

ADDRESS BY THE PRESIDENT OF THE COMMISSION OF THE EUROPEAN
COMMUNITIES AT THE ACADEMIC SESSION ON THE OCCASION OF THE
SEMINAR ON EUROPE AND THE REGIONS: 1000TH ANNIVERSARY OF
LIEGE - FRIDAY, 6 JUNE 1980

Madame le Président, Monsieur le President,
Monsieur le Ministre, Monsieur le Gouverneur, Monsieur le
Bourgmestre, Ladies and Gentlemen.

It is a great pleasure for me to be here today on this special European day organised as part of the celebration of the Thousandth Anniversary of the Principality of Liege. The fact that you have organised a seminar on Regional Policy is a clear demonstration that your region is moving in the right direction. Even as you celebrate 1000 years of history, you have decided to concentrate your thoughts and effort today on the future of the region rather than on its past achievements and glories. I welcome that emphasis and I know that this morning your seminar was devoted largely to discussion and debate on the European Regional Policy. I do not myself wish to cover the same ground again in detail. I thought that you might nevertheless welcome some general comments on future developments in the Community's regional policy and the place of this region of Liege within that general picture.

There is, in my view, no doubt at all that regional policy is going to occupy an increasingly large place in the economic policy of the European Community. The Commission has for some time been aware that structural and regional imbalances are at the root of the political, economic and social tensions, which hinder the proper activity of the Community and all real progress to integration. If, for example, the European Monetary System (EMS) is to work properly, there
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must be more convergence in the trend of the economies of Member States. It seems to us essential that the Community should take a growing part in the efforts of Member countries to solve their structural and regional problems. We need to find ways and means on the one hand to avoid any increase in the present disparities in wealth and prosperity between regions and, on the other hand, to promote steady growth in those regions with structural weakness.

Community activity in relation to the regions has therefore a dual function. First, it must be financially complementary to the relevant activity of Member States. That is to say its financial assistance must be effectively added to state aids. Second, it must ensure real and effective coordination between national regional policies to avoid those policies actually increasing the imbalances existing between Community regions.

Against this general, but in my view quite essential, background perhaps I may turn briefly to some of the comments and indeed criticisms sometimes expressed in your region on the subject of European regional policy.

First, there is the problem of setting limits to development areas. As you already know, so far as Belgium and its regions are concerned, these limits are in the first place a national responsibility. Within the framework of the EEC Treaty, a decision had to be taken by the Commission on 24 April 1972 with a view to taking better account of regional problems in your country. A new note was sent on this matter by the Commission to the Belgian Government on 19 December 1979. I fully understand that the political situation in Belgium has not enabled the Government to reply as yet. I should,

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however, stress that the Commission takes this matter very seriously and intends that full account should be taken of the serious problems of conversion and structural unemployment in the coal and steel basin of Liege.

Second, let me make clear the Commission's view that the resources available to the European Regional Fund are at present inadequate and do not enable it to comply with the vast investment needs of those Community regions, which are less developed or declining. With the support of the European Parliament, we intend to go on pressing for an increased level of resources not only to take account of inflation and Community enlargement but also to assist aid on a larger scale. The European Commission will continue to try and convince Member States that the financial contributions of the European Regional Development Fund should supplement their own financial measures in this field of regional policy.

Finally, within the "quota free" section, as we call it, of the European Regional Development Fund, measures have been planned to assist the conversion of certain steel areas, the Liege steel region in particular. The Commission is well aware of the problems in your region and will spare no effort to help you to overcome them.

There is one further important aspect of the regional policy to which I draw your particular attention. That is the concept of regional programming. It is a relatively new aspect of the policy but nevertheless one to which the Commission attaches considerable importance. In accordance with the Regulation creating the European Regional Development Fund, Member States must send the Commission development

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programmes for those regions deemed eligible for financial aid from this Fund. The aim is to achieve real regional programming whereby the Community, the Member States and the regions may undertake joint investment programmes to ensure over a period of several years that priority investment is financed for the purpose of regional development. I hope that the region of Liege will take all the necessary steps to develop a programme of this kind so that it can participate fully in the general debate and argument on the role of the regions within the European Community.

It is thus a matter of great satisfaction for the European Community to be associated with the celebration of the 1000th anniversary of the Principality of Liege. Whereas the States of Western Europe have been exploring a new path towards unity for a fraction over 30 years, the Principality of Liege has shown how to achieve a measure of territorial organisation over a period now stretching back 1000 years. We only now are beginning to define and to apply a measure of regional policy; you established long ago a transfrontier region in relation to present States. This little "Europe of the Meuse", the Principality of Liege, which stretches from the Netherlands Guelderland to the French Ardennes, has shown the possibilities and advantages of regional organisation long before there was any question of regional programmes or policies.

In recalling your distinctive and distinguished past, may I at the same time pay tribute to the people of Liege, who have so often led the way for others to follow. Among them perhaps I may be allowed to single out two men for their major contribution to Europe: Jean Rey, former President of the European Commission and, as he recently /demonstrated in the

demonstrated in the debates of the new European Parliament, still contributing enormously to the cause of Europe; and Professor Fernand Dehousse, who played such an influential role in furthering the idea of a European Democratic Assembly. It seems to me entirely fitting that, among all those who have worked so hard in the creation and development of the European Community, two of the most remarkable and the most influential should have had their roots here in Liege. That is just one more demonstration of the deeply rooted European spirit which is so much a characteristic and a strength of this region.