

## **“Come to me and we find a solution”**

Since early December, H.E. Mr. J.H.M. (Matthijs) van Bonzel is the new ambassador of The Netherlands to Romania. He plays an important role in the bilateral relations. We are curious about his plans and intentions, his full scope as well as his focus. An interview.



[What was your first reaction when you heard your next post would be Romania?](#)

The Hague checked with me whether I was interested for this post. My first reaction was that it sounded very nice. I was sorry to leave Costa Rica, where I had a great time.

It was clear it would be a difficult post; the political situation to start with is not easy. Still, I see a lot of economical opportunities. Also it is an interesting time in which Romania has to find its place and comfort in the EU. Many subjects still have to be settled, like employees abroad, border control, the EURO, the Republic of Moldova, etc. It also is a relatively heavy post. This is an indication how important Romania is for The Netherlands. There are plenty of opportunities in agriculture, infrastructure and logistics.

[What did you know about Romania by that time?](#)

I have been in contact with Romania already, but had never visited it before.

When we lived in Berlin (2001-2005), I spoke with many people, normal local people. All these people had to find their new places in a new world. The freedom was not easy to deal with; there were no more guaranteed jobs; their education had no longer any value; women were supposed to stay home and not necessarily work. Many people felt discarded.

I was involved in drafting the Treaty of Maastricht and later the addendums from Amsterdam. Both events happened under Dutch Presidency of the EU. I worked there as lawyer to define decision taking in the EU; a tough job, as we shake the sovereignty of nations. Even today, the Treaty is still under construction; it's not finished. Everybody wants his own individual (country) interests to be satisfied. Whatever step we make, we are dependent on each other, it would be a disaster to become independent nations again. The commercial sector stood at the cradle of the EU and will always encourage and enforce changes and improvements. So we have to work continuously on how we can better manage the common market. The EU has proven itself: we live at higher standards, Europe-wide, than 50 years ago.

The EU in the recent years has grown more horizontally, rather than vertically. Much focus was on widening its scope, welcoming new states, while less attention has been given to deepening its meaning, getting better and ..

Romania joined only recently and that late entry has many consequences.

The EU has achieved a lot. For example taking money out of the ATM is for free all over Europe, that is an achievement of the EU. Previously, many companies were state-owned (postal services, telecom, etc). All those privatisations, which led to a larger international alignment, are the result of the EU. People think it was always the case. No, there is a lot of hard work behind these achievements.

Thanks to the EU, any city in Europe has to organise public tenders now. This gives so many more possibilities for most of the companies all over Europe! The EU gets very little applause for its achievements.

The Netherlands is an open economy – we are known for the free flow of goods and services. We have prospered a lot from this openness, think about the developments of Rotterdam harbour and Schiphol airport.

[What have you noticed in your first 6 weeks?](#)

I'm very enthusiastic about the country and its possibilities. I have seen a bit from Bucharest now. I also have visited Cluj, where I met DBC (Dutch Business Association, partners of the NRCC), the prefect and the mayor. I'm very impressed by the mentality in Cluj. They are able to attract top Romanian talent through Dutch companies. The (local) government is really pre-occupied with the question: "How can we do things better?"

We have to focus on what Romania needs, because Romania is still lacking behind. We should definitely not demonize Romania; we are here to help. We can and we want to help on many aspects, among which:

- How to get better access to EU money?
- How to improve bilateral collaborations?
- How to make more collaboration between provinces, cities, local governments?
- How to achieve better results, using (Dutch) consultants?

I'm convinced that we are going to succeed in this! Of course, there will be small and big irritations along the road. That is inevitable. I believe that here I, as ambassador, can play an important role.

So one of my purposes is to help Romania find its place within the EU, while keeping its specific characteristics. We as The Netherlands can help in this process. Agriculture and Logistics are only 2 examples where we have vast expertise and are eager to share and invest.

We do create hard times for Romania and the Romanians sometimes, and with what purpose? What will we achieve in the longer run? I heard a conspiracy theory that we are afraid of Constanta Harbour, that's why we keep Romania out. That is nonsense of course.

[Can you be more specific about your plans?](#)

No, I want that myself as well as all other people at the Embassy are open for the opportunities that are occurring. I don't want people to ignore opportunities and chances, "because it is not in my year-plan". We have to be agile and flexible, I want us to be open towards opportunities, not limited by plans. That is also one of the reasons why I want us all to use social media. I want to make it very public and accessible what the Embassy is doing. We cannot solve every situation, but we can contribute and bring a solution closer by. This for NGO's, companies, human rights and many more directions. Keep your eyes on the social media!

We want that everybody comes to us in an open way with his problems. We as Embassy will look together with our colleagues from the local government for solutions. This is something we are very much willing to offer to all Dutch people. I am going into this in a very pro-active way.

[Will we have also here a Fenedex award \(the Dutch award for "the best Embassy for entrepreneurs"\), like you won in Costa Rica?](#)

We cannot guarantee such prize, though I definitely will work to have that same attitude at our Embassy: be focused on and helpful for the outer world. And from this point of view, the attitude is already very strong and positive at the Embassy in Romania. Also the Economical Department is doing a fantastic job.

