

Let's Build Europe in Partnership

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First of all, I would like to thank you all sincerely for the trust you have placed in me. You have given me a key responsibility, which I readily accept. I know that, as I embark on this new task, I have the support of so many colleagues across political and national divides. Indeed, the smooth operation of the Committee of the Regions is not only dependent on its President and first Vice-President, or on an efficient administration, but first and foremost on the drive and commitment of its members as they draw on their local or regional backgrounds to help give Europe form and substance. We are a political assembly of elected local and regional representatives. And, as is only right in a democracy, it is this assembly that gives orientation and direction to our political agenda and our political ambitions.

I am also particularly pleased to be sharing the presidency over the next two years with first vice-president, Michel Delebarre. We have known each other for a very long time now and have met in a range of European forums. We have worked together on a number of different tasks and we have got to know and respect each other. I am particularly grateful to Michel for the open and constructive cooperation we have built up over the past two years. Mindful of each other's political convictions, we have been able to give that cooperation practical shape in a spirit of mutual trust for the benefit of the institution we serve. Now that we are swapping roles, I hope that we shall be able to continue along this path. I for my part have every confidence in our future work together. I would also like to express my thanks to the chairs of the political groups and of the national delegations for their fruitful collaboration over the past number of years – and the past two years in particular.

As I embark on my term-of-office as President, I would like to

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draw attention to a number of points that I feel are of key importance for the Committee's work over the next two years. I would begin by considering a number of political lines of action. I shall then go on to highlight some key substantive elements and, finally, some strategic priorities.

1. Political Lines of Action

Next year, the Committee of the Regions will be celebrating its 15th birthday. Young it may be, but it is not lacking in experience or maturity. And we are very fortunate in that we still have a fifteen-year-old's enthusiasm and drive. Bit by bit, we have not only found our place in the European landscape – we have also earned it. That said, there is still a long way to go. We are still too little-known and have not yet truly managed to spell out the added value we bring to European decision-making. I thus feel it is vital that the Committee should, with consistent regularity, be a true channel for the political messages that have grown and evolved within its ranks over the years and which are also so important for local and regional authorities. These messages should make clear what issues we feel to be of central importance. Allow me to mention just five:

1. Europe is a value-based community. Our European collaboration is underpinned by values such as the centrality of the human being, freedom, equality, respect for human rights, the acceptance of diversity as an asset, tolerance, justice and solidarity. These European values are part and parcel of our Judeo-Christian and humanist heritage. Together with the local and regional authorities, we must strive at European level too to help fleshing out this value-based community.
2. Europe is a political project. The Europe we want is more than a big economic space. It is more than the sum of individual national concerns. The Europe we are striving for is a political Europe, a Europe that is mindful of national, regional and local identities and is also able to care for the wellbeing of its citizens. A Europe that, acting for the good of its people, is able to play a role in an increasingly globalised world. The Europe that was launched as an economic project must grow into a citizens' Europe. Jean Monnet's statement of 50 years ago is no less true today: «We

are not forming a coalition of states, we are uniting people».

3. Europe is about people's quality of life, about what can be done to improve people's lives in a substantive way. As regional and local representatives, that is something that is very close to our hearts. Key issues include affordable housing, jobs, education and lifelong learning, affordable and accessible healthcare, care for the most vulnerable members of our society such as children and senior citizens and solidarity between the generations.

4. Europe is synonymous with multilevel governance. We must jettison the hierarchical idea of Europe as a pyramid with the EU above the member states, the member states above the regions, and the regions above the towns and local authorities. I would call on the European institutions and on the member states to strive for a new partnership between the different levels of government that allow the various tiers to work together on an equal footing in order to achieve jointly defined objectives. It is a fiction to believe that a single tier of government could possibly be able to respond to the questions and difficulties we face. What we need, therefore, on the basis of this approach, is not a «Europe of the regions» but a «Europe with the regions, towns and local authorities». It is equally false to think that public bodies alone are able to respond to complex issues without involving other stakeholders from within society in the decision-making.

5. Europe must take due account of local and regional realities. Yet there is, in this era of globalisation, a growing awareness of the importance and dynamism of smaller entities and regions. The more global the problems become, the more people look for security and solutions at levels of government they recognise, can access and are readily able to contact. In this globalised world – and in this information society that is becoming ever more decentralised and flexible – we need a political structure that is different from the one that took shape in industrial society and that is marked by centralisation and uniformity. People today identify first and foremost with their local neighbourhood, their town, their region. Thus, local and regional realities must also become a substantive element of European reality and must also be placed on a firm institutional footing.

