

First Forum on the Outermost Regions (Brussels, 27 May 2010)

Caption: On 27 May 2010, the European Commission publishes a speech made by Johannes Hahn, Commissioner for Regional Policy, at the first Forum of the Outermost Regions, in which he focuses on the role and potential of these regions in the area of EU governance.

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SPEECH/10/268**Johannes Hahn**

Commissioner for Regional Policy

First Forum on the Outermost Regions

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

First Forum on the Outermost Regions (RUP)

Brussels, 27 May 2010

Presidents,
Ministers,
Excellencies,
Honourable Members [of the European Institutions],
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Welcome to this, our first high level Forum of the Outermost Regions. It is a great pleasure to see the regions represented here at the highest level, and to welcome so many of you who have travelled to Brussels to exchange ideas on the value and the future prospects of these unique parts of the European Union.

And, I would like to thank the Spanish Presidency, France, Portugal and the regions themselves for their close cooperation in the preparation of this event.

I hope that today will prove to be a milestone in the evolution of relations between the EU and regions which are, perhaps, too little known and too little understood in mainland Europe. The high level of this Forum, and the registration of around 500 experts, encourages me to hope that we can make this a turning point. I hope that the regions themselves will see today as proof of our strong commitment and solidarity with them. And I hope that all of us, from the European Institutions, Member States and others, will take away a renewed sense of the very special contribution that these outlying regions can make.

Each of the regions is in its own way an asset to Europe, whether in the richness of its natural environment, its culture, the particular skills of its population, or its scientific and technological capacity.

Our joint challenge is to realise the potential of the Outermost Regions, embracing them as full participants in the activities of the EU, and at the same time as symbols of the diversity that is the EU's hallmark.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Forum takes place at a pivotal moment for the European Union.

The financial crisis has put us to the test, and Europe is showing that it has the determination and the political will to withstand even the fiercest challenges. The new Europe 2020 strategy is designed to place our economies on the road to recovery and to ensure that they keep pace with the rapid economic, social and environmental changes that none of us can avoid, wherever we live on the earth's surface. New competitors are entering our markets, climate change poses new imperatives for action, and swiftly developing technologies require a new flexibility from people everywhere. There is no room for complacency, and we will ensure that the Outermost Regions benefit from the thinking behind EU 2020 as much as any other part of the EU.

European Regional Policy will be crucial to the success of the EU 2020 vision. While the EU needs an overarching strategy to unlock its full potential, implementation needs tailor-made solutions – and these can only come with the expertise that Europe's regions can provide.

As we approach the end of the current financing period, there is a very active debate on the future of Regional Policy. My vision is not of a system of hand-outs but of a strategic investment policy, an indispensable element of modern economic planning. Our watchwords will be focus and flexibility. Focus means a close alignment with the objectives we have identified in the EU 2020 strategy. Regions should be the engines of the competitive and sustainable growth we all want to see – but flexibility means they should be allowed the freedom to determine for themselves the best way to attain these goals.

One important lesson to be learned from the global financial and economic crisis, is that no region has a guarantee of prosperity for eternity. This has only strengthened my conviction that Regional Policy should cover all regions of the EU, and not only the poorest. All regions need to adapt constantly to global challenges and in Regional Policy can play a crucial role in facilitating the transition towards a more innovative and sustainable economy.

We need to rethink the way we address our support to regions at different stages of economic development.

Those that lag behind must continue to receive support to help them modernize and reinforce their human capital.

In this regard, we also need to set up a fairer transition mechanism which ensures similar treatment of regions in similar situations. Such a system should allow regions to organise their programmes effectively in order to avoid the abrupt reduction of resources in the final years of the programming.

We are aware of the limits of GDP as a measurement of development and well-being but it remains the most stable, robust, comparable measure of socio-economic development at regional level.

Ladies and Gentlemen

In my short time as Commissioner I have already been able to visit one of the territories of the Outermost Regions, and to start building excellent working relations with the ministers of the three Member States to which you belong. I hope, over time to be able to visit more of your regions, and to get to know them.

I am committed to ensuring that Regional Policy supports you in turning your so-called handicaps to advantage. Your physical location, and your proximity to other partners in your neighbourhood pose challenges, but also give you a special value, that together, we must ensure is fully realised.

Nobody can prejudge the next financial perspectives, but rest assured, I will be a very active advocate on your behalf. You also have an important role to play in ensuring a positive outcome: it will be essential to be able to demonstrate that under the current financial framework, optimal use has been made of the instruments and opportunities provided by the Union. Your commitment to efficient and timely implementation of current programmes matters not only for today but for your future prospects too.

Ladies and gentlemen,

While the Outermost regions are full partners in the EU, they have specific needs that need to be taken into account.

I recently had the honour of attending the signature of the joint Memorandum in Gran Canaria. This presents a comprehensive, serious and in-depth analysis of the current situation in the Outermost Regions which will feed into our reflection on the future of Cohesion Policy.

The Commission is ready to develop an approach that reflects both the specific needs of your regions, but also their unique assets. As you know, this has been the thinking of the Commission in its reports both in 2007 and 2008.

We share the view expressed in the Memorandum that we have both to help the traditional sectors like agriculture, fisheries and tourism in their modernisation efforts, AND develop new areas of activity with higher added value, such as IT and green technologies. And as the Memorandum makes clear, we need to support the deepening of links with the geographical neighbourhood of your regions as well as with the EU.

During this Forum, the discussions and exchange of views at the round tables will allow us to further reflect on these important points, and analyse together where further action is needed.

Perhaps the key recommendation of the Memorandum is that special treatment of the Outermost Regions should be available when circumstances require.

The new Lisbon treaty continues to provide a special recognition of the Outermost Regions. This guarantees that they will be treated not only on an equal footing with all other regions, but that there is a legal basis to adjust policy to their needs when necessary – as we have already done on a number of occasions in Cohesion Policy, taxation, state aids, agriculture, fisheries, customs, trade, and research and development. The POSEI regime and the special top-up allocation of €975 million in structural funds are examples of how your unique situation is taken on board in Brussels. You are part of the European family and many benefits flow from that.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I do not like to speak of the handicaps of the Outermost Regions. The natural beauty of these territories, their potential for renewable energies, their wealth of biodiversity, and their scope for cementing special relations with third countries means they have many great strengths.

I hope that this Forum, which is just the first in a series of regular meetings in this format, will allow us to work together to build on those strengths.

Let me add, that the President of European Commission, José Manuel Barroso, regrets that due to other commitments, he is not able to be with us today, but he has recorded for us this message: