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*Panel debate “Regions and the Future of the European Union”*

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It is a good feeling to be again in this room I remember so well from the times when I was coming here as Commissioner for regional policy. I continue to be deeply convinced that local and regional authorities provide a unique link between citizens and EU institutions, between citizens and Europe. Your strength comes from this indeed unique proximity to citizens and from the habit of involving a variety of actors in decision-making. This tradition of engagement has been always promoted by the programs and projects within the regional, or if you wish, cohesion policy of the Union. And I know there is a wealth of good practice in this field.

Your debate about the future of Europe takes place in times when Europe is living better times than five - ten years ago, still facing many challenges and investing in participatory democracy, in the too often missing link between citizens and Europe. But also in people to people relations where again regions and local communities provide the best possible platform.

Challenges Europe has to cope with come from the global world, but also from Europe itself. We are facing the unprecedented process of a member state leaving the Union. Its consequences go down to all levels of European governance, have impact on people's life. I think it is underestimated. Maybe you should look at it more carefully, think long term, prepare. Try to reduce any damaging effects. Look also at differentiated integration, which is a fact of life in the European Union and cuts across regions, increasing value added of macro regional strategies.

External challenges include migration and refugee crises, but also climate change. None of these challenges can be faced without involvement of European regions, local authorities and civil society. You have been active on the level of regions and cities in addressing the consequences of and opportunities coming with climate change. There are also numerous examples of the responsibility and long term approach in your involvement in integrating refugees into your local communities.

EU has always been about change, demanded either by internal pressures, often unfinished business left if political will was not strong enough to complete initiated reforms or by global world, generating continuously new challenges and instabilities. Changes have led to new policy areas. Enlargements have brought new demands and opportunities. It is also true that demographic change, making Europe an increasingly aging continent, to become around 2030 the oldest one, has been over the recent years adding new dimension to migration policy, hence becoming a source of one more demand of change. And an opportunity. It is rather often better understood at regional and local level than at national one.

European economy has been faced, more strongly recently than in the past, with the global competition and the need to invest in its competitiveness. If we look at the global world, it is true that a certain global rebalancing toward Asia has been with us for a while but still 40 % of global trade is the flow between US and EU, western firms continue to outperform others, and six out of ten top global firms are either American or European. The challenge, however, is and will be about who sets the global standards. Quite recently we lost the chance to make a major step forward in this direction when negotiating TTIP. The opportunity has been lost. So is Europe fit for this global challenge of standard setting? Are the European regions fit for the future?

There are regional and local development disparities in Europe. There are new layers of inequalities coming. More socially sensitive Europe is a must. But regions themselves can respond to demands rooted in inequalities. Regional level is where the inequalities are felt strongest. And the action at your level can contribute to a stronger cohesion at people-to-people level. European regional policy has facilitated the catching up process across Europe, at regional and local level. So regarding structural cohesion, we have moved forward. However, what weakens the efficiency

of regional policy is weak political cohesion. We see national leaders not respecting the fundamental values of the Union which is not really helpful to say the least in bringing citizens closer to Europe and getting them engaged in the European decision-making. In this time of lack of political cohesion, your role and responsibility must not be underestimated.

We have done a lot over the last years to make Europe capable to benefit from the global technological revolution. Today technological innovations drive social, economic, political change. In particular, the digital wave transforms our life. Promoting skills, creativity, consumers' power makes us better fit for the future. This technological change facilitates also our link with citizens. We can improve their life in the areas of health, education, housing, energy, mobility. This technological change makes it also easier for the national interests to be fully compatible with European and global ones. And this change can be even more powerful if regional and local potential is mobilized, if you become an active agent of change.

I am also convinced that you can do much more than national governments and European institutions to win public support for globalization. It is about both wealth and security. It is also about proving to the people that European integration is about making globalization work for them. European firms, technology and in particular ICT based, even the small ones at local level must go global to be competitive.

It is true that during the last decade a range of crises has buffeted EU. From economic and financial to migration and refugee to the disgraceful way of doing politics. Those crises affected wealth and security. They affected people's trust in political elites. They affected cohesion among people and among states. I have already said that the political cohesion has been weakened. In some member states, we can see European scepticism of political elites. While economic and financial crises have led to joint mobilization for reforms, migration and refugee crisis has been a test for solidarity. It has not been passed by several member states. We continue to hear fake news, lies, false promises. Irresponsibility of political leaders have created negative attitudes to migrants among European citizens.

Politics being done in a disgraceful way in some of the member states remains a challenge with far reaching consequences. Social media politics leads to the erosion of the authority of political leadership. Leaders become small while we need them big. Post rational politics brings risk to stability. It undermines credibility of politics. Lies and false promises undervalue politics, devastate authority. This erosion of politics leads to the erosion of values. And when values are lost we are lost. In rebuilding bottom up Europe, bringing back trust and solidarity your role is fundamental.

The Treaty of Lisbon has reinforced formally and institutionally the role of regional and local authorities in the European Union and strengthened the role of the Committee of the Regions. The European Parliament and the Committee of the Regions have introduced on practical level instruments for cooperation in order to reinforce the democratic legitimacy of the European Union and contribute to the Treaty objective of pursuing territorial, social and economic cohesion in the Union. So yes, we have invested in our cooperation but we know that more can be done. The challenges facing Europe impact on states, on regions, on cities. The impact may vary according to geographical location, economic development, social infrastructure, etc. Solidarity, continuing maintaining to help regions lagging behind or facing particular challenges remain as important as ever. Problems regions face deserve to be heard, their role in finding solutions is recognized.

Finally, let me reiterate that a transparent and inclusive decision-making process is essential for the democratic legitimacy of the Union. Union institutions and bodies have and should have clearly defined roles and act in accordance with their competences. But European value added comes also from the cooperation. Also, between European institutions.