The need for Dutch-German data exchange from a regional perspective

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The future of data-driven society: Perspectives from the Netherlands and Germany.

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Your Excellency, Prof. Paul, Ladies and gentlemen,

In these first days of November it is an honour to me to address you here at the Dutch Embassy. On Friday the 9th of November we commemorate events that played such a determining role in German and European history in 1918, 1938 and 1989. The German Reunification after the Fall of the Berlin Wall paved the way for a European Germany and for the realisation of the Euro and the European Union. Last Thursday the 1st of November we commemorated that 25 years ago the Maastricht Treaty entered into force, after lengthy ratification procedures in Germany and the United Kingdom. Alongside the free movement of goods, services, persons and capital, it is just a matter of time before the free movement of data will become the fifth European freedom. However, also here walls have to be torn down.

Fifteen years ago I visited Berlin. Not as a tourist, but as a prospective student in search for data. Leiden University organised a pre-university programme, on German language and culture and assisted the pupils with writing their final paper at high school. In my case this paper dealt with the History of the German national anthems: On notably Queensday 2003, German Literature Professor Anthonya Visser arranged an expert interview with Dr. Hermann Gottschewski, Music Historian at the *Musikwissenschaftlichen Fakultät* of the Humboldt University.

The interview in German (new data created on MiniDisk, one of those outdated data wearables) revealed a lot of information on the context of the German nation-building and the evolution of the concept of national anthems during the 19th century, which was not available yet in my country. The few books available in Dutch libraries did not contain this context and the number of sources available on the internet then was limited as well. Back in The Netherlands I visited the Dutch Royal Library to mine and surf through the catalogues, study several antique copies of variations on Haydn's theme.

This anecdote illustrates two things. First it demonstrates that already 200 years ago, countries exchanged -or copy pasted?- data on their texts and melodies of their national anthems. The Prussians honoured their King by singing *Heil Dir im Siegerkranz* in 1871 on Henry Carey's (1689-1743) same melody as the British cheered *God save the Queen.* Joseph Haydn's (1732-1809) original theme on *Gott erhalte Franz den Kaiser* – God save the Habsburg Emperor Franz Joseph (of 1797) - was used by poet August Heinrich Hoffmann von Fallersleben in 1841 on the couplets of *Einigkeit und Recht und Freiheit* which became the official national anthem of the Weimar Republic.

Second, the story also demonstrates that just fifteen years ago, before the breakthrough of the internet revolution, it was still quite difficult to obtain the historical information and its context in a neighbouring country, because of the separated databases, catalogues and limited exchange of science. Even digital, not everything is available. The personal connections and contacts made and make the difference.

Today, we are dependent on data. More than ever, data has become the basis for future expectations. Today, algorithms are used to determine the future, to decide what special offers we receive in our shopping basket and even what are the most suitable events for us to attend during our leisure time.

Today, data has become big business. There is debate about the extent to which data can be used to support commerce. What is ethically sound? In my view, that debate should be applied to all data and data transactions.

Today, digitalisation has far-reaching social and economic consequences. At the same time digitalisation offers an opportunity to boost cooperation across national boundaries. The boundless nature and scalability of digitalisation are two key elements that could contribute to removing borders. For instance, why are we restricted to watch tv programmes online in another country because its content is preserved for internet proxy's in the home countries, while we can watch it live offline? But let us not involve the entire world in this discussion.

Today I will address 1) The need for regional cross-border data; 2) Digitalisation policy close to the border and 3) The government's responsibility as guardian of free data, safeguarding privacy.

1. The need for regional cross-border data

Instead, let us reduce our horizon to a regional scale. Our province of Limburg is special at least according to Dutch standards. It is the only province that shares two national borders, and these borders with Germany and Belgium are longer than its border with The Netherlands. It is therefore common practice for us to work and operate on a regional cross border scale. Limburg is not a metropolitan zone when compared to Berlin, Brussels or Düsseldorf. We have 1.1 million inhabitants which live in and around and four medium-sized cities Maastricht, Geleen, Heerlen and Venlo. Spread across this conglomeration of cities are four campuses -we call them *Brightlands*- where businesses, research institutions and government authorities are working together. We have invested more than four hundred million euros in the development of these campuses. This volume of investment is rather exceptional for a regional government.

