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Celebrating 20 Years of Territorial Cooperation and looking beyond 2013

**High-level conference in the framework of Belgian Presidency
dedicated to the future of Territorial Cooperation**

Opening Speech

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Tournai, Belgium

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear Friends,

I understand that it is not by chance that we are here, in this beautiful city. The city of Tournai, the venue of this conference is very symbolic for our subject as it is located at the centre of the cooperation area for the INTERREG France-Wallonia-Flanders programme, it is also at the heart of the territory of the first European Grouping for Territorial Cooperation, the Lille-Kortrijk-Tournai Eurometropolis.

It is extremely useful to stop from time to time for a while and look backward on what we have done and achieved so far. In particular in moments when we

are about to decide on the future. Looking at post 2013 European territorial cooperation without assessing its first 20 years is of course, unthinkable. We know how much has been achieved. We have spent in the last years many hours on evaluating cooperative actions within European cohesion policy. And we know their European value added.

Nobody would doubt today that in the future we will need more than ever cooperation going beyond national and regional borders. European cohesion policy provides a tailored made frame for such cooperation across European territory.

I am convinced about European value added of cohesion policy, but its third objective, the European Territorial Cooperation (ETC) provides exceptional potential for European cohesion - economic, social and territorial.

I am sure many of you will point to still existing weaknesses of this strand of cohesion policy, discuss bureaucracy, barriers to good absorption of funds. We need such discussions because we are aiming at a better system and delivery in the future.

Let me just thank everybody for the contribution to the development of the territorial cooperation and allow me to focus on the future.

My main message is that in the years to come Europe and its citizens will need more territorial cooperation.

Without any doubt our duty, as European institutions - Commission, Council, Parliament, Committee of the Regions, - is to make sure that territorial cooperation after 2013 will be easier, will be better and will be more clearly linked with strategic objectives of the EU. We should make a strong commitment to simplify this strand of the policy, to ensure the full exploitation of the potential of the EGTC, to broaden the scope of interregional cooperation, to open the transnational strand of the territorial cooperation to macroregional approach. I suggest as well that we look carefully at what has been achieved, also in terms of lessons learnt within the framework of Regions for Economic Change. There is an enormous wealth of good practice there, however, my feeling is that links with main stream programmes have not yet advanced as we had hoped for.

I know that we are not yet at the stage of deciding on the budget for the policy. Let me say, however, that in my view we have not reached with the allocation for 2007-2013 the level of critical mass that could allow us to fully exploit the potential of territorial cooperation. The current period (2007-2013) is a learning process for member states that joined in 2004 and 2007. It is therefore reasonable to assume that a 50% increase of the allocation for the ETC for the next multiannual framework would allow to better exploit the potential of cooperation.

Practitioners in the area of territorial cooperation know that to achieve a visible change a certain minimum in terms of aid intensity is necessary. I

believe that increasing the budget for territorial cooperation would lead to better exploitation of internal market potential and better use of territorial cooperation to abolish existing barriers.

I am also convinced that opening boldly mainstream programmes of both Convergence and Objective 2 to cooperation across regions, in particular in the area of innovation, would increase the added value of the policy. We should move towards more cooperation from both sides. Acting on both sides, i.e. combining further improvement of the functioning of Objective 3 with the eligibility changes within mainstream programmes - could be a solution.

Without any doubt linking the ETC with the delivery of European objectives, including those of EU2020 would strengthen the contribution of the cohesion policy to Europe's growth and competitiveness and job creation.

In an obvious way the ETC works towards removing barriers to the European single market and enhancing the mobility of people and services. But it also facilitates improvement of administrative standards. We all here know how much we have learnt from each other through working together for the last 20 years across borders. And I continue to have the suspicion that sharing and learning remains an untapped potential of the cohesion policy.

So, we should make a major step forward in placing the ETC within the strategic development objectives. We probably all would agree with this. Technically, the best way to ensure the strategic dimension could be through

linking the ETC with cohesion policy strategic documents. And it would effectively raise its value added.

I said before that linking ETC programmes with mainstream programmes could be more efficient if the opening towards ETC was also envisaged on their side. We could even propose obligatory cooperation with other regions for some projects, in particular innovation oriented.

I truly believe in the possibility and even the need to better relate macroregional strategies with the transnational cooperation strand of the ETC. We could start with converting the existing macroregional strategy areas into the zones of the transnational cooperation. This would allow to promote bottom up approach in this strand of the ETC and to continue the full coverage of European territory with the transnational cooperation strand of the ETC.

The territorial cooperation programmes have been evolving through the history of the cohesion policy. They benefit today from the framework of a fully fledged objective. The challenge now is how to ensure a maximum flexibility that multiregional programmes need while making them at the same time better linked with European strategic priorities and policy frameworks. This is not an easy combination. But this is not a trade-off relation and there are probably several ways of achieving it. I would consider the option of a specific regulation truly responding to specific needs of this type of programmes, and providing for flexibility between and also within each of the three strands.