From some points of view, maybe Costa Rica was easy. For example there were several countries that had no Embassy and that nobody ever explored. There we could win a lot of goodwill. We offered all the opportunities to Dutch companies, with the whole EU in the back; as well as – and that is equally important – to offer the region to bring their businesses into



the EU. For this, The Netherlands is an ideal bridge-head. From what I have seen, the NRCC is acting the same.

I believe there is a lot of potential for Romanian companies to do more business with the EU, and why not starting in The Netherlands? Why is there no Romanian wine in The Netherlands on the shelves? There is a market for any wine! And don't think only about the Dutch market, think EU-wide! Tomatoes must be produced in Romania, not in The Netherlands.

When I worked in Japan, it was Martinair (Dutch airlines) which brought every year the Beaujolais Primeur from France into Japan. That is where The Netherlands is so strong: to find opportunities in the EU and facilitate (of course with a margin) their development. So let's sit together, also with NRCC and DRN, and explore the opportunities.

[What about quality? It is said that Romanian products differ too much in quality to rely on them.](#)

First of all I strongly believe that quality standards are "learn-able". They are transferable skills. What I saw in Romania is that the Dutch investors are very proud of their Romanian employees. I don't hear anything about low quality here!

In Costa Rica they were producing and packing flowers, according to their best standards. In The Netherlands though, they were rejected as they were not good enough, both as flower and as packaging.

In Japan bottled water was imported from The Netherlands, high quality water to Dutch standards. But the labels were not always put exactly right on each bottle. In The Netherlands this doesn't matter and still means high quality. In Japan however, people think: if they don't care about the outside, they for sure will not care about what's in that bottle either.

What I want to underline is that quality is not perceived everywhere the same and that for each quality standard there is a market.

[You arrive in a bad moment. The Netherlands is against Romania's accession into the Schengen zone. What can you say about this situation?](#)

We are going to find a solution. We have to focus on the long term, not only on a political situation now. When there is an openness to work together, we will get out of this. We face a situation in which Romania still has a way to go to get up to EU standards in many aspects. We want to help. Therefore we imagine already that the situation is solved, and all obstacles are removed and we work hard to make that image reality. I'm optimistic and it will only get better and nicer.

In each gap that is identified, we have to look for the business. In The Netherlands, waste and garbage have always been dirty and we didn't want to see them. Until someone realised that there is business in it, it's a product. This identification of gaps, identification of possible businesses, to make Romania stronger in its local business, is something that we as The Netherlands are very much willing to look into together.

Also the Romanian people I met till now are very positive. Maybe it has to do with the Latin influences that make the people happy and optimistic. I believe we have to tap into this positive energy and make something beautiful together.

[How is the collaboration between The Netherlands and Romania?](#)

Within the EU it is sometimes more difficult to work together with other EU states than when you work for example in Japan. Outside Europe, all EU countries automatically work together. Within the EU it is more common to work together in subject-groups, in commissions, in industry-communities. Therefore I believe that all EU Ambassadors should work together, all EU Economic Attachés should work together, and so further.

In The Netherlands there are a lot of local contacts with Romanian villages. This has remained from the early days after the Revolution, when Dutch villages collected clothes and toys for Romania. These ties can be built out. It's no longer about saving people from starvation; it's now about learning to know each other as persons, about finding ways to work together, to build together. I think about collaboration between Dutch and Romanian schools, football clubs, student organisations, wine tasting (why not?), churches, etc. It is essential that Dutch citizens visit Romania. That way a real understanding, acceptance and appreciation will be built.

I feel myself to be the Ambassador in all these fields, not only political or economical. I want to be open towards the whole country, I want to do things and projects for people and companies also from the country side. And I mean the same for our own house. It's an open place for visitors.

I want to promote Romania in The Netherlands and in the EU. That's why I support the initiatives Romanians and Romanian companies come with. There are, for example, a lot of "creative industries" here, like the movie, gaming and software industries. In The Netherlands it's the same. Let's work together. Let's use each others' strengths. I believe Romanians are very strong, expressive and artistic people with great language skills. Who knows this in The Netherlands? Bring companies and organisations together and show that Romania is something else than the wrong image it has now in The Netherlands. We hurt ourselves as much as we do to the Romanians.

I do believe that if you put the energy in the right direction, opportunities occur by themselves. Costa Rica was not a holiday destination in the past. Until it found its eco-tourism potential. Now it is even present at the holiday-fair in The Netherlands. The Netherlands is a pioneer in many aspects. Dutch people are willing to try out new things. If you succeed in The Netherlands, the rest of the EU is easier.

Planning is not my strong point. I am better at lateral thinking. So please come with your ideas and we look together how we can make it happen. There are so many contacts at our Embassy, but also elsewhere between The Netherlands and Romania, that a solution must exist. I want The Netherlands to be the multiplier for Romania.

Mr. Matthijs van Bonzel is born in 1956 in Utrecht, The Netherlands. He is married to Cristina van Bonzel-Gomez. They have 2 sons, 19 and 22 years old, 1 dog (called Lucky) and 1 cat (called Zuri (which means in Japanese: pickpocket)). You can follow Matthijs van Bonzel on Twitter on: @MatthijsvBonzel