



1<sup>st</sup> Leaders Meeting,  
18th of April 2024, Antwerp

Joint declaration:

**“Fit for the Future:  
Global Challenges, Regional Solutions”**

At the meeting of government leaders from strong and innovative European regions on 18 April 2024, which was held at the invitation of the Minister-President of Flanders in Antwerp within the framework of the Belgian presidency of the Council of the European Union, the participating regions exchanged views and identified possibilities to work together to make the EU more fit for the future. The leaders confirmed their engagement to keep meeting and advocate the following objectives.

The leaders, at their meeting “Fit for the Future: Global Challenges, Regional Solutions”:

1. Confirm their adherence to the EU as a unique project for peace and prosperity for their regions and beyond. It is in our best interest to see a strong, decisive and effective Union, which focuses on delivering a better Europe – a Europe which generates added value for its citizens and businesses, which is built from the bottom up and in doing so takes full account of the interests and well-being of our respective societies.
2. Point out that our regions are home to world-renowned research centres, top ranking higher education institutions, industrial players and innovative SMEs that are key to global value chains, and together account for about a quarter of both the EU’s GDP and the EU’s intra and extra EU trade. Our regions are smart competitive regions, the heartland of the EU Member States. By joining our strengths in specific fields, we can help the EU to reinforce its global competitiveness, and achieve its goals in the twin transition, industrial deal, economic security strategy, without leaving anyone behind.

3. Call on the European institutions and all actors involved to use the momentum of the new European legislature to view our regions as partners, to enrich European policymaking with a genuine regional perspective, and to strengthen the EU's multi-level governance system in line with a stronger, enhanced subsidiarity principle. The leaders equally call upon the next European Commission to take better account of regional diversity in conjunction with Article 4(2) of the Treaty on European Union, especially in its implementation and interaction processes, in order to increase the success rate and democratic legitimacy of EU policymaking. More specifically, the leaders invite the European Commission to:
  - a) Enhance its understanding of the various EU regions and their ecosystems. Indeed, certain regional characteristics, along with the internal division of competences, are key determinants for the achievement of its policy objectives: the geographical distribution of renewable energy potential, population density, the presence of energy-intensive industry, educational attainment levels, available skills and workforce, infrastructure, etc.;
  - b) Enhance the use and translation of EU harmonised indicators on a regional level and incorporate them in key socioeconomic and fiscal policy coordination processes such as new economic governance and the European Semester, including its country reports and subsequent country-specific recommendations, and where appropriate, region-specific recommendations, the governance of the Energy Union and climate action, reports on the state of the Digital Decade, etc.;
  - c) Undertake detailed territorial impact assessments when proposing new EU rules and strategies, including the impact on regional economies and competitiveness;
  - d) Structurally incorporate regional expertise in the development of EU funding programmes and allow regional programming and planning documents to form part of Member States' contributions;
  - e) Intensify direct interaction and dialogue with our regions. We propose that interactions with Member States' Single Point of Contacts (SPOCs) should be supplemented with regional points of contact. Case-specific meetings should also be possible with regional experts only, in line with their competences.

4. Underline the importance of strategic foresight analysis as a means to increase resilience and improve joint preparedness and evidence-based anticipatory policymaking. During the preparatory phase of this Leaders Meeting, our regions collaborated on strategic foresight analysis. The analysis focused on the four resilience dimensions of the European Union<sup>1</sup> and was based on four scenarios developed by the Government of Flanders. The leaders therefore:
- a) Call on the next European Commission to invite regional ministers to the EU-wide Foresight Network “Ministers for the Future” and to build on the reinforced action on strategic foresight analysis;
  - b) Will engage in an informal network open to interested regional authorities and/or experts from the academia and think tanks working on strategic foresight analysis with the goal to strengthen our joint capacity. Interested regions could seek support by jointly introducing a project proposal for the Technical Support Instrument;
  - c) Aim to maintain the dialogue and work together on common global challenges and regional solutions to reinforce our resilience. We remain open for other regions to join our discussions;
  - d) Reinforce our partnerships and identify synergies with other regional-led initiatives and networks, such as Four Motors for Europe, RLEG-initiative, Regions for EU Recovery (R4EUR), etc.

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<sup>1</sup> The four resilience dimensions of the European Union are: green, social and economic, digital and geopolitical.

5. Building on the common global challenges and potential regional solutions identified in the preparatory phase of this Leaders Meeting, and documented in the accompanying report, the leaders today propose the following key priorities for the next European Strategic Agenda:
- a) After thirty years, the internal market needs new (political) momentum. The European Union should prioritise the deepening and broadening of the European single market. This includes goods, services, facilitating new flows such as waste for the circular economy, energy, public investment and procurement, digitalisation, a skilled workforce, etc. A strong level playing field as its foundation.
  - b) This should be built on a smart regulatory framework that serves an attractive business and investment climate. Introduce a smart competitive region check for new regulations and policies to ensure that rules are fit for purpose and do not hamper the development of and innovation in our regions.
  - c) Jointly identify a limited number of strategic priorities that provide a common thread across industrial, research and innovation policies and respond to broader common challenges and ambitions to strengthen the EU's resilience. Deliver, building on pan-European cooperation between different societal actors based on excellence, and facilitated by EU, private and public funding.
  - d) Build trust in digital and green technologies to promote a European mindset conducive to an innovative, sustainable and resource-efficient economy and society.
  - e) Implement modern trade policies that adapt to new geopolitical contexts and challenges, and also contribute to the development of our regional ecosystems. Develop international partnerships to diversify trade flows, strengthen cross-border and overseas transport connections, and increase trade in goods, services and technologies that contribute to climate neutrality, while reducing over-dependencies, with a strong global level playing field as the foundation.

