

THE ReppORTER

October 2017

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



Budapest External Seminar

**European Week of Regions
and Cities**

**Interview with
Commissioner
Mariya Gabriel**



European Week | Brussels
9-12 October 2017

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#EURegionsWeek

Welcome to the
European Week of
Regions and Cities



European Committee
of the Regions

Foreword

by **President Schneider**

Dear Members,
Dear friends,

The State of the Union speech, delivered by Jean-Claude Juncker, had a very positive tone. Whilst I welcome the satisfying growth rates and our strong innovation capacity, I am also concerned that this is not felt throughout the regions and cities of our Union. Recent election results in my own country of Germany have proven the concerns of millions of people, who feel left behind – or even threatened - by the speed of our social and economic change. We need to focus on what can be done to reach out to those citizens, as chancellor Angela Merkel said. And we must strengthen the EU's potential to fight against the sources of their concerns. With this in mind, I am looking forward to a productive Plenary, which coincides with the 15th edition of the European Week of Regions and Cities. This large event has always been the occasion to make the voice of regions and cities heard and this time will be no different.

But, beyond this week our work will continue. We will support the #CohesionAlliance and I encourage you all to sign up and to spread the news amongst all those who believe in the power of this vital policy. In December, I am delighted to announce that we will have an extraordinary sitting of our EPP Group where we will be able to discuss EU finances and the future of Europe from regional and local perspective alongside Tomislav Donchev, Deputy Prime Minister of Bulgaria and Günther Oettinger, European Commissioner for Budget and Human Resources.

At the mid-point of the 2015-2020 mandate of the CoR, the Chairs of the six thematic Commissions have been changed. I would therefore like to take this opportunity to thank Cristian Buchmann, Raffaele Cattaneo and Anders Knappe for the excellent work that they carried out during the first half of the mandate and to congratulate the newest Chairs, of which two belong to our EPP Group.



Michael Schneider

President of the EPP-CoR Group

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Michael Schneider".

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Members on the field



CoR Tallinn Bureau

The European Committee of the Regions is convinced that cities and regions can play a crucial role as leaders in public sector innovation and in implementing digital solutions, thereby serving citizens throughout Europe.

Ahead of the Digital Summit in Tallinn on 29 September, the Bureau members of the European Committee of the Regions met to discuss how cities and regions can become leaders in public sector innovations and implementing digital solutions, which serve citizens throughout Europe. They concluded that delivering digital solutions for public services will also require that the digital infrastructure in Europe is up to speed with the rest of the world. Within this context, the participatory Broadband Platform, which will be launched on 12 October in the presence of **Commissioner Mariya Gabriel**, is considered to be an important step to ensuring a high level of engagement and cooperation between relevant public and private entities for broadband investment and progress in implementing national broadband plans. It aims to involve local and regional authorities in the deployment of faster, better and sustainable high-speed broadband in all European regions and in particular in rural and sparsely populated areas, working thus towards eliminating the digital divide due to geographical location and/or market failure.

Rewarding Excellence: putting EU regions high in the European political debate

Just after summer recess, Commissioner **Corina Crețu** paid an official visit to the Province of North-Brabant in The Netherlands. On the same day, the EPP coordinator in the European Parliament for Regional Policy, **Lambert van Nistelrooij**, launched a European campaign "Let the Stars Shine!" in order to further improve communication about EU funded projects at local and regional level. However, what Lambert van Nistelrooij did not know was the fact that he would receive a decoration that day from King's Commissioner and CoR member **Wim van de Donk**. A few weeks before,



the regional government of North-Brabant decided that the MEP should receive a high provincial decoration, the Hertog Jan, because of his continuous efforts further to strengthen the position of EU regions in the European political debate.

2018: European Year of Cultural Heritage

The SEDEC Commission kicked off its work for the upcoming European Year of Cultural Heritage 2018 during an external seminar in Timișoara, Romania, on 28 September. The meeting, which was hosted by **Alin Nica**, Mayor of Dudeștii Noi (EPP/RO), focussed on cultural policy. Cultural heritage is the fabric of our lives and societies. As Mr Nica pointed out, Timișoara was designated the European Capital of Culture in 2021 so this meeting provided an excellent opportunity for debate on the importance of this European flagship initiative and its effects on local and regional level. **Apostolos Tzitzikostas**, the CoR rapporteur on an EU strategy for international cultural relations and Governor of the Region of Central Macedonia, highlighted how regional and local authorities can and should be involved in the development of EU policies so that programmes and funding can be better targeted.

