*Speech of Vadim Kuznetsov, youth delegate, Russian Federation*

Role of regions in ensuring a citizen-centred response to COVID-19 and post-crisis recovery

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Dear colleagues,

On behalf of the youth delegates, it is my honor to be addressing you today as we are discussing the role regions play in providing a comprehensive response to the pandemic and, most importantly, to the postpandemic period. As young people, we were, of course, largely affected by the lockdown measures, especially when it comes to social interactions and offline education. However, now we would not insist on considering the well-known implications of the crisis but we would rather suggest thinking about the future as it is us who are just starting our adult professional life. And we would therefore concentrate on benefits that a positive well-balanced regional recovery might offer to young people all over Europe.

Based on the projects that we as YD (youth delegates) implemented last year, we are going to present three benefits that we think a successful post-COVID regional governance may bring to young people.

**First: sustainability**. Despite being quite a popular term adopted by the UN, sustainable development is still to become an integral part of regional authorities' agenda. It is not for nothing that some YD have made sustainability their primary focus of concern while realizing projects in their countries.

My colleague Kristina from Poland, for example, interviewed politicians, artists and youth activists working on sustainable development, while Monika from North Macedonia and Vitali from Ukraine invited mental health specialists to discuss mental health issues facing youth. We firmly believe that sustainable development is not a vague concept as it does help improve citizens' well-being. And it is not only about ecology or environment. It is summarized in 17 SDGs of the UN and covers a wide range of areas: from mitigating climate change to improving energy efficiency and healthcare services to ensuring there is no youth unemployment nor poverty.

We are aware that in the majority of member states regions accumulate more economic power that single cities, which means they have more finance and institutional support to make a concrete change for sustainable development. We are certain that regions should incorporate SDG indicators in their development strategies with focusing on those SDGs that are currently more relevant for a particular region. And thus, we do hope our regions will truly become more sustainable after the pandemic.

**Second: digitalization**. Despite transferring now many of our public services to online, which is a great step forward, digitalization has a larger potential for our regions and youth living in them. It is not a coincidence that a number of YD focused on Smart City technologies and digital platforms in their projects.

This way, Valeria from Moldova engaged young people in monitoring the city budget of Baltsi via online tools; Kristian from Norway worked on launching a digital platform to bring various youth councils together, while Lea from Switzerland used an online participation platform to directly ask young people what they would like to see changed in the city of Geneva. Personally, I conducted a survey to find out what young people expect from Smart City development in Moscow. Technology is indeed a means of connecting people, supporting them and even rescuing their lives. We as young people know better than anyone else how crucial online platforms are to continue education and social communication in times of lockdown. We therefore believe regions should perceive digitalization not only as a means of providing essential services but also as a tool of becoming more transparent to their citizens, including young people. The potential for youth participation in regional governance becomes huge, and it is up to regional governments to seize the opportunity. Today, following the path of Smart Cities, there are some remarkable examples of Smart Regions emerging on the map of the European continent. And thus, we do hope our Smart Regions will not only provide us with quick services of quality but also engage us in a meaningful way.

**Third: international cooperation**. It might sound strange in times of COVID, but regions do need to pursue international cooperation and reinforce their external relations after the pandemic. It is necessary because of two things: regions learn from each other and regions need investments to advance their economies, create jobs, and recover after a significant economic downturn. Furthermore, the majority of the regions in our member states are highly interconnected with their neighboring foreign regions and will remain so once the regular interregional contacts are fully restored.

Many YD realized their projects jointly: nine YD elaborated a questionnaire to collect best practices of local governance, whereas Evgenia from Cyprus and Vitalii from Ukraine held a joint video-conference to showcase youth action during the pandemic. Therefore, we consider it essential to also revive people-to-people international contacts between regions. We as young people are the ones building friendships and bridges for the future. And thus, we do hope our regions will enhance international cooperation that will bring closer our young citizens, start-ups, and businesses.

For our final remark, we would like to underscore that regions have played a crucial role in addressing the toughest challenges of the pandemic. However, the way our regions will prioritize the post-pandemic recovery will directly impact us, young people, so we hope that our aspirations will be taken into account.

Thank you.