



**European Committee
of the Regions**

The President

**INTERNATIONAL DRESDEN DIALOGUE
STRENGTHENING DEMOCRACY AND SOCIAL COHESION
DRESDEN
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KARL-HEINZ LAMBERTZ**

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Introduction

Mayor Hilbert,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am delighted to have been invited back to Dresden this October. On the eve of German Unity Day exactly one year ago, I took part in a very inspiring debate on European policy following an invitation from Minister Dulig. I have known Mr Hilbert for many years from our time working together in the Association of European Border Regions (AEBR), and I appreciate the active role he has played in the Elbe/Labe Euroregion. Dedicating the “International Dresden Dialogue” to social cohesion and its importance for democracy is a great idea. I hope that the 9th round of this dialogue in 2025 will be one of the highlights of the programme that Dresden will put on as the European Capital of Culture.

Especially in light of the events that took place in Dresden on German Unity Day last year, and given the results of the German general election, above all in Saxony, this subject is more topical and important than ever before.

Democracy and social cohesion are inextricably linked. Social cohesion forms the basis of stable democracies. Social cohesion means creating a sense of shared belonging. Only citizens with a sense of belonging will play an active part in the decision-making process and not be led astray by populism.

Background

Europe has been marked in recent years by a social, economic, political and identity crisis that is without precedent since the creation of the EU. In Dresden, this crisis came to a head in the PEGIDA movement.

Even now, the crisis is not yet over. Despite some positive economic indicators, the unemployment rate in Spain stands at 18 % while in Greece the youth unemployment rate is almost 50 %. In 2015, 119 million Europeans were at risk of poverty and social exclusion, representing 23.7 % of the population. Even in Germany, the 2017 Poverty Report highlighted that the gap between rich and poor shows no sign of closing soon.

Given these economic and social conditions and, in a much broader context, the fears of falling behind, part of the population has lost its faith in seeing a better future and is turning away from Europe which, alongside national decision-makers, will be held responsible for the feared deterioration in living standards. In reality it is the other way around. If we are to preserve the chance of having a better future, we must ensure that the European project does not fail.

The promise of Europe

None of the major challenges of the 21st century can be solved by pursuing a purely national approach, be they peace, climate change, scarcity of resources, demographic change or youth unemployment: Europe might not be the only way of dealing with these challenges but is, in my view, the only desirable one.

We need to clearly show people the added value of Europe. Concrete action is required, with a positive impact for Europeans. Europe is often used as a scapegoat, it seems distant and abstract and generates mistrust, with its legitimacy called into question. And that brings us to the role of regions and cities in Europe.

New impetus from the regions

70% of EU legislation either has a direct impact at regional level, or is implemented there. We, as mayors and elected representatives of regions, are the European actors standing on the front line. But we also have to see ourselves as such. Europe is not primarily Brussels, Strasbourg or Luxembourg. Europe is the cities and regions, the local and regional authorities.

Whether it be the capacity to invest, education, integration, environmental protection, security, innovation, partnerships beyond the EU's borders or one of the many other issues at stake, our services are continually in demand.

The local and regional level should therefore always be involved in planning and implementing European policy. This is the role of the Committee of the Regions: to give cities and regions a voice in Brussels.

The latest Eurobarometer data shows that the general public has more confidence in the regional level than any other level of governance — averaging 51 %, trust in the regional level is higher than in the EU (42 %) and the national level (37 %). In Germany, the figures are even more stark: 47% of people have confidence in the European level, 59% in the national level and 76% in the local and regional level. Germany's federal structure is certainly one of the reasons for this.

A new momentum for Europe and its legitimacy can therefore be created only in conjunction with the regions. Europe is local. "I am Europe" must be our motto. We should speak not only about the future of the EU, but also the future of its citizens.

In the CoR, we have launched a project entitled "Reflecting on Europe". The aim of this initiative is to organise dialogue with citizens in the regions. We must listen to them. Since March 2016, we have already held over 135 debates in 20 Member States. Unemployment has been repeatedly identified as one of the main challenges.

Investment

Populism is not only a problem of communication, but also a problem of investment.

European ambition must be accompanied by financial ambition. Currently, Europe costs every European a cup of coffee each day. We might reflect on adding a croissant to this. It could also be a sausage from Thuringia or a Christmas stollen cake from Saxony. However, as a Belgian I am more in favour of adding a portion of chips.

What I want to say is that the promotion of economic and social progress as a key EU objective is stipulated in the founding Treaties. In order to demonstrate its added value, Europe also needs to fulfil its promise of social improvement, a promise it has been making for more than 60 years. Regrettably, the EU's social component is not a priority at the moment.

During my term-of-office as president of the European Committee of the Regions, I would like to make this a priority. I therefore welcome the ideas put forward by the French president in his Sorbonne speech, and hope that the Gothenburg social summit on 17 November 2017 will produce some tangible results. To demonstrate how crucial this is, I would like to quote a remarkable speech given in May 2006 by the then Luxembourg prime minister and current commission president at the Charlemagne Prize awards ceremony in Aachen. In the speech he said that, "In the next 10 years, if we are not able to add a strong social union to a successful economic union, then Europe will fail".

Cities and regions, which carry out two thirds of total public investment in Europe, need adequate resources to be able to invest in a fair and solidarity-based future for the entire EU, thus creating the conditions for social cohesion.

The Committee of the Regions is therefore in favour of a strong cohesion policy. In all its dimensions - economic, social and territorial - the cohesion policy is one of the hallmarks of the EU, the DNA so to say, and is firmly anchored in the European Treaties. That is why calling it into question, by scaling it back, diluting it or making it conditional on things that are irrelevant, would make no real sense.

Cohesion policy is the instrument for European solidarity. This policy must be preserved, as it creates jobs and enables infrastructure and so many other things to be built that Europeans need more urgently than ever before. As specific examples, cohesion policy has enabled 5 000 km of roads and

1 500 km of railways to be built and has given six million Europeans access to better drinking water. Thousands of training courses, retraining courses, start-ups and socially valuable services have been made possible by the cohesion policy, particularly in the strategically important area of cross-border cooperation. A Union without cohesion policy is not the Europe we want.

In partnership with European regional associations, the CoR has created the strategic initiative “# Cohesion Alliance”, which represents exactly this. I would be delighted if you, as the mayors and representatives of other local and regional authorities, were to join this initiative and work together with us to achieve a strong cohesion policy.

We must have the courage to carry out the intentions of the EU's founders. We need not only economic success, but also a Europe that is fully committed to the goals of justice and social progress. This is the only way for us to fend off populism and nationalism and create a peaceful, solidarity-based Europe that is firmly rooted in its cities and regions and is characterised by a high degree of social cohesion. In the words of the former German president Joachim Gauck, Europe needs more courage, not doubters but standard-bearers, not ditherers but people who are prepared to knuckle down, not those who simply go with the flow but active players.