

Speaking points for Mario Milouchev

- Good morning to everybody and welcome on behalf of the European Commission to the 21st NRN meeting. This is a welcome return to Slovenia, if not in person, but virtually, as I understand the 4th NRN meeting was held in Bled in February 2016 with a number of very interesting field trips also offered to participants, where the focus was on LEADER funded projects.
- I want to thank the Slovenian Network Support Unit's (NSU) colleagues for co-hosting this meeting and in particular Secretary of State Mr Irgolič for sparing the time to join us today.
- His presentation focused on rural areas and their future, and I am glad to know that Slovenia has taken the opportunity during its Presidency to work on this very important topic for the Commission and for NRNs, but ultimately for all citizens across Europe.
- I am pleased to see that Slovenia has already organised high level events to support the Long Term Vision for Rural Areas and that this is a priority in your political agenda. I also fully agree with your key message that we need different EU – and also national - funding instruments to work well together to deliver thriving rural areas.
- I also understand that the Slovenian Presidency works with the French one for organising formal Council conclusions in the first trimester next year. Indeed, this will be only logical in view of the fact that the other institutions, namely the European Parliament, the EESC and the CoR, are already working on their formal opinions, reports and positions.
- For us in the Commission it was clear from the outset that a Vision for the future of Europe's rural areas should not and could not be built in Brussels, but had to be developed in the MSs and with the involvement of ALL interested stakeholders. And the national rural networks have a particular role to play here.
- The publication of the Commission Communication and Rural Action Plan in June was just one key step in a process. For the Vision to become a reality the process must continue. The Commission will announce the Rural Pact during the Slovenian Presidency and will

organise an event in middle 2022. NRNs can in the meantime do a lot in particular to engage local stakeholders and help integrate national priorities with regional and local ones.

- I know that much is going on in the MS and would want this to become more visible - so I invite you all to exchange on your respective networks activities. All good practices, like rural action plans at national, regional or local levels, rural proofing experiences, rural assemblies, etc., would be welcome to share.

- I am pleased to confirm that the ENRD will continue its valuable work on the Rural Vision, with two new Thematic Groups – focusing on Rural Revitalisation and on Rural Proofing, particularly at national and regional level and I look forward to hearing about the outcomes of their work in the months ahead.

- Your presentation, Mr Irgolič, touched on some crucial aspects for the future development of rural areas such as the role of women and the urban-rural dialogue.
- The role of women is fundamental for the future of rural areas and we should help them to become protagonists of change. In this regard, I would like to refer to a very important on-going EU initiative, the Conference on the future of Europe. Citizens have been invited to take part in the reflections, but we want in particular more young people and women to make their voices and ideas heard.
- At the previous NRN meeting in June the COFE was presented and a member of the Conference Secretariat explained how people could get involved. Now I would like to ask you/NRNs to help us reach out to citizens in rural areas and, in particular, to young people and women, or the organisations which represent them, and encourage them to contribute on the multilingual digital platform (*link provided in the meeting chat*). We are using the ENRD website and other tools to encourage participation. I invite you to join this effort and mobilise your national and regional networks and spread the message among your partners. Let's together make sure rural views are well reflected in this exercise!

- Following on from Mr Irgolič's remarks on urban/rural interaction, I would like to share with you some considerations – indeed, more relevant for the MS with bigger territories and more remote areas:
- The rural-urban interconnection is very important, in particular for those rural areas, which are close to the cities. They benefit from the “agglomeration effect”, namely the advantage to be close to all kind of city markets (goods, jobs), to services (transport, hospitals, schools, banks, commerce, etc.) and to profit from the diversity of economic sectors and from more job opportunities. For these types of areas, the rural-urban interaction is particularly relevant.
- However, it is not the same for the remote areas, a specific category, which practically cannot profit from the urban-rural dynamics. Those of them, which are say more than an hour drive from a city *or* even further suffer from the “distance penalty” effect: less services, less developed infrastructure, less job opportunities, etc. The economies in these areas are much more dependent on one sector, often agriculture or forestry (or mining).
- For these areas, interaction with the cities is much less relevant. They suffered the most from the economic crisis in 2008/2009 and from the economic slow-down due to the Covid-19 pandemic. They depopulate the most and this leads to desertification, with already numerous examples in Europe
- This phenomenon is hidden by the “average” statistics collected and used for rural areas. It is very wrong to put together all rural areas and to use “average” statistics for them. The “diversity” of the rural areas should be used not to justify the lack of a holistic rural policy, but to adjust the policy to the circumstances.
- The remote areas should have a special treatment, which cannot rely on intensifying the urban-rural interaction. Although important, this interaction does not provide solutions for example for the services and infrastructure in the remote rural areas. For these areas the approach should be to:

1. Speed up the fast broadband roll-out and develop rapidly various digital solutions such as e-health, e-education, e-banking, teleworking opportunities, etc.;
2. Develop the rural agglomerations, in particular in the sparsely populated areas (without even small towns), by improving the interaction in the community of villages and by developing services hubs for several villages and by improving various transport opportunities.

- The focus of my remarks today has been on the rural areas, dear to all of us, but as you know, we are in the end game of the adoption by the co-legislators of the legal framework for the new CAP. Member States are intensively preparing their draft CAP Strategic Plans, which are due to be officially submitted by 1 January 2022.
- The Commission sees a reinforced role for networks in the new CAP. I understand that during the day my colleagues will touch on the state of play of networking under the future CAP, a subject which I know is close to your hearts as NRNs.
- I would just like to underline that we will count on your support in helping involve stakeholders in the new Strategic Plans and in making the transition to a more performance based CAP. By exchanges and sharing of experience and helping find smart solutions, the networks will also contribute to making our policy – and here I speak of both Pillars of the CAP- deliver across a wide range of policy objectives - economic, environmental and social.
- The networks will have a key role in promoting innovation and knowledge creation and sharing in agriculture and rural areas. Your activities will help bring the CAP closer to the ground so its delivery can better meet the needs. In fact, you will also gather and share the stories, which help communicate its results both within Member States and also at European level.

So, there is important work ahead for both the national and EU networks!

- I now leave it to the ENRD Contact Point team to tell you more about the overall agenda for today's meeting. I wish you very good exchanges.