Convention of Marshals of Voivodeships of the Republic of Poland and Jeremiah II in Uniejów



Witold Stępień, Marshal of the Lodzkie Region hosted the Convention of Polish Marshals in Uniejów on 14 September. He was joined for the opening session by **Markku Markkula**, Vice-President of



the Committee of the Regions, **Jerzy Kwieciński**, Secretary of the State in the Ministry of Economic Development and **Olgierd Geblewicz**, Marshal of Zachodniopomorskie Region and President of the Board of the Union of the Provinces of the Republic of Poland. The support of entrepreneurs was cited as one of the most important priorities for the Lodzkie Region. Another important element for the region is to provide help to SMEs through repayable instruments, which have been proven popular among entrepreneurs in the previous financial perspective, according to Marshal Witold Stępień.

Budapest External Seminar

Demographic change and regeneration of our societies



Demographic change is one of the major challenges facing European society. Falling birth rates and an ageing population across Europe have become alarming over the last decades. With a declining working-age population, the pressure to generate productivity must become stronger in the future. This was the main conclusion of a seminar that took place at the National Parliament of Hungary on Friday, 8 September.

President of the EPP-CoR Group, **Michael Schneider**, opened discussions by underlining that demographic change is a matter of values, a matter of effective policies and a matter of affirming our identity as Europeans.

// *Solidarity between generations is the key to sustainable social peace and the answer to demographic change in Europe. We support the strengthening of intergenerational solidarity.* //

Michael Schneider, President of the EPP-CoR Group

He found an ally in **László Kövér**, chairman of the Hungarian Parliament, who insisted that we must stand by our traditional values, strengthen the traditional communities, and build a strong Europe. **Szabolcs Takács**, State Secretary for EU Affairs at the Hungarian Prime Minister's Office, added that addressing demographic challenges in Europe is one of the most important issues facing the EU for the next few years.



Head of the Hungarian delegation to the European Committee of the Regions, **József Ribányi**, underlined that low birth rates are challenging in the rural areas because they are particularly vulnerable to low birth rates and depopulation is more pronounced. *It is an important task to provide the prospect of a future for the settlements to become more prosperous communities, he stressed.*

Speaking on behalf of the EPP Group in the European Parliament, EPP Vice-President, **Kinga Gál**, called for various family-friendly

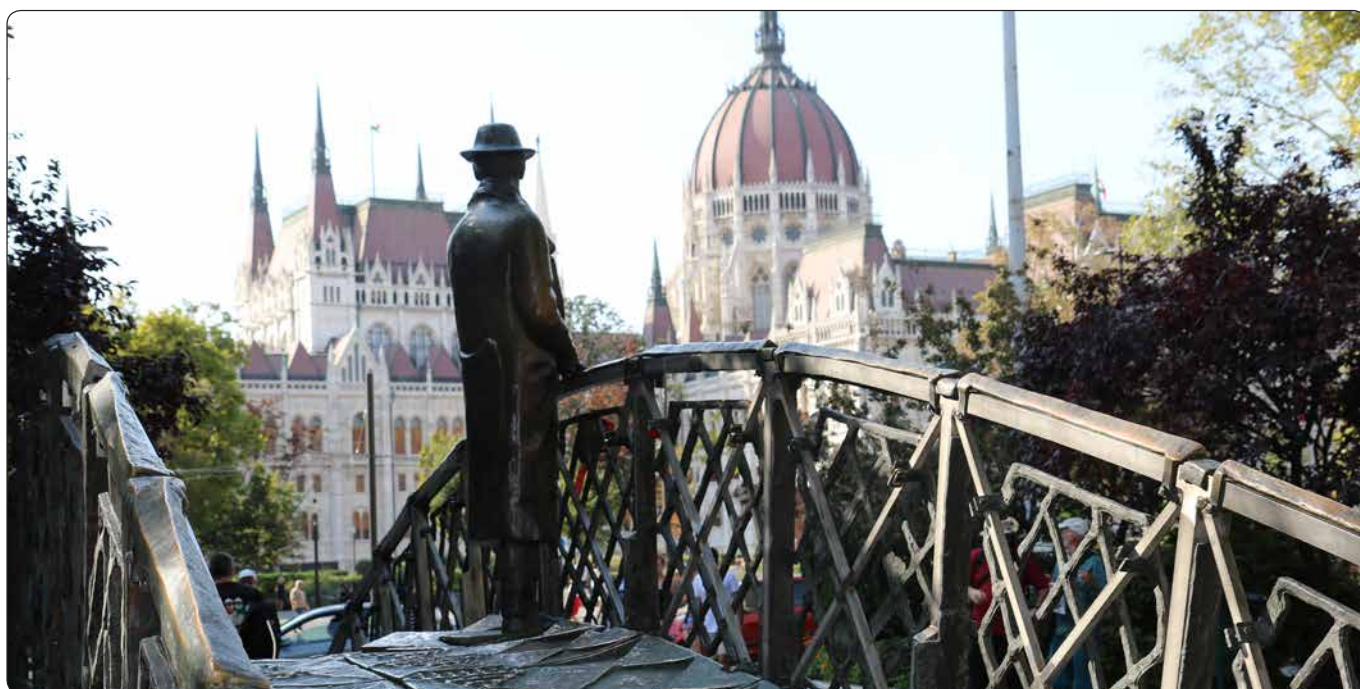
EPP Members debated the urgent need in the European Union for a broad, coordinated and integrated response to demographic concerns and agreed that such a European strategy should encompass all main EU policy areas such as cohesion, research and innovation, health, employment, rural development and migration.



