

European Alliance Group

Hold Firm, with spring around the corner, the hope of recovery is not far behind

by Cllr Kieran McCarthy, President of the European Alliance group

Last year was a very challenging one for many citizens across our regions and cities and our hearts go out to those who have lost loved ones or suffered from the pandemic. Our group sincerely thanks all those frontline staff for their courage and for their continuous and tireless work to make sure we are as safe as possible and that our critical services still prevail. Our hope for this year is that the delivery of the vaccine will bring us to the road to recovery.

Despite the challenges of the day, our work at political level continues, and as a group we have put a focus on the theme of recovery in our most recent online public seminars. We held two very interesting seminars – one on tourism recovery, and the second with the head of EUROCONTROL Eamonn Brennan on regional airports and how they can drive recovery. Both seminars concluded that now more than ever there is an urgency for EU funds to reach local and regional governments so that important projects enabling recovery can be delivered quickly.

We also welcome the last minute trade deal with the UK but I am very saddened by the wish of the British Government not to continue with Erasmus or Interreg. There are so many opportunities with such EU programmes. We now need to make the best of the trade deal and build a new partnership with our friends across the water. Our members are active in this regard on the COR-UK Contact Group.

Looking forward to the Conference on the Future of Europe, the CoR needs to actively participate. I believe that we need to take forward the recent



Hold Firm, Street art mural, Cork by artist Kevin O'Brien, recently commissioned by Cllr Kieran McCarthy

CoR opinion on creating a permanent dialogue with citizens. The high-level group chaired by Herman Van Rompuy will help us formulate some ideas for the Conference.

Nevertheless, we, as a group, remain at the forefront of the debate championing local and regional government to be at the heart of the EU project.

Kieran

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EFA MEPs and European Alliance Group members commit to work on key priorities

On 13 January 2021, the European Free Alliance (EFA) Party and Bureau and European Alliance Group members held a joint meeting to discuss priorities and common actions over the coming months and years.

Welcoming the meeting, Cllr Kieran McCarthy highlighted areas such as the Future of Europe, citizens' dialogues, cross border cooperation as well as continued dialogue and exchange with the devolved Nations in the UK.

President of the EFA in the European Parliament Jordi Solé welcomed the ideas for enhanced cooperation

and said that it will extend step by step but clearly the first priorities should be the Conference on the Future of Europe as well as subsidiarity.

Nanette Maupertuis from Corsica said that the pandemic had brought to the fore the economic and social crisis in Europe's regions and that this urgently needed to be addressed.

The President of the EFA, Ms Lorena Lopez de Lacalle, who initiated the meeting said that it was hugely important to work across EU institutions as this will benefit people in our regions. Dialogue and cooper-

ation is the way forward to build a Europe of all peoples, she added.

The EFA is a group of 47 political parties across Europe that promotes the right to self-determination and supports people's aspirations to choose their own political future, including independence, greater autonomy or linguistic justice and cultural recognition for minorities.

Several EA members belong to the EFA political parties such as ERC (Catalonia), Femu a Corsica (Corsica), N-VA (Flanders) and FNP (Friesland).

"We regret that the European Commission did not follow up on the wish of over 1 million citizens who signed the Minority Safety Pack. It is hugely important that we protect and promote our regional and minority languages and cultures."

József Kóbor, member of the Pécs City Council and EA group's CIVEX coordinator

Brexit: A welcome trade deal but in reality a 'lose-lose' for both parties

by Karl Vanlouwe, Member of the Flemish Parliament and EA group's representative on the CoR-UK Contact Group

The Christmas Eve deal brought a palpable sense of relief in Brussels and London and also across the most affected regions in Europe including my own Flanders. The EU and UK were facing a cliff-edge economic tumble but this was avoided for which we are all thankful. For Northern Ireland the deal is particularly welcome. It is true however to say that no trade deal is as good as EU membership and our companies will have to now complete lots of additional red tape; those involved in fisheries a drastic reduction in quotas and there will be restrictions on our citizens and even our pets.

That is why, during the meeting of the last CoR-UK Contact Group held on the 11th January I called for an increase in the Brexit Adjustment Reserve fund as I do not believe that there is enough in the €5 billion to compensate for the huge barriers they will now need to face in the new trading arrangement. Flanders is looking at a potential loss of 6,500 workers alone and it is worth noting that we have 16,000 companies who trade with the UK. I would also wish to see continued cooperation in particular with the devolved Nations in the UK and the creation of a North Sea Macro Region as well as a twinning programme for Port Cities.



