

Opening Session of the XVI Conference of the Presidents of the Outermost Regions (Tenerife, 28 October 2010)

Caption: This speech by Johannes Hahn, Commissioner for Regional Policy, emphasises the involvement of the EU in the outermost regions and announces an increase in the budget allocated for these regions.

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SPEECH**Johannes Hahn**

Commissioner for Regional Policy

Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort

Opening Session of the XVI Conference of the Presidents of the
Outermost Regions

Tenerife, 28th October 2010

Presidents,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to be here today.

This is the first time I participate in one of your annual Conferences.

It is, however, already my second visit to the Canary Islands as Commissioner.

I was here in May for the signature of the joint Memorandum.

It is wonderful to see you all again and I would like to thank President Paulino Rivero for his kind invitation and warm welcome.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me start by congratulating the Government of the Canary Islands for its excellent work during the last 2 years in Presidency of the Outermost Regions.

Since I have been in office, my contacts with representatives of the Outermost Regions at all levels have been extremely intense: in a short period we have worked together on the joint memorandum of the OR, and the First Forum for Outermost Europe, and I have enjoyed many bilateral contacts.

All that is without taking into account the very steady rhythm of meetings at technical level, joint information seminars and so on.

This intense cooperation shows the quality of the partnership which has been developed over the years between the Outermost Regions, their Member States and the European Institutions.

I am a bit sad to say good bye to Saint-Barthélemy! Of course I respect its decision and wish it well.

And I would like particularly to welcome Ahamed Attoumani Douchina, President of the département of Mayotte.

His presence with us today shows the will of his département to prepare its future accession to the status of OR well.

My staff is following Mayotte's change of status very closely and you can count on my support for the smoothest possible transition.

I am also pleased to see Mr Neves, Prime Minister of Cap Vert, whose presence here today is particularly welcome against the background of the very live debate on how to deepen links between the Outermost Regions and their geographical neighbourhoods.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This event takes place at a pivotal moment for Cohesion Policy.

Implementation of the Europe 2020 strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth and its flagship initiatives is getting underway.

Just one week ago the Commission presented its proposal for a budget review and in less than two weeks I will present the 5th Cohesion Report which will spell out further my vision for the future of Regional Policy.

Take a look at the budget review and you will see the crucial role foreseen for Cohesion Policy in generating European economic growth, and ensuring solidarity.

You will also see that I am determined to build a more results-orientated Cohesion Policy that not only spends EU funds efficiently and effectively, but makes a demonstrable contribution to tackling the main challenges we face.

To achieve the greatest impact, we will need to concentrate on fewer priorities.

But rest assured, I will ensure that you have the flexibility you need to adapt programmes to your particular needs.

The budget debate has only just begun but it is already clear that due to the current economic climate, difficult choices will have to be made.

I will be fighting hard for a budget that covers all regions, with adequate resources to support key investments for a more prosperous future.

I will also be working hard to protect the funding for your regions. The outcome will of course depend on the overall budget

But you also have an important role to play.

I will be your advocate, but help me to make the best possible case for you.

The Outermost Regions are carrying out good projects but to argue for funds to be maintained in times like these, we need to be able to demonstrate that current funding is fully used. Absorption is the key to the next few months

Help me to help you by remaining vigilant and ensuring that absorption rates are as high as possible.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

the Outermost Regions are as important an asset for the European Union as the European Union is for the Outermost Regions.

I am grateful for your latest joint contribution to our common reflection, entitled "Towards a successful integration of the Outermost Regions".

This document presents a comprehensive, serious and in-depth analysis of the current challenges as you seek greater integration in your local neighbourhoods.

It flags the difficulties that can arise in the implementation of territorial cooperation programmes and their articulation with other sources of funding.

The document raises many important issues that deserve serious examination.

You put your finger on some weaknesses which it is time to address.

Some problems will be difficult to solve in the short term, but we should tackle those that we can, and the key will be closer coordination.

My staff is already in close contact with our colleagues responsible for your neighbours in the ACP countries and the EDF funds to ensure co-ordination.

I propose that we should set up an ad hoc working group bringing together all the DG's concerned, with your representatives in the new year to examine the points raised one by one, and reflect on how we can strengthen cooperation in future.

I am ready to examine how we can strengthen Commission involvement in existing "coordination committees" and get the EU Delegations more engaged.

And I believe, if deemed necessary, the difficulty of access to financing in third countries could at least partly be solved by more frequent use of the 10% of ERDF programmes that can be used outside the EU.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Treaty stipulates that your special needs should be taken into account, and I intend to make sure they are.

You know that the Commission has many times shown its commitment to catering for your particular situation, whether through the special allocation or the arrangements under Posei in the field of agriculture or in the studies we are carrying out on growth factors and demographic and migratory trends in your regions.

These should help us to better understand your specific needs.

I could point to the recent seminars to help you optimize the use of EU funds for research and innovation, or many other actions designed to help you succeed.

But, we are all living in a changing context and we need a new European strategy for your regions.

This strategy should include measures on the one hand, to mitigate or offset the permanent handicaps of Outermost Regions and, on the other, to promote their advantages and opportunities.

It should ensure coherence of the different EU policies affecting you, and make sure that you draw all the benefits of the Europe 2020 agenda.

The Memorandum submitted last May provided valuable input and contains a large number of interesting concrete proposals to move forward in the EU strategy for the OR.

We are carefully studying the proposals and consulting with other Commission departments to feed them into the new strategy, which I hope we can publish in 2012 in the light of the new budget.

We have a lot of work ahead of us.

We need a strong and ambitious partnership.

The Canary Islands leave us in a good position for further cooperation and now pass on the baton of the Presidency to La Martinique.

I wish President Serge Letchimy and his team every success and promise that, as ever, he can count on both my support and that of my services.

Thank you!