

THE

# ReppORTER

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Activity report of the EPP Group in the European Committee of the Regions

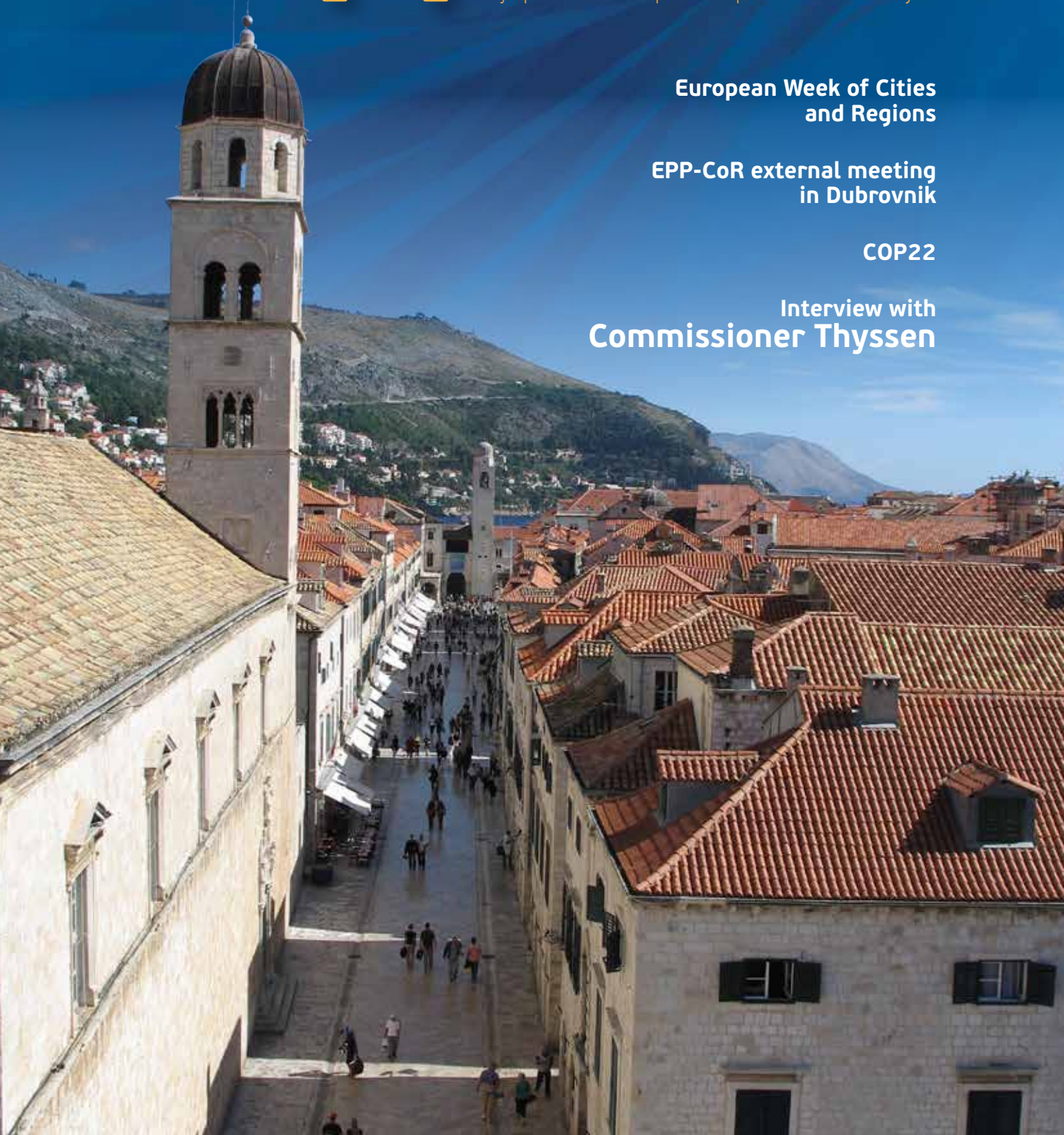


European Week of Cities  
and Regions

EPP-CoR external meeting  
in Dubrovnik

COP22

Interview with  
Commissioner Thyssen



# Foreword

by **President Schneider**

Dear Members,  
Dear friends,

As the year 2016 turns towards its end, I would like to take a few moments to go over a few highlights for our EPP-CoR Group.

Our cooperation with the EU Council Presidencies has deepened and our two events – the **Amsterdam Forum** in May as well as the 7<sup>th</sup> **Summit of Regions in Cities in Bratislava** in July – marked new concrete steps towards the implementation of the EU Urban Agenda with more partnerships in the urban dimension of EU policy-making as well as addressing the alarming fall in public investment in order to tackle growing regional disparities, support sustainable growth and restore faith among citizens.

It is not only the Presidencies that we work more closely with from now on. Regions, as well as towns, cities and urban areas are powerful engines for growth and jobs and make a significant contribution towards the EU's economic, social and territorial development. This has been widely recognised in the European Council, Parliament and Commission – lastly together with Council President Donald Tusk in October.

