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"The role of the regions in Plan D"

Europe: So close yet so far?

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am delighted to be here today with you at the "Best Practice Conference on Communicating Europe", and I should like to thank the Assembly of European Regions, as well as our host, the Representation of the Land of Hessen in Brussels for organising this important event.

I would like to share with you some thoughts about the special role that the regions have in communicating Europe, in particular in the context of the Cohesion Policy and the new communication approach undertaken for the period 2007-2013.

In the last years we have seen the increasing role of the "going local" approach, promoted by the European Commission, which initiated the Plan D initiative in 2005. In October 2007, the Commission published a Communication "Communicating Europe in Partnership". The Communication emphasises the importance of bringing more visibility to EU actions and demonstrating their utility to citizens. The regional and local authorities are mentioned as the ones, who individually or organised in associations, can play a crucial role in promoting communication on Europe. The "going local" approach is very much visible in Cohesion Policy, for which I am responsible.

The recent reform re-positioned 2007-2013 cohesion policy as one of the main engines in the pursuit of the economic modernisation of the Union, through which we can enhance the competitiveness of our territories and businesses. If we can help our businesses to become more competitive, they will grow and they will employ more

people. And if they do so, then the European Union's economy will grow faster and will face up to the challenges we expect to see from the globalising world.

Let me now turn to what is different and new in this period. Cohesion Policy now touches **all regions** in the EU, which are covered either by the Convergence or the Competitiveness and Employment Objective. In addition, many are covered by the third objective, European Territorial Cooperation. Remember that this was not the case in the previous period when eligibility was far more geographically specific. This has created a new communication opportunity, to present cohesion policy as a policy for all regions as well as being the main vehicle for the growth and jobs agenda.

Today I would like to share with you some of my thoughts and experiences acquired during my time as Commissioner for Regional Policy, where I have a special responsibility for **engaging with citizens**. From the beginning of my mandate, I have put great emphasis on visiting regions and projects and meeting the people, who manage, take part in and benefit from European cohesion policy. I am therefore in constant contact with public authorities and stakeholders at the regional and local level where the key decisions and investments are made when it comes to promoting jobs and growth, social cohesion and environmental sustainability in Europe.

It is also here, at the regional and local level, that a prime responsibility for informing both beneficiaries and the general public lies. Whether communicating about the cohesion policy in general or on a single project, the key is to highlight the European Union brand on it. This does not in anyway minimise the role of the local promoter. On the contrary, this places the project in the right context and recognises the European origin of the funds. Indeed, Cohesion Policy is the perfect tool to demonstrate that the European Union is both serious and effective in creating growth and jobs, in improving the quality of people's life. It is also the policy that is present almost at every corner of the European cities and territories. Therefore it is a rich source of information for regional and local media, information that is relevant and thus easy to understand for the European citizens.

For 2007-2013, communication is not only a key factor in the success of programmes but it is also an integral part of their management. It is not by chance that the Court of

Auditors stressed to us already five years ago that a programme with good information is most likely to be a well managed programme. Information and communication must be designed into programmes from their outset, so that cohesion policy can use fully its potential for communicating Europe. This however, cannot be achieved without active participation of local and regional level, and consequently, without active participation and involvement of local and regional media.

The objective is to **involve citizens** in policy substance and to increase ownership by generating debate and providing a channel for citizens' concerns. Cohesion policy is very close to the citizens and their concerns and it is implemented with the direct involvement of local people. Cohesion policy projects in the regions are among the most visible benefits of EU membership and you hold the key to making sure that the citizens actually get this vital piece of information.

The new legislation puts particular emphasis in this period also on so called **transparency** issues concerning the use of the European Funds. For the first time there is a regulatory requirement that complete **lists of beneficiaries** must be published in the Member States. In my view, it is one of the most important information and publicity issues in the new period. I hope they will become useful tools also for all those who will have an easier access to projects developed in their regions and cities. Also, due to the requirement for the Managing Authorities to organise at least one major information activity per year, we believe that there will be plenty of interesting topics related to the cohesion policy and Europe, to be picked up by regional and local media.

To be effective, communicating cannot be done in isolation. In other words, we need to cooperate, exchange information, network and support each other in our common goal: to engage people in the policy which is essential to the progress of the Union and which delivers visible results in the regions. Networking is, in this context, essential. Since the beginnings of the previous programming period we have been promoting networking as being a vital **element** in the field of communication.

