



**European Committee  
of the Regions**



*"Bringing Europe closer to people,  
building sustainable, resilient,  
innovative regional and local  
communities, and striving for our  
values, education and culture: these  
are our main priorities."*

Apostolos Tzitzikostas  
President of the European  
Committee of the Regions

*"The best investment for our  
future is in our people.  
We must engage with all Europeans,  
not just those who live in the capitals  
or are knowledgeable about the  
European Union."*

Ursula von der Leyen  
President of the  
European Commission

## Joint Action Plan

between the European Committee of the Regions  
and the European Commission  
Directorate General for Education and Culture,  
Directorate General for Research and Innovation,  
and the Joint Research Center

# **First yearly monitoring of the Joint Action Plan, December 2021**

## **Executive summary**

### **Objectives:**

Innovation, research, culture and education are key to the EU's competitiveness and ability to lead the green and digital transition. The role of the regions and cities towards addressing these major challenges that the EU is facing is essential. The 26 actions of the Joint Action Plan aim to increase the administrative and implementation capacity of the regions to leave nobody behind, to reduce the innovation divide and to build an interconnected innovation ecosystem in Europe. The Joint Action Plan puts the Committee of the Regions (CoR) at the centre of the strategic debates and gives new impetus to the collaboration and to the involvement of the CoR in the design of the strategic approaches.

### **Achievements in 2021/Work in progress:**

Since the adoption of the Joint Action Plan between the European Committee of the Regions and the European Commission in November 2020, the collaboration between the two institutions has greatly intensified and has brought regions and cities at the centre of the European debate. The Joint Action Plan has proven to be a useful tool for inter-institutional cooperation.

The Joint Action Plan has helped to establish regular CoR-EC contacts involving a diverse set of policies managed not only by DG EAC, DG R&I and DG JRC, but also across the European Commission. Notable is the consolidation of exchanges between the Joint Action Plan partners at high-level involving Commissioner Mariya Gabriel and CoR members on a regular basis (e.g Commissioner Gabriel's address to the CoR Plenary on 4 February 2021), inter-service exchanges and interaction at working level. In particular, the three DGs and the CoR see themselves most valuable partners to raise awareness and visibility for EU policies and programmes in cities and regions and as key stakeholders in delivering actions for the citizens coming from the close collaboration between European and local level.

DG R&I is supporting regions in debating strategic issues, e.g. through joint CoR-EC seminars under the Knowledge Exchange Platform. The focus on this years' two events was on the role of regions in ERA, the opportunities in Horizon Europe and the role of regions in the recovery process.

The CoR has been also included as observer in the ERA Forum for Transition and is actively involved in the preparation of the new ERA Policy Agenda. Co-creation with the CoR is taking place in important initiatives, such as the 'European Strategy of Universities', the 'ERA4You' action, the ERA Hubs and the Horizon Europe Missions.

The CoR is also involved in the diffusion of synergies good practices through the Community of Practice for the Seal of Excellence to disseminate relevant information to its members. The support of the CoR will be crucial in disseminating the guidance on synergies to be adopted soon, which will provide operational clarifications on how to implement synergies.

DG EAC increased its engagement actions under the European Education Area (EEA) by including CoR members in the consultation on higher education policy initiatives stemming from EEA. The SEDEC chair was invited at the kick-off meeting of the Education for Climate Coalition in June, together with other relevant stakeholders to reflect on how education can contribute to the green transition.

The Digital Education Action Plan (DEAP) is seen as a highly important initiative by local and regional governments in the EU and has triggered the adoption of a draft opinion by the CoR. The CoR's opinion on Strengthening STE(A)M education in the EU has been included in the Action Plan.

Through European Digital Education Hubs, the actions under the (DEAP) will be extended to local and regional authorities. In the field of culture, key messages and proposals put forward in the CoR own-initiative 'Opinion on the Restart of cultural and creative sectors' were presented in the European Commission's expert group on cultural heritage meeting on 20 April 2021.

In June 2021, the EP adopted a Preparatory Action "advancing evidence for policy at local and regional level", intended to continue and deepen the Science meets Regions programme. Over 30 applications, mostly from single regions and cities, but also some for multiregional networks were received. In the frame of the action on Extending Science meets Regions to the Western Balkans, a training course was delivered in July 2021.

During the visit of CoR President Tzitzikostas to JRC-Seville in June, plans were made for a new pilot initiative on S4 (with the sustainability dimension added), involving selected regions.

Due to the strong interest by the CoR, several steps have been undertaken by three DGs to involve CoR and its members in the New European Bauhaus process, although the NEB is not part of the Joint Action Plan.

## Outlook for 2022

All these initiatives will be continued and further developed in 2022 to pursue the objective of the Joint Action Plan. They have a very strong regional dimension and need the involvement of the CoR as well as regions and local communities to succeed. Through the Joint Action Plan, the CoR is at the centre of these strategic and important debates for the future. The Joint Action Plan represents both a consolidation and confirmation of ongoing activities, and a roadmap for future endeavours to strengthen the links between JRC, DG EAC and DG R&I and the CoR. They would also include new interesting projects and initiatives, such as the New European Bauhaus, the new Memorandum of Understanding with the European Institute of Technology (EIT) and the 2022 European Year of Youth (originally not mentioned in the Joint Action Plan), promoting together European values, identities and citizenship via education and culture.

New avenues of cooperation will be explored such as the integration of the regional dimension into the bi-annual event on pan-European procurements. The next edition is planned from 4 to 7 October 2022.

