



**REPÚBLICA
PORTUGUESA**

MINISTRA DA PRESIDÊNCIA

Informal Meeting of Ministers

Responsible for Cohesion Policy

Prague, Czech Republic

2nd September 2022

Dear President, Minister Ivan Bartoš,

Dear Commissioner, Elisa Ferreira,

Dear colleagues,

I would like to start by thanking the Czech Presidency for organizing this informal meeting in this amazing city and for choosing this theme. It is important that we think about Cohesion Policy and that we value the commitment to convergence between regions and to the improvement of our citizens' lives.

Allow me to pose a question for your consideration: Can we defend Europe without a good cohesion policy? A Europe with highly developed regions, while so many others are left behind, facing problems of desertification, poverty and exclusion? Can we face the great challenges of the 21st century without convergence and solidarity in Europe?

I believe that the answer is clear and in line with the Union's goals defined in the Treaty of Rome: there is no future of convergence in the European Union without a strong Cohesion Policy.

Based on this premise, I focus my intervention around two aspects that I deem essential:

1) First, it is essential to maintain Cohesion Policy as the foundation for both our long-term and conjunctural responses.

Cohesion is a principle of the European Union, therefore it must be transversal to all its instruments. By entailing structural transformations in the regions, cohesion stands as the conflation between the great European goals and the answer to the successive challenges that have been imposed on us. Cohesion Policy is essential to face climate and digital transitions, demographic evolution and the aging of populations, sustainability and energy independence. Just to name a few structural challenges exacerbated by recent crises.

The benefits of a convergence-oriented policy are also undeniable. I emphasize the references in the Presidency's background paper to the positive impact on less developed regions, but also on more developed

regions, as well as the counter-cyclical potential of Cohesion in times of crisis.

Therefore, Cohesion Policy must be flexible enough to respond to cyclical challenges. The impacts of a crisis never affect regions equally and, for this reason, can undermine cohesion and the entire process of European convergence and construction.

As an example, let me touch on the importance of European Funds, plus REACT-EU resources, to maintain the productive capacity of the economy or the flexibilities introduced to deal with the pressure of humanitarian flows from Ukraine. These are essential responses, which demonstrate Cohesion's ability to adapt to specific contexts, in line with the principles of social and territorial cohesion.

But also the importance of new instruments, from SURE to the RRF to mitigate the impact of economic and social crisis and to put economic recovery in place.

2) The second aspect I would like to mention is related to the integrated management of the instruments that we have today.

In recent years, Europe has been facing structural and cyclical challenges that put pressure on our regions. If it was important to design policy instruments capable of mitigating these effects and avoiding unwanted cracks in the common regional policy, it is essential to ensure an efficient conjunction between them. The existence of a prior and shared development strategy, as we did with the Portugal 2030 strategy and our regional strategies, and an articulated governance model are necessary conditions for the efficient combination of the various instruments, but it is far from being sufficient.

What at first should be considered an advantage and source of synergies, can become a very complex exercise, whether for policy makers, for partners on the ground, for the beneficiaries themselves, or even for European public opinion.

We are dealing with a mix of policy instruments, with potential overlaps, likely to foster competition rather than complementarities, and force artificial boundaries that are difficult to implement.

It is important to learn from the long-standing experience of Cohesion Policy and also from the new instruments (e.g. in the timing of the negotiation process, in the adequacy of forms of financing or of the

territorial scale). It is necessary to learn our lessons and prepare the future, which maximize the impact of our policies: in increasing the quality of life of European citizens, in the competitiveness and capacity for innovation and sustainability of our companies and in all the areas on which the success of this immense, challenging, multicultural and unprecedented European project, which we have been building since the signing of the Treaty of Rome.

Cohesion is what created our Europe and Cohesion Policy is indeed what will keep us together, all of us, with all our differences and all our developmental stages.

Thank you very much and good work.