To narrow the gap between citizens and the European Union, we have launched a series of high level Town Hall debates under the theme "Reflecting on the EU". With the presence of key political actors from Heads of State to local decision-makers, our effort is to debate with the citizens on how policies impact their lives. We hope that debates in Gabrovo, Eger, Dubrovnik, Dublin, Cork and Mechelen bring an inspiration to positive changes.

The refugee crisis has had an impact all over Europe and nowhere has it been felt stronger than in our cities and regions. Europe's local and regional authorities are at the heart of the solution to the recent refugee crisis and successful implementation of the EU migration policy. Our Group called for direct access to the financial resources made available by the EU at our **refugee conference** in Thessaloniki, Greece in September.

We are also committed to the discussions on the European macro-regions and in October we debated on the impact that the **EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region** (EUSAIR) could have on increasing prosperity and security in Europe. Macro-regional strategies help develop cross-border cooperation and increase the results-oriented use of EU funding for the benefit of the entire area.

I would like to wish you and your loved ones a peaceful Christmas and let's make 2017 even better!



**Michael Schneider**  
President of the EPP-CoR Group

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# Building Europe in the county of Heves

By **Róbert Szabó**, President of Heves County Council

The county of Heves hosted the European Committee of the Regions' local event in October. This meeting, which reported full attendance, brought together a good hundred people, including local and regional decision-makers, along with Michael Schneider, President of the EPP Group in the CoR, and Szabolcs Takács, Secretary of State for European Affairs, who attended as representative of the Hungarian government. The conference, entitled Building Europe in the county of Heves, focused on Cohesion Policy post-2020.

Although the use of development funds in the framework of the EU's 2014-2020 budgetary period is ongoing, discussions on the future of Cohesion Policy after 2020 have already started at European level. Róbert Szabó, president of Heves County Council and Member of the Hungarian delegation to the European Committee of the Regions, stressed the vital importance of the outcome of these discussions, which will dictate the form and extent of European funds available in the future to boost local economic recovery, job creation and development of public services.



In his capacity as CoR Rapporteur for Cohesion Policy post-2020, Mr Schneider reported on the results of the consultation under way at European level. During his presentation, he emphasised the unique opportunity provided to relay to the Commission the useful contributions and views put forward during the consultation with local economic players and politicians.

After the conference, the participants were introduced to local best practice and the Hungarian public work scheme. At the proposal of Mr Szabó, the delegation visited the municipality of Tarnalelesz in the county of Heves, where the politicians met about a hundred Roma public workers. The mayor explained that in 2010 the municipality had had the opportunity to join the public work



programme, which it viewed from the outset not as an obligation but as an opportunity, namely to provide people living in extreme poverty with a job creating value rather than simply paying them benefits. This programme, which is a real success, has become indispensable for the 1 830-inhabitant municipality, where each year the number of public workers exceeds 200 and where the unemployment rate is below 10%.

Since 2012, Tarnalelesz has also been part of the start model programme, under which subsidies of over HUF 100 million are provided every year to pay wages, benefits and other material expenses. The work of public workers is now also facilitated by a full complement of machinery, as the aid has made it possible to buy, inter alia, a tractor, a lorry, a mower and a minibus. They also grow, over an area of 8 hectares, tomatoes, onions, cucumbers, beans, parsley and cabbages, which are then taken to the municipality's two kitchens. Surplus vegetables harvested are shared on

the basis of social criteria between people in need. In addition to agricultural work, public workers contribute both to smartening up the municipality and the upkeep of green areas and the cemetery, and to the renovation of municipal buildings.

As explained during the visit, the key objective of the municipal authorities is for people who are able and willing to do so to live on their income from work rather than social benefits. It is important to guarantee a job and thus an income for those who are capable of working. A society in which social assistance is equal to income generated by work is not viable in the long term.

Mr Schneider considered that the Hungarian public work scheme was a useful, viable solution. Moreover, he stressed the rich nature of the local event hosted by Heves and the fact that, in addition to the presentations, the organisers had also given participants a more personal experience through the field visit.





# EPP Group external meeting:

the role of the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Regions (EUSAIR) in increasing prosperity and security in Europe



The EPP Group in the European Committee of the Regions held its external meeting in Dubrovnik on October 28 by the invitation of Mr. **Nikola Dobroslavić**, President of the Dubrovnik-Neretva region in Croatia and an EPP-CoR Member. Nearly 80 EPP-CoR Members were present to debate the challenges and opportunities for the Adriatic-Ionian region. President of the European Committee of the Regions, **Markku Markkula**, emphasised in his address the importance of both macro-regional strategies and the partnerships in delivering a new vision of Europe: "we need a new approach to the way we work and think. Scaling up good ideas and cooperating across borders is exactly this. Macro-regional strategies offer the right platform to exchange knowledge and experiences; to share innovation and new technologies; to co-create European projects. To build a new vision of Europe that works from the bottom up."

