

"Linking Brussels with EU regions and beyond"

Speech at Zenit's 25th Anniversary

1 October 2009

Dear Dr Schuster,

Dear Mr Wolfmeyer,

Minister,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am delighted to join the previous speakers in extending my congratulations to Zenit for 25 years of successful innovation and technology support for SMEs in North Rhine Westphalia.

We have a long and successful history in the European Commission's DG Enterprise of working with Zenit, which was a key member of the former IRC Network and is now one of the most active partners in the Enterprise Europe Network.

It is therefore my pleasure to wish Zenit a "Happy Birthday" today and I look forward to many more years of cooperation.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I know Zenit best from its role in the Enterprise Europe Network – Europe's largest business and innovation support network. The mission of this network is to foster business cooperation within and across regions and to support regional SMEs with innovation services and technology transfer.

But it is not a top-down structure instilling European programmes into small and medium enterprises. On the contrary, the Network rests on the fundamental recognition that bearing in mind regional specificities is a key success factor in SME support. It is therefore a decentralised structure, based in the regions, but interlinked and networked across the entire EU to deliver a real European added value to SMEs in the regions. As a key partner in the regional support infrastructure, the Network brings a European dimension into regional business and innovation support.

This strong regional footing is both characteristic of the Network and essential for its success. The Enterprise Europe Network plays a central role in the local and regional "community" of EU-related advisers and service providers and is at the forefront of the development of a regional culture of cooperation between all relevant actors. Our aim is to create synergies and provide clients with a comprehensive and efficient service, striving to implement a "no-wrong-door principle" not only within the Network itself, but also among different actors at regional level.

Its regional dimension puts the Enterprise Europe Network in a good position to link the business communities in the regions up with European partners, but also with European funding opportunities.

SBA

As you probably know, the SBA consists of 10 binding political principles and a series of almost 100 measures designed to strengthen entrepreneurship and reduce barriers for SMEs. The SME week, the Erasmus for Young Entrepreneurs programme and a number of legislative proposals (for example the late payments directive) are just some examples of recent deliveries designed to make life easier for SMEs.

Within this framework, the SBA Action Plan sets three main priority areas which we currently pursue: access to finance, access to markets and "Think Small First". Due to its strong regional dimension, the Enterprise Europe Network can help deliver on each of them.

Access to finance for SMEs is a key issue for SMEs. However, while there are many funding programmes at regional, national and European level, many of these initiatives struggle to reach their target group. This is where the Enterprise Europe Network comes in: Network partners help link European funding with SMEs in the regions. They are ideally placed to place European funding initiatives within their own regional context and to provide SMEs with a comprehensive service taking into account regional specificities and European opportunities at the same time.

Similarly, the Think Small First principle is translated in the mission and the activities of the Enterprise Europe Network. This is no surprise: a Network supporting SMEs must "think small" by implication. However, due to its proximity to SMEs it also helps us in the Commission to "think small first".

In fact, the Network can act as the Commission's "eyes and ears" at the grassroots, providing ways for SMEs to stay in touch with the EU and, in particular, the European Commission.

The Network runs dedicated SME Panels to consult entrepreneurs directly about their views on European initiatives, as well as a feedback mechanism with which SMEs can make their views and experiences heard in the Commission out of their own initiative. This unique service also allows the Network to play an important role in the SME Test, which gives small and

medium businesses a voice in the EU's legislative process and is designed to ensure that the interests of SMEs are taken into account when drafting new laws or programmes at EU level.

Finally, helping SMEs access new markets is also a central aim of the Enterprise Europe Network. Technology transfer services, the promotion and support of business cooperation within and across regions and internationalisation activities are only some of the tools of the Network to help their local SME clients find new market opportunities. Once more, it is the regional footing of the Network and the direct contact of Network partners with SMEs on the ground that enables the Network to provide these dedicated, individualised services.

I would like to conclude this point by pointing out the particularly positive involvement of North-Rhine Westphalia in this context. An initiative designed to support SMEs cannot work if the regions are not fully involved at each appropriate stage. North-Rhine Westphalia is one of the regions that has recognised the benefits of the SBA for its SMEs and has therefore been – and still is - very active in both the preparation and the implementation of the SBA for Europe. Let me therefore take this occasion to thank the regional government and Zenit for its support of and contribution to the SBA.

Regional Dimension

The Network will have the greatest impact if it is not only present in the regions, but also develops its role as a stakeholder in the delivery of the EU's instruments.

We are therefore working with the management authorities of the Structural Funds to strengthen the link between the Network and the implementation of the EU's regional policy on the ground. In some regions, cooperation is so advanced that Network partners are consulted in the design of the regional operational programmes.

However, cooperation also extends to all other relevant stakeholders to make access to financing instruments of the Structural Funds easier for SMEs and to boost regional business and innovation activities. The result of this extensive regional cooperation is a less fragmented and more efficient regional SME and innovation support infrastructure. At the same time, it helps to ensure that regional funding and SME and innovation support go hand in hand.

The Enterprise Europe Network thus becomes a strong link bridging the gap between local business community and the many funding opportunities for SMEs under the Structural Funds. In the Commission – in DG ENTR as well as in DG RTD and REGIO, we are keen to support and further develop this important regional role of the Network.

Innovation

On the innovation side of the Network's mandate, the pattern is similar. The Network is a key player in regional innovation approaches and strategies, bringing in European projects, tools and funding for innovative solutions and linking regional innovation actors up – not only with each other, but also with the European dimension of innovation support.

With years of expertise in innovation support, Network partners have become welcome stakeholders informing regional innovation strategies. But it is not only their knowledge of the subject that makes the Network special. With the advice and knowledge of 3000 professionals available at the fingertip of every Network partner, there is a unique potential to learn from experiences made elsewhere and to bring examples of good practice from across the EU into the definition of regional approaches to innovation and SME support.

However, the Enterprise Europe Network does not only deliver the European dimension of SME and innovation support at regional level. It is also a two-way communication channel between Brussels and the "real world".

Ladies and Gentlemen, I hope you will agree with me that the Enterprise Europe Network has exceptional qualities that turn it into a powerful, efficient and extremely relevant link between the "EU" and the regions. Local small enterprises often remain entrenched in the socio-economic structures of their region and play an important role in the regional economy. Yet their success increasingly also depends on their ability to make use of business opportunities, cooperation and support facilities that are available at European level.

The Enterprise Europe Network helps them achieve this.

Thank you very much for your attention.