Clearly there is a need of a better approach to the way allocation of funds is handled and to the complexity of the delivery system. Here, a breakthrough is needed. I am also sure that the review of the EGTC will generate new ideas on both establishing and functioning of this instrument. We had a good discussion on it in the EP a week ago. There is already quite a long list of good ideas on how to make it more efficient and supportive for those involved.

I trust also that the European Commission will analyse deeply the functioning of the ENPI, and its effectiveness for the cooperation at external EU borders, the reasons of delay in launching the "grande voisinage" and the efficiency of the pre-accession instrument in preparing future member states to function within the framework of EU structural policies. I trust that there are lessons learned through the IPA instrument that can be of value to the ENPI.

Yes, the need for more co-operation concerns also our external border, the greatest divide in terms of territorial cohesion. Lower levels of GDP per head in the regions bordering the Union translate into a strong migration pressures and untapped economic opportunities. The best way to address both issues is more and better cross-border cooperation.

Europe is famous for its diversity. Integrating European diversity is first and foremost about geography – the Union covers the territories ranging from frozen tundra to tropical rainforests, from mountaintops to remote islands, from global cities to historic hamlets. But there is more to it as each territory has its own combination of cultural traditions, natural resources,

infrastructures endowments, capital and labour. And to this we shall add intangible factors - institutions, skills, local identity and creativity, trust and sense of belonging.

Ultimately, this diversity translates into the unique way our economy is organized. Economic activities on the European territory are much less concentrated – in terms of settlement pattern – than elsewhere in the world. Our metropolises are smaller and the network of small and medium cities is much better developed. This reflects not only a long history of urbanisation and organic growth, but also a certain European "way of life" that values sustainable development, protection of natural resources, and cultural traditions.

While regional diversity is undoubtedly a very desirable characteristic of the EU, regional disconnection is a less appealing prospect. The resources are unevenly distributed across European territories. In 2007 on average 40 % of people lived further than a 30-minute drive from a hospital and 43 % lived more than one hour's drive from a university. Household access to broadband internet is on average 15 percentage points lower in rural areas than in urban ones. Access to the energy network is uneven due to geography - for example on small islands, or for historical reasons as in the Baltic States. If you loose your way after crossing the national border because of the different signposting, it will not help you that before you had not been stopped at the border crossing. We have the European Territorial Cooperation programmes which are designed to address these issues. But they are not any more only

about abolishing barriers, they are increasingly about generating added value and exploiting opportunities. The key question is how to turn this diversity into competitive advantage, how to unleash all these economic opportunities throughout the Union and ensure that every territory is better connected.

Thus economic development and globalisation give an increasing rationale for more co-operation, both within the Union and across its external borders. This implies a more strategic European Territorial Cooperation objective, with reinforced budget and governance tools, with better fine-tuned cross-border programmes, suited to the different border contexts as well as bottom-up transnational programmes based on larger functional areas with shared problems, identities and history.

Our prime objective should be to develop territorial cooperation further. We need more interregional cooperation, we also need enhanced cooperation between the regions within one country. This is the shortest way to strengthen territorial cohesion.

Regional and local authorities highlight that we need a flexible geography. This means we need to be flexible when delineating the territories in which our programmes are implemented. In other words, we need to target the policy at functional areas. We would need for example to sometimes look inside cities – at neighbourhood level – and sometimes beyond the boundaries of the cities – at metropolitan level – and involve decision makers

at these levels where needed. It is also clear that the intra-regional dimension of challenges must be taken into account in every future design of the policy.

This flexible geography does not stop at national borders. Cooperation across national borders is of clear European added value. Many contributions from Euroregions and macro-regions cooperating within transnational programmes emphasise this. They recall the significant untapped potential that lies within cross-border labour markets or transnational clusters and the barriers still existing in the EU internal market. They point to the importance of further work on implementing EGTC, as well as further enhancing its potential. We can make cooperation not only more strategic but also thematically-focused, especially to foster interconnection activities and to better coordinate national regulations along the borders. We can foster pan-European networking programmes on territorial issues and their connection to mainstream Operational Programmes, e.g. further develop the "Regions for Economic Change".

Territorial cohesion added in the new Treaty to the two goals of cohesion - economic and social, strengthens the demand for and the role of territorial cooperation. It is a task for all of us to make territorial cooperation work for Europe, its citizens, its strategic goals. Actors of change Europe has, can be found at all levels of its governance. Territorial cooperation has a particularly strong potential to mobilize local and regional actors and partners at all stages of program design and implementation.

So, my final word. Let me express my hope that this conference will give some answers to the questions concerning the future of Territorial Cooperation and I am looking forward to the outcome of the debate later in the afternoon and tomorrow. The time for providing answers has come.

Thank you for your attention!