

**European cooperation and opportunities for all ages: future perspectives**

*10 July 2020*

Dear speakers and participants,

It is a great pleasure to be with you today. Thank you for the invitation.

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted many aspects of our lives.

However, we reacted swiftly and with determination.

We have taken measures that protected the European citizens.

For more than four months, we have been working hard to develop measures against the pandemic and its economic consequences.

It was challenging, but nevertheless, I think that this situation brought us together.

We all shared the worries for our families and fellow citizens.

We saw the exhausted looks of our health workers.

Ultimately, we saw it in all the things that we may have taken for granted.

So, in turn, we must now see it in all the things that we do to find a solution for tomorrow.

Let me shortly recap what has been done so far.

The European Union has mobilised all its forces to find a vaccine against COVID-19.

This is a moment for Europe's solidarity and science to shine.

I wish to back this up with some numbers.

The European Commission has coordinated a global initiative that has pledged 15.9 billion EUR in funds intended to develop coronavirus treatments, tests and vaccines.

I am particularly proud that my own area of research and innovation plays the central role in this pledge with a 1 billion EUR coming from our flagship framework program for research and innovation, the Horizon 2020.

We have made full use of all different programs and policy initiatives and our objective remains clear.

It is to find a viable vaccine and to ensure universal access to it.

We are, of course, not alone.

Together with the EU Member States, we worked to adopt and amplify various national measures and to find the solutions that work for everyone.

We worked to reopen borders and save the tourism sector.

We allowed exceptional fiscal measures applying the maximum flexibility of budgetary rules so that the EU Member States could support their health care systems and local businesses, but also education and culture sectors.

We are seeing a stabilisation of situations across Europe.

So now is the time to think about how we move on from the crisis thinking and how we can take the steps into the future.

I believe we can do it in the following way:

- One, we need to remind ourselves how to be with one another with care and compassion;
- Two, we need to frame the discussion on solidarity at a local level;
- And three, we need to rethink the methods we employ to all of the above.

Starting with my first point on learning how to find care and compassion in our lives together.

Countries in the Danube basin are renowned for their long-term support to citizens. Traditions related to protecting social rights of individuals and families run deep. But various crises, and especially the most recent coronavirus one have put it under pressure.

The pandemic has disproportionately affected particular age groups.

These are often people that are already affected by the digital divide and a shortage of skills to participate in the 21<sup>st</sup> century world.

In fact, in 2018, the Commission's research service estimated that around 30 million adults frequently feel lonely.

This situation was likely to have worsened because of the pandemic.

But in Europe, no one should be left behind.

Digitalisation of social care services, health care and education can play a role in addressing these challenges.

The Commission has supported the uptake of digital solutions for the elderly under Horizon 2020, for example through the European Innovation Partnership on Active and Healthy Ageing and the Active and Assisted Living Programme.

Through Horizon Europe in the period of 2021-2027, the Commission will continue to support digitisation of healthcare systems and the uptake of digital innovations for the ageing population and the growing "silver economy".

We will continue developing solutions based on digital skills for and in education and training.

We are currently updating the Digital Education Action Plan. I invite you to participate in the online open consultation launched on 18 June.

In the Action Plan, we wish to further emphasise e-learning opportunities for all Europeans.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, we saw the immediate need to provide access to education for students but also to appropriate training to others.

Lifelong learning will be an important part of the Action Plan.

Of course, education is the responsibility of EU Member States but on the Commission's side, I am supporting basic standards for all types of education in Europe, including through the further development of the European Education Area.

For example, micro-credentials can provide a way to validate skills and competences acquired in non-formal learning settings. They are also an asset for adult learning organisations.

European universities will play a major role in providing new programs for integrating and reskilling the elderly.

One of your co-founders, the University of Ruse in Bulgaria, has already demonstrated the importance of volunteering and intergenerational learning in one of its workshops on "Education and Voluntary Work in the Third Age".

We will need many more such activities.

My second point is to invite you to reflect on how we frame and organise the discussion on solidarity in our policies.

The crisis has demonstrated the key role of local and regional authorities in managing it. Mayors and regional governors have been at the forefront of enforcing quarantines, distributing aid, mobilising public resources, ensuring the effective delivery of public services, particularly healthcare, and planning de-confinement measures.

We need to make sure that the European Union is permanently at the service of its people and their places of living and focus on understanding

and responding to the profound transformations that the current green, digital and demographic revolutions entail for our local communities.

We need to invest: EU programmes need to be deployed in synergy with other national and regional funds; investments should be future-oriented investments aimed at critical fields.

That is why, I am working with the Committee of the Regions to develop a joint action plan and to strengthen our cooperation with regions and local stakeholders.

The Danube region stretches a space that goes beyond distinctions of East and West. As such, it is a true European example of cooperation and reaching out to one another across regions and across time.

The European Union has recognised this via multiple investments of European Structural and Investment funds, especially via the INTERREG program.

More importantly, we have progressively incentivised research and innovation activities as a source of competitiveness in the less involved countries.

The “widening” of participation and spreading excellence program under the current framework program for research and innovation, Horizon 2020, has successfully raised the profile of its participants.

As a result, countries such as Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary and Croatia all tend to connect stronger and are involved in more and more research cooperation with other most successful recipients of research and innovation funding.

In the new framework program for research and innovation, Horizon Europe, at least 3.3% will be invested in such widening activities.

This will help us close the “innovation gap” with the EU13 countries.

Beyond the immediate funding for research and innovation, the biggest discussion will happen around how we intend to organise and implement two entangled transitions, the digital transformation in the economy and the green transition in the environment.

The European Green Deal, primarily, will encompass the deep cooperation needed to achieve sustainability on our continent.

If this is to succeed we will need to come together to understand the needs of different groups.

On 1 July, the Commission adopted the European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience to address upskilling and reskilling challenges.

A priority of this Agenda is to support the creation of comprehensive, quality and inclusive adult learning systems, which reach out to all - including seniors - and in particular those most in need of access to learning, including through distance and online learning.

It supports the lifelong learning approach and generates the advanced knowledge and skills European need to adapt to the fast-changing labour market and address our big societal challenges.

I come to my last point. We need to come up with methods that are proportionate and that correspond to the challenges we are facing.

A month ago, the European Commission proposed a large-scale recovery package.

The package has two blocks:

- First, the "Next Generation EU" recovery instrument with €750 billion from fresh financing from the financial markets.
- Second, a reinforced long-term EU budget for 2021-2027, with a strong allocation to research and innovation.

Next Generation EU recovery package contains several large opportunities for supporting skills development, research and innovation.

The REACT-EU instrument within the recovery package, with its 55 billion EUR offers additional funding for skills development necessary for the green and digital transitions.

The recovery package is a guarantee of a better future for Europe.

It recognises all the immediate needs of the EU Member States and of Europeans.

It especially recognises the fact that a resilient Europe requires strong and versatile education programs and learning possibilities.

Erasmus+ program will continue supporting these initiatives.

The decisions that will shape the recovery will be difficult.

However, I trust that we can make them keeping the well-being of our people and of our continent in focus.

I wish you a successful conference today.

Thank you.