The first round of discussions focused on identifying the obstacles faces by the region and seeking to find answers to them through enhanced cooperation and exchange of best practices from all levels of governance. EPP-CoR President **Michael Schneider** stated that "the economic crisis has left its mark also on this region, especially through falling public and private investments, and the EPP Group underlines the need for stronger focus on targeted investment based on local needs to stimulate sustainable growth and job creation. We must have more synergy between EU, national, regional and local funding as well as more public and private

partnerships, and the local and regional level must be closely included in guiding these processes."

The second session aimed at strengthening regional cooperation on security, especially the possibilities offered by the macro-regional approach in promoting cross-border, transnational and inter-regional cooperation to help address the common security and migratory challenges. The EPP Group gives its full support to the development of the EUSAIR and its four pillars of blue growth, environmental quality, sustainable tourism and connecting the regions. However, as **Nikola Dobroslavić**, President of the Dubrovnik-Neretva region in Croatia and host of the meeting stressed, "these four

pillars should be supported by a fifth one on security as our macro-region is at the heart of many of our current challenges, including the refugee crisis. These pillars need to be supported by strong roots on the ground and the active involvement of the local and regional authorities. Moreover, we must ensure the crucial transport links in the macro-region - primarily the implementation of the Adriatic-Ionian highway, Ravenna-Brindisi railway as well as road and overseas connection from west to east."

The event closed with a citizens' dialogue event with Mr. **Dobroslavić**, CoR President **Markku Markkula**, EPP-CoR President **Michael Schneider** together with **Marija Vučković**, Deputy Minister of regional development and funds of EU, and **Snježana Bužinec** Mayor of Municipality of Jakovlje. The dialogue brought together students, local decision-makers and citizens to discuss the role of the region in the European Union as well as current challenges.



# Marrakech COP22

## Cities and regions at the heart of climate action

Marrakech hosted the 22<sup>nd</sup> session of the Conference of the Parties (COP22) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) from 7 till 18 November. During the Conference, the European Committee of the Regions co-organised the Climate Summit for Local and Regional Leaders with the Moroccan authorities where hundreds of local and regional representatives discussed new ways to finance the sustainable transition of territories and adopted the Call of Marrakech - the world's local government call for climate action.

The EPP-CoR Group had several Members in Marrakech speaking both at COP22 events as well as taking part in the Euro-Mediterranean Regional and Local Assembly (ARLEM) Commission meeting for Sustainable Territorial Development through cross-border cooperation, energy and climate action.



*"Cities' and regions' efforts in reducing greenhouse gas emissions are key into bridging the persistent gap between climate commitments and the objective to keep temperature rise to 'well below 2°C'. A new global structure must formally incorporate local and regional authorities in the design and execution of a clear climate action plan to deliver the Paris deal. A structure that monitors binding targets, tracks*

*progress through assessment mechanisms and provides tailored-made financial instruments to transform pledges into deliverables."* stated Committee of the Regions' President **Markku Markkula**.

The role of cities and regions in tackling climate change was formally recognised at the COP21 in Paris last year, as they are responsible for implementing more than 70% of climate change reduction measures and up to 90% of adaptation measures. But more work is needed. While the mitigation is high on our agenda, *"Equally important are the climate adaptation goals and priorities which should be translated into concrete action plans of regions and cities in order to build their resilience and reduce their vulnerability to climate change, and as a result make them more attractive, healthier and safer"*, stressed **Sirpa Hertell**, Rapporteur on New EU climate change adaptation strategy.



The Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy - the largest sustainable urban movement worldwide - brings together thousands of local and regional authorities committed to implementing EU climate and energy objectives in their territory. EU signatories, including almost 200 Members of the European Committee of the Regions, pledge to reduce CO2 emissions by at least 40% by 2030 and adopt an integrated

approach to mitigating and adapting to climate change.



**Michel Lebrun**, former President of the European Committee of the Regions, stressed also the role of international cooperation for climate action: *"Our collaboration throughout COPs proves that our cooperation is on the long-term. It represents the willingness of Chinese and European local actors to build ties for a more sustainable world addressing socio-economic development and climate challenges. Sharing the existing knowledge between Chinese and European players will contribute to the initiated dialogue between European and Chinese organisations and institutions, but also reinforce our partnership."*

**Bruno Hrančić**,  
EPP-CoR ENVE Commission  
Coordinator



*Further coordinated action at all levels along with tailored financial mechanisms are necessary to implement the Paris agreement. We also call regions and cities to aggregate small investments into bigger projects in order to maximise funding, feasibility and success*

## Winter University

The 10<sup>th</sup> edition of the EPP-CoR Winter University gathered 60 journalists, journalism students and media makers in Brussels to discuss about open data and how to use it for better European storytelling. Many of the issues raised were of importance to local and regional authorities, especially on

the key questions of opening up data and the benefits it can bring to European cities and regions. These can be notably felt in terms of transparency and accountability, but also in terms of efficiency.

