

# Local support for SMEs urgently needed to face the energy crisis



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Access to affordable energy and raw materials, friendly business environment and the development of new skills are the most pressing challenges for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the EU. Local and regional leaders, members of the Commission for Economic Policy (ECON) of the European Committee of the Regions (CoR), gathered in Zwolle (the Netherlands) to discuss how to help SMEs face these challenges to overcome the current crisis and contribute to a more sustainable and resilient future.

SMEs represent 99,8% of businesses in the EU and two third of the total private sector employment. EU's regions and cities are doing all efforts to preserve their vital contribution for EU's society and economy as well as to mobilise them to achieve the objectives of the European Green Deal and the EU Digital Decade.

How to create a stable framework for SMEs to operate, invest and expand while taking advantage of digital and green deal transition was the main topic of the ECON commission meeting in Zwolle on 22-23 September.

ECON members from all across Europe welcomed the recent announcement by EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen of the launch of a SME relief package to help businesses cope with the consequences of soaring energy prices, inflation, and supply chain bottlenecks. They also stressed that longer term goals on the green and digital transitions will only be achieved if the EU policy framework is fully SME-fit and backed by robust funding

Ilpo Heltimoinen (FI/ECR), 1st Vice-Chair of the ECON commission and Lappeenranta City Councillor, chaired the

meeting and said: " I am pleased to chair the first meeting of the ECON Commission in the second part of the mandate of the Committee of the Regions. Since the outbreak of the pandemic and the Russian attack on Ukraine, Europe has been confronted with unprecedented challenges, all of which have their serious economic repercussions. Today we are meeting in Zwolle to discuss how we as local and regional politicians can help businesses to survive and prosper in these turbulent times. Meetings like the one today help us to exchange good practices which we can then implement in our cities and regions. "

The host of the event, Eddy van Hijum (NL/EPP), Member of the Council of the Province of Overijssel, underlined that: " In the Netherlands, nearly 70% of businesses are family businesses, the share of which is even larger in Overijssel. SMEs and family businesses, together with governments and knowledge institutions, can take a pioneering role in tackling major societal challenges. In Overijssel we have many inspiring examples of small businesses who create solutions for a smart and sustainable industry ."

Members visited best practices from the Province of Overijssel, such as Koninklijke Van Wijhe Verf, a local family business that is a frontrunner in the green transition, and 'Perron038', the innovation centre for the manufacturing industry in the Zwolle region, a collaboration between high-tech companies and knowledge and research institutions that facilitate innovation projects and knowledge development. To further support family businesses, the province launched the digital magazine 'Family Next', which reflects how Overijssel continues to support its family businesses in the future.

During the meeting, the ECON commission elected Jaroslava Jermanová as its new chair. Ms Jermanová is a councillor of the Central Bohemian Region of the Czech Republic and has been a member of the CoR since 2017. She will chair the ECON's commission's work during the next two and a half years.

Jaroslava Jermanová (CZ/Renew) commented on her election: " I take very seriously the responsibility of chairing the ECON

commission in these times of global instability, persisting inflation, high energy prices, and continued disruptions of trade and supply chains, which heavily impact our citizens and businesses, but also local and regional authorities. Being from the industrial region of Central Bohemia, the pertinent economic policy issues which our cities and regions face are very important to me and during my mandate I will work to improve the EU's policy responses and towards their more effective implementation . "

Local and regional authorities have a crucial role to play in promoting sustainable and resilient growth of SMEs. According to the latest survey report by the Eurochambres , taking account of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, SMEs are constantly facing challenges in accessing finance, skills and coping with regulatory burdens to move forward with the digital and green transformation. The survey gathered feedback from chambers of commerce and industry in 19 countries across Europe and included questions on investment performance and accessibility of EU funding, the digital transition and green transition.

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