

Speech of Ms.Iskra Mihaylova on urban agenda

10.09.2015

Honourable Ministers,

Dear Commissioner CRETU,

Ladies and gentlemen,

We are all aware that nowadays is a time for great challenges for the entire European Union. The challenges include climate change, the consequences of the economic crisis, demographic change, and migration. Social inequalities, unemployment, low growth rates, environmental degradation are direct consequences of these challenges.

European cities are places where these problems emerge due to accelerated urbanisation trend. At the same time towns, cities and functional urban areas are and will remain innovation hubs, laboratories for the solutions that can deliver smart, sustainable and inclusive growth.

There is in the 2014-2020 financial perspective a clearly marked position for the cities in the Cohesion Policy, as vehicles for growth and jobs. Cities are vital to achieving the general objectives and specific targets of the "Europe 2020". This requires a clear involvement of the EU level in urban policy making. Urban development is influenced by EU sectoral policies and, to a large extent, the Cohesion Policy, which is one of the tools for increasing the competitiveness of European cities.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I am convinced that we as policymakers have a great responsibility to future generations. As such, we must pool our efforts and deliver the right mix of ambitious policy measures to address the challenges facing urban areas in Europe. For almost two decades, we have been discussing the need to strengthen the urban dimension of our policies and we have accumulated an impressive number of declarations, policy processes and other documents.

Yet, the time of half-measures and uncertainty should now come to an end. I believe we need to step up to our responsibilities and find the best possible policy

responses to the complex challenges facing cities and polycentric urban areas – not only today, but in the future, too.

I doubt that a minimalistic approach to an EU urban agenda - one that simply concentrates on understanding how our policies affect urban areas and on increasing synergies – will be sufficient to respond to the challenges of tomorrow, which range from information management to resource allocation.

Rather, we need a more ambitious approach. An approach that will transpose our Europe 2020 objectives into urban objectives and actions aligned with the diverse realities of European cities. An approach that encourages the national level to work closely with cities on setting targets and implementing strategies.

On the one hand, urban areas are coming under increasing pressure due to the shifting global economic situation, technological progress and infrastructure challenges. This means the only way to provide effective support is to clearly earmark resources and adopt a coherent, transparent and integrated approach to sustainable development.

On the other hand, the emergence of mega-city regions or functional urban areas is producing a growing mismatch between existing administrative structures and the real-world evolution of urban areas. Economic, social and environmental issues are increasingly crossing the boundaries not only of cities and regions, but also of states.

I therefore firmly believe that the European Parliament, together with the other EU institutions, national governments and local and regional actors, has a key role to play in shaping the contours of a new urban paradigm. We have a responsibility to deliver meaningful legislation that enables cities to convert national and EU policy objectives into concrete actions.

And indeed, the Committee on Regional Development of the European Parliament is negotiating a set of measures and recommendations that go in this direction.

First, the members of the REGI Committee are convinced that **we need a strategic approach with a long-term outlook**. The EU has already agreed upon its strategic goals within the scope of the Europe 2020 strategy. As cities will be the main drivers in achieving these aims, we believe that the territorial dimension of this strategy should be strengthened. The revision of Europe 2020 this year offers an ideal opportunity to reinforce the urban focus.

Second, we believe that **the EU needs a new working method to improve coherence across EU policies, and boost synergy between EU, national and regional efforts**. It is obvious today that a growing number of policy initiatives that impact on urban areas overlap with each other, and lack clear rationale and added value. To avoid this, the urban dimension should be mainstreamed throughout all relevant policy areas. Harmonised data collection on urban issues and efficient communication and information exchange strategies can have a very positive impact in this regard.

In this context, we would also like to see a **stronger involvement of the local and regional levels in the conceptualisation and adoption of EU and national policies impacting on urban areas**. A bottom-up approach is essential here, as one of the main difficulties is designing policies that deliver real results on the ground.

A good example in this context would be the partnership principle, adopted as part of cohesion policy reform, which enables efficient cooperation between various levels of government.

Third, **smarter regulation will be a further essential aspect of the urban agenda**. If we want to efficiently address the challenges our territories are facing, we have to make sure our policies are fit-for-purpose and do not add unnecessary complexity and administrative burden, as this could prevent local and regional actors from achieving tangible results.

Fourth, **the relevant EU, national and private funding should be combined in the most efficient way**, and made available to local and regional beneficiaries to

support programmes and projects aimed at producing long-term benefits to society. In this context, I would like to underline that a number of new cohesion policy instruments are available to address complex territorial challenges. In the case of the Integrated Territorial Development instrument, for example, take-up among Member States has been impressive. However, when it comes to the bottom-up Community Led Local Development instrument, Member States seem to be somewhat reluctant and more cautious in cases where local authorities lack the administrative capacity to carry out the required development strategies.

Yet Member States need to be more open to delegating tasks to urban authorities during the programming and implementation of EU funded policies and programmes. It is essential to understand that the EU Urban Agenda cannot succeed without greater participation of local and regional government across the entire policy cycle.

Last but not least, the Committee on Regional Development supports the idea that a meaningful urban agenda should **focus on a limited number of priorities with proven European added value.** We are confident that the European Commission, with the help of local and regional stakeholders, can identify the key strategic challenges which can be tackled by an effective and efficient implementation of policy initiatives.

Dear Colleagues,

I am convinced that the European Parliament will adopt its resolution, most probably by September 2015, delivering a strong political message on the need to find the right instruments to implement the EU Urban Agenda.

To conclude, **I would like to reiterate the importance of finding a balanced yet effective way of more thoroughly mainstreaming the urban dimension in all relevant EU policies.**

Clearly, the focus should not be on doing more, but on taking what already functions well and making it work even better. As such, we believe that the EU Urban Agenda needs robust political leadership not only at the European Commission but also at the intergovernmental level, as strong political will is the key to moving forward.