Participants had the occasion to exchange with CoR members, representatives from

the European Institutions, local and regional authorities and practitioners from the field. They concluded that in view of the benefits, governments should further open up their data. This should be coupled with measures to boost data literacy both for citizens and journalists alike.



# The European Week of Regions and Cities

The 14<sup>th</sup> edition of the European Week of Regions and Cities, formerly known as Open Days, gathered over 5200 individuals to Brussels between October 10<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup>. The week was centred around the theme of sustainable and inclusive growth, and its some 100 events focused on easing the access of local and regional authorities as well as businesses to investment and funding, overcoming societal challenges, and taking a closer look at energy efficiency and circular economy.

With almost 20 EPP-CoR Members speaking during the EUWRC from the opening session to smaller panels and side events, our Group was well represented in varying topics from developing the Eastern partnership, opportunities for the young and green business.

## EUROPE'S DEMOGRAPHIC – from challenges to local and regional opportunities



Nearly 150 people attended the workshop on demographic change organised by the EPP Group in the European Committee of the Regions during the European Week of Regions and Cities on October 12 2016. "As Europeans grow older and continue to age – while fewer children are born – the political and societal situation is bound to change drastically. Many treat demographic change simply as a challenge. And while there are many issues to solve, demographic change also includes a hint of a possibility - of a chance for a better future" EPP-CoR President **Michael Schneider** opened the event.

The **call for building intergenerational bridges** to exchange experiences and foster intergenerational communication and interaction was a strong element in European Seniors' Union President **An Hermans'** keynote speech on their project "Life history" which enables senior citizens across Europe to able to tell their life stories - and also for younger people to listen.

The workshop continued with a panel of **best practices** of realising the potential of developing the silver cities of Europe. Examples from **António Bragança Fernandes**, Mayor of Maia in Portugal, and Marshall **Andrzej Buła**, from Opolskie Voivodeship in Poland, highlighted the **key role of the local and regional authorities** in providing programmes for social inclusion and activities for the elderly as well as develop-

ing the region from a holistic point of view, including all stages of life.

Altogether 42 billion euros of **funding is available** for tackling social inclusion challenges – including demographic change – but the lack of efficiency in their usage was the problem in the opinion of **Andor Urmas** from the European Commission's Directorate General for Regional and Urban Policy. The final **example** came from **Helen Campbell**, Vice-President of AGE Platform Europe, on the **Age Friendly Ireland** initiative. The core of the initiative is an **alliance of stakeholders** from the public sector, businesses and NGOs launched around the elderly to include them in the decision-making and business development according to their needs – with usually the city mayor as its leader - and the results have been so encouraging that the initiative is now nation-wide.

First Vice President of the EPP-CoR Group and Vice-President of the Zarasai Municipal Council in Lithuania, **Arnoldas Abramavičius**, closed the workshop by emphasising that "Local and regional authorities that have been taking the lead in developing new innovative or ICT-based tools that support active and healthy ageing need the right supportive legal, financial and structural environment from both the national and EU levels to move those successful local initiatives to a larger scale. We now call for a broad coordinated and integrated European Strategy on demographic change."

This event is part of a wider set of initiatives around Europe's Demographic. It follows from the launch of the EU Covenant on Demographic Change last December, and the Committee of the Regions' recent opinion on "The EU response to the demographic challenge" led by EPP member **Juan Vicente Herrera Campo**, President of Castilla y Leon, Spain.



## ➔ EPP-CoR Members in the opening session of the EUWRC 10.10.

*"What can we do to create a more cohesive Europe? How can we support a young entrepreneur in Bulgaria or a bio-farmer in Spain? How do we leave the next generation a life of stability not uncertainty?"*

*Our task must be to look for solutions, to invest our time, energy, knowledge and resources. To make Europe work and deliver!"*



**Markku Markkula**,  
President of the  
European Committee  
of the Regions

*"The future of Cohesion Policy is intimately linked to the future of the EU as a whole: it ensures that all Member States, regions and municipalities – from less developed to more developed – are able to benefit from the advantages offered by EU integration. As a result, Cohesion Policy makes a significant contribution to strengthening the EU as a whole. A strong and effective European Cohesion Policy is vital for a strong and effective European Union!"*



**Michael Schneider**,  
President of the  
EPP Group in the  
European Committee  
of the Regions

*"Cities are engines for jobs and growth. They foster productivity, offer better education and more innovation as well as better accessibility and connectivity. More high growth firms are based in urban areas contributing to higher employment rates. That is why both population of working age and the young are attracted by cities and moving there to look for better career opportunities."*



**Ivan Žagar**,  
EPP Group  
Coordinator for  
COTER  
Commission

# REGI-COTER: Cohesion policy needs to better communicate its results

European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) play a vital role for the EU – however, clearer targets and simpler rules are needed to enhance the funds' performance. The results also need to be better communicated to the citizens, to maintain the levels of support for these investments. These were the main messages shared by regions' and cities' representatives from the European Committee of the Regions' Commission for Territorial Cohesion Policy (COTER) with the Members of the European Parliament's Committee for Regional Development (REGI), from a joint meeting on 12 October.

EPP-CoR Group President and CoR rapporteur on the future of Cohesion Policy beyond 2020, **Michael Schneider** (EPP/DE) called for the policy to be more tailor-made and corresponding to the real needs of regions: "We should avoid one size fits all approach", he underlined.

EPP-EP coordinator for Cohesion Policy MEP **Lambert van Nistelrooij** (EPP/NL) raised the problem of insufficient quality of communication and publicity related to the EU's structural investments in regions and cities "Why can't we use some of the Cohesion funds for better storytelling?" he asked underlining "we shouldn't be shy about results". President Schneider however, said that much clearer rules and more trust are necessary in that regard.

Former CoR Member MEP **Krzysztof Hetman** (EPP/PL) agreed that mostly marginal negative stories made it to the media instead of a majority of good investment examples. He stressed that the EU's Cohesion Policy is the most fruitful investment policy in the EU, but it needs more simplification and confidence between the involved parties.

Looking into the future, President Schneider stated that the Cohesion Policy should become more

flexible in the next period, responding to unforeseen events without abandoning its strategic focus and planning certainty for the local and regional authorities. EPP COTER Commission coordinator **Ivan Žagar** (EPP/SL) underlined that significant imbalances still remain and that the future Cohesion Policy must have the resources to further reduce these disparities. "Its implementation system must be effective, well-targeted and simple to use".

Whereas Chairman of the CoR's COTER Commission, **Raffaele Cattaneo** (EPP/IT), called for bold measures to improve the performance of the policy: "We should have more focus on results through explicitly formulated objectives" he advocated.

REGI and COTER Members agreed on the need to effectively connect the next generation of ESIF-supported investment plans to the actual challenges faced by regions and cities on the ground.



# The Debate on the Future of Europe with MEP Hübner – Europe is the only way to make globalisation work for us

"Europe is the only way to make globalisation work for us" argued MEP **Danuta 'Hübner** (EPP/PL), Chair of the Committee on Constitutional Affairs, in the debate with CoR Members on the present and future of the European Union. MEP Hübner, the rapporteur on the conclusion of an Interinstitutional Agreement on Better Law-making between the European Parliament, the Council of the European Union and the European Commission, called for rebuilding trust in Europe as the only way to deliver on the EU promises.

Speaking on behalf of the EPP Group, President **Michael Schneider** (EPP/DE) named harmonisation and globalisation as two sides of the same process, through which European citizens perceive the EU. "European citizens would like to live in a house with a safe roof and stable walls, namely: well working internal market, migration policy and external borders. But they should have a say on how to furbish the house and in which colour to paint the walls, in accordance with the spirit of subsidiarity or as President Juncker calls it "acting big on big things and small on small things".



CoR President **Markku Markkula** (EPP/FI) called for more unity in the fight against populism but also urged the EU to deliver solutions together with its citizens and communities. He stated that there is a need to communicate them in a more human and less bureaucratic way. "We must listen and understand the needs of the citizens, while trying to develop solutions jointly. And in doing so, we need to be brutally honest" he stressed.

**Theo Bovens** (EPP/NL), Governor of Limburg reminded the Members that the

debate takes place 25 years after the Maastricht Treaty introduced the European Union. He invited CoR Members to take the best achievements of that Treaty as a starting point for the discussions, as it has not only created the CoR but also the concept of the European Citizenship, and should be a lively symbol of debate on our shared future.

The EU's performance over the past few years has raised the question of how the potential of the EU Treaties can be better deployed to face major challenges and to deliver concrete results in response to the citizens' expectations. In certain areas this may ultimately lead to thoughts on possible future reforms of the EU and its institutional structure.

The CoR intends to contribute to the "Reflecting on the EU" political roadmap, proposing its regional and local perspective with open-minded dialogues with the citizens in the EU regions and cities to look for political solutions at grassroots level and link them with the EU level as well as with more initiatives ahead of the European Parliament 2019 elections.



# ➔ December Plenary Session



The 120<sup>th</sup> Plenary Session of the European Committee of the Regions begins on December 7<sup>th</sup> with a debate with **Frans Timmermans**, First Vice-President of the European Commission in charge of Better Regulation, Interinstitutional Relations, the Rule of Law and the Charter of Fundamental Rights. Timmermans is set to discuss on two issues with the Members: the European Commission Work Programme for 2017 (of which the CoR Resolution will be adopted at the end of the Plenary Session) and the REFIT programme (connected to the CoR opinion The REFIT Programme: the local and regional perspective (**Decoster** ALDE/FR)). The Commission Work Programme has an emphasis on the REFIT actions and it is important for the EPP-CoR to stress the importance of multi-level governance and closer involvement of the local and regional authorities in the process.



emphasises the importance of a multi-level approach with close and continuous interaction and cooperation between the different institutional levels, including rigorous territorial impact assessments future initiatives in this field. Regulatory fragmentation should also be avoided as well as excessive regulatory measures which may suppress innovation.

