

Welcome

President Lambertz,

Major Demeyer from Liege,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

after the AEBR's Annual Meeting last year in Berlin, it is a again a great honor and pleasure for me to participate in this year's annual meeting. This time in Liege and in one of the oldest Euregios - in the Euregio Maas-Rhine. Both the AEBR and the Euregio Maas-Rhine have been great pioneers in European cross-border cooperation. And both are lucky to have the same president, who himself is a great pioneer and outstanding advocate of cross-border cooperation.

Cross-border cooperation in Europe has over the years made a major contribution to the integration of Europe. And we in the European Commission, and in particular in DG REGIO, are privileged that we have been able to support this process with Interreg-Programs which will go next year in their 5th generation. For us the exchange of experience with you is crucial as you have the Europe-wide experience in implementing cohesion policy in the border regions.

- And it is in these cross-border, trans-national and interregional programmes where the European value added is most evident: helping to ensure that borders are not barriers, bringing Europeans from both sides of the borders closer together, helping to solve common problems, facilitating the sharing of ideas and assets, and encouraging strategic work towards common goals.
- As you know, and as we discussed in Berlin, the Commission had proposed to increase significantly the financial resources for the European territorial cooperation objective in the years 2014-2020 just because of its European value added. But the current draft for the Multiannual Financial Framework remains only slightly above the current level with 8.9 billion EUR for territorial cooperation for 2014-2020, of which 6.6 billion EUR will be dedicated to cross-border cooperation.
- Given the overall reduction of the EU budget, this is still a remarkable result. It recognizes its high European added value and demonstrates that cooperation is indeed considered a necessity.
- But having more or less the same budget as now, does not mean and should not mean business as usual. We must exploit the potential of territorial cooperation even further, border regions should become drivers for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, for competitiveness and jobs in the EU. Programmes have to become more strategic, focused on

results and concentrating on a limited set of priorities rather than giving in to 'souspoudrage'.

- More effectiveness and more efficiency also means working across silos, be it by department or administrative regions. Future programmes should deliver a more integrated approach, i.e. a co-ordination with other programmes. In order to improve coordination and harmonise implementation of cohesion policy we established common provision for all European Structural and Investment Funds. These include both the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD). Multi-fund programmes will be possible. And in the future we will offer new instruments, such as integrated territorial investments.
- The integrated approach is particular relevant for the main topic of this year's Annual Meeting urban-rural cooperation. The development of rural-urban linkages is a joint challenge for all of us both in terms of territorial cohesion and for leveraging maximum sustainable development. On our side this challenge is echoed in the new full name of my DG Directorate-general for Regional and Urban Policy and has led to organizational changes. I very much hope that the new Common Strategic Framework and above all the Partnership Agreements will help to ensure that the different regional and rural development funds produce synergies and support each other in their effect. We also want to ensure that, in the future, territorial cooperation programmes are taken into account in all strategic thinking about cohesion policy. We want to see territorial cooperation strongly reflected too, in the Partnership Agreements currently being discussed between Member States and the European Commission.
- Ladies and Gentlemen,
- Border regions are now in the full preparation of the next generation of cross-border programmes. This is a strategic moment to shape the next seven years of cross-border development. It is the opportunity not to continue with business as usual, putting to a test what worked and what did not work, to embrace the new strategic orientations, to focus and to achieve results for the benefit of your regions and their citizens.
- The European Commission and border regions are strategic partners in this process. We know that you are committed to the European integration process also in difficult times, that you are committed to overcoming barriers, building trust and confidence across borders and developing and implementing joint development strategies.

In this sense, I wish you a fruitful discussion and a successful event.