



Gouverneur
Provincie
Antwerpen

Welcoming Coreper 1 Trip EU Ambassadors

16th of May 2024 – Handelsbeurs Antwerpen

Welcome to Antwerp. Welcome to our **magnificent neogothic ‘handelsbeurs’**. During the **Antwerp Golden Age** this **mother of all fairs** was the model for many fairs in Europe. Today, the *handelsbeurs* is still an inspiring and attractive meeting place.

Is there a more **symbolic place** to welcome you all, your excellencies, mister Cartuyvels, distinguished guests?

For centuries and thanks to its **port**, this **metropolis** has always been a **meeting place**. Here, the **most diverse arts and cultures, interests and disciplines, talents and nationalities** came together.

Intertwining **science, commerce, craftsmanship, art, openness, and shared faith** in the **future** have been in our **DNA** for ages.

That is **not different now**. It has always made this region **exciting, vibrant, and ambitious**, but very often **complex and challenging** as well. Our **assets** bring **opportunities**. But, the **high density** of **critical infrastructure** such as the large **port** and the nearby **nuclear power plant** also comes with **risks, threats, and vulnerabilities**.

When it comes to shaping Antwerp’s future, **European policy decisions** and **investment agendas** play a **significant role**. At the same time, **Antwerp**, like similar regions, must contribute to **realizing ambitious European objectives**, particularly for the **urgent and socially just transition** to a **sustainable future**.

In 2012, Flanders most **crucial waterway**, the **Albert Canal**, was included in the **TEN-T program** of **European waterways**. Connecting the **Scheldt** and **Meuse** rivers, this canal is essential for **linking** the **Port of Antwerp** to **Germany's Ruhr area**. **EU funding** through the TEN-T program has facilitated the **elevation of 50 existing bridges**, making **container inland shipping** stacked with **four layers** possible now.

This crucial **progress** in the **modal shift** results in **greener mobility** with **reduced CO2 emissions** from freight transport. In addition, **Antwerp** is also a **frontrunner** when it comes to the **energy transition**.

In line with the **TEN-E regulation**, the **Port of Antwerp-Bruges** is **pioneering** in the **hydrogen economy** through projects like **HyBex**.

HyBex aims to make the port a top European **import hub** for **green hydrogen**, using **innovative technologies** to **produce, store, and distribute** green hydrogen, aiding the region's shift to cleaner energy.

Furthermore, Antwerp and its port are deeply committed not only to advancing **green mobility** and **cleaner energy** initiatives in alignment with European sustainability goals, but also to making **substantial investments** in **carbon capture and storage (CCS)** technologies, as a transition technology towards climate neutrality.

A striking example is **Antwerp@C**, together with **Porthos** one of the EU's most **advanced CCS initiatives**. Supported by the **EU's ETS Innovation Fund** and the **Connecting Europe Facility**, **Antwerp@C** aims to significantly **decarbonize the port** and **spark a new European CCS market**.

Moreover, the captured carbon is not just **waste**, but possibly a **valuable commodity**.

The **Flemish Institute for Technological Research**-situated in the south-east of our province- is leading the charge in utilizing **carbonation** to create **sustainable building materials**, by harnessing CO₂ as a binder in **construction material production**.

By doing this, we **mitigate** carbon emissions and pave the way for **eco-friendly construction solutions**.

Additionally, thanks to a **4.3 million euro subsidy** from the **European Regional Development Fund (ERDF)**, the Institute has also embarked on groundbreaking projects like **producing lignin** from **biomass**, further ushering in the era of **biobased and circular economy**. These **bio-aromatics**, replacing fossil raw materials, can be used in the **existing installations**, facilitating the transition to **sustainable fossil-free production methods** fit for a **wide range of applications**.

To transport all these **gaseous** or **liquid** substances, such as the captured CO₂-and hopefully lignin as well-, **approximately 100 million euros** in EU funding is supporting the construction of **pipelines** to connect among other **harbors** in Antwerp, Rotterdam, and the North Sea Port, laying the foundation for **significant decarbonization as an intermediate step to achieve climate neutrality**.

A next step- in the aforementioned ambitious **modal shift**- would be the **recognition** of **pipelines** as a **sustainable mode**. Their significance cannot be overstated, as they serve as the **indispensable infrastructure** to transport **electrons** or **molecules**, across the EU.

No smarter way to take trucks and dangerous transport off road!

