

Cooperativa Europa

Bologna, April 8, 2014

Speech by Dirk J. Lehnhoff – President of Cooperatives Europe

Dear Roundtable participants, dear fellow co-operators.

In less than two months there will be the elections for a new European Parliament. We are living in times of increasing uncertainty, mounting economic & social problems and a lack of vision by many Europeans including our politicians with regard to the future of Europe. Yet, it is just in these times that we need Europe more than ever before, in order to provide security & stability for all of us in Europe including those at our borders. This calls for everyone of us here to take responsibility for not only preserving the European ideal but for working together, in order to solve the burning problems of unemployment, increasing inequality & environmental destruction.

I have just come back from our General Assembly in Warsaw last week and there is one message I would like to share: We need much more collaboration, cooperation & solidarity in Europe, in order to jointly overcome the current socio-economic problems. And cooperatives have a lot to contribute to a constructive and progressive political debate for the European elections. The sole focus of the EU on competition over the last 20 years has made Europe weaker, more socially divided and has not created the sustainable jobs, the politicians had promised. While a certain degree of competition is a necessary prerequisite for a sustainable economy, it needs to focus on the needs and aspirations of the citizens as its key objective and not on preserving power and control of a few companies and sectors. Competition without cooperation is like Romulus without Remus, like man without a woman, like Mozzarella without tomatoes. Europe has forgotten about the need for cooperation – working together for a common objective or purpose for sharing a mutual benefit!

The time has come for a cooperative Europe! And this is of course a great opportunity for cooperatives – all around Europe and naturally for Cooperatives Europe, the European voice of cooperatives of all sectors from all across Europe uniting more than 160.000 cooperative enterprises with more than 5.4m directly employed people. This is a formidable force for more cooperation in business in Europe.

Cooperatives Europe has come a long way in fighting for the recognition of the cooperative business model and ideals in Europe. It took almost thirty years to finally develop a European Cooperative Statute in 2004, which recognizes cooperatives at EU level and its way of doing business. This coincided with the creation of Cooperatives Europe in 2006, in order to speak with one voice towards the European institutions.

But recognition is only a first step, in order to start entering into a dialogue. Next on our agenda was to establish a permanent dialogue with the EU Institutions, in order to bring in our concerns into the political debate and to create a more balanced and diverse European economy. Since Massimo Baldinato from the DG Enterprise is present here, it is a great pleasure to announce that we are working with his Commissioner VP Tajani on developing a European Cooperative Roadmap, which will be launched during the EU Presidency by Italy in the second half of 2014, here in Italy. I hope that the two parties will agree quickly now on a date while we have launched our expert group on developing concrete proposals. This roadmap will initially focus on the areas of cooperative education & entrepreneurship, financing of cooperatives and cooperative business development services. There will certainly more issues be developed over time as the dialogue becomes more and more intense.

Next to the EU Commission we also need to develop a strong relationship with the EU Parliament, in order to have a strong group of Parliamentarians supporting our cause. That's why we have developed a European cooperative manifesto, which asks for three concrete support measures by EU Parliamentarians: We need a level playing fields with other forms of business, in particular shareholding companies, which have been overdominating via liberalisation & deregulation in Europe over the last thirty years. We are not asking hereby for particular favours, but for recognition of our way of doing business, which supports the development of our local communities and regions in Europe. We also need to educate our young people that there are businesses, which are based on cooperation and we need to provide the respective business support to cooperative enterprises for set-up and development. I know that the Italian Cooperative Alliance has translated our manifesto in Italian and we need all your help to promote this to your Italian candidates, in order to get their support.

The cooperative model has proven its success over its 150 years of history all around Europe and the world. And since the international year of cooperatives in 2012 we are more in the focus of the public, the media as well as the political world.

2014 will be a crucial year in promoting cooperatives in Europe, but also in voting for a democratically controlled, autonomous, people-centered and cooperative European Union. Together we are strong – together we can make the European dream of integration, freedom & peace a sustainable reality.

Thank you.