Mr Karl Vanlouwe

CIVEX: Participatory democracy and fostering old links with the neighbourhood EA priorities for 2021

by József Kóbor, EA group's CIVEX coordinator



Mr József Kóbor

In the coming weeks and months, we hope to see the beginning of the long-awaited and overdue Conference on the Future of Europe. In this context, EA group will particularly focus on the pro-

motion of the concept of a permanent dialogue with citizens led by local and regional authorities which we hope will be piloted during the Conference and then used as a permanent mechanism to involve citizens in the agenda setting and decision making on EU policies.

Also, I personally and we as a group will continue insisting on closer cooperation with the EU's enlargement and neighbourhood countries and especially on renewing historical connections, cultural and economic, between regions within the EU and those currently outside of it. Coming from a border county myself, I find it inexplicable that, while Europe and the world are going towards more integration, many links with our neighbourhood which existed just decades ago now appear cut.

We very much regret that the European Commission did not support the citizens' initiative on the Minority SafePack ignoring both the will of the citizens and the support of the European Parliament. The Minority SafePack was focused on the promotion of minority rights, language rights, and the protection of their cultures which are fundamental in reflecting and respecting the richness of our diversity. We will not give up either this citizens' initiative or the other one under way, which is about "Cohesion policy for the equality of the regions and sustainability of the regional languages and cultures".

We strongly believe that these initiatives are not about identity politics, but about the well-being and European self-awareness of European citizens.

COTER: Future of cross border cooperation high on the agenda

by Nanette Maupertuis, EA group's COTER coordinator



Ms Nanette Maupertuis

Challenges to cross-border cooperation have become more visible with the COVID-19 crisis as local

and regional authorities face obstacles to cooperate across borders.

In 2021, the CoR intends to start a reflection on the long-term future of cross-border cooperation, that will entail a number of actions and that will result in the CoR's official contribution to the Conference on Future of Europe.

In the meantime, programmes under the new Interreg will continue and new ones will see the light. We welcome the fact that, thanks to our efforts, valuable programmes such as Interreg Europe and Urbact will continue in this programming period.

However, it is unfortunate that, despite their high added value, some will disappear as a result of

Brexit. It will be paramount to ensure benefits of historical collaboration are not lost and fruitful collaboration is maintained, possibly creating EGTCs with UK local authorities and a North Sea macro region.

Our members will continue advocating for balanced territorial development, which also takes due account of the challenges of insular and mountainous areas. We call for targeted policies on urban and rural areas, and for a successful implementation of the Urban Agenda.

Finally, in 2021 members will contribute to the discussions on the role of transport and smart mobility in achieving the Green Deal objectives.

ECON: Recovery will be driven by cities and regions and our SMEs

by Tadeusz Truskolaski, EA group's ECON coordinator



In the ECON commission, we will focus on the policy areas which have a high priority on the EU agenda and a direct impact on local and re-

gional authorities, especially in the aftermath of the massive socio-economic crisis engendered by the Covid-19 pandemic.

In my opinion, it is of utmost importance to ensure an effective and geographically balanced recovery, while not setting aside our ambitions for sustainable development.

As representatives of our local and regional communities, we are responsible for leading the economic recovery strategies that must address the global sustainability challenges in a coherent way across different policy fields. We are responsible for our local communities and their development and this is a part of the development of a strong and coherent indus-

trial policy so crucial for building a resilient, innovative and competitive Europe. We need to support our local entrepreneurship and SMEs. All policies at different levels should follow a place-based approach, focused on supporting SMEs and on strengthening and connecting regional ecosystems, to drive innovation and new business, and job opportunities linked to a carbon-neutral and circular economy.

We also face a new situation with Brexit and the first year will be crucial with the new trade deal and a new chapter in relations with the UK. Our group will support all work at the ECON commission related to monitor the development of the situation.

ENVE: Shaping the Green Deal from the bottom up is 2021 top priority

by Andries Gryffroy, EA group's ENVE coordinator

Following the adoption of the 2021-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework, 2021 will be marked by the adoption of legislative proposals which will put the EU on track to meet climate and energy goals.

The European Commission "Fit for 55 package" will cover several areas, from buildings to renewable energy and energy efficiency, emission trading, to name just a few.

Following up on the opinion on the regional assessment of the Green Deal, the EA group will continue advocating for a bottom up approach in the

implementation of the Green Deal, calling for systematic participation of LRAs in the design and implementation of national energy and climate plans as well as in Recovery and Resilience Plans.

The transition to a climate neutrality will happen only through engagement of subnational governments and when their actions and contributions are fully taken into account.

Ahead of 2021 COP in Glasgow, we intend to promote the essential role of local and regional authorities in "bridging" the emissions gap and meeting global climate goals.



