



# **Towards a European University of the Regions (EUNIREG)**

## **Concept Note - January 2020**

### **1. Regional Governments facing new challenges and missing a systemic and specific capacity building opportunity**

The regional dimension of policy intervention (policy shaping and making, not only policy implementation) is recognised to be crucial to the development of global sustainable development goals, economic and social innovation, Smart Specialisation Strategies, but Regional Governments are not offered a systemic capacity building opportunity to cope with new challenges in terms of policy shaping, policy implementation and policy impact assessment. Whilst Member States are constantly involved in structured consultation and peer learning activities in each of the policy areas in which the European Union is involved, Regional Governments miss a systemic offer of specific policy-oriented training for the regional perspective, and are frequently obliged to find their own path (e.g. specific EU projects of a limited duration, with eligibility constraints and normally aimed at other objectives) to understanding and facing new challenges and related requirements. The attendance to the sessions of the European Week of Regions and Cities shows, beyond any possible doubt, the number and variety of policy issues in which Regional actors (regional politicians, but also high and middle level civil servants) express an interest and a willingness to cooperate and exchange experiences, but the format of about two hours is clearly not sufficient to host this exchange and the possible mutual learning that might emerge from it. On the contrary, the European Union pays a great attention to the capacity building of neighbouring countries public administration and has developed successful formats to establish collaboration among them and with EU Member States.

### **2. The concept of Peer Learning as a methodological foundation of EUNIREG**

The basic idea behind this proposal is the development of a systemic capacity to offer structured peer learning opportunities to the staff of Regional policy making authorities and agencies on emerging and unattended policy issues through the establishment of a multi-polar European University of the Regions (EUNIREG).



The term “university” is used here in a metaphoric way to mean that the learning experience provided will be of a high level both in terms of expertise and qualification of “teachers” , and in term of openness to state-of-the-art policy/research perspective, not to mean that the initiative is aiming to establish as a formal Higher Education Institution; different term ( Regional Policy Lab, Regional Peer Learning Academy, etc;) can be proposed.

This initiative is expected to produce several positive impacts:

1. First of all, the **increased capacity of regional authorities to cope with new challenges**, based not on “packaged know-how”, but on authentic exchange of concrete experiences, concerns and solutions with colleagues of other EU regions;
2. Secondly, an increased **capacity to collaborate and establish long-term thematic partnerships among regions sharing similar challenges**, based on concrete interventions in the related policy fields and on personal trust;
3. Thirdly, an improved capacity of **making the regions’ voices heard at national and EU level thanks to an increased competence level** and awareness of solutions adopted in other EU Regions;
4. Finally, an increased capacity of European regions **to assert the specificity of the regional dimension in shaping EU policies**, not only in implementing them.

The main methodological foundation of the EUNIREG should be peer learning based on the demand emerging from partners Regions and open to a

consensus-based evolution of the agenda. Each learning activity should be related to present or future policy development issues and the format should be extremely participatory, with facilitation and expertise offered by EUNIREG on the basis of the requests emerging from partner Regions (experts may come from academia, European Institutions or other competent bodies according to the policy areas affected, while methodological facilitators will guarantee that the participatory and active project-based learning approach is maintained along each thematic session). Typically one peer learning initiative should last one year, with three face-to-face sessions in Brussels or in the participating regions with three-four representatives per Region attending, with on-line project-based collaborative activities and webinars between the sessions, to allow the participation of more learners from the partner regions. Within the limits authorised by participants groups, the materials produced during the peer learning initiatives will be capitalised and made available to the participants of subsequent editions of the same thematic initiative. An online learning and collaboration platform will be provided by EUNIREG.



Some examples of thematic sessions that might be organised in the early phases are:

- Integrated use of EU Funds and Programmes
- Strategies for integration of migrant children
- Labour demand and supply matching in the age of IA and social media
- Digitalisation strategies of the Public Administration at regional level
- Quality of the air and climate change: what Regions can do
- Building regional skills ecosystems
- From smart specialisation to smart differentiation strategies
- Building regional education-enterprises hubs
- Learning to learn and live together in multi-cultural environments
- Impact assessment of mobility programmes at regional level
- Responsible Research and Innovation: how the concept can be implemented at the regional level
- Cultural history to drive rural tourism
- Social identity change: the Regions as unit of contextualisation
- SMEs support in the circular economy

### **3. The institutional framework on which the concept might be implemented**

The starting condition for the development of the EUNIREG might be the establishment of an association gathering a few Regional Authorities, FREREF (which is the Network from which the proposal emerges as a successor of the “Université d’Eté des Régions Européennes”), possibly EARLALL; the Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles (member of FREREF) might offer the Academie Royale de Belgique as a representative headquarter of the new entity in the heart of the European Capital. The European Committee of the Regions and the European Commission should be invited to support the initiative in different ways. The European Economic and Social Committee and the European Parliament should also be informed and invited to support the EUNIREG initiative.

### **4. Proposed implementation strategy and success criteria**

In order to keep its demand-led orientation, EUNIREG should build its core activity on specific requests coming from a core of Founding Regions, ready to support and take part in the initial phases of development; these regions should have a role in the management structure and have their staff units piloting the first peer learning experiences on the selected policy areas.



Every year the initiative should be evaluated on the basis of criteria agreed among the Founding Regions, among which the satisfaction of participants, the observable improvement of collaboration processes and the quality of policy developments might certainly be included. The capacity to attract the interest of “newcomers” Regions and of institutional partners at EU level will also be relevant to determine the success of the initiative and its prospective development.

## 5. First operational steps

It is extremely important to connect EUNIREG to the new Programming Period 2021-27 and to the new leadership of the EU Institutions, to make it a visible initiative for the coming years.

In 2020 the first pilot experiences might be launched selecting one to three emerging themes, on which the core of Founding Partners may quickly agree. The first face-to face sessions might take place in early summer 2020, followed by a short session in October (around the European Week of Regions in Brussels, and by a Winter Session in January/February 2021, including a closing event in which evaluation results will be presented.

In the meantime the core of Founding Partners may establish the juridical basis for EUNIREG to work and seek institutional support through the Committee of the Regions and the European Commission. The EUNIREG will also have to be promoted by its first partners in view of an extended activity in the following years, after the use of evaluation results to improve, and possibly diversify, the operational and methodological approach.

For the period 2021-22 a maximum of ten Peer Learning Initiatives might be planned and implemented, to guarantee the necessary gradualism and attention to the quality of the learning experience to be offered.

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