policies and actions on every level in order to turn the current demographic winter into a new demographic spring. Within this context, **Andrzej Buła**, the Marshal of the Polish Opolskie region shared experiences of his 'Special Demographic Zone' programme, which encourages family policies. Concluding the conference, **Anna Magyar**, Vice-President of the County Council of Csongrád Megye, called for an exchange of good practice that can be spread throughout Europe.

“ We should collect EU-wide good practices from Member States’ level to regional and local levels, in order to well establish a realistic, broad and integrated EU policy as an answer to the tough demographic challenges. ”

Anna Magyar, Vice-President of the County Council of Csongrád Megye



OCTOBER PLENARY SESSION:



Overview

October Plenary Session



The 125th Plenary Session of the European Committee of the Regions takes place on 10-11 October in the European Commission's Charlemagne Building. The first point on the agenda

is the first ever State of the Union from the viewpoint of regions and cities in the presence of **Donald Tusk**, President of the European Council.

Miguel Arias Cañete, Commissioner for Climate Action & Energy, will address the Plenary Session on the first day to outline his EU aspirations for the COP23 and the role of local and regional authorities in implementing the decisions. Encouraging action to limit climate change is one of the strategic priorities of CoR, reflecting the particular importance assigned to climate change by local communities. Since the COP 21 in Paris, there is a



broad understanding of the need for local action and a bottom-up response to global challenges.

Relevant Social Media hashtags: [#CORPLENARY](#), [#SOTREG](#) and [#EURegionsWeek](#), [#CohesionAlliance](#)

European Week of Regions and Cities and launch of the Cohesion Alliance

Members of the CoR will participate in the opening session of the 15th European Week of Regions and Cities, which is entitled: "Regions and Cities working for a better future", on 9 October in the Hemicycle of the European Parliament. This will be the occasion for the



official launch of the [#CohesionAlliance](#), in the presence of **Corina Crețu**, European Commissioner for Regional Policy and the Chair of the European Parliament's REGI Committee, **Iskra Mihaylova**. In addition, a second event entitled "Building the [#CohesionAlliance](#) – new ideas and next steps" will take place on 11 October to kick off the [#CohesionAlliance](#) with the territorial associations.

EPP Workshop: Cohesion Policy and Europe's Strategic Investments

11 October 2017 - 14.30-17.00, JDE 51

Cohesion Policy ensures that all Member States, regions and cities – from the less developed to the most developed – are able to benefit from the advantages offered by the European Union. It is one of the strongest and most visible expressions of European investment and solidarity in

our cities and regions. A strong Cohesion policy is therefore an integral part of the solution for a more responsive and democratic Europe. This workshop aims to demonstrate the need to maintain Cohesion Policy as the EU's main investment policy tool, and will look at its future shape. It will also look at what can be done to bridge the investment gap, and explore how the potential of strategic long-term investments in Europe's regions and cities can be further exploited, notably via synergies with other European investment tools such as the European Fund for Strategic Investments. Speakers include: **Michael Schneider**, President of the EPP Group in the European Committee of the Regions,

rappporteur on "The Future of Cohesion Policy beyond 2020", **Markku Markkula**, 1st Vice-President of the European Committee of the Regions, rapporteur on "Bridging the Investment Gap: How to Tackle the Challenges", **Olgierd Geblewicz**, President of Westpomerania Region, Poland, **Andrey Novakov**, MEP, rapporteur on "The right funding mix for Europe's regions: balancing financial instruments and grants in EU cohesion policy", **Iliyana Tzanova**, Deputy Managing Director of the European Fund for Strategic Investment, European Investment Bank, **Nicola De Michelis**, Head of Cabinet of the Commissioner for Regional Policy, European Commission.



