



DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL
OF COHESION REGION
VZHODNA SLOVENIJA



REPUBLIC OF SLOVENIA
MINISTRY OF COHESION
AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Regions for a Competitive and Resilient Europe

Joint Declaration by the Assembly of European Regions (AER) and the Development Council of the Cohesion Region of Eastern Slovenia

We, the regions of Europe, represented in the Assembly of European Regions (AER):

- **Reaffirm** our belief that *innovation is a pillar of territorial resilience, economic renewal and social wellbeing*, especially in times of geopolitical instability, green transition, digital transformation, and demographic change;
- **Emphasize** that *regions play a critical role in the innovation ecosystem*, as conveners of local actors – both from the public and private sectors–, implementers of EU funds, and initiators of pilot place-based approaches such as in bio-economy, decarbonisation, digitalisation and social progress;
- **Recognize** that *territorial cohesion, equal access to innovation, and cross-border cooperation* are essential to ensure that no region is left behind in the innovation wave;
- **Underline** the continued importance of cohesion policy to foster economic, social, and territorial integration, deepen the single market, reduce inequalities, and fight poverty and exclusion.

As European regions committed to place-based innovation, we identify the following priority actions:

- **Ensure that place-based innovation is a core objective** of EU Cohesion Policy, Horizon Europe, Interreg, and the proposed European Competitiveness Fund;
- **Simplify access to innovation finance** for regional SMEs, start-ups, and public authorities by reducing administrative burdens, enabling multi-level and public-private partnerships, and creating a single point of entry for regional beneficiaries;
- **Support strategic investment in the regional bioeconomy and circular economy**, addressing the €62 billion investment gap in sustainable agri-tech and resource management identified by the Commission;

- **Bridge the digital divide** by co-financing rural broadband, regional AI testbeds, SME digitalisation, and upskilling programs, with full use of Digital Europe and InvestEU;
- **Recognize and invest in social innovation** as a key driver of inclusive growth, including community-led models, energy cooperatives, and regional platforms for civic engagement;
- **Strengthen cross-border and interregional cooperation** in innovation by expanding funding for joint infrastructures, open innovation clusters and experimental zones under Interreg and NDICI instruments;
- **Integrate innovation objectives into regional development strategies** and EU programme planning;
- **Reject the Commission's idea of establishing a single national plan**, and call for the adequate involvement of regional authorities in the decision-making and implementation process
- **Share knowledge-sharing tools** such as innovation scorecards, peer learning instruments and impact monitoring methods among regional public authorities
- **Adopt effective and meaningful models of engagement** to involve citizens, youth and local actors in shaping innovation agendas and governance models;

Innovation is not a luxury, it is a necessity. As regions of Europe, we stand ready to shape and deliver a more innovative, inclusive and cohesive Europe, by and with our territories.

Maribor, Slovenia, 18 June 2025

Aleksander Saša Arsenovič

President of the Development Council of Cohesion
Regio Vzhodna Slovenija/Eastern Slovenia

Mayor of the Municipality of Maribor

Albert Castellanos

Honorary President of the Assembly of
European Regions (AER)