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**SPEECH BY THE CoR PRESIDENT, KARL-HEINZ LAMBERTZ**

**HIGH LEVEL CONFERENCE DEDICATED TO EU COHESION POLICY: POST-2020 PERSPECTIVES FOR**

**CONVERGENCE AND SUSTAINABLE REGIONS**

**8 JUNE 2018, PALACE OF CULTURE, SOFIA**

Prime Minister,  
Deputy Prime Minister,  
Commissioner,  
Ministers,  
Members of the European Parliament,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to start by thanking the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the European Union for organising this high-level conference on the future of cohesion policy.

The stakes are indeed high enough that ministers need to respond, and take the time to evaluate what impact the decisions they take will have on the ground in our regions and cities.

Secondly, I would like to highlight one obvious truth that too often goes unspoken in the current debate – the European added value of cohesion policy is not up for debate, for at least two reasons:

First of all, this European added value lies in the implementation of the European Union's objectives, that is to say promoting economic, social and territorial cohesion.

Convergence between Member States and their territories, social cohesion and territorial balance between urban and rural areas are all public goods of the utmost importance.

The second reason is that cohesion policy allows regions and cities to cope with major future challenges, including the "new challenges".

With regard to the reception of migrants, for example, it enables regions and cities to respond to the influx of refugees and migrants, and gives them the tools to help them integrate the new arrivals into society.

When it comes to climate change, cohesion policy has the largest budget in the EU to address the issue.



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One last illustration of this ability to handle new challenges: cohesion policy is helping cities and regions to adapt in response to the threat of terrorism and to security problems.

This capacity for action and this flexibility in handling new challenges are further reinforced by the draft regulations that the European Commission published on 29 May.

With regard to future challenges more generally, the next programming period will place much more emphasis on research and innovation, which should help cities and regions to adapt to the challenges of globalisation.

As you can see, there are a great many examples, and they do not leave much room for doubt as to the usefulness of cohesion policy.

Those who say that cohesion policy is outdated, or a policy of the past, are wrong.

Cohesion policy is already preparing our future as of today, and it will do so even better tomorrow as long as it continues to be based on the partnership principle, multi-level governance and place-based approaches.

These concepts are not just empty words.

Ideology, as well as experience – first and foremost that of local and regional politicians – have shown that this partnership-based methodology is the only way of solving problems where people live, not least in those areas most impacted by globalisation, where isolationism is particularly tempting.

For people on the ground, it is incomprehensible and disappointing that the European Commission should have proposed cutting the cohesion policy budget so drastically.

Moreover, these cuts are made even worse by the fact that the budget for the “rural development” pillar of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) has been pruned by a quarter.

That pillar has also been removed from the general regulation for cohesion policy. This, along with the attempts to renationalise the European Social Fund, could completely undermine the European added value of cohesion policy.

Another worrying example involves European territorial cooperation.

Looking at it objectively, we cannot deny the European added value of cross-border cooperation in Europe, or of macroregional strategies.

And yet, despite having promised to ring-fence programmes with high European added value, the Commission has reduced the territorial cooperation budget by 12%.



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The European Council and the European Parliament therefore need to reverse these cuts.

As part of the #CohesionAlliance, an initiative launched in cooperation with the six main European associations of cities and regions, the European Committee of the Regions will keep up the pressure on this subject.

So far, we have the support of more than 110 European regions, more than 88 cities and municipalities, 44 national associations of regions and cities and over 5 000 individuals throughout your countries – as we cover 97% of the EU population.

I am probably mostly preaching to the choir here but, if we could all rally round and convince the finance ministers in our own countries of the utility of cohesion policy, our fine words today could be transformed into actions that will benefit the public and the places where they live.

At the European Committee of the Regions, we will get out there in your cities and regions, in cooperation with the national associations of cities and regions, to ensure that the demands we are making on behalf of Europe's regions do not get lost in the shadows of indifference. The future of Europe depends on it.

Thank you for your attention.

**(864 words)**