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Coping with the coronavirus pandemic together – Together for Europe's recovery

The Covid-19 pandemic puts Europe and European cohesion to the test. Only together can we cope with the challenges presented by the coronavirus. 70 years ago, the Schuman plan marked the foundation of the European Union. Since then, Europeans have not only been connected through history but also by shared values. Liberty, democracy, and the rule of law are part of our society, which is characterized by pluralism, tolerance and solidarity. We were very concerned about the rise of national self-interest and a nation-state mentality at the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic. Solidarity and cross-border cooperation between member states have suffered a slow start. 25 years after the Schengen Agreement entered into force, we have found ourselves, once again, in a Europe of closed borders and border controls.

Partnership work of local authorities: enabling solidarity

Solidarity and cohesion have never been as important as they are today. Cities, towns and regions show their solidarity – especially with the municipalities located in the most affected countries. Despite major challenges, they provide partnership and pragmatic support. In order to be able to provide this concrete help, municipalities should be given the necessary freedom. Especially in times of crisis, the resilience and strength of these relationships become apparent. Close links between cities, towns and regions in border areas, which have been formed over decades, now stand the test. Solidarity between municipalities does not stop at Europe's borders. Around the world, municipalities work together in a spirit of international partnership, based on the support of many active citizens.

Border closure: coherent approach required – appreciating a common living space

Open borders are one of Europe's main achievements. They symbolize coexistence, cooperation, encounters and friendship. The Covid-19 pandemic does not stop at our borders. Closed borders put a special strain on every-day cooperation in border regions, which has grown over a long time and creates a common living space. The German Section of the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (RGRE) emphasizes the importance and necessity of free movement of persons, goods, services and capital. Controls at the internal borders of the European Union can only be temporary measures to curb the spread of the coronavirus pandemic. Unilateral border closures must be avoided in the future. Border openings and any future border closures require a coherent approach. The specific situation of border regions should be considered through a closer involvement and consultation of local and regional levels. This is also to ensure that the common living space will not deteriorate due to a national border compared to a living space without such a border.

Resuming the process concerning the Future of Europe – integrating municipalities

The process around the Conference on the Future of Europe has to be resumed after the start of the Conference, which had been scheduled for May 9, had to be postponed indefinitely due to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. The German Section of the CEMR (RGRE) welcomes Chancellor Angela Merkel's statement that it is necessary to "talk seriously about what Europe has not been able to do adequately now and about what will constitute the future of the European Union" as well as her announcement that treaty changes as well as closing ranks would not be ruled out. A representation of municipal interests in the conference must be ensured. The German Section of CEMR (RGRE) will play an active part in the organisation of the Conference.

Strengthening cross-border cooperation in the event of a crisis

The Covid-19 pandemic can represent an opportunity for the future of Europe. The German Section of the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (RGRE) appreciates that the German Presidency of the EU Council addresses the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. The aim must be to jointly develop a sustainable and resilient society and to promote the ability to innovate and modernise the European economy. Beyond a short-term rapid response, it is important to lay the ground for a greater resilience of the European Union. Possibilities of cross-border cooperation in the event of a crisis need to be expanded within the European Union. This applies especially to simplifications in cross-border patient transport and to improved facilities for the cross-border purchase and use of protective equipment.

Not questioning local European projects

The Multiannual Financial Framework and the Recovery Plan should therefore be designed in the spirit of solidarity. The EU recovery plan "Next Generation EU", which is limited in terms of duration and scope, is one step in the right direction. The needs of the local authorities during the Covid-19 crisis must not only be met within the REACT-EU initiative but also through additional liquidity support and credit programmes of the recovery plan. However, the long-term resilience development of the European Union ought to be based primarily on a properly resourced structural policy, which must not be put into question by the proposed "Next Generation EU" recovery plan. According to the new proposal, allocations to the budget heading "Cohesion and Values" are much smaller than those set out in the 2018 proposal by the EU Commission. Especially in the context of the present crisis, the cohesion of European citizens must be strengthened, and local EU projects must be promoted. We are very concerned about the feared reductions in the budget for "Cohesion and Values", especially regarding the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) and the "Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values" programme, the successor of the Europe for Citizens Programme.

Europe stands for open borders, cooperation and coexistence in numerous projects and friendships as well as partnerships extending far beyond the borders of each country. As local authorities we are convinced that we can only cope with this crisis and its impact by embracing a coordinated and solidary European response. The German Section of the Council of European Municipalities and Regions will be an active partner in shaping the future of the European Union together for Europe's recovery.