The Startup Village Forum, organised with the support of the JRC, is key to the implementation of the flagship action on research and innovation for rural communities. The launch event of the Startup Village Forum took place on 16 November 2021. It brought together both science-based and community-based knowledge and gathered insights on challenges and potentials for rural innovation. By bringing together these different experiences, the event provided a fruitful dialogue on rural innovative start-ups, the types of innovations they are involved in, the gaps in the services that they expect from innovation ecosystems and how these could be strengthened in the future. The CoR attended the launch event and will be closer involved in this activity from 2022 on.

This Annual Monitoring Report consists of a core part presenting the highlights per each priority (ie: a selection of the major joint actions implemented in this first year of the Plan, with their outcomes and impacts). In addition, a more detailed table with the reporting on all the actions of the Joint Action Plan can be found in the annex.

## **Priority A. No one left behind, evidence-based policymaking in the regions**

Several actions aim at elevating the debate with regions to more strategic issues. The longstanding cooperation between DG R&I and CoR under the umbrella of the Knowledge Exchange Platform has been relaunched in November 2020 (KEP 2.0) becoming a flagship initiative for addressing strategic debates, such as the latest ones on the **regional dimension of the European Research Area** and the **possibilities for regions and cities in Horizon Europe**. These two topics have been debated at the first KEP event in the margin of the R&I Days in June 2021. In addition, CoR members attended several sessions at the R&I Days discussing e.g. about **synergies and the role of regions in the recovery process**. The R&I Days attracted 21,000 participants from over a 100 different countries. At the European Week of Regions and Cities, the second KEP seminar, in collaboration with the JRC, and in synergy with Science Meet Regions, was held during the EU Week of Regions and Cities (13 October 2021) focussing on **science and innovation for the recovery** and on the green transition from both the R&I and the science for policy angles. Both seminars were well attended with over 160 participants, excellent speakers from the CoR, the European Parliament, the European Commission representing also the Horizon Europe Missions and regional and local stakeholders. Participants reacted positively on the high quality of the sessions. A joint **Innovation Camp** is planned back to back with a KEP peer-to-peer event in spring 2022. Through KEP and Science meets Regions, follow-up events are organised with the regions on local level, creating a dialogue between citizens, the scientific community and policymakers.

To give regions and cities the possibility to interact directly on R&I matters relevant to regions, provide feedback on KEP events and give suggestions for futures ones, the **Knowledge Exchange Platform web site** has been rendered **more interactive**. This is done via a contact section linked to a functional mailbox and an **EU survey**. The first survey has already been added to the web site in order to collect feedback from the KEP event, follow-up opinions and good practices on the topics discussed at the European Week of Regions and Cities. The feedback revealed that topics on the green and digital transition as well as on R&I funding are of particular interest to the respondents and are suggested for future KEP events. Through the interactive website, regional and local stakeholders have the possibility to interact with the Commission services on R&I matters relevant to their regions.

In the future, the survey will be linked to each KEP event. Good practice examples from regions and local communities could be collected systematically and eventually be replicated.

One of the flagship initiatives in the effort to **promote and spread a culture of evidence-informed policymaking** in recent years has been the **Science meets Regions** programme. Deriving from the annual *Science meets Parliaments* event, which brought together high-level policymakers and scientists in the European Parliament, *Science meets Regions* has evolved into a fully-fledged tool for regions and cities to boost their knowledge potential in order to improve the quality of public policymaking.

Revolving around participatory events on specific policy topics, a training offer for policymakers and an incipient community of practice, the instrument is currently financed through a Preparatory Action, which the EP adopted in December 2020. A first major call was launched in June, receiving over 35 expressions of interest from all over Europe. 14 regions and cities, as well as 2 multiregional

networks, were selected for financial, methodological and scientific support to the policy events and processes they are planning.

A second call, with deadline in early 2022, is set to follow. In parallel, the development of a pairing scheme allowing local and regional policymakers to spend time with scientists working on topics of relevance to them, is being set up, as are the outlines of the training component.

The CoR was consulted and closely involved in the design of the project and the first call for expression of interest, and many of its members have applied with their respective region or city. A major novelty is that the scheme now also allows for multiregional collaborative networks.

Another flagship initiative is the **European Researcher's Night**<sup>1</sup>, funded by the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA), which successfully put the diversity of science and its impact on citizen's daily lives on display across Europe on 24 September 2021. More than 420 cities and regions alongside universities and research institutions across member states and neighbouring countries had been involved in public outreach activities. In 2022, as a yearly event, the European Researchers' Night will take place again on 30 September, gathering a very broad public across Europe and beyond. The event will bring research and researchers closer to the public through hands-on experiments, science shows and competitions, games, quizzes, exhibitions and more. The night's celebration will involve local and regional authorities, alongside universities and research institutions and introduce a new initiative, the "Researchers at Schools" activity, which will bring researchers to schools around the year. This will allow for direct interaction between researchers and pupils on current and future challenges tackled by our societies.

Furthermore, the MSCA initiative Science is Wonderful! brings the world of science to primary and secondary schools all over Europe. Since 2020, the event has been organised online, thus increasing its reach to schools in different EU countries and regions. Scientists from all disciplines are ready to exchange online with teachers and pupils, to inspire them and show them the world of research. Schools from all Member States registered for the event, which allows them to exchange with researchers in all the EU's official, as well as minority and regional languages. The initiative must also be considered as a lighthouse placing MSCA female researchers as strong role models for women and girls in STEM in the spotlight. In 2021, 57% of the researchers involved in the event were women and mostly female researchers took part in the different webinars and sessions during the event, giving their testimonials about their career paths and motivations to become scientists, aiming to inspire young students to pursue a career in science. The next edition of Science is Wonderful! is planned for 2022.