NAT: Post-pandemic recovery is a priority and it must include our rural areas

by Dariusz Strugała, EA Group's NAT coordinator



The pandemic has changed our lives profoundly. COVID-19 has created uncertainty and stress for all of us. At the moment, in NAT commission we are dealing with several opinions due to be adopted in 2021 and linked with different health

issues. The COVID-19 crisis has put public health higher on our agenda.

The pandemic has added an additional dimension and urgency to the ambition for a rural revival in regions across the European Union. Rural areas, towns and villages have been decimated by the reduction of demand for agricultural products with the closure of bars and restaurants as well as the demise of tourism across the EU. They have also been more vulnerable as they have limited access to medical centres, hospitals and transport, as well as poor or non-existent access to internet. The digital divide has especially impacted education and business. In order to increase the attractiveness of rural, mountainous and island areas as

a place to live and work, it is necessary to boost their recovery by better coordinating Common Agricultural Policy, ESI funds the Recovery and Resilience Facility and other relevant EU financing programmes.

The CoR has for a long time asked for the needs of rural areas and areas with specific geographic conditions to be recognised and addressed by a proper EU policy. We had an opportunity to call for Rural Agenda last year and as a Representative of the biggest local Polish association of rural areas I am very happy to see the real interest now from European Commission to deliver it. The local authorities are waiting the concrete proposal from the European Commission in 2021.

SEDEC: Research, Innovation and Social Economy are the answers to the post-pandemic crisis

by Mikel Irujo Amezaga, EA group's SEDEC coordinator



Given the challenges we faced in 2020, it is obvious that this year will be all about recovery and stream-

lining various policy initiatives in order to help different sectors of our economy recover from the pandemic and build resilience for the future.

It is clear that research and innovation have a crucial role to play both in addressing the pandemic and mitigating its consequences. As a group, and for me personally, we will continue lobbying for a greater involvement of regions in the initiatives which aim to promote and support innovation in the EU. In this regard, we will continue highlighting the importance of smart specialization strategies and regional innovation ecosystems and fostering interregional cooperation.

As the rapporteur on the forthcoming EU Action Plan on Social Economy, I will work hard to ensure that this ever more important sector receives due recognition in EU policies and that people who run and work in the 2 million social economy enterprises in Europe have better access to funding and training and less regulatory obstacles.

Finally, as a group we have always been fierce supporters of cultural and especially linguistic diversity in the EU. Therefore, we will continue advocating a greater recognition and promotion of Europe's linguistic diversity, especially of its regional languages.

Mikel Irujo appointed rapporteur on the EU Action Plan on Social Economy

At the SEDEC commission meeting held on 25 November 2020, members appointed Mikel Irujo, Director-General for External Action of the Government of Navarre as CoR rapporteur on the outlook opinion on the new European Action Plan on Social Economy.

There are 2 million social economy enterprises in Europe, representing 10% of all businesses in

the EU and employing more than 11 million people – about 6% of the EU's employees. Common challenges all these enterprises face include access to finance, low degree of recognition, varying regulatory environments across the EU and a lack of entrepreneurial skills.

The Action Plan will be adopted in the fourth quarter of 2021 and is expected to serve as a far-reaching instrument that will bring the social economy into the socio-economic policies of the European Union.

The first exchange of views on Mr Irujo's opinion will take place at the SEDEC meeting on 17 February 2021.

CoR members adopt EA opinions on Green Deal and Rural Revival

During the 141st plenary session of the European Committee of the Regions, held between 8 and 10 December 2020, members adopted with an overwhelming majority the opinions of two EA group members.

The opinion on a German Presidency referral "The impact of climate change in regions: an assessment of the Green Deal", prepared by member

of the Flemish Parliament Mr Andries Gryffroy underlines the potential of the European Green Deal to achieve climate neutrality but at the same time points out that, in order to be successful, it needs to put regions and cities at its core and be flexible enough to take into account different specificities and local circumstances across the EU.

Leitrim County Councillor Enda Stenson drafted an opinion on an EU Strategy for Rural Revival which outlines a vision to create rural areas where people could live, work, raise a family and grow old with dignity and self-sufficiency.

EA group's Primary Schools Competition 2020

The 13th consecutive year of the EA group's drawing competition for children aged from 6 to 12 years presented us all with rather difficult circumstances.

In spite of all the problems and disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, a total of 17 schools from 9 member states have taken part this year. The young age of the children has not prevented them from clearly seeing the issues facing the European Union in the future.

The theme of the competition, 'My region, my Europe' has prompted the children across Europe to enthusiastically give much thought to all kinds of subjects including their cultural heritage, the preservation of the environment, their identity as Europeans and the role of the European Union, all expressed visually in the beautiful artworks.

Among the main themes across all regions we see a huge concern for the environment, ideas for recycling in Ireland and the preservation of the vast forests of Lithuania.

