns and their local authorities when support is not granted.

For twinnings like the Douzelage, an enlargement from 12 to 25 can only be carried out successfully if local authorities can see that their commitment in building this wonderful Europe and the political legitimacy they give to this twinning is encouraged by a firm and permanent support from the European Commission. Because also on the local level, you find of course critics and sceptics of the integration process who are already predicting that Europe or in our case, the Douzelage, could collapse under its own weight.

But I am confident that the Directorate General for Education and Culture and the many other actors who have so successfully contributed to this development process, have created a new programme that will prove that there is a definite added value in the field of town twinning and of active citizenship.

Therefore I am convinced that a Douzelage, enlarged to 25 member towns will continue to function effectively and attend to the interests of its citizens.

Thank you for your attention.