

Andra
Rupprechter

“Master Plan for rural areas — equal opportunities for the regions”

Dear Madam President (Gudrun Mosler Törnström)

Dear Members of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities

Dear Secretary General (Andreas Kiefer)

- It is a pleasure to be back to the Congress after having had the honour to represent the Austrian chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers in March 2014.
- The **Council of Europe is one of the oldest and most important European political organisations** - a key actor in protecting human rights, democracy and the rule of law. **I am truly pleased to speak before** the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, which plays such an important role in **bringing together governments from across Europe and beyond**. The Congress' dedication to promote local and regional democracy, to improve local and regional governance and to strengthen authorities' self-government cannot be overestimated.
- As an Austrian, coming from a mountain farm in rural Tyrol **I have always been a strong advocate of the role and importance of our regions and communities**. As some of you may know, I was elected Secretary General of the EU's Committee of Regions in 2013, just

before assuming my post as Minister for Agriculture and Environment in Austria.

- The **partnership between our different levels of government** – local, regional, national and European – is highly important. Only a truly **multilevel governance approach** can ensure full legitimacy of decisions.
- In my work as Minister for Agriculture and Environment I have worked hard to involve our federal states into the legislative work at the **EU** level, allowing a representative of our federal Länder to accompany me to each Council session I have attended in Brussels and Luxemburg. This ensures that our federal Länder are not only informed about what happens at the EU level, but thus they also become part of the decision making process as such.
- Today I am very pleased to present a best-practice-model of Regional Policy – our “**Master Plan for rural areas**”-, a programme developed by experts and citizens to strengthen our rural areas.
- The aim of the programme is to create new perspectives for rural areas, to preserve them, and to transform them into attractive living spaces for the whole population.
- In Austria, **two thirds of the population lives in rural areas** — more than 5 million Austrians.

- Due to a number of conditions, including the intact environment, healthy local food and strong social cohesion, the **quality of life in the countryside is very high.**
- This, however, is only part of the picture.
- In the **structurally weakest regions** of Austria an emigration of approximately 10 % of the resident population to urban areas is expected by 2030.
- Mainly **young people are leaving these areas**, which leads to a massive brain drain.
- It is my conviction that the rural population deserves **equal opportunities and requires new prospects.** Consequently we have to focus all our energy on providing better economic perspectives and infrastructure in order to change young peoples' perception of rural areas.
- Following a stakeholder led-process, my Ministry developed the **Austrian Master Plan for Rural Development** which we presented to the Austrian public this summer.
 - **3.000 citizens participated in the consultations,**
 - **250 experts were involved,**
 - **2.000 concrete ideas and proposals for rural development were submitted.**

- The result is a comprehensive, cross-cutting strategy for rural areas: **127 pages, summarized in a compact manner.**
- In total there are **20 priorities** in the fields of agriculture and forestry, administration, living in the countryside, infrastructure, social responsibility, mobility and digitalisation.
- It addresses issues such as land consumption, energy transition and economic cooperation. From innovative education to cultural infrastructure – the Master Plan focusses on sustainable action to make life in rural areas more attractive.
- We come to the clear conclusion that more flexible childcare is essential, particularly for young families.

Volunteering

- Voluntary work deserves more attention: local associations preserve established village structures. However, it is unacceptable that volunteers have to struggle with administrative obstacles, taxes or liability issues on a daily basis.
- To the contrary: Businesses, public administrations, schools and universities should support and value voluntary engagement.

Decentralisation

- Decentralisation policies in the administration not only help to create jobs and promote careers but also make sure to return competence

back to rural areas. My Ministry has already implemented first steps and has set a good example in this respect.

- But we want to launch a nationwide trend reversal. In close cooperation with other Ministries, we want to relocate 10 percent of federal authorities, which are about 3.500 departments, to rural areas.

Digitalisation

- A powerful internet connection is absolutely vital - both for a modern society and to guarantee a healthy economy. Rural areas should not only keep the pace, but rather surge ahead in Digitalisation.

Infrastructure and mobility

- Mobility for people and companies is a key issue in the countryside. Due to the weak infrastructure in rural areas, 83% of all journeys are made by private cars, only 2% by public transport. The Master Plan proposes forward-looking and innovative mobility concepts.

A positive image and role of agriculture

- The key factor for strong, vibrant and pleasant rural areas is, and will remain, of course – agriculture.
- Our small-scale farms ensure the development of a liveable countryside, help to maintain the variety of our cultural landscape and ensure the production of high-quality food.
- In 2016 the output of the Austrian agriculture sector amounted to 6,8 billion Euros. Directly linked to the agriculture are over 43.000

companies with a turnover of approximately 65 billion Euros in their respective upstream and downstream sectors.

- The Austrian agricultural sector employs some 138.000 people. **One out of every 7 jobs in Austria is directly or indirectly related to agriculture.**
- Austria's agricultural exports amounted to around EUR **10 billion** in 2016. **Out of a total of around EUR 130 billion of exports, every 8th Euro processed from the agricultural and food sector.**
- Agriculture is a key element in our environmental policy. 82 percent of the agricultural land in Austria is sustainably cultivated under agri-environmental schemes.

Perspectives

- Austria's federal states and municipalities have always been among the most active members in the **European Committee of the Regions** and will continue to assume such a role also in the future.
- It is thanks to this strong engagement that I am here today.
- Before concluding, I would like to briefly mention that the next monitoring visit of the Congress to Austria is due in 2018 or 2019. Following up on the last Congress recommendation, the Federal Council - on the initiative of Herwig van Staa - introduced amendments to several laws including constitutional amendments regarding inter-municipal cooperation across Land borders and issues

of social security for local politicians. I am glad to say that Austria takes the recommendations of this Congress seriously.

- Too often the focus lies on Brussels, Paris and Berlin and overlooks the **key role our regions play**. In this regard I do not only think about my own homeland the **Euregio, Tyrol - South Tyrol - Trentino**, but also about the many **cross-border projects**, of all our federal states, regarding cross-border national parks, technology parks, research, cultural or environmental projects to only mention a few.
- Ladies and Gentlemen, the Council of Europe and in particular the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities has an important and responsible role in **supporting the regions in Europe**. Together with other great institutions such as the Committee of Regions it is time for Europe to **work even more intensively on the future of our regions and the development of our rural areas!**
- The Austrian Master Plan is a great best-practice model and I am already looking forward to implementing it as a key element of our work in the next legislative period. I would also be interested in continuing this debate with you. We heartily invite all of you to come to Austria and to examine the achievements of our Master Plan for Rural Areas!

Thank You