In essence, our journey towards **sustainability** and **carbon neutrality** is **multifaceted**, **intertwined** with European initiatives and driven by **innovation**.

Through **strategic initiatives** and **European funds**—you know much better than I do—our **region** is speeding up its **transition** to a **circular, zero-emission industry and economy**.

It's no coincidence that **over 70 international CEOs** presented the **Antwerp declaration** for an **industrial deal** to Commission President Von der Leyen at the start of the Belgian presidency, in addition to, and as a contribution to the **realization** of the **Green Deal**.

If we **succeed in Antwerp**, we can **succeed** in the **entire European Union**, and—as Antwerpians are generally known for their modesty— even **globally**.

Admittedly, **European legislation** and **policies** present **challenges** in our heavily industrialized region. This includes **complying** with the crucial **water framework directive, habitat and bird directives**, as well as **promptly realizing sustainable energy projects** while adhering to all regulations.

Within the scope of my **coordination mandates** and considering our **responsibilities** for **emergency planning** and **crisis management** especially in **flood and drought prevention** by **river and valley restoration**, my team and I aim to make a **significant contribution**, in close and appreciated **collaboration** with **numerous stakeholders**.

The **Flemish Blue Deal**, for example, is the **central strategy** to tackle **drought and water scarcity**. Funded by the **Flemish government** and the **European Recovery Plan**, it supports **sustainable water management projects** to enhance **climate resilience**.

Although it is politically sensitive, I'm convinced of the necessity of the **Nature Restoration Act** in our well understood **self-interest!**

In the **valley** of the **Kleine Nete**, one of our valuable **rivers**, we are actively **restoring** this **ecological area of potentially European top nature**. Since 2012, I'm coordinating **projects to reintroduce the natural river flow**. We're working on **raising water levels to prevent peat drying, reducing CO2 emissions and stabilizing the peat**.

Also, we're **restoring native vegetation to promote ecosystem health** and improve the **natural water retention capacity** of the valley, to protect us against **floods and drought**. Obviously, **policy goals and plans are essential**. Yet, it is their **co-creative translation into tangible results** that ultimately makes the difference in real life, in our lives.

Those achievements require a **lot of efforts**, taking into account **challenges** stemming from the **reality of very limited space** and the many **divergent concerns** of all **stakeholders**: entrepreneurs, farmers, environmentalists and citizens.

In any case, with trial and error, this **integrated approach** guarantees the **sustainability** of our **restoration efforts**, transforming complex challenges into widely supported opportunities to prosper.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Especially in the wake of the covid-pandemic, **global peace** is again **paramount**, especially for all those horribly affected by **aggression and war** in **Ukraine, Israel, and Gaza**.

For many reasons, these are **no distant conflicts** for **Antwerp**.

The city hosts **significant Jewish** and **diverse Muslim communities** and welcomes a large number of **displaced Ukrainians**, more than any other Belgian city or province.

Recognized for its **strategic importance** throughout **history** and in times of war and conflict in particular, Antwerp remains a **vital logistical hub** in Europe today. This underscores the need for **extra alertness** from our **security services**, the **National Crisis Centre**, my **federal emergency planning department** and **myself**. It also **emphasizes** the **importance** of **European emergency planning** and the **expansion** of the **European Civil Protection Mechanism**.

Furthermore, it **compels us** to **engage our citizens** more than ever in the **entire emergency planning process**, enhancing overall risk-awareness, emergency preparedness and response. We are **increasingly committed** to this.

In conclusion, now our Post-War peace dividend appears to have been used up, **helping to restore world peace** and **jointly achieving a socially just climate transition...** are perhaps the most **significant challenges** that nearly 80 years of impressive prosperity have brought us.

By **capitalizing** on our **historical strengths**, **embracing European objectives**, addressing **industrial challenges**, and fostering **global peace**, we must ensure that also **Antwerp** continues to shine as a **beacon of progress** for generations to come.

For that purpose, our **province** and **city** also **depend** on a **strong European Union** that is **close** to its **citizens** and a **genuine leader** throughout these **disruptive** and **challenging times**.

For that reason, dear excellencies, dear mister Pierre Cartuyvels, I warmly **thank you** for **choosing Antwerp** for this wonderful event.

Antwerp thanks you for your **valuable contribution** to **shape** the **preconditions** for a **safer, stronger** and **more sustainable Union**.

Enjoy the evening!