

28 August 2020

Minutes of the introductory bilateral meeting between Mr. Knops and Ms. Sirpa Paatero

Report on the introductory bilateral meeting between Mr. Knops, Secretary of State for the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations and Ms. Sirpa Paatero, Minister of Local Government on the subject of the Coalition of the Willing.

Present

The Netherlands:

Mr. Raymond Knops (Secretary of State for the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations),

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Ms. Sirpa Paatero (Minister of Local Government),

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Introduction

Ms. Paatero and Mr. Knops exchange their experiences concerning Covid-19 in their respective countries, such as the contamination rate and the effects Covid-19 has on the Finnish and Dutch economies.

Covid-19 apps

Mr. Knops states that in the Netherlands we have introduced a Covid-19 app that can be used to see where people have been contaminated with the virus and to see which people were there at that time in order to warn them. There has been a lot of discussion about the app and the impact on fundamental rights, such as privacy. The Dutch app is being tested in certain regions of the Netherlands. These test results will be implemented in a new version that has to be accompanied by a new law, a process that is now going on in the Dutch parliament. Ms. Paatero says that they will start with a Covid-19 app as of 1 September and that they would like to share experiences with the Netherlands about the app, more specifically the development, the test phase and the rollout of the app. Mr. Knops fully agrees.

Digitalization in the wake of Covid-19

Mr. Knops says that Covid-19 can be seen as speeding up the process of digitalization in our countries. As such, it has created a chance to innovate on a higher base, as well being more inclusive. More and more people see the advantages of being part of a digital society now. Digitalization has been a political priority in the Netherlands for years. Yet, now we see a higher pace of innovation and ideas, like the Covid-19 app, that can help solve societal issues.

Ms. Paatero says that in Finland the government states that all services should be in a digital way. The challenge is more on the people who are not used to the digital services or who do not even have the knowledge on how to use these services. In Finland, there is a project about providing all Finnish citizens with an ID-card that is often needed for these services. Finland is very much connected to the X-Road project of Estonia.

The Coalition of the Willing

Mr. Knops feels a lot of affiliation with the level of ambition of Finland, for instance on Artificial Intelligence. Some countries can fulfil the role of frontrunners. Mr Knops states that in the EU, we want to have our own standards. It differs from the 5.1.2a Therefore, it is good to work together with likeminded countries and share experiences and best practices to provide other countries with these ideas as well. In fact, we can be more effective when we work more closely together on projects.

Mr. Knops says that the idea of the Coalition of the Willing is that the countries which are invited to join are all on a certain level of digitalization. As such, the Coalition of the Willing could function as

28 August 2020

an informal network of likeminded countries. Working together could speed up the digitalization process and be beneficial to the EU-agenda, like the ones on AI and fundamental rights.

Ms. Paatero asks what the reactions from the other countries are. Mr. Knops says that France, Germany, Belgium, Portugal, Estonia and Denmark have shown their support. Bilateral meetings have taken place with Estonia, Germany and Belgium. Mr. Knops asks whether Finland would like to participate in the coalition as well. Ms. Paatero states that Finland would indeed like to join the coalition and wants to participate in the kick-off meeting as well. Finland has also provided comments on the non-paper.

Ms. Paatero says that sharing experiences and helping each other out with new ideas in the field of digitalization is very important for Finland. Ms. Paatero states that in the coalition we could also provide input on EU-level on digitalization, as there are many different levels of digitalization in the EU. Mr. Knops says that by meeting each other we can influence the speed and content of the process and the ambitions of the European Commission they have presented so far. Working together prevents us from making the same mistakes. We can align our visions in Brussels and benefit from the investments in calls requiring cross border cooperation. Next to that, at the same time, we then have the Coalition of the Willing with civil servants and politicians that can easily contact each other. In this coalition, all members can add topics to the agenda. However, topics have to be practical in nature, such as actual societal or governmental issues with which we can help each other.

Ms. Paatero states that they have multiple issues that could be discussed during the coalition meetings. Mr. Knops welcomes Finland's remarks on the agenda. Ms. Paatero says that we can also look into experimenting with sharing data.

Mr. Knops believes that if you organize digitalization in a proper manner, it can be more inclusive, simpler and save way whilst safeguarding fundamental rights. The government should provide services on a high level with acceptable costs. Therefore, we have to innovate and work together.

Ms. Paatero states that one of the challenges in Finland is legislation. Legislation sometimes is different in the eight countries that will join the coalition. As such, Ms. Paatero says that we can look at laws so that they do not work against this new way of services and digitalization. Mr. Knops states that the big problem is indeed not technology but the laws between different countries that are not always aware of the effects when you cross borders. A common approach on how to create standards and legal frames in which these systems can operate is thus very important. Laws cannot be completely similar but the hindrances can be limited by aligning laws more than we has been done before.

Moreover, elections are coming up and there are always many changes in positions. Continuity should be carried by the civil servants.

Follow-up appointments

- Finland will be present at the kick-off meeting of the Coalition of the Willing on 5 October.
- Preparation of the kick-off meeting on 5 October with Finland.
- Exchanging best practices about launching the COVID-19 apps via the Coalition of the Willing.

Minutes by: 5.1.2e