

"EU missions will tackle pressing global challenges"



PUBLISHED MAY 16, 2022
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Interview with Markku Markkula (FI/EPP), rapporteur for CoR opinion on European missions

It offers enormous opportunities. What marks the mission out in particular is that the cities must pledge to achieve carbon and climate neutrality by 2030. Steps must therefore be taken without delay. As Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has pointed out, these 100 chosen mission cities are trailblazers and pioneers for others. Already this year and in the course of next year, the EU will provide EUR 360 million to launch new measures in the selected cities. The amount of EU funding is augmented with the addition of private funding and cities' own and national funding sources, allowing to multiply the measures. These 100 pioneers are now likely to move full steam ahead towards a greener, better future. This will also benefit everyone else, in Europe and elsewhere in the world.

The missions have been compared with the decision by John F. Kennedy in 1961 for the US to put a man on the moon within a decade and to get him safely back home again. At that time, the impossible was made a reality, without compromising on safety and quality. All five missions set qualitative and quantitative targets to be achieved by 2030. Four of the five missions focus directly on the climate or clean soil, air and water. The fifth is also closely connected: the health-related cancer target. We will work together with the EU to deliver results through bottom-up action which can be replicated across the globe. The EU is leading the way and helping others too.

The importance and scope of the missions is illustrated by the fact that almost ten different Commissioners were involved in the Commission's press conference and press release. Missions are a new and important tool to focus resources on tackling the pressing global challenges ahead. Putin's war against democracy and freedom in Ukraine and across Europe has prompted us to find solutions more quickly and, more than ever before, to use shared resources to overcome these pressing challenges. However, this cannot be

achieved by decision-making in Brussels or the Member States alone. It must be achieved from the bottom up: through cities and regions, cities and businesses.

This exceptionally important opinion came about as part of a broad process. As rapporteur, I had the opportunity to meet in person the leaders of all five missions and their teams. I was also able to consult experts from the French EU Council Presidency on how to achieve these ambitious objectives. The main task now is to tell everyone openly what we want to achieve, and what resources and funding are available. This type of policy package is needed both across the EU and at local level. The key word here is coordination: not stand-alone measures in their own silo or sandbox, but a resolute shared approach and a desire for synergies and more determined use of the knowledge and know-how of the various stakeholders. Learning from others, acting together.

Another key element of the opinion is the need for significant additional funding and investment in R&I. This is to be achieved through public-private partnerships. Today, roughly one third of the technologies needed to deliver energy and non-energy solutions by 2030 are available. The second third is in the testing and pilot phase, while the final third of these technologies and know-how is currently still the subject of basic research at universities and research institutes. So much needs to be done. We need this information at local level and it must be put into practice there. The local level, as well as cities and their partners, are therefore crucial.

It is an honour for me to take part in this forum as a second member of the European Committee of the Regions. The Zero Pollution Stakeholder Platform is a joint project by the Commission and the CoR, involving around 30 European networks and leading organisations in their respective fields – all key players taking practical steps every day for the climate and for clean air, water and soil. Under the missions, these actions will be implemented with EU funding, and priority actions must now be identified. If we take the example of Finland, the 1000 researchers from the Natural Resources Institute Finland (LUKE) must be more closely involved in this kind of cooperation, which cities and regions put into practice in their own decision-making in cooperation with businesses – not only in Finland, but across the EU and also globally. Together, we can ensure that the results and findings of research are put to use more quickly. I have

made it my task to support researchers in this regard. Here, too, this Zero Pollution platform creates the relevant conditions and missions are a tool for practical implementation.

All missions must be linked to the day-to-day workings of municipalities and cities and, of course, to their renewal. Today's processes require big, even radical changes, with digitalisation and artificial intelligence playing a crucial role. In my view, the most important topics will be phenomenon-based future trends, effective digital infrastructure with a focus on interoperability, digital security, MyData and digital identity, and a data economy that accelerates sustainable development. All of these measures are needed to support the central role of human capital in sustainable social development. Knowledge and good practices from around the world must be passed on to Espoo and other cities, and tailored to local needs. This is a huge learning process in which the full exploitation of the potential of knowledge and technology, as well as lifelong learning and innovation, are key concepts. These concepts need to be put into practice in a way that we may not have yet fully realised. There is also a need to learn from the COVID-19 era and to create a new normal that emphasises a wide range of intellectual, physical and virtual cooperation – on a global scale.

First of all, it's great that Espoo and five other Finnish cities are among the 100 mission cities. To take the example of Espoo, I can say that the use of coal in Espoo will be phased out within about three years. Around a dozen major investment projects have been launched with Fortum – the company operating the heating network – and other businesses, with a view to putting a complete stop to the use of coal and improving the use of renewables and energy sources. Another example is that new solutions are being sought together with the VTT research centre, universities and polytechnics. Take urban planning, for instance, with the development of compact urban villages with small houses, serving as an example across Europe of how to ensure sustainable housing, jobs and mobility. These are the pioneering solutions called for by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and which are needed in every city. It is important for cities to work together, to be more involved in EU policy-making and to observe how good solutions are taken forward elsewhere.

Press release distributed by Wire Association on behalf of Europa, on May 16, 2022. For more information subscribe and [follow](#) us.

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