In June 2022 (tbc), the European Commission and the European Research Executive Agency (REA) will be organising an MSCA Cluster Event on Ocean & Waters. The event will bring together excellent projects and researchers funded under the MSCA, as well as other research and innovation (R&I) initiatives under the remit of the European Commission's Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (DG EAC). These include the European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT), Erasmus+ (including European University Alliances), the European Solidary Corps and Creative Europe projects. The cluster event is part of the EU's feedback-to-policy activities and will convene policymakers at European, regional and national level, as well as researchers and experts to explore how R&I is helping achieve the goals of the EU Mission: Restore our Ocean and Waters. Discussions will focus on topics such as the protection and restoration of biodiversity and ecosystems,

<sup>1</sup> See <https://ec.europa.eu/research/mariecurieactions/event/2021-european-researchers-night> .

eliminating pollution and the blue economy.

#### **Local and regional (CoR) perspective**

*In the framework of a continued inter-institutional cooperation between the EC and CoR, several events were held successfully, raising a lot of interest, under the Knowledge Exchange Platform (KEP) initiative. They took place linked to the European R&I Days and the European Week of Regions and Cities, in a digital format.*

*Bottom-up and networking initiatives such as the Seal of Excellence and widening measures have also accelerated in the second half of the year and hold considerable promise for local impact.*

Support to **Territorial Development and Smart Specialisation** features high on the list of priority actions in the Joint Action Plan. Considerable progress has been made in 2021. On April 15, the JRC and CoR co-organised a webinar on Smart Specialisation Methodologies that was widely attended (over a 1000 participants) and featured several high-level speakers, including Commissioner Ferreira. On the basis of the discussions at the event, the idea of a pilot on S4 (including the sustainability dimension in Smart Specialisation) gathered momentum. S4 builds on the JRC's valuable experience with Smart Specialisation over the past decade at the regional level, and also on its ability to link different policy domains relevant to the sustainability transition. In June, CoR's President Mr Tzitzikostas visited the JRC premises in Seville. Shortly afterwards, a letter was sent to Commissioners Ferreira and Gabriel expressing the wish to engage in a pilot, the implementation of which would be led by JRC.

There have been significant advances on the theoretical foundations of the pilot, and talks about the modalities and criteria for selecting the pilot regions are ongoing. The pilot is expected to be launched in March-April 2022. In this pilot, regions will have a leading role, where we can benefit from their experience in consultation with stakeholders, multilevel governance and whole government approaches to policy making.

While the JRC has limited scope for taking on additional research work outside the remit of its Work Programme, JRC scientists are maximally available to **deliver relevant data and factual material to the CoR and to local and regional authorities** directly.

The JRC made a significant contribution to the **CoR's annual barometer** in several fields: Green Deal, Migration and Demography, as well as participatory and deliberative democracy.

The CoR has also been cooperating with the JRC of the European Commission regarding a number of horizontal studies (especially as regards the implementation of the Green Deal, foresight, demography and resilience), but also with respect to mapping "educational inequalities" both during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. It would also be important to highlight the role of such mutually beneficial cooperation and sharing of expertise and political views in relation to both institutions' participation in the Conference on the Future of Europe. The work on **participatory and deliberative democracy** also deserves mention here. The JRC recently launched its new competence centre on the subject, with participation of the CoR CIVEX Chair Mr. Speich in the launch event. Cooperation with both the CoR administration and CoR members is picking up speed in this area.

### **Local and regional (CoR) perspective**

*Substantial progress was achieved in the majority of areas originally identified as important in the JAP. In a challenging period for EU's local and regional authorities, dominated by the COVID-19 pandemic, but also by the relatively short period to submit their own strategic plans and continue the Green and Digital transformation, the wide expertise of JRC was actively sought by sub-national authorities.*

*The recent evolution of the field of Smart Specialisation and the design phase of the New European Bauhaus, including labelling, have solicited a keen interest on behalf of many regions and cities across Europe.*

*The new edition of Science meets Regions and first call to regions has attracted many individual participants and territorial networks to join this project.*

*The attempt to map educational inequalities during a pandemic context has proven to be challenging to realise, as data and local authorities' engagement was quite irregular and difficult to mobilise. Nevertheless, systematic efforts in this direction will be carried in the near future.*

*Finally, the JRC services have regularly shared research analyses and studies with the CoR commissions, while members have been invited as speakers to different key policy events.*

### **Priority B. Close consultation on the implementation of the European Research Area (ERA), the European Education Area (EEA) and the Digital Education Action Plan (DEAP), Horizon Europe Missions and other initiatives**

Substantial progress has been made in supporting the involvement of the CoR in strategic Fora, such as the ERA Forum for Transition, which is an **important forum for strategic dialogue**. The CoR is actively involved in the preparation of the new ERA Policy Agenda and is participating in the discussions on the ERA Hubs and the ERA4You initiatives, which are both part of the **ERA policy agenda**. The ERA Hubs are targeting place-based innovation and territorial cooperation whereas ERA4You is an action targeted on balanced brain circulation and intersectoral mobility. Both initiatives were on the agenda of the ERA Forum for Transition meeting on 8 October, where CoR participated actively. **Through these strategic discussions, important initiatives are co-created and designed together.** The recommendations and advice of the CoR will enter into the design of the final ERA Hubs concept by the end of the year and its implementation in the following year. CoR will be a strong partner in the future implementation of the ERA Hubs in EU regions. The processes to launch the ERA Hubs initiative will consist of a pilot period of two years, starting in 2022, after which the initiative could be scaled up. To ensure that all relevant lessons from the pilot period can be captured, an assessment of the pilot period would be put in place. Before the pilot is launched, the Commission and CoR need to finalise the requirements for ERA Hubs. A meeting will take place to this effect with the CoR end of December/beginning of January. Once ERA Hubs are in place across different geographies and structures in Europe, they can bring missions closer to the citizens and society as they are place based.

