

OPENING SESSION 9 October 2017

Full interventions

Sequence 1

Karl-Heinz Lambertz, President of the European Committee of the Regions (CoR), emphasised the need for a Europe of citizens – the EU is not only Brussels and Strasbourg, he said, but every village, town, region and city. It is at local and regional level that Europe should relaunch its future and once again become a source of hope. Donald Tusk, President of the EU Council, has asked the European Committee of the Regions to contribute to the discussions on the Future of Europe which is why, led by its members, the CoR is conducting hundreds of local citizens' dialogues across the European Union. The importance of two-way dialogue – listening and sharing the views, concerns and hopes of citizens – was paramount, President Lambertz said, which is why a mobile application had also been launched allowing everyone to have their say in Europe's future. He also invited the audience to take a look at the photo exhibition in Leopold Park, illustrating Europe united in diversity through pictures of Europeans at borders. He urged the audience to be inspired and to join in the massive task of relaunching Europe through dialogue with the public.

Iskra Mihaylova, Chair of the Committee on Regional Development of the European Parliament, stressed the importance for representatives of European institutions of having dialogue with the public, and further developing the values of a united Europe on which the success of the European Union and of EU policies, including regional policy, was based. The recipe for the future of Europe was contact with the public and the development of policies that provided answers to issues in people's everyday lives: infrastructure, transport, innovation, business, market, trade, etc. The future of Europe entailed better standards of living and security for everyone. All EU policies should be interrelated and should be flexible, as should the EU budget, including European Investment Funds.

Corina Crețu, European Commissioner for Regional Policy, pointed out that the EU and the younger generations were preoccupied by the same issues – how to regain trust in unique projects like the European Union: 70 years of peace. It was important to engage with people, and Mr Juncker's White Paper had launched a broad debate in this direction, with more than 2000 public events across the EU. Commissioner Crețu also underlined that the most important goal of cohesion policy was filling in the gaps that still existed on the European map and improving people's quality of life. She drew attention to the need for young people to engage in their future but also warned them not to take everything for granted.

Catiuscia Marini, President of the PES Group and President of Umbria Region (IT/PES), stressed the need for social cohesion and protection in Europe. The European Union was

still an area of democracy, guaranteeing the right of free movement and freedom of opinion and expression. Nevertheless, she said that people did not see today's Europe as something that presented prospects for improving their working lives, security and social protection, or job prospects for the younger generation. She underlined that the future of Europe had to be built on a social pillar: only then would the EU be in a position to fully restore people's faith in the merits of joint action.

Władysław Ortyl, President of the Podkarpackie Region (PL, ECR), emphasised the importance of local public debates on the future of Europe, citing the example of a debate held in the Podkarpackie region on 4 June 2017 that had brought together European, national and local representatives. The people were clearly calling for a reform of the EU that would bring Europe closer to the people. He also highlighted the fact that cohesion policy must in future continue to help all regions.

Corina Crețu, European Commissioner for Regional Policy, responded to these two statements by saying that cohesion policy was the most important policy that could be seen in every region and in every town and in people's lives. She said that we should make a joint effort to make the public aware of the financial solidarity offered by European funds. She also paid tribute to the people of Italy, especially those in Norcia, who had been hit by a powerful earthquake, and thanked the European Parliament for its cooperation in putting in place legislation enabling each country affected by natural disasters to use European funds for 95% of reconstruction costs.

Sequence 2

Corina Crețu, European Commissioner for Regional Policy, underlined that the younger generation could shape the future of Europe not only by sharing their ideas on the platform with the EU institutions but also by taking up opportunities such as Erasmus, the most popular EU-level programme for young people, or by being involved in the European Solidarity Corps.

Iskra Mihaylova, Chair of the Committee on Regional Development of the European Parliament, specifically pointed out how indispensable help from young people was; they were of great value to the European Union: they needed to be involved in EU decision making, to bring innovation and fresh ideas into the process.

Karl-Heinz Lambertz, President of the European Committee of the Regions, underlined that investing in the future of Europe meant investing in its youth, and drew attention to the need to tackle youth unemployment, to support young people to be innovative and to ensure they help shape the future of Europe. He pointed out that the youth unemployment rate was 15% across Europe, and worryingly higher than 50% in some countries. Furthermore, he said people needed to be integrated into the labour market, and that this would be one of the major challenges of the 21st century.

Ulrika Carlefall-Landergren, member of Kungsbacka Municipal Council (SE/ALDE), highlighted the fact that the future of Europe belonged to young people, stressing the importance of ensuring that they had a good start in life, as well as good basic education and training. She noted that her municipality had decided to become one of the best municipalities in Europe for schooling, mentioning the need to invest in longer term training and education, to encourage entrepreneurship and knowledge of languages and to provide opportunities to study abroad. With regard to asylum-seekers, she emphasised the need to offer them as good an education as possible. She concluded that she was proud of the new generation and that we ought to listen to them much more.

Sequence 3

Karl-Heinz Lambertz, President of the European Committee of the Regions, underlined that cohesion policy was the DNA of Europe. An EU without cohesion policy was not a future the CoR could accept which is why, together with all the leading territorial associations, the #CohesionAlliance had been launched – a wide alliance demanding a stronger and more visible cohesion policy for all regions and cities after 2020.

Iskra Mihaylova, Chair of the Committee on Regional Development of the European Parliament, called for the mobilisation of all stakeholders to prove the importance of the cohesion policy for the future of Europe. Cohesion policy should be more flexible and more digitally-oriented, and should take on board the views of young people.

Corina Crețu, European Commissioner for Regional Policy, reminded attendees that behind the figures of the 7th Cohesion report there were people and lives and that cohesion policy improved those lives. She thanked the CoR for its initiative.

Claudio De Vincenti, Italian Minister for Territorial Cohesion (IT) stressed that the Cohesion Alliance was very important because it was a central policy that gave meaning to European citizenship. He said that the Italian government was in favour of this initiative. He drew attention to macroeconomic conditionality, which had a negative impact on the regions that needed support the most. Consistency between European policies was needed for European recovery. The Cohesion Alliance would help to achieve consistency at all levels: European, national, regional and local.

Michael Schneider (DE/EPP) pointed out that the opinion on the Future of cohesion policy adopted by the CoR in May was a great example of the democratic opinion-forming process at European level. His suggestion of creating an alliance for cohesion policy had been adopted. He thanked Commissioners Crețu and Oettinger, as well as Iskra Mihaylova and other Members of the European Parliament who had supported the initiative from the start. He called on Member States to strengthen their regions, saying that cohesion policy could only work with strong regions.

Stanislaw Szwabski (PL/EA) responded by calling on the Cohesion Alliance to guarantee a strong cohesion policy after 2020 and an appropriate budget. He thanked the European Parliament for supporting it in the past few weeks, and called on it to adopt a resolution. He said that cohesion policy was very important in people's daily lives, and that it was essential to use structural funds to show solidarity after 2020. There were many examples of cohesion policy success stories: in his city, they were managing to leverage synergies between the port and the city, and they wanted to continue to develop maritime transport. Regions and cities, he said, were facing significant challenges and the key to addressing those was helped greatly by the cohesion policy of the European Union.