



European Rural Parliament delegation meetings with the Estonian EU Presidency and coming Bulgarian EU Presidency representatives, Cabinet of Commissioner Hogan, Cabinet of Commissioner Cretu, Cabinet of Commissioner Gabriel

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Summary compiled by Kristiina Tammets using comments and notes from Vanessa Halhead and Kirsten Birke Lund.

Main aims of the meetings were:

- To introduce the European Rural Parliament movement, the European Rural manifesto and the Venhorst declaration messages including new proposed LEADER/CLLD implementation model for 2021-2027;
- To discuss the renewal of EU policy instruments regarding rural development and European Structural Investment Funds framework for new programming period;
- To explore mutual cooperation possibilities while designing policies and ESI Funds framework for the future.

EU Council Presidency and European institutions were represented by Mr Seestrand, Mrs Lees (Estonian Permanent Representation), Mrs Eskidarova, Mr Petkov (Bulgarian Presidency representatives), Mr Ryan, Mr Tynan (DG Agri Hogan's Cabinet), Mr Scheele (DG Agri), Mr Stavropoulos (DG Regio), Mrs Ujupan (DG Digital Economy and Society).

European Rural Parliament (ERP) delegation consisted of Staffan Nilsson, (President of European Rural Community Alliance, ERCA), Goran Šoster (President of PREPARE Partnership for Rural Europe, PREPARE), Kristiina Tammets (President of European LEADER Association for Rural Development, ELARD), ERP coordinators Vanessa Halhead and Kim Smedslund, ELARD Council member Kirsten Birke Lund.

Main messages from the European Rural Parliament (ERP)

ERP delegation emphasised that rural communities are increasingly willing and able to take initiative in strengthening their own local economies and social structures. They can thereby contribute to the EU goals of smart, sustainable and inclusive growth and they need the effective support of EU, national governments and civil society organisations. At the different meetings during the day **ERP delegation highlighted following issues:**

- Continued commitment to Cohesion Funds, in support of regions with fragile economies;
- Continued regional and rural development programmes, focused on strengthening rural economies and sustaining rural services and infrastructure;

- Increased focus on the needs of young people in rural areas, so that they can play their full part as drivers of rural development;
- Recognition of the key role of small towns and smart villages, as focal points for innovation in rural regions;
- Increased investment in measures to combat climate change and to mitigate its impact on rural regions, and to realise the strong contribution which rural areas can make to generate renewable energy, promote circular and eco-economies and provide long-term protection for natural resources;
- Support for citizen-led local development and the action of civil society organisations in all areas – rural, coastal and urban – which need development;
- A rethinking and expansion of the role of LEADER, as the crucial link between government support systems and citizen-led local development in rural, coastal and urban areas;
- A combined EU Reserve Fund for Community Led Local Development, to be earmarked for the objectives set by local development strategies defined and implemented by local action groups in rural, coastal and urban areas. We proposed that this Fund should receive 15% of all EAFRD, ERDF, ESF and EMFF money in the new programme period starting in 2021 and be matched by national and regional programmes in member states on a mandatory basis;
- An accelerated process of rural development in the countries of South East Europe, supported by the EU, involving civil society and making formal use of LEADER;
- A wider programme of capacity building and exchanges between rural stakeholders and governments in all European countries, including extension of the Erasmus+ programme.

Main messages from the EU institutions

- For the next programming period a new dynamic should be given to rural areas through **innovation, digitalisation, smart solutions**. DG Agri said that they work very closely with other Directorates to create real synergy with different policy areas for the new Common Agricultural Policy (CAP);
- The messages of **Cork 2.0 declaration** are very important for DG Agri for future policy design. Farming is the bedrock of vibrant rural areas, but the increasing value is coming also from the 2nd pillar implementation. Regarding rural development the new initiative “**Smart villages**” is developed jointly by different General Directorates. Commissioners already speak about it publicly and it shows that this initiative having a great interest.
- **Young people, generation renewal and willingness to undertake rural businesses** is also one priority but it won't be easy to achieve if the quality of life in rural areas diminished (cohesion at local level) and land availability is made difficult. Synergies and partnership could be found in two-way communication, sharing practices in this respect;
- **LEADER is recognized as an effective tool for rural development**. DG Agri is the biggest defender of LEADER method and disseminates this good practice among other Directorates. LEADER is important to continue in the next period;

- **Rural proofing** which ensures that the needs and special considerations of rural communities and areas are routinely and objectively considered as part of the policy development process is considered as important, especially on DG Agri's side;
- **Cohesion policy is a good investment** and a very cost effective for Member States. It has been proved that Cohesion policy has **triple effect** because every single euro brings back 3 euro to Member States. Cohesion policies have created 1,2 million jobs. This is all to strengthen local economies and Member States should use this possibility and invest even more resources through Cohesion policy;
- It has been discussed at EU level that the overall direction is to enable **more freedom and flexibility to Member States** to design their special measures and instruments while implementing EU Policy. European Commission is setting up objectives and criteria to be fulfilled and Member States will have to find the actions. **The subsidiarity opens possibilities for more place-based solutions.** New financial instruments are also thought as cheap loans and flexible funding mechanisms;
- The future Regional Development Policy will concentrate more than before on rural areas by utilizing their potential. This is important **to find a good solution for urban, rural and coastal through cohesion policies.** Overlapping of tasks should be eliminated. Big challenges like climate change, migration, demography are to be dealt with. Transport, broadband, social inclusion are considered as very important. "Smart villages" is one of the priorities. Small cities or towns, which lack capacities and funding for regional or local development, were also discussed;
- Regarding digital agenda a rural toolkit is under preparation. **Broadband development should be discussed and advocated at Member State level.** DG Digi was very positive on LEADER and its potential. "Smart villages" is of interest of DG Digi as well. A dialogue with Committee of Regions (CoR) and the regions is ongoing. All regions should be on board. In February or March 2018 DG Digi will open a call for Member States to establish Broadband. The Cabinet was interested in cooperation related to the Western Balkan area (digital angle).
- Opinions were different regarding one **earmarked fund for CLLD at EU level.** The final outcome is not sure, especially how Member States will handle this issue. Discussions on CLLD and the % from ESI Funds budget are ongoing. It was noted that the higher support would lead to more auditing. General question is how brave the politicians are to **give more resources to bottom-up, to local initiatives, to citizens to decide?** It is open on how Member States will choose between the different funds (single fund, CLLD %, etc);
- Dissemination of the directions of new agricultural and rural development policy has started. The CAP communication is out; MFF (Multiannual Financial Framework) discussions are ongoing. **New EU budget introduction is expected in May 2018.** There is pressure between Agri, Cohesion, Regional policy. Main target is to avoid duplication of tasks. How will the resources be distributed with new challenges (digitalization, migration, Brexit, etc) is still

unknown;

- In order to get influence on future policies the **timing is very good** at the moment to bring forward **messages from grassroots**. The advocacy should be broader and involve important partners as European Economic and Social Committee, Committee of Regions, European Parliament through committee chairs and MEPs, especially before the upcoming elections, prime minister cabinets and finance ministers in Member States. It was suggested to initiate **civil society vote** (collect 1 million votes) in order to support bottom up messages.