The opinion on Technical measures in fisheries (**Westley** PES/GB) stresses that the elaboration of clear and simple rules that are easy to comprehend and apply for fishers are of great importance for the success of the Common Fisheries Policy and the proposal is a real step towards regulatory simplification of the technical measures in European fisheries.

Three opinions with EPP-CoR Rapporteurs will be discussed and adopted on the first day: Tourism as a driving force for regional cooperation across the EU (**Wagner** EPP/AT) connected to a debate with **Taleb D Rifai**, Secretary-General of the United Nations World Tourism Organization; Regulating price volatility of agricultural products (**Blanc** EPP/FR) and EFSI 2.0 (**van de Donk** EPP/NL) with a debate with MEPs **Udo Bullmann** (S&D/DE) and **José Manuel Fernandes** (EPP/PT) (tbc). You can read more of these opinions in the following sections of the rEPPorter.

The Review of the audio-visual and media services Directive (AMSD) (**Horváth** PES/HU) would have liked to see the regional dimension taken into consideration in the new directive as recommended previously by the Committee of the Regions, as this would contribute towards enhancing European cultural identities, cross-border co-productions within the European Union and local creative innovation.

The second day of the Plenary Session, Thursday December 8<sup>th</sup>, is focused on the big issue of local and regional authorities dealing with migration challenge: from crisis modus to daily management. **Dimitris Avramopoulos**, EU Commissioner for Migration, Home Affairs and Citizenship and former Member of the European Committee of the Regions, will join our Members for a second time connected to the three opinions on the Reform of the Common European Asylum System (**Bianco** PES/IT), Integration of third country nationals (**Vanlouwe** EA/BE) and Legal Migration (**Gblewicz** EPP/PL). As the EPP-CoR Group has continuously stressed, the local



The opinions on The Revision of the Posting of Workers Directive (**Renström** PES/SE) and A New Skills Agenda for Europe (**Rönmark** PES/SE) stress that a well-functioning European single market not only requires fair rules and procedures to ensure the free movement of labour but also a work force that is skilled enough to answer the needs of the changing labour markets. People need to be versatile and flexible to be able to withstand unexpected changes and to take advantage of new opportunities.

and regional authorities are at the frontline of the crisis – but also of its solution. Our September Conference in Thessaloniki, with Commissioner Avramopoulos as the keynote speaker, stressed the need for a common response and inclusion of all levels of government.

The opinion on Collaborative economy and online platforms: a shared view of cities and regions (**Brighenti** PES/IT)

# ➔ EPP Opinions

## in the upcoming Plenary Session



**Hanspeter Wagner**, Mayor of Breitenwang, EPP/AT

### Tourism as a driving force for regional cooperation across the EU

The significance of tourism for the European economy can hardly be overstated with a 10 % share of overall EU GDP and strong role in many rural and remote regions in creating employment. The opinion aims to boost the sector through three key measures: easing the access to investment, cutting red tape and promoting European tourism.

The opinion stresses the facilitation of access to finance for tourism-sector SMEs and microbusinesses by setting up regional investment platforms through the European Fund for Strategic Investment or EFSI, suggesting already a planned pilot for five regions with different profiles across the Union.

The second pressing demand relates to the regulation and rules surrounding the SMEs in the tourism sector. The complex bureaucratic, regulatory and tax burden has to be reduced to ensure that smaller businesses can remain competitive and innovative against their larger and global competitors.

Finally, a sense of European citizenship can be strengthened through tourism and initiatives such as a European Citizen Travel Card, to offer reductions of major sights, or through a European Traveller's Pass app, gathering useful information on Europe's travel destinations together with information on consumer rights.



**Elżbieta Bienkowska**,  
Commissioner for  
Internal Market, Industry,  
Entrepreneurship  
and SMEs, European  
Commission

*"Tourism is a strong driver of growth and jobs for many EU regions and cities. We need smart investments in skills and actions to preserve and promote our unique cultural and natural heritage and variety of transnational tourism offers to attract international travellers. I encourage thus regions, cities and local authorities to work closer together and make even better use of the available EU funds for development of the competitive tourism sector. Lets do our best together to keep Europe as the worlds leading tourism destination!"*



**Olgierd Geblewicz**, Marshal of the West Pomeranian Voivodeship, EPP/PL

### Legal migration

*"In order to ensure the EU's status as a competitive actor on the world stage, a comprehensive strategy is needed for obtaining foreign capital, including human capital. The latter element is important for every economic system wishing to scale up its innovativeness, level of technology and competitiveness."*

The establishment and promotion of effective channels for the legal entry of third-country nationals should remain one of the priorities of the European migration policy. The proposal by the European Commission focuses on this for the purposes of ensuring an adequate supply of highly skilled employment in the European labour market.

of both employers and migrants, and have instead perpetuated a fragmented system in the EU. The opinion welcomes the proposals to reduce income thresholds, introduce instruments to promote internal mobility, facilitate access to long-term residence permits and take account of migrant workers already residing in the EU.

needs as well as play a very important role in providing public services for migrants. Their role should be considered in various contexts, such as in relation to the establishment of experimental fast-track systems, sharing of best practices and the implementation of solutions ensuring the best possible match between formal qualifications and the needs of local and regional labour markets.