Alongside the institutional debate, I would like to see greater

attention paid to the concepts of regionalism and localism. This is essentially a question of political conviction and a particular mindset that favours a bottom-up approach to policymaking.

We want a Europe that is united by shared values, a Europe that is not turned in on itself but that is open to further development, a political Europe that is concerned about people's quality of life, that involves all tiers of government as partners in decision-making, and that is ever mindful of local and regional realities. That is the Europe of the future and it is that Europe that we shall continue to work for.

Let me change tack slightly to sum up: what we need are regions, towns and local authorities with a heart for Europe – and regions, towns and local authorities in the heart of Europe.

2. Key Substantive Elements

The European agenda we shall have to tackle is a heavy one. I should like to highlight those policy areas that are of key importance for local and regional authorities. These are issues on which we are either taking the lead or are making our voice clearly heard. They are issues to which we as the Committee of the Regions can bring added value. Without claiming to be exhaustive, allow me to name just a few which I believe to deserve priority treatment: (1) the reform of the European budget; (2) energy policy and climate change; (3) the Lisbon objectives; (4) cohesion policy and the European Grouping for Territorial Cooperation; (5) cultural diversity; (6) neighbourhood policy; and (7) multilevel governance and subsidiarity.

(1) A debate is under way on the reform of the European budget. The aim is, on the one hand, to equip Europe to tackle new challenges, while at the same time making it less dependent on financial bidding – or rather «downbidding» – among the member states. Here at the CoR, we shall, at the next plenary session, take an initial position on this issue, in line with a proposal from an ad hoc commission set up to look at the matter, thereby ensuring that we are not left tagging along behind, but are able to help influence the European debate as it happens. The future, and the practical expression

of other policy areas such as agriculture and cohesion, naturally have a direct impact on this fundamental debate on the European budget.

(2) Another topic of European debate is energy and climate change. A fortnight ago, the European Commission launched its climate plan: by 2020, the aim is to cut CO₂ emissions by 20%, increase the share of renewable energies to 20%, and save 20% of energy consumed. That is why we need Europe: to formulate joint objectives. No country – however large – is able to solve this global issue on its own. But these objectives will not be worth the paper they are printed on unless all levels of government shoulder their responsibility for implementation. We must not wait for other to act first or to look to see what anyone else is doing. Why shouldn't we, as the Committee of the Regions, join together with the local authorities, towns and regions to draw up a declaration of intent and an action plan on the issue? We must be proactive rather than reactive.

(3) There is an awareness of the vital role that can be played by local and regional authorities in achieving the Lisbon objectives. The Committee of the Regions will be reporting on this issue at the upcoming Spring Summit. In practice, however, it is clear that too many regions, towns and local authorities are dissatisfied with their level of involvement in national reform programmes. In setting up our own Lisbon Monitoring Platform, we have succeeded in a very short space of time in securing the necessary kudos, not only vis-à-vis the local and regional authorities involved, but in other social and political circles as well. We need to continue to build on that. Next month, we have the Territorial Dialogue in Slovenia, followed a week later by the Spring Summit at which we shall present the report and the resolution we shall be adopting during this plenary session. In Europe, it is decentralised tiers of government that provide the framework for productive, innovative investments, that speed up the creation of employment and that are able to raise the level of education and training. It is they who have at their disposal the necessary practical resources to stimulate growth and jobs.

To underscore the particular role of the regions in this area, I would call on the European Commission to join us in further fleshing out the idea of European entrepreneurial regions along

similar lines to the European «capitals of culture» scheme. This would encourage regions to develop new innovative programmes and initiatives.

(4) Cohesion policy is, for us, a key priority. In fostering economic cohesion, we have already made a positive start, but the road is far from ended. There is still a long way to go before social cohesion is attained. One important new legal policy instrument is the European Grouping for Territorial Cooperation (EGTC). We can be justly proud of the CoR's role as the initiator of this new instrument. At the first meeting of the expert group that I attended in Brdo, Slovenia, it became clear that some 20 to 30 EGTCs are currently in the pipeline. Two actions – the interinstitutional conference on EGTCs due to be held on 19 June this year and the own-initiative opinion on the subject that we are also set to adopt in June – will undoubtedly help foster territorial cooperation and multilevel governance of this kind. The Committee of the Regions will also soon have a key role to play in monitoring the EGTC process.