The role of regions in the ERA pilots will be explored further as some of them have a clear regional dimension, as e.g. the one on Green Hydrogen. As hydrogen valleys are of regional interest, a first idea could be to involve regions through the CoR in this activity.

Works to create an attractive online entry point to policies and activities under the wider EEA umbrella, the **EEA Portal & ERA Portal**, are continuing into 2022 and are set to include the regional dimension in the implementation of the EEA, the ERA and the Pact for R&I respectively.

This strand of work is crucial to achieve EAC's objective of including local and regional authorities in future initiatives, an endeavour that gained support from the European Parliament in May 2021 with a vote on a resolution scheduled for the Plenary Session in November.

As local and regional authorities play an important role in the implementation of the **European Education Area and the European Research Area**, the CoR expressed support of the Commission's efforts to achieve the European Education Area by 2025 through the adoption of an opinion in their Plenary on 17 March 2021. DG EAC and DG R&I appreciates the increased engagement of CoR through a Targeted Consultation Meeting on higher education policy initiatives stemming from EEA in synergy with ERA held on 5 July 2021. Commissioner Gabriel informed CoR members about developments regarding the European Strategy for Universities, which is being developed by DG EAC and DG R&I and is underlining the synergies between the EEA and the ERA, as well as about developments on the European approach to micro-credentials and Education for Environmental Sustainability, being coordinated by DG EAC. This is to be followed by further targeted consultations and additional inter-service consultations, including consultations with the Erasmus+ programme committee.

Mobilisation of regions following the adoption of the Communication on **Horizon Europe Missions** is progressing very well.

Horizon Europe Missions represent without any doubt one of the areas in which the collaboration between DG R&I and CoR have a high potential of positive impact. Thanks to this enhanced cooperation, important exchanges have taken place during the last months between regions and missions representatives on the possible role of regions in missions: a first event mobilising over 100 CoR members learning about missions objectives, a second one giving the opportunities to regions to discuss how to co-create structures and governance for missions at EU, country and regional levels. The collaboration will intensify now as the Communication has been adopted. In his recent State of the Union speech from the regional and local perspective, CoR's President Mr Tzitzikostas welcomed the European Commission's Research Missions to break silos and work together on adapting to climate change, smart cities, oceans, soil health and food, cancer. All five mission secretariats are in contract with the CoR and are organising common events and communication activities. More intense collaboration will follow during the next months. On 25/11/21, a conference on European Missions "Launching the implementation of EU Missions and presentation of the European Commission's call for expression of interest for the 100 Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities Mission" took place in the CoR. More than 1000 participants connected to this event. The CoR via President Tzitzikostas reiterated its commitment to contribute in accelerating their implementation process.

Common activities to elevate the debate with regions to a more strategic level include the yearly WIRE conference (Week of Innovative Regions in Europe) – a EU Presidency Conference supported by Horizon, where the CoR is part of the steering committee. The CoR is actively participating in

setting the agenda and proposing speakers. The next WIRE conference will take place under French Presidency in the first half of 2022.

Furthermore, the CoR is foreseen as observer in the informal Commission expert group ‘European Network of Research & Innovation and Cohesion Policy Managing Authorities’ (RIMA), which will be launched soon and will gather, for each MS, one representative from the side of cohesion policy managing authorities and one representing Member States’ R&I authorities, nominated by each MS. The purpose of the RIMA network would be to foster closer cooperation between R&I and cohesion policies and create and facilitate exchange of knowledge and practices among various authorities dealing with R&I and Cohesion policies as well as the two most important EU programmes supporting R&I, Horizon Europe and Cohesion Policy Programming.

#### **Local and regional (CoR) perspective**

*The JAP has catalysed a series of key cooperation activities between DG R&I and the members of the CoR. Two notable examples are the ERA Forum for Transition and the implementation of European Missions, whereas the EC made significant headways to include local and regional authorities not only in the consultation process, but also in some of co-design and governance structures. Important synergies were built with other EC DGs and funding instruments, which could potentially have a significant impact on smart and innovative territorial investments.*

Concerning Education, several JAP milestones were reached and can be reported as follows:

In support of the implementation of the **European Climate Pact** through innovative education capabilities and supported by the Erasmus+ programme, the Joint Action Plan parties joined forces in the creation of the **Education for Climate Coalition**. On 22 June 2021, Commissioner Gabriel opened the first Education for **Climate Conference** with a keynote speech. The Conference also included a high-level panel discussion with the SEDEC Chair and the presentation of the design and structure of the coalition to the public and coalition stakeholders. On 25 November 2021, EAC successfully hosted the First Education for Climate Day on 25 November 2021, which aimed at the mobilisation of all the education community and existing initiatives to connect at regional, national and EU level.

Significant progress can be reported on cooperation in the context of the **Digital Education Action Plan (2021-2027)** and in working together to address the fragmentation of digital education policies across Member States and regions since the adoption of an opinion in CoR Plenary on 6 May 2021, which reiterated the important role of cities and regions. The CoR’s opinion on Strengthening STEAM Education in the EU, which covers areas of action in STEM subjects in education and training, is also welcome. Elements of the opinion have been included in the new Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027.

The **Connectivity4Schools** initiative, which encourages Member States to uptake EU support for broadband, internet access and digital tools, raised interest in the CoR, recognising its potential to provide high-speed connectivity in rural areas. Preparatory work for the creation of a **Digital Education Hub** linking digital education initiatives and strategies with stakeholders is underway with cooperation amongst DG EAC, the European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT) and the EU STEM Coalition. Its outreach and engagement activities include the **Digital Education Hackathon**, which took place on 9-10 November 2021. It was open to all digital education actors competing for three DigiEduHack 2021 Global Award, which will be presented by Commissioner Gabriel. DG EAC and SEDEC are also exploring the possibility to organise an event on the regional and local dimension

of digital education, to take place in early 2022 in order to feed into the Strategic Dialogue with Member States on digital education and skills.

