

Ladies and gentlemen,
Dear friends,

Living in a small country means that looking beyond your borders is an easy thing to do. Our neighbours in France and the Netherlands are only a short car trip away. But looking beyond our borders should take us further away as well, towards the borders of Europe.

The Government of Flanders has a strong tradition in doing so. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Flanders invested more than 100 million euros in programs aimed at assisting our new neighbours in the east. Under this programme, between 1992 and 2009, more than 3,6 million euro went specifically to projects in Ukraine.

Last Thursday, I read with pleasure about the visit to Kyiv of Commissioner Hahn, who has signed with your Minister of Economy a new agreement worth 55 million euros for the EU SURE programme, aimed at re-launching the Ukrainian economy. This news is a further sign of the unprecedented support made available to a non-EU country in such a short period of time.

At the occasion of the ratification by the Ukrainian Parliament of the Memorandum of Understanding for the new EU macro-financial support, the Vice-President for the Euro and Social Dialogue of the European Commission, Valdis Dombrovskis, acknowledged the commitment of Ukraine to its reform path. The measures included in the Memorandum, in particular on the fight against corruption and on the reform of its public administration, are key for Ukraine to become a secure and prosperous state, despite the ongoing conflict in the east.

This conflict continues to worry the Government of Flanders. At the end of 2014, Minister-president Bourgeois decided to provide a grant to the Council of Europe for the support of the International Advisory Panel monitoring human rights violations. In this way, Flanders wants to contribute to the de-escalation of the ongoing violence.

All this said, and the Government of Flanders subscribes to that, Ukraine should feel welcome as a member of our large European family. But I am sure we all agree that even more tangible action should be taken.

This is why we did not hesitate to offer our assistance to the Council of Europe when it went looking for a partner to organize a study visit on public broadcasting and media. Working together on the issue of public broadcasting and media is working together on promoting some of the core values the Council of Europe represents, the freedom of media.

Flanders offers a wide range of print and broadcast media who operate independently, including the public broadcasting service VRT. Media is an exclusive regional competence, which means that there is no Belgian media policy nor a federal minister or ministry in charge of media. The Government of Flanders has developed its own media policy, and all the necessary organizational and regulatory frameworks to assure its freedom. We hope that this week's study tour will offer inspiration for the future development of the media landscape in Ukraine.

I wish you fruitful and pleasant stay. Thank you.