(5) Cultural diversity is at the heart of our work. We must state in the clearest of terms that cultural diversity poses no threat, but, on the contrary, adds value to European society. Cultural diversity, firmly embedded in a framework of democracy, tolerance, social justice and mutual respect between peoples and cultures, is a vital element of peace and security at local, regional, national and international level. Europe has much to gain from diversity as it forces us to give more thought and consideration to the relationship between the West and the Arab world and to inter-religious relations. In the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue, this is one area to which we shall have to give the attention it deserves. The tag line «United in diversity» would, moreover, also be an appropriate motto for our Committee.

(6) As CoR members, we must also be attentive to events outside our external borders. Under the European neighbourhood policy, we shall have to step up contacts with local and regional authorities in countries abutting these external borders. The Committee of the Regions can help put these partnerships in place. Initiatives are already under way as part of the Euro-Mediterranean dialogue to take these partnerships forward.

(7) Lastly, I should like to say a few words about multilevel governance and subsidiarity. This is part of the CoR's core business and is an area that I feel is deserving of even greater attention. We must draw more fully on the subsidiarity network and on the many committed stakeholders within it and bring their expertise to bear on our work. The challenges here are particularly great and expectations of the Committee are running high. Alongside all the other players involved, we must make full use of the opportunities offered to us by the Lisbon Treaty to monitor subsidiarity. I also believe that we must use the subsidiarity network above all to assess the impact of any draft provisions on local and regional authorities, in order to determine the additional financial and staffing costs involved and the extra administrative burdens that must be borne by local and regional authorities. I am convinced that *ex ante* impact assessments of this kind will enable us to take a proactive stance and secure fresh and unparalleled input into the European decision-making process. In order to give expression to this added-value and fresh approach, we need to draw up an annual subsidiarity report and organise a subsidiarity forum as part of the process. I also believe that, on this front, we must strengthen our ties with the national parliaments.

The Lisbon Treaty reiterates the idea that responsibility has to rest on many shoulders and that support must be given to interaction between the various tiers of government. This is the type of government that we at the Committee of the Regions must foster. It must be network-based, allowing the various stakeholders to work together on an equal footing. Such an approach generates interdependence among the various tiers. I hope that, before my term-of-office ends, we will be able to organise a conference bringing together all stakeholders and tiers of government to develop and build on this concept of governance. Thus, the Committee of the Regions will also be able to play a part in the efforts under way – at the initiative of the European Commission – to simplify legislation in Europe.

My dear colleagues, it is in these policy areas that we at the Committee of the Regions need to make a difference over the next two years. I hope that I can count on your support and cooperation in this process. If you will allow me a quote from

Goethe: «Dream no small dreams, for they have no power to stir the hearts of men».

3. Strategic Priorities

Before I finish, I should also like to draw attention to a number of strategic priorities. These are just a few points for consideration that I feel might improve the way in which the Committee operates and that, in my view, can help not only to raise our profile but also to boost the impact of our political assembly.

(1) As I mentioned earlier, the Committee of the Regions will be celebrating its 15th birthday next year. We must not let the occasion go unmarked. This is the ideal opportunity to consider our mission statement, our core tasks. Who are we? What do we want to be? What are our core tasks and how do we want to realise them? I intend to conduct an in-depth and wide-ranging debate within the Committee, based on an analysis of our strengths and weaknesses, our opportunities and limitations, and how, essentially, we are perceived by the outside world.

(2) I fully share the view that the Committee of the Regions needs more to be more imaginative – at a substantive level – if it is to make a difference. We must look more to the future and take the long view. We need to be daring enough to develop ideas and concepts that, although not feasible today, nonetheless lay the groundwork for tomorrow. Alongside our important advisory work, we need to be a more proactive force on the European scene. That is why, in the new establishment plan, I urged the inclusion of a «forward studies» unit that has the resources to develop these new ideas and concepts and thus, in close collaboration with the other departments, make further headway in strengthening the Committee's political role. I hope that this «forward studies» unit will, among other things, be a breeding ground for Committee of the Regions «discourses» through which we can help give direction to the European debate.