In addition, CoR's involvement in the Open Public Consultations (OPCs) for "**Pathways to School Success**" initiative (18 June – 24 September 2021) and for "**Education for environmental sustainability**" (24 June – 30 September 2021) has been vital. The results of the OPCs will inform the proposals for respective proposals for Council Recommendations by the end of 2021 and first half of 2022.

#### **Local and regional (CoR) perspective**

*The JAP induced a new dynamic to the cooperation with DG EAC in all three main policy fields: education, culture and sport, defined by intensified exchanges and dialogue, increased mutual participation in major events and forward planning and consultation.*

*The adoption of the CoR Opinions on the European Education Area Communication and the Digital Education Action Plan were prepared by direct exchanges between the rapporteurs and DG EAC, accompanied by CoR participation in preparatory actions and targeted consultations, that translated in turn into a stronger territorial dimension in the implementation phase, taking into consideration the local and regional specifics in the field of education and training.*

*The CoR own-initiative Opinion on the Restart of Cultural and Creative Sectors (CCS) also benefitted from the political debate with Commissioner Gabriel at the February Plenary. While the CCS benefitted from the EU support during the pandemic, more efforts are needed to ensure recovery, including a Status of European artist.*

*The European Week of Sport and the SHARE initiative were presented in SEDEC commission and the European Week of Regions and Cities offered the opportunity to further discuss the link of sport with territorial development.*

In the field of Sport, efforts between the DG EAC and the CoR are ongoing to exchange evidence through studies and collected data to improve sport policies. Both institutions collaborate closely through the **SportHub Alliance for Regional Development in Europe (SHARE)** initiative as well as in other flagship initiatives, such as the European Week of Sport, #BeInclusive EU Sport Award and notably the HealthyLifeStyle4All. In 2022, actions in the field of sport will continue to give visibility to the role of sport in contemporary society for people's health, social inclusion, well-being and to its contribution to economic growth.

The **SHARE initiative** (SportHub: Alliance for Regional development in Europe) will continue to promote the role of sport and physical activity as an instrument for economic social and cultural development towards more healthy and active communities, and enabling spaces for healthy lifestyles, for instance in the context of the New European Bauhaus . The **SHARE initiative** was presented to the SEDEC on 23 June 2021 and featured prominently in a workshop during the European Week of Cities and Regions on 12 October 2021, which included a testimonial by CoR's First Vice-President Mr Alves Cordeiro.

Continuity will be ensured in the support of the **European Week of Sport**. As an annual action week from 2 to 30 September, the European Week of Sport will raise awareness of the importance of sport and physical activity, encouraging Europeans to embrace a healthy and active lifestyle.

Launched by Commissioner Gabriel during the 2021 European Week of Sport, the **HealthyLifeStyle4All** emerged as a follow-up to the Tartu Call for a Healthy Lifestyle. The Commission's two-year campaign aims to link sport and active lifestyles with health, food and other related policies. HealthyLifestyle4All showcases the Commission's commitment to promoting healthy lifestyles for all, across generations and social groups, noting that everyone can benefit from activities that improve health and well-being. More than 35 international organisations, member states and sport organisations have introduced a pledge to the HealthyLifestyle4All committing to promote a healthy life style.

Until 2023, the HealthyLifestyle4All initiative will continue to promote a broad outreach, uptake and ownership of healthy lifestyles across society involving the sport movements at national, European and international level; state authorities, cities & regions and civil society organisations of Member States, Erasmus+ programme countries, the Eastern Partnership and the Western Balkans countries. The 2022 EU Sport Forum will feature an Ideas Lab on HealthyLifeStyle4All that will contribute to promote healthy life styles across generations.

The promotion of gender equality in sport has a dual benefit: Sport can contribute to the overall promotion of gender equality but it is also beneficial for the sport sector itself. Women can contribute to greater diversity in sport, combatting prevalent gender stereotypes. Sports organisations also benefit from better participation of women from an economic point of view, be it as athletes, coaches or leading members of organisations. In 2022, a High Level Conference will be organised, presenting the work results of the High Level Group on Gender Equality in Sport.

The **#BeInclusive EU sport awards** recognise sport organisations dedicated to people with fewer opportunities from ethnic minorities, refugees, people with disabilities, youth at risk, and other groups that face challenging social circumstances. In 2022, a gala event is planned.

The collaboration between the JAP partners in the **European Capitals of Culture** initiative is set to continue during the second year with regular participation in the selection of the Capitals through the related expert group and ongoing monitoring activities. DG EAC is currently planning a second edition of the High-Level Webinar bringing Commissioner Gabriel, mayors and regional representatives together in early 2022, aimed to foster an exchange of ideas around the HealthyLifestyle4All initiative.

The **European Commission's Expert Group on Cultural Heritage** is continuously followed by the CoR as an observer, with CoR representatives in attendance at the meeting held on 20 April 2021. Its meeting on 14 December 2021 will focus on the European Year of Youth 2022 and invites to reflect on potential synergies and the integration of cultural heritage in the year. Fostering the mutual exchange of expertise, the expert group has proven to be an important forum for exchange. Concerning equal representation of genders, it is worth noting that out of 93 members, 66 identify as female. EAC is looking forward to foster the cooperation in regard to the European Heritage Label Award, which celebrates remarkable projects, initiatives and personalities in the field of cultural heritage and aspires to give stakeholders the opportunity to reflect on recent developments, novelties and strategies. In 2022, the Commission is committed to explore ways how to develop the action, thanks to the close cooperation with the Member States and the European Panel of independent experts, of which one member is appointed by CoR.

