

**Report on ERP-advocacy mission March 17 to:  
Mr. Raffaele Fitto, Executive Vice-President for Cohesion and Reforms and  
Mrs. Taru Haapaniemi, Member of Cabinet of Commissioner Christophe Hansen**

Tuesday March 17 the ERP-delegation, Piotr Sadlocha, Miki Matavulj and Ben van Essen had meetings with executive vice-president Fitto/DG Regio and Mrs. Taru Haapaniemi, Member of Cabinet of Commissioner Christophe Hansen. On behalf of the European Rural Parliament, we highlighted key priorities for the next EU policy framework:

- Making the Right to Stay a real choice for rural people and youth
- Embedding rural proofing across EU and national policies
- Ensuring accessible, place-based funding that reaches communities
- Safeguarding LEADER-CLLD and community-led innovation
- Strengthening the Partnership Principle and structured dialogue with civil society

In both meetings we started with an introduction where we emphasized that the European Rural Parliament (ERP) is a unique process and event, unlike any other, in which the rural voice is directly rooted in the rural people themselves. The ERP is a Partnership of 70 national organisations in 40 European countries. In its biennial Gathering the ERP brings together over 400 rural players from 40 countries – local, regional and national – to exchange experience and agree the rural policy agenda.

**Mr Fitto** accompanied by Mrs. Kadri Uustal, head of Unit Cities, Communities, People and Mrs. Julia Luerzer. 45 minutes

- A very positive meeting. After our introduction Mr. Fitto explained the MFF, being a new approach.
- Fitto explained that he was working on strategies: Agenda for the Cities (finished), a Strategy for outermost regions and islands (to come) and a Strategy on the right to stay.
- The Strategy on Right to Stay is very important for Mr. Fitto. May 6 he will launch the consultation period on this strategy in the European Parliament to have a strong podium and broad support. He hopes that the Committee of the Regions will participate. He would like the ERP partners to actively participate. The consultation period will last until October/November. In December there should be a final draft strategy. Mr. Fitto would like to cooperate with ERP network to achieve very broad participation in the consultation.
- He is also interested in further cooperation (walking together) not only in relation to the Strategy on Right to Stay but also in other general points of mutual interests. He mentioned even that establishment of a joint technical working group might be possible. However, it was not elaborated during this time how this joint technical working group should operate.
- He underlines that in the new NRPP's the position of the region is very important, including rural regions.
- Mr. Fitto mentioned the modernization of the Cohesion Policy. Piotr presented an ELARD-paper which clarifies that the budget for rural (lag) regions is 10 times less than in urban regions. For example, for Poland the paper makes it very clear how large the budget differences are between rural and urban. Fitto acknowledges that improvements are needed in the new cohesion policy (more flexibility and simplicity). There will be an obligation for CLLD in the NRPP.
- In short time the results of the Midterm Review will be available. There are 6 priorities: Defense, Water, Housing, Energy, Infrastructure and Competitiveness
- We had a short exchange on the Competitiveness fund, which will take on board all citizens (Right to Stay, tackling depopulation), infra, connectivity en modernizing rural development.
- Miki emphasized that supporting the innovative force in rural areas is not a subsidy but an investment (local solutions to global challenges, motto ERP). Miki presented the E-CLIF policy proposal and was invited to have a follow-up meeting with the Cabinet of mr. Fitto (this might be done through technical working group mentioned above).
- We invited Fitto and his staff to meet at the ERP-follow-up on June 23 at the Scotland House, Brussels (see attachment). He is very interested.



**DG Agri Mrs. Taru Haapaniemi**, member of cabinet Commissioner Hansen, Mario Milouchev, Alexia Rouby and secretary.

- Surprisingly commissioner Hansen came in to welcome us and made some statements:
- Rural areas are important, including agri.
- We must invest in local services, quality jobs.
- People mention also Housing crisis, but mr Hansen does believe that housing is a not much of a problem for rural areas, because rural areas lose population and there is enough space for houses. That's why mr Hansen focusses on Connectivity.
- This afternoon he had a meeting with SMEs. Hansen wants to invest in SMEs.
- Mrs. Haapaniemi (Taru) is very engaged with rural regions (lives in a very rural region in northern Finland). She notes that rural development is a complex and multilevel challenge. What are the main solutions which we need for rural regions?
- Leader is a shiny item for DG Agri. Very important and successful but will not be ringfenced. Member states have to be concrete on Leader in their NRPP.
- 10% Rural Target is a starting point. It was a welcome proposal. DG Agri is now working on the implementation. Mario's advice: aim your advocacy on MEP's
- Piotr again presented the ELARD study on unequal CAP and Cohesion funding for rural and urban.
- Miki also briefly explained E-CLIF policy proposal and asked for opportunity to continue working jointly in developing further this proposal.
- Mario explains that DG Agri is working on 6 thematic areas for the recommendations in the European Semester. The 6<sup>th</sup> is rural areas. There will be a lot of data.
- The (Draft) new Rural Action Plan will start to circulate in the DG's in a few weeks and will be on the agenda of the last RPCG May 5.
- Taru mentions that Rural Pact is strong in dissemination of knowledge and organizing webinars. She believes that it is a good way to stay in contact with all rural stakeholders.
- We invited Taru, Mario and Alexia to the ERP follow-up meeting on June 23 in the Scotland House



In leaving we had a very short exchange on the question that the Rural Pact Coordination Group is being dissolved (May 5 will be the last meeting). Mario confirmed once again that RPCG will stop because the EU-context has changed too much. He mentioned that he had asked the RPCG presidency (Radim) to think of an alternative. We suggested that perhaps a form of cooperation with the ERP movement could be sought, to continue representing the rural voice to the European Commission.

To conclude:

- The introductory meeting with DG Regio was very positive. There are opportunities for further cooperation with Fitto/Dg Regio.
- Discussion with DG Agri was less structured through the (appreciated) intervention of Commissioner Hansen, but still important to represent ERP. Mrs. Taru Haapaniemi could become a friend of the ERP.
- June 23, we have the ERP-follow-up meeting in the Scotland House in Brussels. We invited Fitto and his staff, the Cabinet of commissioner Hansen and DG Agri. We need to make a robust program where we can discuss the key points of the ERP in more depth.