(3) We are a political assembly and that must be reflected in the cut and thrust of debate, in arguments for and against, and in the weighing-up of what is good, better and best. Thus, in

our meetings, we must be able to conduct a political debate about issues directly affecting our local and regional authorities. We must conduct that debate with European political leaders but we also need to invite representatives of the business world, the cultural sector, environmental groups and others to attend our meetings and join the discussion. Thus, we also need to invite representatives of the business world, that is to say energy suppliers, to the forum on the European Commission's climate plan and energy package that is being organised in conjunction with April's plenary session. Involving all the stakeholders in this important debate can only be beneficial to the consideration we in society must give to the issues involved.

(4) Given the changes afoot in society and the fact that the Lisbon Treaty is set to alter the working arrangements of some of the European institutions, I would also call for a review of our agreements with the institutions in question. Our aim is to secure renewed partnerships with the European institutions concerned. Ever since the Committee of the Regions was established, our most natural partner has been the European Parliament. The past few years have seen the establishment of an increasing number of ad hoc partnerships that give the Committee the opportunity to add value to the substantive proceedings of the European Parliament. I am convinced that we need to proceed further down that road. In collaboration with the relevant associations, we shall have to consider how we can improve and above all build on the structural dialogue with the European Commission so that it becomes an indispensable tool for examining plans and policy approaches in the pre-legislative phase. In the light of the changes to the workings of the Council planned under the Lisbon Treaty, including the proposals for a permanent presidency, we shall also be compelled to review our relationship with that body and give it form and substance within the parameters of a renewed partnership. We must redefine our areas of collaboration with the Council of Europe, and more particularly with the Congress, so that each of us mutually supports the other in its activities.

(5) Diversity and heterogeneity are the hallmarks of the Committee of the Regions. Our assembly brings together local councillors from small rural communities, Mayors of European

capital cities and First Ministers of large regions with key legislative powers. This diversity is our strength – provided that we draw on it and give it practical expression. Rural communities, large towns and cities, and regions with legislative powers do not, after all, face the same difficulties and challenges. I firmly believe that the Committee of the Regions must become the spokesman for all local and regional authorities in Europe, but also that it must give due attention to – and indeed voice – the specific problems facing certain authorities. Steps must be taken to ensure that issues that are of importance to local authorities and cities can also be taken on board and supported by the regions, and vice versa. One side's strength is not the other side's weakness.

The same, I feel, also applies to people who, at local and regional level, are socially committed in areas such as education, healthcare or welfare. We must develop machinery for bringing these people's specific experience and expertise to bear on our activities. That can be done in our commission meetings, but also through the organisation of conferences and study days.

(6) Many of you are active not only in the Committee of the Regions but also in local and regional government organisations. Regular structural and constructive collaboration is already in place with these associations and that is a particularly encouraging sign. We are also engaged in structural dialogue with the European Commission. These associations represent specific interests and expectations, whether of regional parliaments, border areas or elsewhere. By stepping up our cooperation with them – something I would expressly advocate – we will better be able to reflect those expectations in the work of the Committee of the Regions. That can be done by giving greater political follow-up to the action plan in place for each of them.

(7) Our communications strategy also deserves greater attention. People are still too unfamiliar with who we are. That becomes plain, for instance, when visitors come to the Committee. The ratification of the Lisbon Treaty and the European elections are opportunities for the Committee of the Regions. As representatives of local and regional authorities, it is our job to bring home to people the key role that Europe can play in tackling the issues that local, regional and national

governments cannot address on their own. The role of the regional media is of course particularly important in a communication strategy of this kind. The most important communication tool, however, is the power of persuasion of tens of thousands of local and regional elected representatives who, each on their own home patch, are able to bring Europe closer to the citizens.

(8) During my term-of-office, I shall also be striving to give symbolic expression to European integration. I want to take the Committee to the places where Europe was made (Strasbourg), wounded (Dresden/Ieper) and transformed (Gdansk), to the places where Europe is being called into question (Prague) and is in demand (Croatia), to the places where Europe is in the process of renewal.

No President, even if he is supported by an excellent and experienced first Vice-President, can make this ambitious agenda a reality on his own. He needs to be able to count on cooperation from all of you, the members of this assembly.

You have given me your trust. I know I shall be able to count on your support in the ongoing development of our broad lines of policy. Let us see in each other, partners in a common project, each one working at his or her station in local authorities, cities and regions.

Let me end, therefore, with a call to all of you, to all the European institutions and to the member states: Let's build Europe in partnership!