The issue of employment of highly skilled workers should be treated in a holistic and comprehensive way, also developing a single method of collecting data, while taking into account that even though the immigrants might be most attracted to the most developed regions, their presence may be most desirable in regions that are not in a position to offer them such attractive work and residence conditions.

The rules introduced in 2009 have not met many of the needs and expectations

The local and regional authorities have the best knowledge of their labour market



**Wim van de Donk**, King's Commissioner for the Province of Noord-Brabant, EPP/NL

## EFSI 2.0

The extension of the European Fund for Strategic Investments was proposed by European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker in his State of the European Union 2016 address. Local and regional authorities have a key role to play in identifying, planning and supporting investment in their regions, so their close involvement is crucial for the success of the investment plan, especially regarding the smaller local projects.

The opinion welcomes the proposed extension both in terms of duration and financial capacity in order to stimulate

employment, growth and competitiveness, and notes positively especially the focus on SMEs and clarity around projects related to climate action, agriculture and fisheries.

The aim of the investment plan should be to support investments that could not have been carried out by the EIB without EFSI support and the opinion also wishes priority be given to cross-border projects. The importance of combining EFSI with other EU funds such as ESIF, Horizon 2020 and CEF is underlined and strategic coordination is essential for tangible results.



**José Manuel Fernandes**, MEP and co-rapporteur for the EFSI opinion in the European Parliament

*"In just over a year EFSI has mobilized over € 138 billion in 27 Member States, and supported more than 200,000 small and medium-sized enterprises. It is essential that beneficiaries are informed of this opportunity and that they have support in the preparation of applications which will contribute to the geographic and thematic diversification of the fund."*



**Jacques Blanc**, Mayor of La Canourgue, EPP/FR

## Regulating price volatility of agricultural products

*"European farmers are the backbone of our economy and the key actors contributing to the development of our rural societies and therefore the local and regional decision-makers should stand up for them in their hour of need. The opinion takes a holistic view on the current situation and suggests many concrete initiatives to rectify the situation."*

The current Common Agricultural Policy has emphasised moving into a market-oriented direction to safeguard high-quality European agriculture for the future. However, the structural changes in food production, climate change, current sanctions against Russia and increased imports from non-EU countries have increased the price volatility of agricultural products to the harm of farmers.

The high price volatility of agricultural products has a negative impact on industry stakeholders as well as rural areas as it leads to repeated crises that results in the disappearance of farmers and

deters young people from farming. It is therefore essential to provide better protection for producers' incomes to maintain agriculture across the EU, preserve vibrant rural communities and enable European farmers to contribute to European and global food security.

The opinion highlights that the industry's self-regulation mechanisms are not effective and an EU-level action is needed to ensure fair buying and selling conditions for European farmers and consumers. The range of risk management tools available to farmers should also be expanded according to the Rapporteur.

## Ongoing opinions

### → CIVEX

Legal Migration Package – **Olgierd Geblewicz**  
Adoption foreseen December 2016

European consensus on development  
– **Jesús GAMALLO ALLER**  
Adoption foreseen February 2017

### → COTER

EFSI 2.0 – **Wim van de Donk**  
Adoption foreseen December 2016

Arctic Sea – **Pauliina Haijanen**  
Adoption foreseen February 2017

The future of Cohesion Policy beyond 2020  
– **Michael Schneider**  
Adoption foreseen May 2017

An European Strategy for Low-Emission Mobility –  
**Jozséf Ribányi**  
Adoption foreseen July 2017

### → ECON

Bridging the Investment Gap: How to Tackle the Challenges? – **Markku Markkula**  
Adoption foreseen February 2017

Fiscal Capacity and Automatic Stabilisers for the Economic and Monetary Union – **Carl Fredrik Graf**  
Adoption foreseen February 2017

Smart regulation for SMEs – **Christian Buchmann**  
Adoption foreseen May 2017

### → SEDEC

Towards an EU Strategy for international cultural relations – **Apostolos Tzitzikostas**  
Adoption foreseen February 2017

Copyright in the Digital Single Market  
– **Mauro D'Attis**  
Adoption foreseen February 2017

### → ENVE

Energy Governance – **Bruno Hranic**  
Adoption foreseen July 2017

Towards a new EU climate change adaptation strategy  
– **Sirpa Hertell**  
Adoption foreseen February 2017

Outlook Opinion on Mid-term evaluation of the LIFE programme – **Witold Stępień**  
Adoption foreseen February 2017

### → NAT

Regulating price volatility of agricultural products –  
**Jacques Blanc**  
Adoption foreseen December 2016

Tourism: a driving force for investment, jobs and sustainable growth in Europe's regions and cities –  
**Hanspeter Wagner**  
Adoption foreseen December 2016

