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337 Regions, cities, municipalities and interregional organisations demand a strong renewed EU Regional Policy after 2020!

Brussels, 28th September 2016, Highly visible and strong signal of the regions at an early stage before the first considerations on the multiannual financial framework 2020ff: common declaration signed by 332 political representatives of regions from 22 member states (71,5% % of EU population) and 5 interregional organisations demand the continuation of a EU Cohesion Policy for all regions after 2020; handing-over of the books of signatures to the EU institutions by initiator Governor Dr. Erwin Pröll as a mandate of regions and local authorities in a Europe of the regions.

EU Regional Policy (technical term: EU Cohesion Policy) has been created in 1986 with the Single European Act to contribute with concrete projects in the regions to the strengthening of economic, social and territorial cohesion. In the current financial period 2014-2020 it amounts to 351,8 billion €, 1/3 of EU budget. Besides the European overall added-value these financial means are used in the regions, cities and municipalities for coherence, structural changes, climate change, energy transition, creation of jobs, stimulation of innovation, economic growth and in the less-developed areas especially for improving infrastructure. Roughly 70% of the funds bring benefits to the citizens and enterprises in the less-developed regions and 25% in the transition and more-developed regions. Additionally, about 3% are used for the co-financing of projects for cross-border cooperation and there is still additional funding for the youth employment initiative as well as for the overseas territories and those with particularly low population density. A survey has shown that 70% of the population who is informed about EU Regional Policy sees this policy area as a central EU policy area.

The basis for the projects in the regions are the decisions about the EU multiannual financial framework, on which discussions have already begun and which will be more concrete at the end of 2017 and planned to be completed in 2018. These decisions are taken by heads of government in the European Council and by the European Parliament. The regions are not entitled to take part in the decision. They can only contribute through their institution, the Committee of the Regions. The Regional Policy as an own EU policy area could be compromised. The influence of regions could indirectly decrease in the longer term. Europe would also be driven from afar in regional and local political decisions.

That is why 332 political representatives from regions and local areas from 22 EU member states – statistically 188 NUTS 2 regions from a total of 276 NUTS 2 regions of Europe – and 5 interregional organisations have joined a Europe-wide initiative of the Lower Austrian Governor Dr. Erwin Pröll. The initiative is about making together a clear commitment for the prolongation of EU Regional Policy after the end of the current financial period with a common declaration entitled “A strong renewed Regional Policy for all regions post 2020” in the run-up to the decisions of the Council and the Parliament about the financial perspectives 2020ff. The signatures have been gathered at the highest political level as a sign of the high importance for the regions. The initiative brings all categories of regions together.

The highlight of the initiative is the 28th of September. A conference entitled “The contribution of EU Regional Policy to manage future challenges” will take place in the Committee of the Regions as the institution of the regions in presence of over 300 regional representatives from the European member states, including approximately 25 regional presidents and 9 regional vice-presidents. Afterwards the book of signatures consisting of over 300 pages will be handed over to the EU institutions, notably to the President of the Committee of the Regions Markku Markkula, the EU Commissioner for Regional Policy Corina Cretu, Ambassador Peter Javorcik, Permanent Representative, on behalf of the Slovakian EU-Presidency as well as the Chair of the Committee of

Regional Development of the European Parliament Iskra Mihaylova during a festive ceremony in the Representation of the Free State of Bavaria in Brussels.

Lower Austrian Governor Erwin Pröll noted that: „It is a particular honour, but especially also a clear sign that so many regions, authorities and additionally interregional organisations have joined this Lower Austrian initiative as equal partners.

The signatures and the travelling of the so many regional political representatives from all member states to Brussels is the visible proof for the extraordinary importance of EU Regional Policy for all regions. Considered in a democratic Europe, both of these elements are binding on both EU legislators, the Council and Parliament in their future decisions on the multiannual financial framework 2020ff. In return, we regions are disposed to contribute actively to a better efficiency of EU Regional Policy in the interests of European added-value in the formulation of the legislation on EU Regional Policy. – BUT: the EU Regional Policy for all regions must remain as a central policy area in a Europe of the regions!”

President of the European Committee of the Regions, Markku Markkula, thanked Lower Austria for the initiative noting that, "By attracting support from 188 regions representing nearly three-quarters of the entire EU population, this Declaration sends a clear message: cohesion policy must continue to lie at the heart of European Union and benefit all regions. A better Europe also means being open and committed to change which is why we need to positively reform cohesion policy after 2020. The CoR will continue to work tirelessly to ensure it is strengthened, made simpler and continues to be Europe's innovation and investment tool in the next EU budget"