But at the height of the economic crisis, we deemed those investments indispensable in order to strengthen our economic and social structures. The collaboration between the public and private sector has been quite successful: apart from the students, 12.000 people work at our campuses, which count almost 300 companies. Bordering on the regions of Liège, Hasselt, Aachen and Düsseldorf the region is home to 4 universities, 3 university hospitals, many universities of applied sciences, and a huge variety of businesses. What is the next step?

The challenge for our regions is to increase cooperation and to retain and improve our competitiveness in an increasingly interdependent world. In facing up to this challenge, for regional government, the central focus is not data itself but its social impact on both sides of the border. How do we maintain affordable healthcare? How can we make our society circular? How do we keep the energy, climate and food transition on course?

To make these advances possible, what we need is an **ever closer Union of data**. That implies a very clear demand for transnational data. In many cases, there is no lack of willingness. The difficulties lie in differences in legislation and regulations. Or a simple lack of knowledge of one another's existence. Concerning our economic future, cross-border data is needed in at least three respects: Labour market, land development and logistics.

First, what **jobs** are available across the border and where and how to find them? The employment agencies Dutch *UWV*, Flemish *VDAB* and German *Bundesagentur für Arbeit* should combine their databases of job-seekers to enable to match their competencies with the available vacancies. Actually, there is a large demand for workers in logistics, ICT and agriculture.

Second, in terms of **spatial planning** we need to know, and to coordinate across the border which areas are available and reserved for instance for warehouses and distribution centres.

This prevents a race to the bottom at both sides of the border or that border areas are broken up against each other by potential foreign investors.

Finally, we need to anticipate together on the trends in **logistics**. All goods arriving in the ports of Rotterdam (marked as *unser Seehafen* by NRW Prime Minister Armin Laschet), need to be transported trough our border regions to the Ruhr area, the large ports of *Duisburg* to barge on the trains and trucks, more and more using the New Silk Road to China, and vice versa. By digitalisation transport becomes more efficient. How to keep plant breeding and vegetables fresh? The Benelux experiment of a digital waybills should be exported across all EU member states.

These issues call for a lively community of businesses and research institutions that come and work together, irrespective of national boundaries. After all, data knows no boundaries, and the logic of science itself is not -and should not be- restricted by borders. The logical consequence must surely be close cooperation.

2. <u>Digitalisation close to but across the border?</u>

Does more data also result in better policy making? Numbers don't speak for themselves. What forms of data collection, data processing and data visualiation deliver faster and more accurate policy information? Using digitalisation as a powerful tool, these are dilemmas that can best be addressed by working together. Data exchange is of vital importance in order to create data-driven regional policies including crossborder implications on a structural basis.

Much is already happening. For the first time, the federal government contains a State Minister for Digitalisation, Mrs. Dorothee Bär. Moreover, 'Berlin' has appointed a Digital Council to advise the Federal Government on digitalisation issues. The coalition programme states that from 2025, every German citizen is entitled to fast Internet access.

Closer to home – at least from the Maastricht point of view– there is an active digitalisation policy in **North Rhine-Westphalia.** I support the digital strategy which focuses on Artificial Intelligence, exposed recently by *Landesminister* Pinkwart. With new techniques like Blockchain and Techruption, the Smart Services Campus, RWTH Aachen University, Maastricht University and the Hochschule Niederrhein together create the largest added value to meet the challenges of digitalization.

The **province of Limburg** is also developing a broad-based digitalisation agenda. Let me give three examples. First, the Brightlands Smart Service Campus in the city of Heerlen is a physical location where research, education, business and government are working together on the challenges and opportunities raised by digitalisation. It is located next to and partly in the former Statistics Netherlands headquarters (CBS). Here Data sciences and smart services concepts go hand in hand. The campus is working intensely on secure digital environments in in which undertakings can do business without being hampered by cybercrime.

Second, by contributing to the **Centre for Big Data Statistics**, an initiative of Statistics Netherlands, we are investing in innovation in the field of data collection and processing. The CBDS generates data differently and uses diverse sources such as social media. It enables the evolution of evidence-based policies with using realtime information. Together with Statistics Netherlands, we have taken the initiative of establishing a Provincial Data Centre and one of the challenges facing the organisation is the collection of data about the Euregions Maas-Rhine and Rhine-Waal.

