

Honorable guests of ministries and regional authorities from Austria, France, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Scotland, Slovenia, Spain, and - last, not least - from the German Länder Saxony and NorthRhine-Westphalia,

honorable representatives of the URBACT secretariate in Paris, of savings banks, other financial institutions, chambers and institutions of regional development from all the aforementioned countries,

honorable representatives of the partner municipalities in the project and the Deutscher Verband in Berlin, respectively Brussels,

dear representatives of financial and economic institutions of the Aachen region,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

it is my great honour and pleasure to welcome you all, today, in Aachen, and I want to express my gratitude to Dr. Bräutigam, CEO of the Aachen savings bank, Sparkasse Aachen, who hosts this conference.

When the Sparkasse Aachen, Deutscher Verband, and our service of economic development started the planning of the project FIN-URB-ACT, more than a year ago, the financial and economic world looked different. During the last 12 months, the events on the international financial markets, the rescue programs of governments, and the growing uncertainty about the effects of this financial turmoil has, unfortunately one must say, proven that the project FIN-URB-ACT, which we start

today, deals with topics of great importance. How can regions and cities shape framework conditions which foster the financial and non-financial support of small and medium companies? What kind of networking do we need to attire funding programs for our local economy and put projects into practice? How do we organize the famous "triple helix" of close cooperation between Research & Development, companies, and local and regional authorities? How can we enhance the cooperation between "managing authorities" on regional and national levels and the local reality?

When we were asked, if Aachen would take up the role as project leader in FIN-URB-ACT, we accepted this offer deliberately. We did so, because Aachen shows some features which match the intentions of FIN-URB-ACT perfectly. Firstly, we are a city of knowledge-based economy, where research and development - in our universities and in hundreds of small and medium companies - plays an eminent role. Finding the access path to financing start-ups and young research-based companies has been an important topic for all stakeholders in this region since our re-structuring process began, some thirty years ago. Secondly, Aachen has always stressed the accent on regional cooperation. Our "local support group" in this new project is, therefore, a network of savings banks, local banks, chambers and local authorities of the the whole Aachen region, the name of which is GründerRegion. You will have opportunities to learn more about our specific approach, during this conference. Thirdly, Aachen is quite experienced in cross-border and international cooperation. This is natural for a city which is only 3 kilometers away from two neighbouring countries. Cooperation in cross-border and international projects always means learning from each other. Therefore, Aachen is looking forward to entering into an intense exchange with our partner cities in this project.

It is my great pleasure to welcome the cities Aveiro, Edinburgh, Galati (*ausgesprochen: Galáts*), Gijón, Gliwice, Leipzig, Linz, Maribor, Reims, and Rome here in Aachen and in the project FIN-URB-ACT. We have been cooperating already successfully with Gliwice in European projects, and Reims has been our twin city for more than thirty years. The mutual participation in FIN-URB-ACT of Aachen and Reims is a most welcome opportunity to explore new fields of cooperation.

Let me say a word about the importance of URBACT as the governing program of this project. When the Lisbon strategy was introduced in 2000, the doors of European policy began to open for the perception and acknowledgement of the urban dimension. As a city, which strives to implement the principles of the Lisbon strategy on local level, we appreciated very much that, since then, the importance of the urban dimension has been strengthened more and more in the programs of the European Union. URBACT, as a program specially designed for the exchange between cities, is emblematic for this growing acknowledgement of the role of cities for the future of Europe. The URBACT program has adopted the importance of innovation as one priority, as have all other programs for regional development. And innovation is a domain, in which Aachen, and all other cities relying on knowledge-based economy, feel very much at home. We are very happy that Jean-Loup Drubigny, director of the URBACT program, is with us, today.

I hope that you will find some moments to discover Aachen, also, as a historical city which, since the times of Charlemagne has always shown a European commitment. When the city emerged from the darkest period of German history, wise and visionary citizens established the

International Charlemagne prize, which is, today, the most important prize for European engagement. Many important personalities from politics, literature, and religion have been the awardees of this prize. Our guests from Rome will be pleased to hear that the laureate of 2009 is professor Andrea Riccardi, founder of San' Egidio.