



**European Committee  
of the Regions**

**SPEECH BY THE PRESIDENT OF THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS,**

**KARL-HEINZ LAMBERTZ**

**FIFTH ENLARGEMENT DAY PLENARY, OPENING SESSION**

19<sup>TH</sup> JUNE 2019, 09H30

Your Excellences,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am pleased to see such a high level of interest in the enlargement of the EU on our fifth Enlargement Day.

At the European Committee of the Regions, we are committed to maintaining our continual support for completing the unification of Europe.

We gather today to discuss about efficiency of EU funding for enlargement and in particular about results in terms of rule of law, governance and reforms in candidate and potential candidate countries. We gather in a peculiar moment, when the Member States of the EU struggle to keep their commitments despite the fact that factual progress was often achieved in terms of reforms, but also in terms of political decisions in order to fulfil criteria and conditions.

Indeed, more and more, election after election, in Europe we hear about growing resistance to further EU enlargement.

We hear that priority should be given to implementing internal policies rather than enlarge the Union.

I believe fears must be defeated with pragmatism: we need to explain the risk of no enlargement; talk about the hazard of losing the path for reforms in neighbouring countries; about the consequence of frustrating citizens who believe, in some case fighting for, the European integration perspective.

After all, without any concrete European perspective, how could the EU help our partners to further engage in those difficult reforms, and in those difficult political dialogues, which are fundamental for the stability of the entire region?

Citizens of the enlargement countries, in turn, need to know what they are getting into.



**European Committee  
of the Regions**

They need to know that with obligations freedom will follow, as both are part of the package. We must demonstrate to politicians and citizens that the application of the rule of law and enhanced governance can indeed lead to local socio-economic development, stabilization and a better future.

But first of all, they need to recognise the Union as a reliable interlocutor.

I wish to thank our panel members today who bring a wide variety of experience: political, journalistic, academic, administrative and civic.

I hope we can have a frank debate on these key issues – one that does not avoid problems, yet can be creative and point towards the future.

We have two esteemed keynote speakers: Ambassador Inzko has dedicated much of his life to guarding and enhancing the stability of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and thus the entire Balkans and Europe.

Mayor Shilegov is not only the president of two of our key partner organizations, ZELS and NALAS, but also the Mayor of the capital city of North Macedonia.

North Macedonia, this is the first time that these words have been spoken from the podium of the Enlargement Day plenary!

Since we last met, it has been an eventful year. There were significant events such as the Prespa accords between Greece and North Macedonia. It was an act of pragmatic responsibility to rest a historical dispute, and I applaud all those who took part in solving it. I will be delighted to travel to Skopje soon in order to further acknowledge the support granted by local authorities working for the European perspective of that country and its people.

Let me express my firm support for opening membership negotiations with North Macedonia – and this still in 2019 – as well as with Albania, which has carried out an impressive renewal of its entire courts system.

Albania has passed through a great municipal reform: although legislative issues remain to be solved, we look forward to local elections to be hopefully organised very soon: elections always strengthen democracy and should never be taken in hostage. The European Commission's Enlargement Package also reports many other cases of positive developments in the enlargement countries.

However, it has not all been good news.



**European Committee  
of the Regions**

The recent cancellation of the election in Istanbul and decision to rerun elections on June 23 has undermined the overall electoral process to which the Turkish people have shown their commitment by casting their votes in very large number.

In Serbia, intimidation of opposition mayors and councillors has led the Council of Europe to open an investigation.

The EU is a union of freedom and fully stand behind these principles. We do not seek to impose our freedom on others, rather countries and peoples come to the EU after having freed themselves.

One of the cornerstones of our freedom is local democracy. Mayors and councillors need to be prepared to handle and implement the massive body of European legislation that will affect them. Without proper preparation, their citizens will not be able to fully enjoy all the possibilities of our union of peoples. And, if local representatives are not committed to the rule of law, they will lack a rule of law in their country.

Regional and Local authorities perform better when they can address global or societal challenges "in partnerships": they are the ones translating the sustainable development goals into concrete projects at local and regional level. The Covenant of Mayors, for instance, shows us that local actors can be pioneers by committing voluntarily to ambitious objectives.

We are seeing a greater recognition of these truths, and I am pleased to note that several chapters of the Commission's Enlargement Package address the local level. The CoR will produce a formal Opinion on the Enlargement Package by the end of the year, and our Rapporteur, Jaroslav Hlinka, will commence his consultations on 25 June.

The European Commission is also carrying out an evaluation of EU support to local authorities in the neighbourhood regions of the Union. When completed, this important information will lead the way to better and more focused help and advice to our friends.

Indeed, the best advisors are friends who have "been there before".

Providing peer-to-peer advice to local and regional authorities in the acceding countries is the best way to establish well-functioning local services and confident communities.

In this context, the CoR has published a brochure explaining the financial assistance that the EU currently offers to local and regional authorities in candidate countries.



**European Committee  
of the Regions**

Dear colleagues,

We do not underestimate the difficulties that our partners face in the countries aspiring to join the EU. We are very grateful for the work that Turkey and the Western Balkan countries have done in bringing under control the flow of refugees and migrants. Border regions are those worst hit by migration.

In addition, discrimination towards minorities can still affect those regions, in particular when nationalism and populism take room in the political context.

Yet, many of the most positive examples of cooperation are implemented in border areas.

Our friend the Mayor of Edirne, Mr Gürkan, among our speakers today, can take credit for the success on the EU-Turkey border.

Finnish Presidency of the Council is about to start. A region like the Baltic Sea can easily understand the role played by EU enlargement.

I appeal to all Member States to take a strategic view, and keep working towards the unification of Europe.

Enlargement policy is not enough to build stable European integration, but frustrating European perspectives is enough to jeopardise full regions and full generations.

Let me conclude by hoping to see a successor of Commissioner Hahn committed and dedicated as he has been.

We believe that the future Commissioner might even have a portfolio dedicated to enlargement policy alone, to reflect the strategic and geopolitical weight of the issue.

Thank you for your attention.