A first State of the Union from the viewpoint of regions and cities

Since 1986, the objective of cohesion policy has been to strengthen economic and social cohesion. The Lisbon Treaty introduced a third, yet crucial dimension: territorial cohesion. The annual local and regional perspective on the state of the European Union therefore aims to make a local contribution to more effective EU decision-making and for the CoR to act more prominently in the institutional and political landscape. On 29 June 2016, the European Council decided to begin a reflection on the future of a European Union

of 27 Member States. This resulted in the Bratislava roadmap where Heads of State and Government agreed to focus their attention on the issues of most immediate concern to our citizens. Shortly after, Donald Tusk, President of the European Council, requested an official opinion from the CoR on the local and regional perspective on re-building citizens' trust. As outlined in the Rome Declaration, which was signed in the presence of Markku Markkula, former CoR President, the EU needs to 'work together at the level that makes a

real difference, be it the European Union, national, regional, or local, in line with the principle of subsidiarity'. European cities, local communities and regions are on the frontline when it comes to managing citizens' expectations. As the EU's assembly of local and regional politicians, this first State of the Union from the viewpoint of regions and cities will take stock of the current state of play and set out their vision for the future of Europe.

Jean-Claude Juncker's State of the European Union address



We have a window of opportunity, but this will not stay open forever; the President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, warned members of the European Parliament in his State of the Union address on 13 September. His tone was upbeat as he thanked those responsible for achievements ranging from the economic recovery to job creation and reaching agreement on the Investment Plan 2.0.

"Together, we showed that Europe can deliver for its citizens when and where it matters... Our 27 leaders, the Parliament and the Com-

mission are putting the Europe back in our Union. And together we are putting the Union back in our Union... I believe that, over the months to come, we should involve national Parliaments and civil society at national, regional and local level more in the work on the future of Europe."

There were five thematic priorities for the President's speech: open and fair trade, stronger and more competitive industry, the fight against climate change, completing the digital market and protecting Europeans in the digital age as well as migration, including solidarity with Libya and Africa.

Turning to the debate on the future of Europe, where the CoR has contributed with its Reflecting on Europe initiative, including local citizens' and town hall debates, the President underlined that any future scenario must be built on *"three fundamentals, three unshakeable principles: freedom, equality and the rule of law"* adding *"These three principles must remain the foundations on which we build a more united, stronger and more democratic Union."*

Subsidiarity and Proportionality Task Force

The President announced a task force, which will *"take a very critical look at all policy areas to make sure we are only acting where the EU adds value"*. It will be chaired by Frans Timmermans, First Vice-President of the European Commission and will include Members of the European Parliament as well as Members of national Parliaments. The task force is expected to report back in a year's time.

Future budget and MFF

An important element for discussions in the next months will be the budgetary plans, which the European Commission will present in May 2018. President Juncker outlined a choice: either to pursue the European Union's ambitions in the strict framework of the existing budget or to increase the European Union's budgetary capacity so that it might better reach its ambitions. He added: *"I am for the second option"*.

Michael Schneider's response on behalf of the EPP/CoR:

We endorse a common European approach to tackle the refugee crisis in Europe, as outlined by European Commission's President Jean-Claude Juncker in his State of the European Union address today. We particularly welcome the proposed common EU list of safe countries of origin, for which we called recently. However, we hope that the role of the regions and local authorities in providing support, integration and inclusion to those in need will be better recognised. The Commission's readiness to

look into how EU Funds can support these efforts is well appreciated and we are ready to be part of this dialogue, especially as we are the ones primarily responsible for the first interactions with migrants arriving on our shores by providing housing, education and food.

We need to reduce obstacles and better use the scale of our continent to stimulate innovation, connect our talents and offer a wider choice of products and services. We hope that in line with the spirit of subsidiarity expressed during their last visits at the CoR, President Juncker and President Tusk

will continue to recognise municipalities and regions as important stakeholders in preparation of better policies for the Union.