For this period, we have set up a Community network of communication officers, called Inform. The first meeting will take place on 17 June. Apart from the exchange of information and getting inspired with innovative communication ideas, the participants will look at the ways of presenting EU-funded projects to the media. Also, my colleagues shall speak about the possibilities of linking communication officers in the Member States and the Commission Representations, and through the representations, with regional and local media, with whom the representations have working contacts.

As I can see from my numerous visits to the European regions, and also from the launch events to which I and my colleagues participate, there are already numerous interesting communication practices taking place in the Member States and regions. For example in Greece I have seen a witty TV spot, promoting a very serious document, called the Greek National Strategic Reference Framework for the period 2007-2013. It is my intention to give more visibility to similar and different communication actions at the European level. We introduced a specific category for the 2009 edition of the RegioStars, a media award for the best TV or radio spot promoting Cohesion policy. We hope this will be an interesting piece of information to regional and local media, since it is through you and your channels, that those TV or radio spots are distributed.

I am happy to see that the Assembly of European Regions launched yesterday the second edition of the Communicating Europe Award. One of the categories is "Engaging regional media on European issues". Let us cross our fingers that one of the Cohesion policy related information campaign would be awarded here.

Before moving to the last part of my presentation I should like to tell you about the recent Eurobarometer surveying the perception of the citizens on EU Regional Policy. Over 27,000 EU citizens, 1,000 in each Member State - were questioned on their awareness and views concerning the EU Regional Policy. The survey included as well a set of question on the preferred media for EU information and confirmed – no surprise – the importance of TV as the first source in most Member States. Interesting however, that in the Nordic countries and Germany, regional newspapers

outweighed both, TV and national newspapers as first-choice information sources indicating a clear task to adapt EU information to national and local contexts.

Let me highlight some of the results of this Eurobarometer survey.

We had good results on the aspect of "awareness of EU Regional Policy" and found that

- In all 27 Member States, about half (49%) of the respondents were aware that the EU supported their city or region, a higher awareness degree as compared to e.g. Common Agricultural Policy or themes such as "Galileo".
- A large majority of citizens supporting the policy's rationale and method, namely the fact that the poorest regions receive support in order to catch up and that the regional and local levels are actively involved, including the civil society. In addition, there is widespread support for EU Regional Policy to deal with the most important political challenges such as climate change, globalisation and demographic change
- 70% of those being aware of EU Regional Policy are convinced that it has a positive impact on the development of their city or region.

We hope that the findings of this survey will stimulate Member States and regions to tell the good story EU Regional Policy has to tell. We will of course use these findings as some sort of a benchmark in order to measure which impact the transparency rule for EU Cohesion Policy will have and to develop them further if need should be.

Those results show that local and regional media are well suited to provide information on the European Union filtered by the local and regional dimension and particular information needs of the citizens, resulting from their specific living circumstances.

To summarise:

- First, cohesion policy is the perfect tool to communicate Europe in local contexts. It is not just a lip service, it is a policy of results with impact on people's lives, managed in partnership with regional and local actors while proving that the EU cares and matters.
- Second, communicating cohesion policy has been made an obligation for all regions and beneficiaries including a more media-oriented and pro-active approach; regional and local authorities are not free "to fly the EU flag" or not, they have to do it. They have to speak to the general public and to the media on an annual basis and they have to tell where the EU money goes and which impact that has.
- Third, the fact that the means and rules are in place may lead to good and transparent information but not necessarily produce good communication. Presenting an engaging story in the regional and local media is just the beginning. Involving local actor for common objectives and organising two-way communication channels and full transparency is the final goal. Not as a means in itself but for better results of EU and public investments.

My services and I are deeply committed to facilitate the work of communication officers as well as regional and local media, to encourage exchange of contacts and good practice between various groups and levels of communicators. Also our information tools, such as the Inforegio website and the Panorama magazine, are evolving towards being more interactive and allow for an active input from the regional and local level.

I am counting on you, that you will not follow the typical media rule, being: "good news is no news". Cohesion Policy has plenty of success stories to tell, about people whose lives have been positively changed. Such stories give "human face" to the European Union, which is indeed much needed to bring it closer to its citizens.

Thank you for your attention.