

Speech of HRK-President Margret Wintermantel at the conference „Looking behind the metaphors: How to build stairways to excellence in EU regions?“, in the European Parliament, Brussels

Dear Ms. Hübner,
Members of the European Parliament,
Ladies and gentlemen,

First of all, I would like to thank you, Ms. Hübner, for hosting this event and for your warm and inspiring opening remarks.

It is a great honour and pleasure for me to give a brief introduction to today's conference together with my colleague from the Conference of Rectors of Academic Schools in Poland, Prof. Katarzyna Chalasinska-Macukow. I think I do speak for all three organizers – the national university representations from Poland, Austria and Germany – when I stress how excited I am to see so many participants gathered in this room today. You are bringing together at this place the much needed expertise from various professional backgrounds and different regional perspectives in Europe. Therefore please do not shy away from actively contributing to today's discussions!

When addressing together the topic of European cohesion policy we are in fact talking about a policy field which has become one of the trademarks of European Union actions. Not only because of its higher visibility (in contrast to many other areas in which EU governance, albeit effective, is hardly perceived by its citizens) but also because of its sheer importance. Cohesion policy is a crucial trigger for

regional growth and, furthermore, our main policy tool for ensuring social and economic cohesion as well as equal opportunities throughout all Member States. In other words: It is the social adhesive and fuel for the European Union. And the role of European Cohesion policy is even more important given the current economic climate which is, as we all know, dominating the headlines in recent months. In order to get Europe's economy back on track and to make sure that no European Member State or regions falls behind, we have to make effective use of it.

Against the background of the financial and economic crisis the European Union has made the right decision in placing the emphasis of its strategy for the current decade, the EU 2020-strategy, on research and innovation. It is going to be the instruments of the EU cohesion policy, mainly the structural funds and the cohesion fund, that serve as the primary driver for innovation together with the framework programmes for research and innovation. And they will even more respond to this goal in the future, according to the EU.

For universities in Europe these settings in European policy are of utmost importance. As initiatives for regional development are supposed to go hand in hand with innovation-related targets, universities are necessarily the most important stakeholder in the process. As the sole protagonist on the scene, they have a longstanding tradition, often comprising several centuries, of incorporating research, higher education and innovation under one roof. Hence, they ensure that research which meets highest international standards can create knowledge spillovers in the regional surroundings. Or to put it in less economic terms: Universities directly benefit

the regional economy through education activities and cooperation with the private sector.

The fruitful role of universities is not restricted to being a mere driver of regional development. It is equally important when it comes to the question how regional development should be oriented. "Smart Specialization" strategies, suggesting a development philosophy that focuses primarily on the endogenic capabilities in which a region has an edge over its competitors on an interregional or international stage, seem like a very promising path. Here, once again universities play a crucial role since they act as an interface between the international and regional level. Therefore they should not be viewed as being only at the receiving end of regional funding activities but should instead be acknowledged as a valuable provider of expertise when important decisions on regional development priorities are to be made.

Ladies and Gentlemen, universities in Europe have actively contributed to the discussions on the EU cohesion policy from 2014 to 2020. The German Rectors' Conference, together with the two other organizers of today's event (CRASP and Universities Austria) as well as the Hungarian Rectors' Conference, have set up a working group earlier this year to prepare a common position. The result was a joint declaration on the future of EU cohesion policy which has been signed by all together 13 national university representations from all parts of Europe. Bearing in mind the present talk about the European Union being divided in north and south, "new" and "old" Member States, unable to reach a consensus due to national egoism, it is certainly not without a bit of pride when I am referring to our declaration and the group of its signees. It shows that at least the university sector in Europe speaks with a strong and unified voice and is able to make a clear statement on

how it sees the future of research, innovation and cohesion policy: Excellence must remain the core criterion for the research framework programme and its successor "Horizon 2020" as the striving for excellence is not a pure policy choice but belongs to the very nature of science itself. Cohesion policy, on the other hand, must enable those regions and institutions, still unable to compete at the highest level of science and research, to undertake the necessary capacity building measures in order to catch up.

Ladies and Gentlemen, here is where the famous metaphor of "stairways to excellence" comes into play. Indeed, one of its main characteristics seems to be that everyone knows exactly what it will look like, but no one actually knows how to build it. I do not know if we have among us today the highly skilled carpenter who can solve the puzzle. I am quite sure, however, that the different speakers, who will take the floor over this morning, political decision-makers as well as practitioners from the field, will each have some valuable information and perspectives to contribute.

But before, I would like to pass the word to my fellow colleague from the Conference of Rectors of Academic Schools in Poland, Prof. Katarzyna Chalasinska-Macukow. Katarzyna, you have the floor.