EPP Opinions in the upcoming Plenary Session

// *If we want to avoid social fragmentation and social dumping in Europe, then Member States should agree on the European Pillar of Social Rights as soon as possible and at the latest at the Gothenburg summit in November.* //

Jean-Claude Juncker, State of the Union address



Mauro D'Attis, Member of the Executive Council of Roccaforte Municipality (Messina), Italy

The European Pillar of Social Rights and Reflection paper on the social dimension of Europe

SEDEC-VI/027

The CoR supports the establishment of a social pillar, which will enable the delivery of a sustainable and inclusive Europe and the creation of an active society. The European Pillar of Social Rights should strive to be the cornerstone of a strong European social agenda, in which competitiveness and social justice complement each other. This is a key element for the debate on the future of Europe and it is necessary to evaluate how the local and regional dimension can be incorporated. Specifically, the opinion calls for local and regional authorities to be supported

in their efforts to implement appropriate employment and social policies, including support for the development of work-life balance and labour market access policies, in line with the Commission's recent proposal. The long-term objectives of establishing a pillar of social rights must serve to make Europe more cohesive and more responsive to the social dimension of citizens' needs. Within this context, it is necessary to take greater account of the need to reduce poverty, foster social inclusion and tackle youth unemployment. Fair wages should also be linked to pro-

ductivity. The opinion focuses mainly on the necessary policies for tackling unemployment and social exclusion, outlining the regional and local dimension with an amendment to the original text underlining that economic, social and territorial cohesion shall play a key role in supporting the establishment of the social pillar. Finally, the rapporteur would like to see a reference to legal refugees and regular migrants in order to show that they integrate effectively and economically.

Reflection paper on the social dimension of Europe

The reflection paper aims to steer a debate on the definition and meaning of a social dimension for Europe that builds on what we have and is fit for 21st-century realities. It shows where the EU has come from, where it stands now and possible solutions for the future. It highlights the differences between countries and regions, for example the great economic disparities, income inequality and demographic worries within the territories of the Member States, as well as common challenges. The expectations of citizens are placed into the hands of all authorities — be they local, regional, national or European



Tom Vandenkendelaere, MEP and shadow rapporteur on the European Pillar of Social Rights

"Building a European Pillar of Social Rights will not only require efforts and dedication from the European level. Other levels, national, regional and local, must be included. The key to success lies in the combined efforts of all levels of government."

EPP/CoR Study Visit 2017

On 22-23 November, just one week after the UN Climate Change Conference in Bonn, the EPP Group in the European Committee of the Regions is inviting 40 students and young people from across the EU for a 2-day study visit in Brussels where they will gain a better understanding of the

implementation of the EU's climate change goals from a local and regional perspective. We will also give them an opportunity to share their opinion on how young people can be better involved in promoting a positive European narrative ahead of the 2019 European Elections.

More information can be found closer to the event from the EPP-CoR website: <http://epp.cor.europa.eu>

New CoR Commission Chairs



Cor Lamers, Mayor of Shiedam (EPP/NL) and Chair of the European Committee of the Regions' Commission for Environment, Energy and Climate Change (ENVE).

It's an honour for me to be the new chair of the ENVE commission. I have devoted a substantial part of my political career to the improvement of the environment: as a mayor, within the Netherlands and Dutch national politics and on the EU level as a member of the European Committee of the Regions. I wanted to find - and realize practical solutions for environmental problems as these effect the quality of life of our citizens. As a matter of fact this prompted my decision to apply for the CoR's membership twelve years ago.

In Dutch cities, like in many European cities, we experienced very high level of air pollution, and my citizens were complaining about health problems due to polluted air. To ensure cleaner air for our citizens, we put forward ambitious measures at the local level, and linked it with the national objectives. However, we realised this was not enough. You cannot tackle air pollution on your own, in your own city, in your own region, or in a small country such as The Netherlands without taking into account your European neighbours.

The environment and climate require a European approach, or even a global approach.

My Political objective is to pursue efforts towards building more sustainable and more attractive cities and regions, finding a balance between economic, social and environmental development in the areas of environment, energy policy, climate change as well as circular economy and support to SMEs looking for carbon free technologies. Today's debate on the future of Europe is a step in this direction. We should have a clear vision and an implementation strategy. Therefore we will soon decide on our working plan for 2018 and beyond, based on the CoR 5 political priorities for 2015-2020.

