



# CPMR-DG REGIO Conference: The role of Cohesion policy delivering EU priorities

13 October 2016, Brussels

The CPMR co-organised an event with the Directorate General for Regional and Urban Policy of the European Commission (DG REGIO) last 13 October 2016 in Brussels. 43 CPMR member regions attended, with a total participation of more than 100 people.

Commissioner for Regional policy Crețu and Enrico Rossi, president of Tuscany and Vice-president of the CPMR opened a conference which aimed at demonstrating the crucial role of Cohesion policy in delivering European priorities and showing how Cohesion Policy is much more than a "pot of money".

The conference was structured in three main sessions dedicated to showcase, through CPMR member regions case studies:

1. The significant **contribution of Cohesion Policy to European priorities** as defined by the Commission on Climate change (Midtjylland, Denmark), the Digital Single Market (Murcia, Spain) and Migration (Calabria, Italy).
2. The **impact of Cohesion Policy in improving sustainable and long term investment** in Europe. Cases studies from Haut de France (France), Catalonia (Spain) and Zuid-Holland (The Netherlands) showed how Cohesion Policy has been creating the right conditions for jobs and growth in their regions.
3. The **contribution of Cohesion Policy to European Economic governance**. The regions of Podlaskie (Poland), Tuscany (Italy) and Madeira (Portugal) shared concrete examples of the contribution of Cohesion Policy in delivering reforms at territorial level.

Key messages on Cohesion Policy and its future emerged from the discussions between CPMR members, the European Commission representatives such as Deputy Directors-General of DG REGIO Normund Popens, Nicholas Martyn, Deputy Director-General of DG Employment Zoltan Kazatsay and the Head of Cabinet of Commissioner Crețu Nicola de Michelis. Other Cohesion policy experts such as Thomas Wobben (Committee of the Regions), Prof. John Bachtler (European Policies Research Centre) and Iain Begg (London School of Economics) completed the programme.

The main key messages were the following:

There was a general agreement that **Cohesion Policy is delivering EU priorities and that it needs to be modernised**. The need to ensure that the discourse is realistic, the narrative suitable and in line with the EU Treaty was stressed.

- The participants underlined the **importance of maintaining the central role of Cohesion Policy**, as a vital source of public investment in Europe. Since the economic crisis and in the light of pressing challenges European regions are facing, Commissioner for Regional Policy Corina Crețu stressed that “Cohesion Policy is more necessary than ever”. Cohesion Policy has a leverage effect that is needed to boost growth and investment in all European regions. She emphasised that Cohesion Policy is more than ever a policy to promote socio-economic and territorial development across Europe.
- Member regions expressed their **concerns about the gradual disintegration of the policy**, which is under serious threat. They called for a **significant reform of the Cohesion Policy** in order to contribute to its general objective of reducing regional disparities across Europe. Commissioner for Regional policy Crețu announced the main elements she considered to be leading the reform process for the Cohesion Policy post-2020: flexibility, simplification, performance, focus on results and stronger link with Economic governance.
- Commissioner for Regional Policy Corina Crețu stood for a **broad involvement of actors to build a reformed Cohesion Policy post-2020**. Therefore, she invited representatives of the regions and stakeholders to participate in the public consultation on the impact assessment of Cohesion Policy that will be launched by the European Commission in spring 2017 and to the Cohesion Forum taking place after that in summer 2017. She also underlined the need for a strong cooperation between all levels and all institutions to shape the future Cohesion Policy.
- It was confirmed that regions are **agents of innovation and intermediaries facilitating private investment** with the help of Cohesion Policy. Structural funds often work as seed funding and allow the development of projects in all types of regions while delivering EU priorities.
- **Commission representatives stated that ‘ex ante conditionalities’ could be one of the ‘lifelines’ of Cohesion Policy when it comes to renewing it for the post-2020 period.** The most famous of ex ante conditionalities at regional level – **smart specialisation strategies** - is one of the success stories of Cohesion Policy. They go hand in hand with operational programmes and have an impact on the territories. There were suggestions made to reinforce ex ante conditionalities and to extend their monitoring by the Commission beyond three years, as is the case for 2014 – 2020.
- The **link between Cohesion Policy and the European Semester** raised the need to reconcile the Treaty obligations of Cohesion Policy with the development of the European economic governance in recent years. It was perceived that Cohesion Policy was unfairly seen as a "scapegoat policy" for all of the problems and challenges of the EU, and that it was unreasonable to suggest that Cohesion Policy (which accounts for 0.3% of the total EU GDP) could support the implementation of structural reforms directly. It was suggested that instead of thinking in terms of what type of support can Cohesion Policy provide to the European Semester, it was more relevant to think about the interaction between the two. The idea of reinforcing the territorial dimension of the European Semester was mentioned as a way forward.
- Linked to the above, **macro-economic conditionality** was a hot topic too. Commissioner for Regional policy Crețu reminded that these provisions were agreed and adopted by the European Parliament and the Council and currently the European Commission is applying them. However, she clarified that in case of a suspension of funds taking place (the decision is to be made by the Council shortly), the impact in Spain and Portugal will only take place in 2020.
- Given the specific territorial characteristics and challenges faced by Island regions, the Commission advocated for a pragmatic place-based approach that would ensure a targeted approach to each situation. The European Commission acknowledges the special situation of outermost regions and

northern sparsely populated areas, as per articles in the EU Treaty and specific provisions in the Common Provisions Regulation.

- There was a consensus among participants that there are still significant improvements to be made as regards the **visibility of Cohesion Policy**. The CPMR and the representatives of the European Commission and the Committee of the Regions highlighted how crucial it is for Cohesion Policy **to build a strong communication strategy** and **to enhance its visibility**. Better and more communication on the achievements of the policy would contribute to creating faith in this policy but also restoring trust in the EU.
- Member regions and the European Commission agreed on the need **to simplify the regulatory framework** of the Cohesion Policy in particular for the managing authorities and the beneficiaries. Member regions pointed out that the potential of the policy is constrained by the complexity of administrative procedures. Even though regions welcomed measures undertaken by the Commission to reduce the complexity of the framework with the extension of simplified-cost options, member regions stood for a significant reduction of the administrative burden. Commissioner for Regional Policy Corina Crețu proposed to harmonise the rules and to establish one set of rules for all ESI funds in order to avoid unnecessary burden generated by the current regulatory framework with different rules.
- The CPMR member regions urged the European Commission **to introduce more flexibility** in the design of Cohesion Policy post-2020 in order to react swiftly to new challenges, such as the refugee crisis. Even though Cohesion Policy is a long term investment policy, it should integrate current challenges.
- **European Territorial Cooperation** was also mentioned. The European Commission underlined the need to better align all INTERREG strands (Cross-border, transnational and interregional) with macro-regional strategies for the post-2020 period.
- **Europe 2020** was also discussed during the event. CPMR member regions would like to know how the Europe 2020 Strategy would be taken forward. The Union strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth is a reference point for programming and is being implemented in the regions.

The agenda and presentations of the Conference can be find [here](#).