The Cultural Heritage in Action project, which is funded by the Creative Europe programme and aims to empower cities and regions to strengthen their cultural heritage policies and initiatives and to develop innovative solutions to preserve cultural heritage assets, will enter its second phase and run until 2023. New calls for good practices are currently open to cities and regions.

November 2021 saw the launch of the **CulturEU funding tool**, a new interactive online-tool developed to support stakeholders from the cultural and creative sectors in navigating available funding opportunities for cultural activities across the EU programmes 2021-2017 and to access them successfully.

The regional and local perspectives on a possible future **Work Plan of Culture beyond 2022**, will be of outmost interest, as the Commission is considering reflections on the regional dimension of cultural policy making in Europe. The report on the implementation of the Work Plan for Culture 2019-2022 is due in June 2022 and will include strategic reflections on future priorities and working methods. Furthermore, the EAC envisages a “non-paper” on the **cultural dimension of sustainable development** to be published in the second half 2022, intended to raise visibility of the cultural dimension and contributions to achieve the UN Agenda 2030, including making cities more inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable (SDG 11).

As a good example for increased synergies and participation in events, **the Conference Diversity and Competitiveness of the European music sector** on 4-5 March 2021 should be mentioned, which included a Panel discussion with Commissioner Gabriel and Ms Hristova, Mayor of Gabrovo. The event included a session on the role of music in society and its contributions to social cohesion and the well-being. It also saw strong female representation among attendees.

### **Priority C. Raising awareness and dissemination of funding opportunities. Exchange of best practices in the fields of research and innovation, education, culture, youth and sport**

In the field of Youth, EAC appreciates the CoR opinion on Youth Employment Support under the **European Youth Guarantee**<sup>2</sup>, adopted by the Plenary on 3 February 2021, recognising the important role of cities in regions in supporting youth both in their educational, vocational and professional training as well as socially. The cooperation between the JAP partners has proven to be important in a joint effort to promote the **EU Youth Portal**, as a focal point of information for youngsters, which include relevant information about the **European Solidarity Corps** and funding opportunities through **Erasmus+**, including the **DiscoverEU** initiative. Cities and regions are regularly addressed via news items highlighting EC / CoR initiatives and via articles tackling topics with cities in the spotlight. Some examples include the “Youth4Regions” competition, the “Europe in My Region” stories competition, the presence of the European Solidarity Corps at the European Week of Cities and Regions, traineeships opportunities at the CoR, European Youth Capitals and Cultural Gems in European Cities. The European Youth Portal also highlights cities and regions via European Solidarity Corps opportunities, the DiscoverEU competition and its Green Route, the EU Youth Dialogue and its local / regional consultations, and events taking place in EU cities. In the framework of DiscoverEU, the Portal will provide as of Spring 2022 a map for meet-ups in EU cities. The European Year of Youth 2022 will also be the occasion to highlight via the EU Youth Portal activities aimed at young people in cities and regions across the EU.

<sup>2</sup> See <https://cor.europa.eu/EN/our-work/Pages/OpinionTimeline.aspx?opid=CDR-3454-2020> .

In regard to the DiscoverEU initiative, linkages to cities and regions are ensured by the recently introduced DiscoverEU Learning Cycle, which National Agencies are requested to implement as of 2021. Each participant's learning cycle and experience does cover a pre-departure meeting and/ or receiving a pre-departure information package as well as at least one DiscoverEU meet-up at a historical, cultural or particular sustainable site, providing learning activities. National Agencies are asked to organise at least one coordination meeting with regional and local multipliers to support participants hosted in their country, coordinating with stakeholders such as youth associations and municipalities. Apart from steering DiscoverEU participants into the regions through the above mentioned main activities, the EC DiscoverEU team is also developing the 'DiscoverEU Routes' on the European Youth Portal. The first one, called the 'Green Route', was published in July 2021. Its aim is to inspire DiscoverEU participants to travel to sustainable European cities such as the European Green Capitals and European Leaf Cities. The second one is 'the Digital Route'. It will be published in the beginning of 2022, and will focus on cities that are doing particularly well with the digital transition. A 'Cultural Route' is also under preparation. Its aim is to encourage the young people to embark on a cultural journey during their travel with DiscoverEU. The route will highlight places of cultural interest, preferably in smaller cities and should be published on the European Youth Portal in the first half of 2022.

Cities and regions are likewise important stakeholders of the European Solidarity Corps, providing young people with an opportunity to tackle unsolved societal challenges faced by communities across Europe and beyond. Young people engaged in the Corps therefore bring tangible benefits to places and communities in need. These can be either the communities where they reside, in the case of local initiatives, such as Solidarity Projects, or communities that host cross-border Volunteering Projects. By participating in the European Solidarity Corps, the young volunteers also gain essential personal, social and civic competences that will help them better cope in a rapidly changing world and will help them act as active citizens once they are back in their own communities after the completion of their engagement in the Corps. While the municipalities can clearly benefit from any and all activities of the European Solidarity Corps that take place on their territory, regional and local authorities and other stakeholders may also directly take part in the programme as participating organisations that request funding for a project specifically designed to meet their needs in the solidarity sector. In 2020, 2828 local solidarity projects and 2691 volunteering projects were submitted. The National Agencies are implementing the actions of the European Solidarity Corps in individual participating countries, also monitor the representation of individual regions and carry out specific outreach activities aimed at promoting a balanced geographical distribution of the programme's funding and activities. Specific measures are foreseen for facilitating access to Solidarity Corps activities for young people with fewer opportunities, including those who face geographical obstacles, incl. long travel distances and weak transportation links.