I want to be an inclusive Chair. I want to give space to you - the members - so that each of you can get involved in the issues of your interest and your expertise. Within this context, I request your comments and proposals, to which I am very much looking forward, so we can make this political mandate a joint success.

It is an honor for me, and for the Autonomous Community of La Rioja, to assume the presidency of SEDEC. There are many challenges ahead of us. We begin this mandate at a stage marked by the debate on a more humane Europe, in which citizens feel that their voice is taken into account. We need to eliminate the image of a bureaucratic Europe with little connection with the reality of its cities and regions. We must improve the functioning of the European Union and for this we have to equip ourselves with adequate instruments. We need the future post-2020 budget, which will have to take into account the outcome of the negotiations of the Brexit, to live up to the challenges of the future of Europe. We are living in a time of uncertainty, but I believe that we, the local and regional leaders and our citizens, can make it an opportunity for our municipalities and regions.

La Rioja, the region that I represent, is fully integrated into the European construction project and is proud to be a member of it. Our aim is to continue to build and revitalize Europe. We must make it clear that the European Union can only exist with the confidence of its citizens. And they will only appreciate its added value if they perceive a reflection in their daily lives. Therefore, as political leaders of our regions and cities, we should focus on meeting those needs. We are fortunate to

work in a Commission, SEDEC with competences in subjects closely linked to citizens such as employment, social policy and education, amongst others.

I propose that in these months that we have ahead we work on strengthening social cohesion in Europe across their territories, giving impetus to employment policies, offering solutions for the demographic challenge and defending our cultural heritage. Of course this can only be achieved by increasing our contribution help research and innovation in our territories whilst working to obtain fully digitized public services in administration, business and education.

As President I will work until February 2020, with the enthusiasm and the strong will to make the voice of our cities and regions heard. But, I also want to give space to you, the members, so that each one can get involved in the matters of your interest and experience and I encourage you to work together to achieve the success of our goals. For example, in my region, we have opened a debate on the adoption of the "Pact for Youth Emancipation" and I would like to ask you for your collaboration to extend this exciting challenge to all of Europe. Youth emancipation is not only a generational problem, but also the future of our European society.



José Ignacio Cenicerós González, President of the Autonomous Community of La Rioja and Chair of the European Committee of the Regions' Commission for Social Policy, Education, Employment, Research and Culture (SEDEC)

EASTERN PARTNERSHIP SUMMIT



The 7th CORLEAP Annual Meeting took place on 12 September, a couple of months ahead of the Eastern Partnership Summit (Brussels, 24 November 2017), at a moment when negotiations of the Summit declaration were ongoing in the COEST Council body, and before negotiations with the partner countries.

During this meeting, institutional support for CORLEAP was confirmed by strong messages including a commitment from the European External Action Service that CORLEAP and local and regional authorities will be mentioned in the Eastern Partnership Summit for the first time. The future co-chair of CORLEAP was appointed by the Ukrainian delegation, Volodymyr Prokopiv, Head of Kyiv City Council, who will succeed Alksandr Popkov from Belarus as of 1st October 2017.

In a letter from **Johannes Hahn**, European Commissioner for European Neighbourhood Policy & Enlargement Negotiations to the CoR president at the end of July, he stressed the role for local and regional authorities when it comes to cooperating on and promoting the Eastern Partnership beyond the capitals. *"I am convinced that the Committee of the Regions as well as CORLEAP could play a key role to support our work in preparing the Summit and beyond, in particular by enhancing synergies between our respective activities. Political and economic partnerships between EU and Eastern Partnership regions and cities could contribute to economic and social development and better support necessary reform processes"* he said.



During the October Plenary Session, the CoR is due to adopt a resolution on recommendations to the heads of state or

government gathering in Brussels on 24 November 2017 for the fifth Eastern Partnership summit.

The potential of the Eastern Partnership: from the perspective of an East German

Talking about the future of Europe, we need to talk about the future of Eastern Europe. In no other part of Europe is the experience with democracy so fresh and so fragile, as in the post-soviet states of the Eastern Partnership (EaP). Not without reason, some of these countries nowadays have concerns to be other-directed again by land grabs and forceful interference as conducted by Russia in Georgia and Ukraine. As an East German I know the feeling of becoming the citizen of a free state and a free Europe after the fall of a communist dictatorship. The transformation societies of the EaP-countries do not

have a partner like West Germany, which supports the reconstruction of economy and democracy. For the EaP-countries this partner must be the European Union. There is no natural law saying that huge parts of the European population should remain excluded from freedom, prosperity and good governance.

