

# One German Land's "Embassy" to the European Union

INTERVIEW BY ROD MACDONELL



**Hans Stein** is Director of the Brussels office of the German *Land* of North Rhine-Westfalia. He and a staff of 25 are civil servants from different ministries in their *Land's* capital of Düsseldorf. All 16 German *Länder* have offices in Brussels, where they represent their *Land* and sometimes Germany at the European Union and other international bodies, as well as work with companies and other institutions. The North Rhine-Westfalia office in Brussels – the second to be established after Hamburg's office – celebrated its 20th anniversary in 2006.

**FEDERATIONS:** Did you and your family move to Brussels when you took up your post?

**STEIN:** So far I commute between North Rhine-Westfalia and Brussels. Brussels and our capital of Düsseldorf are only 220 kilometres apart.

**FEDERATIONS:** What are the main functions of your office?

**STEIN:** It is our task, first of all, to report on those issues that might be of relevance for our state to bring our government's position into the decision-making process here in Brussels and also to work as a platform for institutions, companies and so on, coming from North Rhine-Westfalia who want to present themselves in Brussels.

**FEDERATIONS:** Could you please describe a day in the life of your office?

**STEIN:** Let's say it is parliamentary week in Brussels. First of all we discuss the day's schedule to screen what is happening in the different committees in (the European) Parliament, to check whether on the agenda of these committees there are political issues like structural policy research and development policy, you name it, that might be of interest for us and then one of our employees attends the committee meeting and gives a report, and in some cases, makes a proposal for a press release, and that is coordinated with the chancellery (office of the prime minister) in Düsseldorf.

Then we have several meetings with business representatives to explain and give them support when they approach the European institutions so that we are network-building. I have several meetings with representatives of other delegations either of the German *Länder* or partner regions, in our case, in the Netherlands

or Scotland, for example, to discuss which issues we might cooperate on.

And then at lunch time we very often have meetings in our representation of North Rhine-Westfalia to discuss new developments in the field of research and development policy or environmental policy. Then in the evening there are Land discussions and receptions either by a ministry coming from Düsseldorf or a company that is based in North Rhine-Westfalia where we put forward further political issues and have political debates.

**FEDERATIONS:** When people from North Rhine-Westfalia with commercial interests wish to make representations, do you show them which doors to go to, and how to open those doors?

**STEIN:** Yes. Take for example an energy supplier. North-Rhine Westfalia is the part of Germany where the most energy is produced and where the biggest companies are. When such an energy producer organizes a political debate on issues that are important to him – for example climate control or energy policy – we, together with this company, are organizing a conference where an EU commissioner, several Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) as well as representatives of our government and the company are discussing these issues. Thus, we give that company a platform, and we are discussing issues that are of concern to all of us, and thus we are enhancing a debate and getting involved in the decision-making process here.

**FEDERATIONS:** Is it the members of the European Parliament that your staff is most required to discuss with?

**STEIN:** It's both the European Commission on one side, and Parliament on the other. The commission because it prepares the initiatives in European poli-

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cies so you must get involved in what is prepared as an initiative as soon as possible so that it fits into your policy agenda. It is also important to be in close touch with parliament because especially those MEPs who were elected in North Westfalia have the same task as we have.... It is a very close relationship.

**FEDERATIONS:** How do you relate with the German Embassy and other Land offices?

**STEIN:** Among the circle of the different *Länder* offices, we directors meet regularly, and in all political fields, there are special working groups like in environmental policy, interior affairs, social affairs.... We are also cooperating with the permanent representation of the Federal Republic of Germany. To give you an example, Germany has the general presidency of the EU (until June 30, 2007). So the permanent representation (of Germany), as well as the *Länder* representation, organized a cultural program to support the general presidency here in Brussels. We show German culture and innovation through various activities such as concerts, debates and receptions... There are sometimes, frankly, issues for debate because we are working more as lobbyists for our states and thus we might differ from the Federal Republic's policy or we might set different priorities that are not the same as the federal government's. But that does not mean that we are working against the federal government, rather that we are playing our part.

**FEDERATIONS:** So that is how you relate with the German Embassy?

**STEIN:** To give you an example, after the enlargement, the policy of how to divide structural funds financed by the EU, between member states, it was in our interest that regions with older industries who are facing a structural development process also have to be supported in future. So we lobbied together with Scotland and the British Midlands and French regions, whereas our federal government had also to keep in mind the new German *Länder* as well as the new member states. So we on the one hand worked closely together with the federal government and the permanent representation of the federal government. But we highlighted the aspect of these older

regions such as the Ruhr Valley, in our case, which still need support.

**FEDERATIONS:** The federal government no doubt has concerns that Germany present a coherent voice in Brussels. Can you give examples where there were significant differences between the federal government and at least some of the *Länder*?

**STEIN:** For the last while I cannot recall a problem we had.



Miners leave a coal mine in Rhine-Westphalia at the end of their shift. The EU pays financial compensation to the *Länder* for the loss of such aging industries.

**FEDERATIONS:** In many cases, EU laws and directives require legislation by the *Länder* for implementation. Apparently, Germany is non-compliant in certain areas because of the lack of such implementation at the Land level. Is this a major problem?

**STEIN:** I think Germany is neither better nor worse than other member states and the *Länder* play their responsible part. I don't see that you can blame *Länder* for not implementing legislation soon enough. I mean if you have a look at the statistics of all member states in all regions that in the view of the European Commission have problems in implementing laws and directives but seen overall, you cannot say that is a very serious problem, especially not a German problem.

**FEDERATIONS:** The EU has developed the concept of a "Europe of the Regions."

Is this a priority for you? Why?

**STEIN:** The future of Europe lies in the concept of a Europe of Regions because the European regions have such a variety that only if you take the special characteristics of the regions into account, you will get the support of the people, you will create or establish the European house... that makes it interesting and strong, so we should focus more on the principle of subsidiarity and we should support the regions and their characteristics. (Editor's note: Subsidiarity, as defined by the Oxford dictionary, is the principle that a central authority should have a subsidiary function, performing only those tasks which cannot be performed effectively at a more immediate or local level.)

**FEDERATIONS:** Could you explain Article 23 of the Basic Law (the German constitution) adopted in 1992?

**STEIN:** This article settles the relationship between the federal government and the *Länder* governments. It means that while more political issues went upwards to the level of the European Union, in our federal system, the *Länder* got the right to participate through our second chamber, the Bundesrat, in matters concerning the EU. So we are part of the official legislative procedure on EU matters via the second chamber in Berlin.

**FEDERATIONS:** In 2003 there was an attempt made by your federal government to limit the *Länder* rights in dealing with the EU. What was the essence of that disagreement and how was it resolved?

**STEIN:** Very often it is said that it is difficult to deal with the federal republic because of our federal system and because the *Länder* play an important role in the decision-making process. The federal government tried to reduce the influence of the *Länder* but in the end we came to an agreement that the *Länder* play their part in the decision-making process. So we secured our position and right now after the first part of our reform on federalism, in matters of cultural affairs, broadcasting, education, it is the *Länder* who are representing Germany in the European institutions and not the federal government. We strengthened our impact. (6)