All EU youth programmes share the vocation to mainstream the gender equality perspective throughout its actions over the entire programming period, in line with the principles of the Gender Equality Strategy 2020-25. The - Erasmus+ Programme Inclusion and Diversity Strategy supports an easier access to funding for a wider range of organisations, and to better reach out to more participants with fewer opportunities, in order to fostering equality. The participation in the Erasmus programme by gender is well-balanced, and in terms of supported activities, 9,243 projects funded under the 2014-2020 Erasmus+ programme generation reported to have addressed gender equality among other objectives. When it comes to the young people registered for the European Solidarity Corps, i.e. those wishing to engage in its activities, the aggregate data since 2018 shows a prevalence

of young persons declaring themselves to be female (60,5%).

EAC welcomes the existing exchanges on current calls within EU programmes such as the **ErasmusDays**, and invites the CoR members to maintain the contact with their respective Erasmus+ National Agency.

Furthermore, the EU Youth Coordinator serves as a visible point of reference for young people and youth organisations from cities and regions across Europe and aims to ensure that their views and perspectives are taken into account and integrated in all relevant policies. The Coordinator's mission is "to help ensure coordination and coherence, and raise awareness of the EU's action in the area in close co-operation with EU institutions and agencies as well as with Member States" (COM(2018) 269). The role was established in the 2019-2027 EU Youth Strategy, with the objective of enhancing cross-sectoral cooperation, as well as knowledge development and exchange on youth issues within the European Commission services. Ms Biliana Sirakova was appointed as the first EU Youth Coordinator on 1 June 2021. In September 2021, she spoke at an event of the Young Elected Politicians (YEP) and presented the needs of young people in a post-COVID world. As part of the 2021 European Week of Cities and Regions, the EU Youth Coordinator took part in three sessions with Euromontana, the Working Community of the Pyrenees (CTP) and DG COMM.

In view to the European Year of Youth 2022, Ms Sirakova moderated and spoke at the first meeting with youth stakeholders and national coordinators on 16 November 2021, with a representative from the CoR in attendance. The EU Youth Coordinator will participate in an exchange with the Commission for Social Policy, Education, Employment, Research and Culture (SEDEC) on 13 December 2021. In the framework of the European Year of Youth, Ms Sirakova is coordinating interactions with youth stakeholders, national coordinators and the EU institutions. She is available to discuss concrete ideas and initiatives, which can be co-designed and co-managed with the CoR, looking forward to foster the exchange of best practices in the field of youth.

In the field of Culture, the European Institute of Innovation & Technology will keep playing a crucial role by identifying relevant events for the promotion of the call jointly with the CoR, through the **Knowledge and Innovation Communities (KIC) on Cultural and Creative Sectors and Industries (CCI)**. Following the formal publication of the call, EAC is looking forward to working closely together with CoR members on identifying relevant events. In order to ensure coordination, regular meetings between DG EAC, EIT and CoR are taking place. The Call for Proposals will close on 24 March 2022 with the results to be announced on 22 June 2022. In accordance with the official timeline, the EIT expects activities to start in 2023.

The future relations between the European Institute of Innovation & Technology and the CoR will be framed in a Memorandum of Understanding, currently at draft stage. The signature is foreseen to take place in early 2022 and will be a communication opportunity to demonstrate the good collaboration between the parties and the good progress made on the implementation of the Joint Action Plan. This Memorandum of Understanding will translate cooperation opportunities into concrete activities that will allow strengthening the link between the EIT and its KICs and the CoR at regional and local level, in particular in those regions that are eligible for the Regional Innovation Scheme due to an innovation performance below average.

## **Priority D. Co-funding of programmes: top-up with European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF)**

In the context of enhancing synergies between Horizon European and Cohesion programme funds, CoR participated in the meeting of the **Seal of Excellence Community of Practice** on 16 September 2021 and will be invited to disseminate information on the Seal of Excellence to their members. This should lead to an **increase in implementation of the Seal of Excellence in the regions** and ultimately to more regions investing in Research and Innovation. The CoR will disseminate **the guidance on synergies** once it is adopted and DG RTD will present the guidance to the CoR members. Joint seminars will be held to disseminate the guidance as widely as possible with the aim to inform regional and local authorities and stakeholders in regions and local communities.

The work programme calls 2021 for the European Innovation Ecosystems (EIE) have been published in July 2021. An info day was organised on 21/9/21 to share more details about the six calls that are open until around mid-November 2021 (total budget ~28 Mil EUR). Target groups include national, regional or local authorities, and other players in the ecosystem. The Executive Agency EISMEA called on the CoR to further disseminate the EIE work programme calls. Concerning the COFUND scheme, the call is expected to open Q4 2022 and the exact implementation modalities (COFUND templates, possible ESIF contribution or private sector contribution, etc.) remain to be clarified. DG R&I is currently exploring the role of regions in innovation ecosystems in the context of the new innovation agenda. It is well known that the Smart Specialisation Strategies play an important role in strengthening local and regional innovation ecosystems to stimulate economic growth. Nevertheless, there is a huge potential to generate and diffuse innovation in Europe in a much better way. This requires interconnecting local innovation ecosystems across the EU level and making them key contributors to and beneficiaries of EU-level initiatives such as Missions under Horizon Europe.

## **Initiative not mentioned in the Joint Action Plan as adopted on 25 November 2020**

The **New European Bauhaus (NEB)**, of which JRC leads the design phase, has attracted considerable interest from European regions and cities. The JRC has made an effort to maximise regional involvement in the project.

