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"Macro-regional strategies and their significance from the perspective of the European Parliament"

MEETING OF THE CHAIRPERSONS OF THE COMMITTEES ON ENVIRONMENT PROTECTION AND THE COMMITTEES ON STATE ADMINISTRATION AND LOCAL AUTHORITIES OF NATIONAL PARLIAMENTS
Macro-Regional Strategies: Development and Prospects
Vilnius, 24–25 November 2013

Dear Chair Algimantas Salamakinas, dear Chair Virginija Baltraitienė ,
Dear Members of the Seimas, dear Members of the National Parliaments,
Dear Commissioner Hahn,
Dear Colleagues and Friends,

This meeting of the national parliaments on the macro-regional strategies takes place right after the vote of the European Parliament on its consent for the Multiannual Financial Framework and its adoption of the new legislative framework for the Cohesion Policy 2014-2020.

With this vote we have opened the possibility of having as of January across Europe a wave of new investment supported by the European funds and bringing growth, jobs and more competitive and socially responsible European economy.

The new framework creates conditions for a successful cohesion policy to be implemented through more than 300 national and regional operational programs.

If we add to the European funding also the national co-financing, we talk about more than 500bln euro of productive investment over the next ten years, strongly aligned with the objectives of EU 2020 strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth and geared towards economic, social and territorial cohesion.

I would like to use the opportunity provided by this meeting to say how important it is that national parliaments get involved in pushing towards timely finalisation of negotiations between the governments and the European Commission of partnership agreements, operational programs, and smart specialization strategies.

But it is important also that you push towards serious approach to partnership and good preparation at all levels of policy management to fully exploit investment potential of cohesion policy.

I would also like to encourage you to follow the progress in policy implementation throughout the whole period 2014 - 2020. The European Parliament will join you in this effort.

We are here to discuss the development and prospects of the macro-regional strategies. You have been focusing on it in all previous sessions of this conference.

These strategies have been talked a lot over the last years. Involvement of national parliaments in this debate enriches democratic legitimacy of this process. This is important.

Long ago European cohesion policy has adjusted itself to the fact that many development challenges, both obstacles and opportunities, have stopped to respect any borders, political or administrative. Crisis has also made us aware of numerous cross border spillovers that national policies can generate. We also understand today better that if we approach those challenges together we can be not only much faster more effective but also we can use more efficiently our resources, including budgetary ones.

There is no need any more to justify the need of pooling our aspirations and resources to achieve results through common action, both public and private. Globalisation and the imperative to cooperate make this need obvious.

The first two macro-regional strategies have been decided, programmed and implemented on the ground of a strong political will and commitment and a combined administrative effort. When the European Commission launched the work on the first ever macro-regional strategy back in 2007 - the Baltic one - there was no legal basis to facilitate this effort. Tomorrow it might be easier. We have a legal framework within the Common Provisions Regulation, facilitating the establishment and implementation of macro-regional strategies.

Our judgement in the European Parliament is that the first two macro-regional strategies have been successful and can be a rich source of recommendations for the future, both their own future and that of other macro-regional strategies that will come.

We have to be aware, however, that even the best practise of the past might not be a good practise for tomorrow, but what matters most is that thanks to what has been achieved so far we have a huge accumulated cooperation capital in Europe and this cooperative dimension of the cohesion policy is its major value.

We will need in the years to come even more of cooperative approaches to what Europe must deliver. We can improve governance of macro-regional strategies building on those cooperative approaches.

We have seen recently a number of European documents, Commission communications, Council conclusions, European Parliament resolutions, Committee of the Regions and European Economic and Social Committee statements, also meetings, hearings, now we will have your statement.

We all agree that there is a clear added value in this macro-regional policy framework and we also share the views on the need of further improvements of the way macro-regional strategies work.

The immediate challenge today is to link smartly both emerging new and evolving existing macro-regional strategies with the new framework offered by the new CPR

and the ETC regulation, and, in particular, ensure their closer links with different European policies, beyond the cohesion policy.

Aligning available financing instruments with the macro-regional strategies, identifying possibilities for transnational cooperation in the macro-regional context and reaching out to the deeply modified European Groupings for Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) instrument - these are things to do. I would like to invite you to look at the modified EGTC potential, especially with regard to labour law and service of general interest.

I would like to ask you when you go home to see that these new opportunities are taken on board by those in charge of macro-regional strategies.

For the first time, we have a fully-fledged, independent regulation on the European Territorial Cooperation which is very clear on its commitment to the macro-regional strategies. We should therefore see that the potential of synergies between territorial cooperation and the macro-regional strategies is fully utilized.

We hear here and there complaints from various organizations representing citizens that the way we, as Europe, handled the crisis driven reforms has increased the distance between Europe and its citizens.

Democratic legitimacy of these reforms is questioned, democratic deficit is claimed to have grown. That is one of the reasons why this meeting is important. It reflects your will to link the macro-regional strategies and the citizens. We in the EP take this challenge of democratic legitimacy very seriously. We also hope that we can move forward on this road together. We already work together on many issues. The REGI Committee, which I chair, has the annual meeting with National Parliaments this week. The topic is the implementation challenges of the new cohesion policy.

We have expressed our support for macro-regional strategies through many resolutions, reports, meetings and hearings. But, first of all, through our support and

commitment during the negotiations of the new cohesion policy framework where we pushed very strongly towards the presence of the macro-regional strategies.

In the CPR, the macro-regional strategies feature strongly and visibly in all important segments of the policy. In particular in the provisions covering: the content of the common strategic framework, the partnership agreement, the operational programs, monitoring and reporting as well as territorial development.

In practise that means that during the programming process, objectives and priorities of the macro-regional strategies will have to be embedded in the partnership agreement, in operational programs for 2014-2020, as well as in all other relevant national, regional, local, cross border and transnational ones. These links are of both strategic and practical nature.

Macro-regional strategies have a chance to be mainstreamed in all relevant European policies. In particular, this is true for Horizon 2020, education, culture, health, environment, maritime, transport and SMEs.

We, in the European Parliament, would like to see strong involvement of public authorities and partners at local and regional level, where the needs and resources are best known. But we believe that the European Commission should continue to play a key role in programming and implementing the macro-regional strategies. We would also like to see the macro-regional strategies included in the agenda of different formations of the Council of Ministers. And, as I said, the chances for good results will grow with the involvement of national parliaments.

I have listened to many stakeholders involved in the macro-regional strategies since 2007. They had hopes. Today they say- the strategy works. It can be a strong convergence force within a region where usually a great differentiation is the reality. Now, when Europe needs growth, the macro-regional strategies can be a powerful trigger for growth and a powerful tool to boost cooperation. It can generate a lot of motivation and inspiration.