



Република България
Вицепрезидент

Ladies and gentlemen,

The report, which I had the privilege of being appointed as rapporteur, was an initiative meant to show our support for one of Europe's biggest treasures - its mountains. Cohesion Policy is one of the main investment tools of the European Union and it can do a lot to support mountains, which feature not only rural areas but also large urban centres. Indeed, mountains that are often only rural areas are highly dependent on the area around their foothills and nearby lowlands, which is why Cohesion Policy can do more than it currently does for their development.

Our report aimed to include mountainous regions in cohesion policy through several goals. Firstly, we asked for an agenda on mountainous regions. Such an agenda would allow a better overview of their development needs, how they can be achieved and how cohesion policy can be active in this. The mountain agenda would be the first crucial step towards acting on article 174 of the Lisbon treaty, where it is said that mountain regions, among others, deserve special attention in EU actions leading to the strengthening of economic, social and territorial cohesion. Given time, it may become the heart of an EU strategy on the development of mountainous regions.

In addition to the mountain agenda, existing instruments that work in mountain areas need to be re-examined. Many policies of the EU, such as LIFE and Natura 2000 are active in mountain regions, but do not have their own mountain dimension. Such a dimension would allow more focused and better targeted funding, which would achieve a maximum impact. We also asked for the allocation of specific funds under Cohesion Policy towards mountain regions. These funds would be a very small percentage and are not meant to cover the development needs of mountains. Instead, we aim to lead the Union into paying more specific attention to mountain regions and taking note of their potential. It would also mean that member states themselves have to afford mountain regions specific attention, in order to benefit from the full amount of Cohesion funding.

Mountains across the EU are very different, but they share some qualities on which policy at an EU level can focus on. They are rich in natural resources and have many advantages over lowland areas – the potential for high-quality sustainable agricultural, their high quality of life, richness in sustainable energy sources and potential for tourism. Many special trades and crafts can only be found in these regions. Mountains are a crucial source of one of the most important goods in modern civilization – drinking water. The sustainable use of these opportunities means that mountains can flourish within the EU, if we afford them the appropriate attention. On the other hand, they suffer from specific obstacles as well, that prevent them from achieving their potential. Transport and infrastructure is difficult in mountains, as is ICT. Farmland does not allow profitable mass production, so they have to rely on high-quality production. The environment of mountains is very important to their potential, so all development must be done in light of preserving their natural resources. Small and medium enterprises need to overcome these challenges if they are to survive in a mountainous region, which means that businesses may prefer the lowlands and big cities where infrastructure is better and easier to develop. These special opportunities and needs mean that Cohesion Policy funding needs to have its own mountain dimension, much like how the outermost regions do.

Possibly the biggest problem mountains face, however, is the demographic one. Mountains across all of Europe are sadly losing their population. As more people flock to the lowlands where big cities can usually be found, even the richer mountain areas often cannot cope with the demographic issues. Without people, the potential of the mountains may be lost and along with it the rich history and culture of these areas. The Rhodopes in my own country share this issue with the Alps and both regions are making efforts to keep young people in the mountains. This goes hand in hand with better education. Vocational education is very important for mountain regions. We also need to provide better opportunities for young people to stay, because if depopulation stays at a similar level to what it is now, we risk losing one of our biggest treasures – our mountains.

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