Towards a sustainable EU food policy that creates jobs and growth in Europe's Regions and Cities  
– **Arno Kompatscher**  
Adoption foreseen February 2017

Regional healthcare systems: performance, integration and cooperation – **Birgitta Sacredeus**  
Adoption foreseen March 2017

Health in cities: the common good – **Roberto Pella**  
Adoption foreseen May 2017

# Interview with Commissioner Marianne Thyssen

In anticipation of the new European Commission Work Programme 2017, the rEPPorter had a chance to interview Marianne Thyssen, EU Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs, Skills and Labour Mobility, on the topical questions especially interesting to the local and regional level: youth employment and the European Pillar of Social Rights – and how the Commission is attuned to the principle of subsidiarity within them.



**Youth employment is a big issue for the next few years with youth unemployment numbers even rising in some Member States. What exactly are the Commission's plans for the Youth initiative and the Skills Agenda and what will be the future role of the Youth Guarantee?**

Let me first of all underline that youth employment is on the rise in Europe. Our efforts are starting to bear fruit. Three years on from when the Youth Guarantee took off, there are almost 1.6 million fewer young unemployed and almost 900,000 fewer NEETs (young people not in employment, education or training) in the EU. The youth unemployment rate has decreased from a peak of 23.9% in February 2013 to 18.2% in September 2016 in the EU. While we are by far not at the end of the road, we are driving in the right direction. There are still 4.1 million young people looking for a job and we cannot leave them behind.

Investing in the right skills of young people is essential in helping them to get a good quality job or to set up their own business. Through the New Skills Agenda for Europe we have strongly engaged to address this challenge. Cooperation with employers is part of the solution and our joint approach is already bearing fruit. We have created over half a million training and job opportunities through our engagement with business.

We will prioritise the implementation of youth aspects of the New Skills Agenda for Europe through our new Youth Initiative this year. We will be looking at how to modernise education needs to reinforce the mobility of apprentices for example. While results are becoming visible on the ground through the Youth Guarantee, more efforts need to be made to reach out to low-skilled youth and those

furthest away from the labour market. There is also room to further improve the quality of the offers and services provided to young people in many Member States.

To tackle the remaining challenge of youth unemployment also with financial means, the Commission has proposed to boost the EU dedicated budget for youth employment with €2 billion for 2017-2020. This will make it possible to support 1 million more young people until 2020 in Member States most affected by youth unemployment.

**The European Pillar of Social Rights has been long in the making and will nudge one step forward next year with initiatives such as work-life balance for families, access to social protection and working time directive. How do you see the bigger picture within the pillar: is it more important to bring existing regulation closer to a European model – and what could that be – or do you see passing new legislation as primary for the moment?**

The Pillar is first of all a reconnection with the basic principles of our social market economy and the European Social Model. That is a growth model where economic development and social progress go hand-in-hand. It should be seen as a reference framework made up of a series of key principles which we consider essential for fair and well-functioning labour markets and welfare systems.

Fortunately, we are seeing an increasingly job-rich recovery in Europe. The number of people in jobs in Europe is the highest it has ever been. Despite first signals of convergence among Member States, employment and social trends continue to vary significantly across Europe. Against this backdrop, the Pillar should be seen

as a compass pointing the way towards employment and social systems that are less vulnerable and more resilient to economic shocks. The Pillar should serve to screen the performance of participating Member States, to drive the process of reforms at national level in the light of the 21st century realities.

The principles we propose revolve around equal opportunities, fair working conditions and social protection. All Member States have now been consulted, and the consultation is in its final stage with just a few weeks left to receive contributions from citizens and all interested parties. After the consultation we will be able to better define the legal form of the Pillar. This could include reviewing the existing legal framework, proposing new legislation, developing common benchmarks or putting forward targeted measures specifically for the Eurozone. However, our aim is not unification or harmonisation of social systems. Every Member State has its own history and tradition and we must respect and even cherish that. The aim is to learn from each other – to draw lessons from what works and what doesn't work, so as to do better for our people – and overall, to achieve better convergence.

**The remit of your Commissionership are closely attuned to the principle of subsidiarity, of which the European Committee of the Regions holds central to its operation. How do you envisage an inclusion of local and regional authorities in your new initiatives to ensure as effective implementation as possible on the city and regional level?**

The creation of real and decent job opportunities is among the most pressing challenges facing Europe today. These challenges are most concretely felt at the regional and local level. At the same time, the most innovative recipes to turn challenges into opportunities are also developed at the local and regional level. Therefore I do everything I can to take into account lessons from local and urban labour markets. Dedicated events are organised in the Member States to reach out to regional and local authorities, social partners and other stakeholders.

Moreover, I am very happy to see how the European Committee of the Region is supporting the consultation process so far on the European Pillar of Social Rights. This support will also be essential to make the Pillar a reality on the ground, as regions and cities in Europe hold many of the crucial policy levers to cement a European social model which is fit for purpose in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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