



European Committee  
of the Regions

## **SPEECH BY 1S VICE PRESIDENT TZITZIKOSTAS**

### **Annual TSI conference**

Brussels & Online, 12/05/2023 – 11h15

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to thank Director-General Nava for his kind invitation to attend the annual conference of the Technical Support Instrument.

Indeed, it is a pleasure to join you all again, as I already had the honour of participating in last year's annual conference.

And, I must say, it is always fascinating to hear about the work that is being done with on-the-ground and tailor-made technical expertise in support not only of Member States, **but of local and regional authorities as well.**

As Governor of the Region of Central Macedonia in Greece, and as First Vice-President of the European Committee of the Regions, you will understand why this last point is particularly important to me.

You invited us to reflect on the theme "*Public Administration fit for the future and adaptable to change*". So I would like to take a few minutes to briefly tell you what this means from my perspective.

The way I see it, what is at the heart of this question is our common ability to **identify the broad challenges** our

administrations face, and to **put forward innovative ways to enhance its ability to tackle** those challenges head on.

Together with my colleagues at the European Committee of the Regions, we identified 3 broad challenges faced by local public administrations, and we made these **the 3 overarching priorities of our political work**:

- to ensure the **strength of democracy** at all levels of governance;
- to manage fundamental **societal transformations**;
- and to ensure that economic, social and territorial **cohesion is fostered**.

Our first priority is to ensure the **strength of our democracies at all levels of governments**; this also includes to better connect the EU with its citizens.

Public administration is called to **defend the rule of law**, which is a fundamental value that makes prosper not only our democracy, but also the European business environment. Unfortunately, public administration is not always perfectly shielded from attacks; quite the opposite. Take for instance the danger of cyberattacks, or more simply the spreading of disinformation which provokes the **erosion of citizens' trust** on the public administration.

The challenge is not only how to technically counter-attack these threats, or how to reskill public officials, but also how to **build and retain mutual trust** between citizens and public administrations.

That is why we are so committed **to reinforcing participatory and deliberative democratic processes** locally, for example by holding citizens panels and townhall debates, which may lead to finance projects via participatory budgets. In this context, I

believe that also the Artificial Intelligence can help in projecting present and future needs within a given community, and help shaping new tools which involve EU and local governance.

Secondly, we need to efficiently **manage fundamental societal transformations**. In order to tackle health crisis, climate, digital and demographic transitions, as well as the flow of migration, the phenomenon of depopulation, the ageing of population, the brain drain, local and regional authorities need to **build resilience**.

We see a regular outflow of younger people from rural areas, ageing of rural population, increasing medical care needs. And all this coupled with shortages in access to health and social care services.

We see regions facing the so-called 'talent development trap'. And this requires urgent actions to promote and retain a skilled workforce in shrinking regions.

Here the digital transition has an enormous potential, provided that first we offer regional and local authorities the tools they need in order to tackle the "digital divide" they may suffer.

Last but – let me assure you – very far from least, our third priority is **cohesion**. We want to and need to ensure that economic, social and territorial cohesion is fostered in all EU cities and regions, now and in the future.

The challenges here are plenty, such as achieving smart mobility, tackling the urban-rural divide by investing in rural development, promoting sustainable transport, achieving efficient cross-border cooperation, fixing the digital divide.

For all this, we need to ensure that long-term investments are made it available to local and regional authorities in a true spirit

of partnership between the EU, the central and the regional governments.

Our call for a credible and functioning cohesion policy is extremely timely right now, when the exercise on the mid-term review of the MFF is about to start, in the aftermath of the multiple crisis we are living through and which have had somehow made cohesion fund deviate from its natural scope.

In this context, and in the light of the **delay in spending due to the extraordinary circumstances we are living through**, I believe the Technical Support Instrument can further help regional authorities to enhance their capacity, and make full use of the cohesion funds to address development challenges, and harnessing talent and employment opportunities.

Dear colleagues,

The EU is facing an impressive array of challenges and crises - from the consequences of war on its doorstep to the climate emergency, from ageing populations to the digital transition, from decreasing growth to increasing disparities.

All these challenges have something in common: their solutions have to be found at the local and regional level.

It is here where the European Union has to invest in a **place-based reform agenda**.

Such a place-based reform agenda must have different dimensions:

- A **regulatory dimension** in order to put forward new European legal frameworks to tackle new common challenges;
- An **innovation dimension** for providing the local and regional level with the ability to develop their own territorial

mission to engage research and innovation in meeting the challenges, providing a clear purpose to action, orchestrating the rich diversity of expertise, instruments, resources and competences that are scattered over different players, and enabling bottom-up solutions;

- A **cohesion and just transition dimension** to provide the necessary long-term investment for addressing the social and territorial divides and the asymmetric effects of the big transition.

The place-based reform agenda is a challenge for all regions **within a common space of the European Union**. This space can be called our Common Market, our common cohesion policy or our European Administrative Space.

We need to **exploit the potential of our common space** to put forward reforms. By working together, including through peer-learning, mobility and by re-skilling our staff, including by promoting and managing the Artificial Intelligence, we can achieve results that can be used in several regions, and let me you give some examples:

- **Automotive Regions** have to work together to find local solutions and joint strategies how to address the fundamental shift in the industry towards e-mobility;
- **Chemical Regions** have to collaborate to find joint transition pathways;
- **Harbours, Islands** or other regions with similar economic and geographic features have to receive specific instruments to navigate through the transition.

This is where the Technical Support Instrument plays a key role by focussing on the following aspects:

- to support the collaboration of local and regional authorities to develop joint reform agendas;
- to develop new models of administrative cooperation at all levels for the twin transition;
- to provide support for local or regional testbeds for new ways of working and regulation;
- to establish effective feedback mechanisms about the "user experience" of EU regulation and reforms in view of the future design or consolidation of the policies.

For these reasons, we still believe that local and regional authorities should be entitled to directly trigger the requests for technical support, without passing by the central authorities.

The European Committee of the Regions stands ready to strengthen the cooperation with DG Reform in this direction and eagerly awaits the Communication on the European Administrative Space later this year. This communication could be an excellent opportunity to address some of these points.

Thank you very much once again for your invitation, and I look forward to the debates.