EU annual regional and local barometer

Opening statement by President Apostolos Tzitzikostas

Debate with Chancellor Angela Merkel on the German Presidency of the Council of the European Union

13 October 2020

#EURegionalBarometer
Dear Chancellor, it is a great honor to welcome you today.

Germany was the driving force in founding our House.

Twenty-six years ago, our political assembly was created with the support of the German Länder and Chancellor Kohl.

The Committee of the Regions was created to bring Europe closer to people.

Today, your presence represents a legacy that addresses Europe’s grassroots.

Germany and its Länder, are successful in responding to the coronavirus.

Our COVID platform tells us of Italians and French patients treated in hospitals in Saarland and North Rhine Westphalia.

Thank you for keeping your doors open to patients from other states.

We have seen how regions such as Lower Silesia received 100,000 masks from Saxony, and laboratories in Dresden are conducting hundreds of tests to help regions in other Member States.

These, Chancellor, are real stories of European solidarity.

Dear Chancellor, dear colleagues,

Yesterday together with President von der Leyen, our Committee released its first Regional and Local Barometer.

The key message is simple:

local and regional leaders are on the front line fighting the pandemic, and they are essential to our European recovery.

From Bergamo to Madrid, from Paris to Stockholm, from Vienna to La Valetta, we are working tirelessly to contain the virus, help the most vulnerable, protect our communities, and safeguarding local economies and jobs.

We are fighting side-by-side with doctors, nurses and teachers.

We have established platforms for e-health, e-governance and e-learning.

We protect our natural habitat, make our buildings energy efficient, our transport cleaner and our communities greener.

But despite our efforts, we are struggling to provide basic services for our people, with 91% of local budgets falling.

To give you one example, only six Member States are able to provide digital schooling for 80% of the students.
Dear Chancellor,

The German EU Presidency comes at a time of monumental importance.

30 years after German reunification, it is time for us to reunite, restart and rebuild Europe.

Citizens urgently need a new EU Budget and “Next Generation EU.

Because when our regions and cities recover, Europe will recover and our people will recover.

Chancellor, we can access EU funds and the EU rule of law must always be respected.

However, local and regional authorities should never be punished for the behavior of their national governments.

Our recovery needs not only investment but also European coordination.

I welcome your recent talks with Germany’s major cities to follow the same rules in responding to the pandemic.

Now, the same must happen for all European issues.

We need a consistent European approach between all regions, cities and member states.

The German EU Presidency also comes as we enter the final mile of the Brexit negotiations.

It will directly impact many regions, their people and businesses.

This sad chapter has shown that European solidarity should never be taken for granted.

It is a wake-up for all Europeans.

The new pact for migration is also on the table.

And all member states should follow Germany’s example:

European solidarity, rights and shared responsibility is how we will successfully manage migration.

Frontline countries cannot be left alone to cope with the migration crisis.

Dear Chancellor,

We believe in the German motto “Gemeinsam” - “Together”.

Only together, can we build a more resilient, democratic, sustainable and human Europe.
300 regions and 90,000 municipalities are the EU’s democratic foundations and its safety net.

They help bring Europe closer to its citizens.

Let’s acknowledge that, today, two-dimensional Europe has reached its limits.

We need a three-dimensional Europe with all levels - EU, national, regional and local working together, for the people.

This is how we see our European House of Democracy:

the EU is the roof, Member-States the walls and Regional and Local levels - its foundations.

No house can exist without strong foundations.

The Conference on the Future of Europe should improve our House of European Democracy, and, must not become a “beauty contest” between Brussels based institutions.

As the EU’s political assembly of regional and local leaders, let me make three commitments:

First, we will continue to bring people closer to Europe through “Local Dialogues”.

Citizens must no longer feel forgotten, neglected or ignored.

Therefore, we need a permanent stream of communication by holding local dialogues on EU matters that really concern citizens.

They must be organized already during the German EU Presidency, together with regional presidents, mayors, councilors, national and EU elected politicians.

The EU should stop being perceived as a bureaucratic machine.

And, for this to happen, it needs to better take into account its territorial impact on regions, cities and villages, in line with the principle of subsidiarity.

The voice, powers and competencies of regions and cities must be truly reflected throughout the EU, with or without Treaty changes.

Our second commitment is to ensure that cohesion becomes Europe’s guiding compass.

Cohesion is not just money.

It’s a fundamental European value that brings added-value benefiting every person, every business, every community and every member state.

Let’s not forget that for every euro invested, cohesion returns nearly three to every EU tax payer.

East to West and North to South.

No state, region, city or village, should be left alone or behind.
Chancellor Merkel,

The European Union is the greatest political and economic achievement of modern times.

And, it was possible because European people stood as one.

Some extremist and populist voices call for a retreat into isolation behind national borders.

But, the values that bind and hold Europe together are stronger and will always prevail.

Our internal EU borders are not barriers, but laboratories for unity, enhancing resilience, fostering dialogue and accelerating the green transition.

My third proposal would be therefore to involve our Committee in the Council discussions to speed up the European Border Mechanism.

It was you Chancellor Merkel, who during the most difficult times, defended the value of open borders within our Union.

But, in order to keep our internal borders open, we need strong external borders.

The EU must defend its territorial sovereignty. The borders of the Member States are borders of the EU.

The latest Turkish provocation, which escalated again yesterday, is unacceptable.

If this situation persists, sanctions need to be envisaged.

I welcome the German EU Presidency’s clear position on this matter.

Dear Chancellor Merkel,

You are one of the most respected, experienced and trusted world leaders.

And we, the one million regional and local leaders all across Europe, we are your allies.

We are pragmatic.

We deal with the concrete realities on the ground.

We deliver solutions.

With determination and partnership, together, we can turn fear into trust, division into unity, uncertainty into confidence.

Gemeinsam – together, we bring Europe closer to people.

Thank you Chancellor, for your participation today, and everything you do for Europe, lets do it together.
October 2020

Created in 1994, after the entry into force of the Maastricht Treaty, the European Committee of the Regions is the EU’s assembly of 329 regional and local representatives from all 27 Member States, representing over 446 million Europeans.