EUROPEAN UNION

Committee of the Regions

WELCOME SPEECH

Dear Governor Pröll, Dear President Schneider, Honourable Presidents, Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to commend **Lower Austria for taking the initiative in gathering the signatories of 188 regions - home to three quarters of the entire EU population** – who have given their support for what has and must continue to be the EU's main investment tools: cohesion policy.

This initiative couldn't be more timely given the number of unprecedented challenges facing Europe today. Both the President of the European Commission and Council are quite right in calling on all of us – as EU institutions, governments and citizens – to reflect on the sort of Europe we want for the future.

The priority of European Committee of the Regions is clear: **we need to invest for jobs and growth. We need to reduce regional inequality.** We need create sustainable communities. We need better simpler regulation. We need to show that the European Union brings tangible benefits to the lives of every citizen.

This is why the 351, 8 billion euros of regional funds – one third of the entire EU budget committed until 2020 - is so important.

And this investment triggers much more. For instance, we know that **for 2007-2013 for every Euro invested through Cohesion Policy, 2.74 Euro will be generated by 2023**. A return of 1 trillion Euro! And the creation of 1 million of jobs!

So we must be in no doubt that **cohesion policy** is worth every cent and therefore **must continue to be the key pillar in driving economic, social and territorial cohesion** within the European Union.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I very much welcome your initiative and your **Declaration on the future of cohesion.**

Let me please highlight only one dimension of it, which, I'm sure will be stressed by many contributors today. I personally believe that **cohesion policy should support both, lagging behind and stronger regions.**

We all know that **investment is not just about transport and other infrastructure.** It also needs to be targeted at education, young people, training, skills and culture; in research and innovation; in smart energy networks; in housing, social and health facilities; and in support for the start-up and scale-up of innovative and dynamic enterprises.

As the leaders of European cities and regions, **we are on the front line dealing with these new challenges:** the economic refugee crises; regional disparities; climate change; border instability; populism; terrorism to name a few. No one needs to convince us how **crucial a strong cohesion** policy is for solving these problems.

But if we are to create a better stronger Europe we need be open to change. **Cohesion policy needs positive reform to make it more efficient, more result oriented and simpler.** We must speed up the implementation of the current ESIF programmes and better communicate the results.

The European Commission is now doubling the investment funds under the Juncker Plan. We must all be open to different sources of investment, whether it is private or public funding. But we must not forget that each of **these financial resources have a different philosophy and serve a specific purpose.** They need to operate in synergy and cannot replace Cohesion policy.

We are also currently drafting an **opinion on the Future of Cohesion policy**. I am therefore pleased that the rapporteur, **my colleague Mr Michael Schneider, has agreed to moderate today's discussions.** I am sure that they will provide him with valuable insights in the preparation of his opinion.

I wish today's event every success and have no doubt the D**eclaration** - to be presented to the leaders of the EU Institutions later this afternoon - will create considerable momentum towards achieving this shared objective.

Let me now pass **the floor to the architect of this precious initiative: the Governor of Lower Austria - Ervin Pröll**!

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