Third, the Province of Limburg has created successful collaboration with the Dutch National Statistical Institute and IT NRW. In 2016 both institutes jointly created and presented a report on cross border labour migration. In 2017, Limburg initiated a project with CBS and partners in Germany and Belgium to

produce cross-border health statistics and the first results are very promising. Moreover, CBS is a lead partner in a *DG Regio* project in which eight European countries measure crossborder labour migration across the EU (by using big data and mobile phone data) and between EU neighbouring countries like Moldova and Ukraine.

Just like in Limburg, policy in North Rhine-Westphalia is taking in the broadest possible scope. With no less than 6 digi hubs, including one in Aachen. And yet, the digi hubs are focused primarily on businesses. What strikes me as somewhat strange is that there is not a single German affiliate partner at the Smart Service Campus. By the same token, there is no Dutch affiliate partner at the Center Smart Services in Aachen. These two knowledge centres are located less than 15 kilometres apart! After the successful foundation of the crossborder Aachen Maastricht Institute for Biobased Materials, the time has come for a similar **Aachen Maastricht Institute for Smart Data and Digitalisation**.

Happily, the three digital days in Aachen, Hasselt and Heerlen represent a first – albeit hesitant – move towards investigating the nature of the digital knowledge and skills available on the other side of the border. Since cross border data are vital to the sustainable progress of border regions, we argue that it is vital that this data is not only created and shared between Dutch and German regions, but across the continent so that all European countries can profit.

A second move is the Unique IT work and study programme "Train4smartservices" to prepare trainees in Flanders and The Netherlands for future hightech jobs. Today 30 trainees have started this programme, co-funded by Interreg in cooperation with the Brightlands Smart Services Campus and higher education institutes from Heerlen, Sittard, Antwerp and Hasselt.

3. <u>The government as guardian of free data</u>

The use of data and the deployment of algorithms in making decisions are not without problems. Are we the boss of our own data? Who is owning it? In revived times of propaganda, fake-news and redundant experts [? *Fragezeichen*], this crossborder data should be reliable, comparable, accurate and independent, which can be validated. It also requires that this same data deserves protection. Not every institution should be entrusted with the task of statistical data production, collection and analysis. It is a dilemma to simultaneously ensure transparency, facilitate processes and safeguard privacy. When the free movement of data becomes reality, the authorities should act as a guardian of this freedom. More than anything else, in this respect the government must be trustworthy.

That means guaranteeing maximum transparency about the way in which we use data. Citizens should have the right to know and determine where their personal data are registered and who has access to them. Should every EU citizen obtain one online Identity, one digital address that is known among the authorities which the citizen can maintain and is secured at the highest level by a Digital Locker?

Ladies and gentlemen,

More than as a tool or a threat, digitalisation should be considered as an opportunity. How can we together put a spotlight on the effects of digitalisation for both business and the general public in such a way that we see these opportunities, while safeguarding the key social interests that we in government serve? It is essential that individual citizens benefit from the developments resulting from digitalisation. Citizens as local residents, as businessmen, as employees, as customers, as students, as tourists and as scientists. Public data should remain and become available for innovation. For instance data which authorities gather about mobility and energy usage. If that succeeds, we can

ensure that our businesses make the most of innovation resulting from the digitalisation opportunities.

It is our task to create the necessary space for experiments so that the importance of digitalisation will be better legitimised. That calls for a different attitude from us in government, to avoid hiding behind bureaucracy. Not only in formulating and implementing laws, but also as the guardian of privacy, and in setting a good example.

Are we data driven or do we drive the data? Even then, this rudder should not be in the hands of just one party. Steering a safe course through this digital pioneering age is the responsibility of us all, brilliant scientists, smart businessmen and stable statesmanship. One the one hand government must serve as a partner to all those parties intensively involved in the processes of digitalisation and data handling. Pioneering means cooperating with these partners, in sharing and generating knowledge. Are we brave enough to share the necessary knowledge? On the other hand, pioneering does not mean giving away all our secrets. It is up to us to protect our vital infrastructure. It is the task of government to regulate the digital markets to ensure a level playing field. Are we sufficiently free to do so?

Ladies and gentlemen, in this way *Unity, Justice and Freedom* symbolises not just the motto of the current German national anthem, but in my view also three principles of an area without frontiers in which the free movement of data in Europe has to be ensured. In the search for answers, I hope we all experience innovative pleasure and success.

Thank you very much for your attention.