



**European Committee
of the Regions**

**Closing Session – President's Briefing
EuroPCom 2020: Time for Communication
Tuesday 8 December 12:30pm-1:30pm**

Ladies and gentlemen,

The pandemic has affected all of us. It has affected our work, our travel, our relationships.

When it first broke out in March and again recently, in my region – the Region of Central Macedonia in Greece – we had no other option but to implement strict lockdown measures.

To ask a shop or a business to close, to restrict the movement of people, or ask citizens to keep distance from their loved ones, have been unquestionably the toughest decisions of my career.

But at the same time, to stand shoulder to shoulder with those on the frontline – the health and social workers, the first responders, the teachers, was also one of the most meaningful moments of my public service.

These tough decisions would never have worked without having peoples' trust.

Communication is crucial in responding to a crisis, but it is only successful if people trust the messenger.

Trust is built by demonstrating that the interests of our communities comes first in every decision we take.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

research released in September shows that across Europe local and regional governments are the most trusted level of government – more than the EU or national governments.

The European Union needs its one million local and regional leaders, to explain what Europe is doing to tackle the crisis and foster the recovery. Trust is built by delivering results and communicating those results to people locally.

Trust is built not only in our words but also in our deeds.

People don't care about technocratic words. People don't care how bureaucracy works, they want democracy to work.

Local and regional leaders want to talk about Europe. We want to show tangible results that improve our peoples' daily life.

We want to talk proudly of hospitals funded by the EU or projects that create opportunities for our young people.

We want to explain that it is because of the EU we are showing ambition on climate change, digitalization and sustainability.

But still, not enough of this is known to citizens. The content from Brussels is too often lost in jargon and translation for our communities.

Sadly, despite its best efforts, during times of crisis, the EU is too slow in reacting, missing an opportunity to show to people that it is there when they need help. The pandemic was no exception.

If we want better communication, the EU needs to be more reactive and vocal on the ground, during times of crisis and prosperity. We need to communicate loudly with locally elected politicians to make an impact.

The EU may have been too slow and unheard during the crisis, but with the exceptional EU budget and next generation EU recovery plans hopefully agreed soon, together we have a chance again to show the added value of Europe.

And this brings me to my final point:

We need to stop speaking only to the converted. We need to move back towards meaningful dialogue.

I truly believe the Conference on the Future of Europe is an opportunity, to change the way the EU works and the way it engages with people.

This process cannot be a beauty contest between the big EU institutions. It cannot be just with those who believe in the EU, but also with those who question the EU.

It needs to be inclusive, open, authentic. It needs to be with and for every citizen. If not, it will reaffirm the populist message that the EU is a closed door club for elites.

It needs to be done with all levels of government, with young people, and with the civil society.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In our Committee alone, we have 700 members and alternates from every member state, who are ready to open the doors to their communities.

We are ready to offer our resources and closeness to people to make the Conference a success. Equally, we are ready to relay back what citizens want from Europe, but we must make real changes based on people's needs.

This is why this week we will launch a High-level Group for Democracy with Herman Van Rompuy, bringing leaders from all levels together with experts and academics.

This is also why we are establishing a network of local and regional leaders, across Europe's regions and cities.

This is how we will restore citizens trust.

The pandemic has pushed us to be innovative with our time, resources and technology. In my region we adapted our budgets and services to protect services, jobs and businesses.

Like this edition of EuropCom, our Committee's plenary this week will be fully virtual for the first time in our history.

The virus has not stopped democracy. We have adapted the way we govern, the way we do politics, and the way we communicate.

2020 has been a year of crisis and fake news but democracy was not defeated. Our Union is moving forward.

We need to restart Europe. To unite and reinstate the truth. We need to work together to hold open local dialogues.

We need to work together to bring EU policy to life and deliver results. We need to work together to bring Europe closer to people.

Brussels cannot do this alone. Together we can.

Thank you for listening.