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Adriatic Ionian Sea: Cooperation will pay off

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Es gilt das gesprochene Wort

Committee of Senior Officials of the Adriatic Ionian Initiative

Ancona, 16 February 2011

Under Secretary Mantica, Your Excellency Grafini, distinguished authorities, ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you for your kind invitation. It is a real pleasure for me to be here today.

Thank you also for bringing all the national authorities of the Adriatic and Ionian countries together in one place, as you have regularly done since 2000. Meetings, such as this, are crucial for us to forge a region-specific and truly effective approach for this part of the Mediterranean.

The Commission has been advocating better governance in the Mediterranean since 2009. With 30% of all sea-borne traffic passing through the basin's waters, with the high risks posed by climate change, with over 400 cultural heritage sites under threat, we believe the Mediterranean is in urgent need for cooperative and integrated governance.

Meanwhile, many fora for dialogue in the Mediterranean have seen the light. Plenty of discussions are ongoing. For me, it's time for these discussions to produce concrete ideas and real partnerships. It's time to go from words to deeds. In other words: Ladies and gentlemen, we have laid the foundations. Now it's time to build the house.

This may be easier if we proceed floor by floor, or sub-region by sub-region, rather than trying to tackle the whole Mediterranean Sea all at once.

In fact, I may have spoken of the Mediterranean as a single entity so far, but we all know that the challenges and the opportunities vary from one area to another.

This is why I applaud once again the initiative taken by the eight countries of the Adriatic Ionian Initiative over a decade ago. The Adriatic Ionian countries are bound not only by historical links and a common cultural heritage, but also by a shared responsibility for their sea.

And the Adriatic and Ionian Sea is a highly sensitive marine area, facing serious environmental challenges such as pollution, overfishing, transport of dangerous goods, coastal overdevelopment and tourism, to mention but a few.

All these issues, and the future of the region as a whole, need to be tackled in a comprehensive manner through trans-national and trans-regional cooperation mechanisms. This is all the more true as regards maritime affairs.

I believe we urgently need to develop a proper maritime strategy for the area.

Why a maritime strategy?

First of all, because we need to coordinate the multitude of existing initiatives in the field of maritime affairs, inserting them into a truly European framework.

Secondly: to make sure we give impetus to concrete actions that will make the difference. This doesn't mean that we want to preclude or duplicate any existing initiative. On the contrary, these are our natural starting point, something we aim to build upon.

Ultimately, the strategy may even prove to be a good test bench for a "macro-region" work at a later stage.

Italy, Greece and Slovenia have chosen the sea as the first common topic for cooperation, so this maritime strategy comes at the right time: if this maritime strategy works, it will show the world that you are serious about this form of cooperation – and that it really pays off.

I have instructed my services to work on a Maritime Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian. Today I gladly invite the countries concerned to work with us in the coming year, so as to have a proposal ready in 2012.

Let me briefly describe to you the kind of approach I have in mind.

Personally, I see four axes to develop. But I do hope you will complement these with other ideas of yours.

- 1. The first is what I like to call "Blue Growth": that is, maximising the economic potential derived from the sea as advocated by the Europe 2020 strategy and the Integrated Maritime Policy.

With this regard, the work carried out by the Forum of Adriatic and Ionian Chambers of Commerce is a very good starting point, and I will encourage them to do more. Given their role as economic drivers, they can help identify further opportunities for "blue growth". They can strengthen the role of Small and Medium Enterprises as pillars for the sustainable growth of coastal regions, in a perspective of partnership among Adriatic Ionian countries. Structured and systematic cooperation with this kind of initiatives is exactly what the new Strategy will be all about.

- 2. Reconciling economic growth with environment protection is in the very nature of the Integrated Maritime Policy. So the second axis must clearly focus on sustainability and the protection of the marine environment.

One cannot stop progress – nor do we want to stop exploring sea beds in search for new energy sources, setting up off-shore wind energy plants or building new tourism infrastructure. However, thanks to Maritime Spatial Planning and Integrated Coastal Zone Management, we will be able to do all this in a controlled, balanced and sustainable way. In view of present and future marine uses, it is important that we start looking at them not as individual developments but as pieces of a larger puzzle. Cross-border coordination when planning activities at sea and in coastal areas will create a stable, transparent, fair and predictable regulatory framework. This in turn will stimulate investor confidence, which is likely to attract further investment. So I intend to launch a test project on Maritime Spatial Planning in the Adriatic and Ionian. This project, will aim at improving the coherence between land and sea planning and lead to a streamlined planning process which should ultimately benefit all end users, from economic actors to citizens. This initiative will complement existing activities on the issue as the Priority Actions Programme Regional Activity Centre, seated in Split. The centre has accrued considerable expertise in the field of Integrated Coastal Zone Management in the Mediterranean. Our Strategy will try to take advantage of it.

- 3. The third pillar relates to my other area of responsibility: fisheries. Needless to say, all the outstanding issues here require regional cooperation, from excessive fishing capacity and overfishing, to shared and declining fish stocks. From illegal fishing to fisheries management in international waters.

I have two concrete ideas to submit to you today.

We could support joint control and inspection activities through our Fisheries Control Agency in Vigo so as to improve the culture of compliance in this specific sea area. We need to move towards a more uniform and effective implementation of the principles of the Common Fisheries Policy, also in the light of the candidate or potential candidate status of some of the coastal States concerned.

And within the upcoming reform of the Common Fisheries Policy, will also be reforming the policy part which deals with the market for fisheries products. Here we want to strengthen the market position of producers by encouraging and reinforcing producers' organizations. This should help European fishermen capture more of the

value in the chain, and thus help them compete better in what will, whatever happens, remain a global market.

- 4. Last but not least, maritime safety and security. I'm happy to be able to quote an initiative coming from you - the Adriatic Sea reporting system (ADRIREP system) – as a helpful way to have a clear idea of traffic flows.

I'm sure there is more we can do, and I am thinking for instance of encouraging a structured dialogue between national coastguards, enabling them to circulate data and exchange best practices about their respective roles for maritime surveillance. Often, coastguards have different competences from one country to the next, yet they are increasingly called on to cooperate with each other, in a context of global interconnections. I see some room for improved cooperation, both at operational and at decisional level, if we are to ensure a safer and more secure maritime space. This can certainly be achieved, provided there is a clear and regular system for exchange.

And I come now to the point of participation. When talking about the four axes, I have mentioned some organisations as sources of inspiration or cooperation for the Strategy. I have done so deliberately.

When it comes to good governance, all stakeholders have something to contribute, from those working at national and super-national level to regional and local officials, who are closer to the actors on the field and to grass-root initiatives.

I have already mentioned the Forum of Adriatic Ionian Chambers of Commerce. Let me also mention a few more, such as the Adriatic Euro-region, the Forum of Cities of the Adriatic and Ionian Regions or the Commission for the protection of the Adriatic Sea; these are good examples of consolidated structures whose active involvement is necessary in making this strategy.

We count on the input of each. Without them – without you – the Maritime Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Seas would be consigned to remaining dead letter.

In sum, ladies and gentlemen,

I see the Strategy as the first example of close cooperation at the Mediterranean sub-regional level within a clear EU framework. I also see it as opening up a new phase of Integrated Maritime Policy in the Mediterranean, more focused on concrete results. The Strategy must pave the way for sustainable development of the maritime sector, and bring real added value to economic growth and to the people.

For my part, I am here today to convey a strong signal that the EU is committed to the region, and will be increasingly so in the future; and that we are determined to make a difference in this important area, for us and for generations to come common.

Thank you.