The CoR members and their regions contributed actively on to the design phase of this important European project, while a very successful high level event on 14 April 2021 with the participation of both Commissioners Gabriel and Ferreira was jointly organised with the CoR and included Mayors of European Capitals of Culture (ECOC) and Innovation (iCapitals). The Communication "**New European Bauhaus. Beautiful, Sustainable, Together**" already includes the proposal by the CoR to establish a NEB label on the model of the Seal of Excellence.

From the meeting, some guiding principles for the transformation of cities and regions in the spirit of New European Bauhaus emerged, such as the inclusion and involvement of citizens, the building of creative ecosystems, and the sustainable reuse of heritage, traditional materials and methods. Many of the issues discussed were later taken up in the Commission communication on the NEB (September 15) and its design phase.

The JRC will continue to **involve the regional and local level in the further development of NEB and counts on the CoR to raise awareness via its members throughout Europe's regions and cities.**

The online high-level Conference on the New European Bauhaus on 22-23 April 2021 marked its kick-off. Bridging science and innovation with arts and culture, policy actions funding under the NEB will mobilise different EU programmes including the European Regional Development Fund and Horizon Europe, notably the Horizon Europe missions. Commissioners Gabriel and Ferreira announced on 23 April 2021 the New European Bauhaus Prize, whose ten categories include awards for leading in green building, planning and urban design, urban projects with strong participation of citizens and local stakeholders, for reinventing community spaces and for transforming cultural heritage – all at local and regional level. The tools and financial instruments of the NEB are open to cities and regions, featured prominently in the 19th European Weeks of Regions and Cities with a session hosted by the JRC on 14 October 2021.

## **Conclusions**

It is indubitable that the Joint Action Plan has both structured in a strategic way and contributed to the significant increase of the bilateral EC-CoR, but also inter-service (across DGs), cooperation in a number of key areas.

The Joint Action Plan is a fundamental element to maximise the positive impact of EU action in Europe's regions and local communities. It is a hallmark of strengthened outreach, not just to the CoR as a political body, but also directly to the local and regional authorities and the citizens it represents.

Furthermore, in a complicated period characterised by the still-ongoing COVID pandemic and the impending deadlines to start the new programming period, the implementation of EU policy measures and numerous funding activities on the ground has already benefited and will continue to do so from such bespoke collaboration, involving supranational and local and regional actors.

Ultimately, the priority areas identified in the Joint Action Plan present an important compass for decision-makers and policy officers in both the EC and the CoR. The inbuilt flexibility of this list of actions allows for the inclusion of new interesting projects and initiatives, such as the New European Bauhaus and the 2022 European Year of Youth (originally not mentioned in the Joint Action Plan), promoting together European values, identities and citizenship via education and culture, adapting the EU's activities to the new dynamic realities. Bearing in mind the need to quickly roll out actions across Europe through major EU programmes such as Erasmus+, Horizon Europe, the European Recovery and Resilience Facility and the Just Transition Fund, presents a big challenge.

A solid multilevel and inter-institutional partnership is a guarantee that this could be carried out successfully in the near and medium term future.

Considerable progress was made for the actions under JRC's remit. The flagship initiatives (S3/S4, Science meets Regions) are on track and will be further implemented in close consultation with CoR. Special attention will be given to the areas where more progress is needed, such as the provision of data at local and regional level (notably in the field of the Green Deal that was mentioned as a priority area).

Substantial progress has also been made by DG R&I to involve the CoR in strategic working groups and fora on the future of the European Research Area, an involvement made possible thanks to the JAP.

DG EAC and the CoR are looking forward to fostering the joint stakeholders' engagement at European, local and regional level and to develop further joint outreach activities. An important milestone to continue with the great cooperation will be the organisation of the second European Education Summit on 9 December 2021, where several CoR members have been invited to participate in various high-level panels.

## Milestones

Indicative milestones/events (2022)	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	2023
KEP Thematic seminars: June/October 2022						X				X			
KEP – Science meets regions joint innovation camp, spring 2022 + KEP Peer-to-peer					X						X		
Deadline for the second Science meets Regions call		X											
WIRE – Week of Innovative Regions in Europe					X								
Science meets Regions: Pairing scheme start			X										
Launch of the S4 Pilot Smart Specialisation Pilot (S4+), major conference & announcement of call	X												
ERA Forum for Transition 19 Jan – call regarding a number of policy actions	X												
The ERA Hubs pilot deadline for participation				X									
European Education Area and European Universities – Education package	X												
Digital Education Action Plan							X						
Sport Healthylifestyle4all high-level event			X										
Sport European Sport Forum		X											
Creative Europe - 08/02: SEDEC Seminar on Cultural Diversity in the Mediterranean		X											

Promoting European Values through education and culture, 3-4/03 9th CoR Summit in Marseille			X									
European Year of Youth 2022 (A CoR resolution on the EYY2022 to be adopted in December 2021), 25-27/01 FR PR European Youth Conference	X											
Consultations for the implementation of the EEA Council Recommendation on Education for Environmental Sustainability and Council Recommendation on Pathways to School Success expected to be adopted in <b>early 2022</b> ;												
Cooperation in the Context of the Digital Education Action Plan Possible event co-organised by DG EAC and SEDEC <b>in Q1 2022</b> ;												
European Capitals of Culture A concept note on the preparation of a second High-Level Webinar is in preparation;												
EIT KIC on Cultural and Creative Industries (CCI) Call for Proposals closes on 24 March 2022; Award planned for 11 June 2022 with early-bird activities starting in 2023;			X			X						X
Co-Location centres, local innovation ecosystems (widening countries) Mobilisation of the CoR in each of the EIT RIS countries by 2022;												
Strengthening collaboration within Creative Europe and HEU												

Ongoing: regular exchanges between EAC and CoR at services level on Creative Europe;													
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