The European Committee of the Regions successfully contributes to the Eastern Partnership with CORLEAP. It's the regions and local communities that possess direct links into the EaP countries by hundreds of local and regional partnerships. The high potential of these ties is not yet used enough to support and achieve economic growth, the rule of law as well as to fulfil the European Integration. Therefore, we are looking forward to increase contributions to the EaP and to the summit in

November to raise the potential of the regions and local communities for our eastern neighbours.

Sören U. Herbst, Member of the European Committee of the Regions, representing the city council of Magdeburg.



Extraordinary EPP/CoR meeting and Winter University for local and regional media

On 5 December, the EPP Group will gather in Brussels for a debate on **The EU finances and the future of Europe from regional and local perspective**. The objective is twofold: to look at the EU finances from a regional and local viewpoint while identifying its impact on the future of the European project. Given the different economic, social and environmental features of the

European Union, a “one size fits all” solution for the EU budget must follow a place based approach in order to respond to the needs of municipalities, cities and regions. We also want a pragmatic and visionary budget, where the EU’s added value can be understood by the citizens.

On this occasion, the EPP Group will also invite 30 local and regional journalists to

its annual Winter University for local media, which will take place on 4 and 5 of December. In addition to participating in the Group meeting, the journalists will be invited to reflect on the future of local media and the role of local media in communicating ahead of the 2019 European elections.

Upcoming events

→ 18.10. COTER Working Group on the EU Budget
→ 24.10. ARLEM Commission for Sustainable Territorial Development
→ 25.10. Working Group Western Balkans, East Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina
→ 09-10.11. ECON external meeting in Rovaniemi, Finland
→ 13.11. CAFA
→ 20.11. NAT
→ 21.11. SEDEC
→ 22– 23.11. EPP/CoR study visit for students
→ 22.11. ENVE
→ 23.11. CIVEX
→ 24.11. JCC Serbia, Novi Sad, Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, Serbia
→ 30.11 – 01.12. CoR Plenary Session
→ 4.12. Subsidiarity Conference, Vienna
→ 4-5.12. EPP/CoR Winter University for local media
→ 5.12. Extraordinary EPP Group meeting, Brussels

Ongoing opinions

CIVEX

Reflecting on Europe: the voice of regional and local authorities to rebuild trust in the European Union – **Markku Markkula (with Karl-Heinz Lambertz/PES)**
Adoption foreseen July 2018

Regulation on the European citizens’ initiative – **Luc Van den Brande**
Adoption foreseen February 2018

Mid-term review of the implementation of the European Agenda on Migration – **Dimitrios Kalogeropoulos**
Adoption foreseen March 2018

COTER

State of play on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies – **Raffaële Cattaneo**
Adoption foreseen December 2017

Europe on the Move: promoting seamless mobility solutions – **Ivan Zagar**
Adoption foreseen January 2018

Europe on the Move: labour aspects of the road transport – **Spyros Spyridon**
Adoption foreseen January 2018

The future of EU finances until 2025 – **Marek Wozniak**
Adoption foreseen January 2018

Boosting Growth and Cohesion in EU Border Regions (working title) – **János Ádám Karácsony**
Adoption foreseen May 2018

ECON

European Commission report on Competition Policy 2016 – **Michael Murphy**
Adoption foreseen December 2017

A European strategy for industry: the role and perspective of regional and local authorities – **Heinz Lehmann**
Adoption foreseen March 2018

ENVE

Promoting coexistence with conflict species within the framework of the EU Nature Directives – **Csaba Borboly**
Adoption January 2018

NAT

Sustainable development of the blue economy in the western Mediterranean – **Samuel Azzopardi**
Adoption foreseen January 2018

SEDEC

Modernising school and higher education – **Csaba Borboly**
Adoption foreseen December 2017

Digital Single Market: Mid-term review – **Alin Nica**
Adoption foreseen January 2018

Interview with Mariya Gabriel, European Commissioner for Digital Economy and Society

1. The Digital Economy and Society is a wide portfolio with many repercussions at the local and regional level. Where are the areas that you see room for cooperation with local and regional authorities?

