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The Sea at the Heart of the Adriatic

Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort

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President Bresso, Ministers, ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you for your kind invitation to join you at this meeting. I first met representatives of the Adriatic Ionian Initiative in Ancona in February and I must say I appreciate how vigorously and steadily you are proceeding in your cooperation together. I also would want to congratulate you on the initiative to hold this meeting in Brussels which allows decision makers from the EU to join you.

As I said in Ancona, your wish to strengthen cooperation in the Adriatic Ionian is important to me, because it opens up a new phase of the Integrated Maritime Policy in the Mediterranean; a phase which accelerates bringing concrete results to people. Our efforts in the region must bring real benefits, real jobs, real added value to the people – or it remains an empty shell.

In this perspective, we need to start to deliver. Maritime affairs are a perfect sector that lends itself to further cooperation immediately. After all, the sea is and always will be at the heart linking the Adriatic Ionian countries! I see many pros in starting from the maritime. One, you have our full support, since the EU has been calling for better governance in the Mediterranean for a few years. We are also big fans of the basin or sub-basin approach, as it can address the real needs and specificities of a given area.

Two, we have a good role model in the Baltic Strategy which established from sea-connection and is now a genuine success story; just think that there over 80 projects underway, with an amazing sense of ownership among stakeholders.

Three, this can be a stepping stone for you: once the connections are made and the working methods are acquired, once the cooperation flows through all levels and the first results are visible, you will have more bargaining power vis-à-vis the institutions. Also you can have more acceptance from public opinion and you can go beyond the maritime.

Blue growth, fisheries, marine knowledge, environmental protection, maritime surveillance safety and security – are a natural starting point for you and an ideal basis for a maritime strategy. And they are also domains which are likely to produce good results in a relatively short time.

Of course we shouldn't lose sight of the big picture. So, at the same time we can also be realistic and choose broader targets that are both feasible and appropriate to each country's needs and demands.

We may believe that a maritime strategy may be a good test bench for a "macro-region" work at a later stage or not. But in any case it is clear that we urgently need to develop a proper maritime strategy for the area.

The Adriatic Sea, for instance, is a highly sensitive marine area, facing serious environmental challenges from pollution, overfishing, transport of dangerous goods and coastal overdevelopment, to mention but a few. It is also an area where, rapid developments in sectors such as tourism, are providing considerable opportunities for growth, but need to be framed in a logic of long terms sustainability.

Most importantly, we are witnessing some extraordinary events in the Mediterranean this year. The divisions between a democratic north and an autocratic south are breaking down and the EU is offering all the support it can to the process: we have already published a joint Communication on a "Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity" But we must also ask ourselves:

How can our maritime policy help?

I think our current activities will help – for instance our actions on marine knowledge will facilitate better knowledge of the southern stretches of the Mediterranean as well as the northern parts. A project supported by the European Commission, the International Maritime Organization and the European Investment Bank aims to identify opportunities for maritime cooperation and growth in the Mediterranean. It will report in September 2011.

But we must start thinking now of what else we can do. Remember this is never a zero-sum game. More trade, more prosperous markets, more business activity and more innovation benefit us all.

I have instructed my services to work with you on a Maritime Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian. I extend a special welcome to the non-EU countries and I gladly invite you all to work with us in the coming year, so as to have a proposal ready in 2012.

Let's make the Adriatic Ionian cooperation a successful prototype for other sub-regional basins.

As they said in the 80s, we should *start small, think big, move fast*. The results will come.

Thank you.