

**Welcome speech for the presentation of the European Public Sector Award (EPSA) on 27 November 2013 in the Gouvernement building on the River Maas**

Ladies and gentlemen,

Welcome to the home of the province of Limburg. The home where, 21 years ago, the Maastricht Treaty was signed. In this room, to be exact. As you anxiously await an award from Europe, you are doing so in a place of tremendous significance for Europe.

Europe. As you know, opinions about our Union are more divided now, than in the days when the national leaders signed that historic agreement here.

Now she does not always enjoy good publicity. Too many rules, too much bureaucracy, too expensive ... As I have often said in this room: Europe needs a new story.

A new story that enables our citizens once again to believe in cooperation; a story that can explain that Europe gives so much more than it costs.

And you, ladies and gentlemen, are the co-authors of that story. For if there is one thing that our citizens hold us responsible for, it is the service we provide.

And each of you have made a tremendous effort to bridge the gap between government and citizens – otherwise you would not be here.

Now all of Europe can appreciate your efforts and follow your example. And that is the benefit of European cooperation. Within the member states of the Union, but also in Iceland, Norway and Switzerland

And that's is quite an achievement in these harsh economic times. It is with good reason that the theme of this year's European Public Sector Award is: Weathering the Storm, Creative Solutions in a Time of Crisis.

Indeed, that really hits the nail on the head: the real challenge is to provide our citizens with a high level of service in a time of budget cutbacks. This leaves you with just one single choice, and that is to think creatively.

But what strikes me in particular about the 2013 award, is that this time the jury is devoting special attention to cross-border cooperation – across governments and beyond national borders.

Here in this region, we wouldn't have it any other way. Let me remind you: Maastricht is at the heart of one of the very first Euroregions.

A Euroregion that involves five governments spread over three countries – Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands – and where we speak three different languages.

And one look at the map of Limburg will tell you, that our foreign neighbours are closer to us than the rest of our own country. Near Germany. Near Belgium. Even near Holland.

Add to that a shared history and culture, and you will understand that people here are ready, willing and able to step across borders.

To go shopping and to have fun. But also to work, to live, to do business, to obtain health care and to help one another.

But the differences in national regulations do not make it easy for us. Let me give you a few examples.

There's the farmer who is allowed to use cheap diesel when working on one part of his land, but not on the rest. That's because the rest of his land is just across the border...

Or parents who want to take their seriously ill child to the nearest hospital for specialist care, even though it is on the other side of the border. The differences in national payment systems make this almost impossible.

Under those circumstances, you need very strong willpower and a lot of creativity to help those children, those farmers ...

Then there are the fire-fighters, eager to assist because their fire station is closer to the scene of a fire – but on the other side of the border. Only to discover then that their hoses don't connect up to the water supply.

Here too, strong willpower and creativity won the day. Together, the fire-fighters designed an adapter to make their hoses fit.

Ladies and gentlemen, you might say that we are "Europe in microcosm". A European microcosm that cannot do without cross-border cooperation.

The alternative would be to retreat behind our own national boundaries and regulations – and that would limit us severely.

That's why we – like those fire-fighters – are always in search of adapters: looking for ways to make things fit. Yes, we do have to be creative. But let me put it this way: if you want to be European, then you have to be creative.

You too have shown yourselves to be true Europeans, or potential Europeans. And who knows, you may soon be going home with a European award.

But whoever leaves this historic room with an award in their hands, I believe that every public servant who succeeds in bringing us closer to our citizens, is a winner.

I am therefore pleased that, in any case, you have all been rewarded with a visit to the birthplace of the European Union.

It is – as you have probably seen by now – a beautiful historic city, located in a part of Europe where together we are working towards a bright future. So please be sure to come back and visit us again.

For now, the waiting is almost over! As the tension continues to build, please remember one thing: you have already won simply by being here. I congratulate you all.