Digital economy and society touches upon everybody. I think all areas would benefit from a fruitful cooperation. I would like however to underline the necessity to join our efforts when it comes to connectivity and skills. Today less than 76 % of European households have access to internet connections of decent speed; in rural areas, that percentage goes down to less than 40 %. Investment in broadband coverage can be financed from different sources, including European funding; however the take up of such investment opportunities is much smaller than it could be. Certain Member States even are in the process of re-programming resources that were initially allocated to broadband investment.

We need to work together with local and regional authorities to better identify connectivity investment needs, to better target financial resources and simplify procedures where necessary. I also count on regional and local authorities to promote in their specific constituencies, including in the local business communities, the EU connectivity objectives and funding opportunities. The Connectivity Broadband fund is expected to unlock additional investments between €1 billion and €1.7 billion in broadband deployment in underserved areas, where very high-capacity networks are not deployed yet.

As for skills, we need to raise awareness together and make sure that we use the resources we have to prepare our citizens and protect them accordingly in order to benefit from the digital revolution, not be victims of it. We need to anticipate change and turn it into opportunity.

2. Achieving a connected Digital Single Market is the number 2 priority in the roadmap launched by Jean Claude Juncker after his State of the Union speech. Do you agree that this should be a priority?

Yes, this is my priority number 1. The internet and digital technologies are transforming our economy, our society, our world. But a lot of barriers still exist online. This means citizens miss out on goods and services, internet companies and startups have their horizons limited, and businesses and governments cannot fully benefit from the digital revolution.

A fully functional Digital Single Market could contribute €415 billion per year to the EU's economy and create hundreds of thousands of new jobs in Europe.

Since 2015, the Commission has made good on its promise and delivered 35 initiatives, which bring concrete changes to the life of our citizens. Let me mention a few examples:

- The update of European audio-visual media services rules will create a fairer environment for all, promote European films, protect children and better tackle hate speech online.
- Modernised copyright rules will guarantee fair remuneration for journalists, publishers and authors, while boosting consumers choice to content online and across borders.
- As of May 2018, a new single set of EU rules on data protection and privacy in electronic communications. This will allow people to take back control of their personal data and set clear limits on the use of their data.
- The WiFi4EU initiative will help local authorities offer free Wi-Fi connections for all in towns and villages in the EU by 2020. At least 6000 to 8000 local communities will be able to benefit from a total funding of €120 million until 2020.
- Thanks to €6.7 billion from public and private investment, the European Open Science Cloud will by 2020 offer Europe's 1.7 million researchers and 70 million science professionals a virtual environment to store, share and re-use their data across disciplines and borders.
- In the EU, 4 out of 10 retailers use geo-blocking. Removing geo-blocking would lead to a consumer gain of €500 million, firms' profit would increase by €283 million from new trade.

Finally, last May the Commission presented a midterm review of the DSM implementation which included further work in the field of online platforms, cybersecurity and free flow of data. My focus is now to work very hard with the co-legislator, - the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union in order to make all DSM proposals a reality for our citizens, as we did for the end of roaming last summer.

3. The WiFi4EU scheme was recently approved by the European Parliament. Could you tell us a bit about the next steps and how local and regional authorities will be involved? How will the launch of the Broadband Platform fit into this work?

The portal for the WiFi4EU initiative will be launched publically towards the end of the year and the first call expected to be in early 2018. After the new legis-



lation enters into force, we will be able to finalise the implementation steps, notably change the CEF Work Programme after consultation of the Member States. In parallel, an information campaign will start across Europe, targeting in particular the municipalities. The Broadband Platform will provide a useful forum for political discussion and a relay of information about this initiative across all European regions.

4. The EPP Group in the CoR has the lead on the CoR opinion on the mid-term review of the Digital Single Market. Our rapporteur, Alin Nica, has concerns about data privacy and how local politicians can best protect their citizens. What advice would you give him?

There are a few things that can be done. Most important are skills – citizens need to be aware of the options and rights they have and of the tools that can help them. But companies also need skills to understand their obligations and comply. When it comes to local companies another idea is to push very directly for more privacy-friendly approaches. For example, it would already be great progress if the local banks and the local utilities and maybe also the local administration would support and perhaps even promote personal data management tools.

5. Managing taxes in the digital age is a specific challenge. What is your position on unifying VAT for online commerce?

In most EU countries, e-publications are charged a standard VAT rate. However, publications on physical media can benefit from significantly lower rates or even not pay tax at all. The amended EU VAT rules would contribute to the EU's pursuit of its digital single market strategy and, more broadly, help it to keep pace with technological progress in the digital economy. We have to ensure a level playing field for everybody.

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