



**European Committee
of the Regions**

SPEECH BY PRESIDENT TZITZIKOSTAS

"A ROBUST INNOVATION ECOSYSTEM FOR THE FUTURE OF EUROPE"

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EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS, BRUSSELS

Dear Commissioner Gabriel, Dear Director Malo, Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to welcome you here at the European Committee of the Regions.

Today, we welcome over 150 representatives from universities and research centres, national innovation agencies and start-ups, investors, and corporates, ministries, regions and cities from all over Europe.

This high level mix of institutional, corporate and academia knowledge coming from European, national, and regional level, shows how crucial research and innovation are to our present, and to our future.

Both as Governor of the Region of Central Macedonia and newly elected President of the Committee, have the pleasure to work closely with DG for Research and Innovation and also with the recently established European Innovation Council.

We all share a common goal: to ensure that Europe supports every local community, creates new jobs, drives economic growth, and accelerates the energy transition.

If we are to build a stronger future of Europe that delivers on these demanding challenges, we need to untap the innovation potential of every region and every city.

This is why the topic of today's conference on Innovation Ecosystems is on top of my agenda.

With our fellow Committee rapporteur, Markku Markkula, we have always agreed that we must:

First, ensure that no region and innovation ecosystem is left behind.

Second, tackle the "brain drain" of researchers and valuable specialists, and even reverse this trend, to "brain gain".

Third, in light of the economic crisis, to make our innovation systems more resilient to any future social and economic upheavals.



**European Committee
of the Regions**

And fourth, in the beginning of the new programming period, we have the challenge to work closely together, regional and local authorities with research institutions, in order to mix the funds of the European regional fund and the new Horizon programme, to boost innovation and upscale it for SME's and local economies.

So how do we achieve this, ladies and gentlemen?

First, we Go local: successful regional ecosystems are developed bottom up, involving all stakeholders, researchers and innovators, public authorities, businesses, universities and society.

Second we Simplify: we need to ensure there are synergies between national, regional and European funds, making cooperation easier and quicker, and make the best possible use of the human resources and knowledge locally;

Third we Invest: many of our regions and cities have embraced the opportunities of innovation, and will benefit from the proposed increased EU funding in programmes such as Horizon, Erasmus and Digital Europe.

Nevertheless, if we want to build an ambitious and innovative Europe, this can only be achieved through cooperation.

Now is the time to plan and implement smart actions and synergies between regional authorities, innovation ecosystems and SME's in order to boost innovation into our local economies.

Ladies and gentlemen, with the support of the European Commission, smart specialization strategies have boosted local authorities' innovation capacity. This shows that cohesion policy is irreplaceable if we want to spread innovation in our regions.

Just think: funded by 67 billion euros of EU structural funds, 120 smart specialization strategies would have brought 15,000 new products to market, would have created 140,000 new start-ups and 350.000 new jobs by 2020.

I am ready to team up with you, dear Commissioner, to support actions that will boost local economies and the entrepreneurial spirit in our regions and cities.

Our existing European Entrepreneurial Regions Award could be a good platform for this purpose, an Award, I am proud, my own region won in 2018.

European citizens hugely benefit from the results achieved in innovation and research, thanks to EU programmes such as Horizon 2020 (future Horizon Europe).



**European Committee
of the Regions**

In the same way, our people and local communities benefit from EU funds and policies which aim to reduce disparities, even in the field of innovation and research.

Let me be clear: we must avoid creating competition for resources between policies that bring results and make our people's life better. Stronger innovation policies must go hand-in-hand with a stronger cohesion policy to ensure no one is left behind.

I am concerned that the EU budget proposals currently being discussed by the EU member states, which include deep cuts to cohesion policy, will hold back the innovation potential of our regions, and therefore our Union.

Let me stress: if we want to achieve results, we must strengthen our cooperation, and we have to do it in very concrete way.

I will start by proposing clearly to the European Commission and the European Innovation Council: let us work closely together on the forthcoming proposals on the European Research Area and European Educational Area.

The European Committee of the Regions is ready to be the link with regions and cities all over Europe, and help define these new proposals from a local and regional angle.

I would also like to take this opportunity to invite you, Commissioner Gabriel, to one of our future Plenary Sessions to present these important communications.

I hope that together, we can also reflect on how to enhance funding opportunities to link and create stable networks of European-regional innovation systems.

I am worried that the present widening and ERA chairs' measures in Horizon 2020 do not address this major problem.

Furthermore, we must make full use of the existing cooperation between our Committee, DG RTD, and the EC Joint Research Centre in the field of research of innovation. We need to strengthen our cooperation on projects such as the Knowledge Exchange Platform and the Science meets Regions.

Finally, the European Committee of the Regions stands ready to support DG RTD to "Go Local" to improve the communication of its research results and achievements.

We will work intensively to involve our members and their cities and regions in the ongoing "Tour des Capitales" initiative, As well as support extending the Policy Support Facility from the national to the regional and local levels.

Thank you for your attention!