



**European Committee  
of the Regions**

**STATEMENT AT THE ROUND TABLE: ENSURING SYNERGIES BETWEEN  
COHESION POLICY AND THE RRF THROUGH STRENGTHENING THE  
PARTNERSHIP WITH LOCAL AND REGIONAL AUTHORITIES**

**CoR HIGH-LEVEL FORUM ON REGIONAL RECOVERY AND RESILIENCE  
(EXTERNAL BUREAU MEETING)**

**24 SEPTEMBER 2021, SEŽANA, SLOVENIA**

[863 words]

Dear chair, dear ministers, dear colleagues,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide the views of the NAT commission in this panel. I would also like to thank my colleague Isabelle for the good cooperation with the COTER commission for giving the rural dimension its appropriate place in Europe's cohesion policies.

It has been said many times and it remains true: A crisis is a turning point, inviting us to make bold decisions. For several years, we have seen a growing gap between the attention paid and the funds available to urban areas and to rural areas. With the recovery ahead of us and the digital and green transitions ongoing, we need to decide if we want to continue seeing the number of farmers declining, young people leaving their rural home

for lack of job opportunities and public services, the digital economy concentrating in big cities, pollution and overheating increasing in the cities etc. Or do we want to build on experiences of those people who during the Covid crisis discovered the many opportunities in rural areas that have broadband access, a digitally competent administration, offer smart and clean mobility solutions, and ensuring short food cycles for themselves and for cities in their surroundings?

I am very happy that the European Commission has chosen for the second approach in its long-term vision for rural areas that was adopted just before the summer. The CoR has been asking for such a strategy since several years and received the Parliament's full support from 2018 onwards.

After all, we are talking here about the chances and the potential of the 137 million Europeans living in rural areas. And much more than that: We are also talking about the non-rural citizens who benefit from everything that rural areas have to offer: from food production to renewable energy to building material, and to tourist destinations.

The challenge that lies in front of us is how to turn the long-term vision into real policies and real investments. Unfortunately, the Commission adopted its long-term vision only after the funding programmes until 2027 were finalised.

As our rapporteur and President of Andalusia, Mr Moreno, said to the EU ministers of agriculture at their informal meeting earlier this month: we need to make up for this late timing, using funds like cohesion and

Horizon, the agricultural funds and, last but not least, the recovery and resilience funds! Every Member State and every region asking for EU funds should build the rural proofing into their investment strategies.

For this to happen, we need to empower rural communities. Every study shows that if European policies are not based on the regions, if they do not grant these areas sufficient resources to develop their own policies and experiments, then we will not achieve the results that we expect.

This is why, for example, the CoR put forward amendments to the Common Agricultural Policy that aimed to enable regions to continue playing their role as rural development management authorities, and prepare and manage CAP strategic plans. We have seen with satisfaction that Parliament and Council agreed to include this point in the final legislation. Management that is as close as possible to the ground ensures that the problems and potential of regions are better taken into account and that European policies are more effective.

Of course, the CoR will be supporting the Commission on the way to its proposals for the next financial framework. However, we cannot wait until 2028. We need to close the gap between rural and urban areas now!

Cohesion policy has helped to make inequalities between EU Member States and regions decrease. Nevertheless, sub-regional disparities tend to increase, creating what ESPON calls "inner peripheries". According to ESPON, these neglected territories represent 45% of European regions in which Euroscepticism is also crystallising. The geography of EU discontent is very speaking in this sense.

The overall budget for rural development will fall by almost 8% compared to the 2014-2020 programming period. It will therefore be necessary to do more with less. As a result, we need to maximise the efficiency of these limited budgetary resources by getting the regions closely involved.

And we need to ensure that the rural dimension will be part of the investments under the Recovery and Resilience Funds: It is good to see that digital infrastructure is a priority for the national recovery plans. Yet, if we do not enable farmers, entrepreneurs, teachers, associations, sports clubs, local authorities and other public services to use this infrastructure, these massive investments will be lost. In this respect, I fully agree with Commission president von der Leyen who invited leaders to put digital skills on top of their agenda in her State-of-the-Union speech last week.

The Covid crisis has shown that not actively fighting against the logic of agglomeration and the agglutination of populations in cities was not the right solution during an epidemic. And it will not help us in achieving our environmental and climate goals.

To achieve our aims and overcome the crisis we are experiencing, we will need to mobilise all our regions. The added value and potential for creativity and innovation offered by rural areas is considerable, but their contribution to inclusive, sustainable and smart growth has to date been underexploited.

Thank you for your attention.