EU annual regional and local barometer

State of the Union from the regional and local perspective

Address by Apostolos Tzitzikostas, President of the European Committee of the Regions

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#EURegionalBarometer
Dear President von der Leyen, dear colleagues and friends,

These tragic times have reinforced the very essence of European solidarity and responsibility.

If we are to provide the right answers, we need to understand what our people need.

This is why I am pleased to present our first “Regional and Local Barometer” report.

The word “Barometer” was chosen because in my Greek language, “baros” means “weight”: and so it’s about the weight of Europe’s regions, cities and villages.

And “metron” also comes from Greek meaning “measure”.

Unless we measure the state of our regions and cities, we cannot understand the state of our Union.

Only by taking the pulse of our communities, we can decide how effective the EU has been on the ground, and what the EU needs to do help its people.

Dear President,

During your State of the Union speech, you rightly paid tribute to the heroes of this crisis: doctors, nurses and the first responders.

Today, I pay tribute to the unsung heroes at the forefront of the pandemic: Mayors, Presidents of Regions, Councilors.

From our COVID Platform, our members shared hundreds of real stories.

They tell of how cities and regions are working relentlessly to protect our communities and local economies.

Regional and local elected politicians are ensuring hospitals are equipped.

They are keeping our public transport running and safe.

Our local leaders are supporting the most vulnerable and local businesses.

Europe’s recovery needs solidarity, not only amongst member states, but across borders and between regions.

We all need to take ownership and responsibility for our recovery.

Dear President, dear friends,

Europe starts in every region, city and village.

It starts in the Slovak town of Prešov, which bought electric vehicles to deliver food and medicine to the elderly.

It starts in Lubelskie, the Polish region which used EU Funds to purchase medical equipment.

It starts in the Italian town of Capannori, whose Mayor fundraised to buy equipment for the local hospital and buy food for those who lost their jobs.
This is proof that the one million local and regional elected politicians are the democratic foundations of the European Union.

They make the EU visible and real, rather than distant and ineffective.

The Regional Barometer confirms that the pandemic has hurt us all.

It shows some areas are particularly vulnerable.

Île-de-France, the Spanish regions of Andalusia, Castile and León, Madrid and Valencia, and most of the Italian regions are the hardest hit, along with coastal regions in Croatia, eastern Bulgaria and Greece.

Falling revenues and increasing expenditure - the ‘scissors effect’ - puts public finances of municipalities, cities and regions in the EU at risk.

The subnational authorities in France, Germany and Italy will lose 30 billion euros in 2020 alone.

Over 90% of EU regions and municipalities expect their revenues to plummet.

If public services collapse, our recovery will be slower and more painful for the people, and their communities.

Dear President,

The EU’s response has been bold and the investment package you proposed is exceptional.

But let’s make no mistake: to be successful, the next EU budget and “Next Generation EU” need smart planning based on the needs of our territories.

A recovery plan, which remains spatially blind and meets only national needs, will fail.

Given that regional and local authorities represent half of EU’s public investment and one-third of public expenditure, they need to shape the recovery plans.

I therefore call on the EU and its regional and local authorities:

- to be better coordinated in the recovery, fully taking into the territorial impact;
- secondly, to help cities and regions address financial gaps and protect them from the “scissors’ effect”;
- and finally, to make the EU’s recovery sustainable and inclusive, ending all EU investment in fossil fuels and giving regions and cities direct access to funds to deliver local green projects.

Dear colleagues,

the crisis risks a lost COVID-19 generation.

Only six Member States are able to offer digital education for 80% or more of students.

Citizen and businesses have changed their behaviour with the rise of teleworking.

We urgently need to accelerate our efforts so every business, public service and home has access to fast
internet to avoid deepening the rural-urban divide.

Our report also confirms that COVID-19 is especially affecting women, who make up nearly 80% of the healthcare sector.

COVID-19 has also shed light on the vast disparities of hospital care.

For instance, the number of intensive care hospital beds per capita is six times higher in Germany than in Portugal.

We need to address this “new geography of regional disparities” and help regions cope with increasing healthcare demands.

Europeans want “health” to be the EU’s priority.

The EU and its regional and local authorities must now:

• firstly, double-up measures to tackle social exclusion avoiding a lost generation from COVID-19;

• and secondly, review the balance of health competencies between European, national, regional and local levels, in line with the subsidiarity principle.

Based on our joint concept of “active subsidiarity”, we can promote dialogue between all levels of government to find the right division of powers in a future “European Health Union”

Dear President, Dear friends,

Our Regional Barometer shows cohesion policy matters to all places, and people of our Union.

From the Azores to Cyprus, from the Mediterranean to the Arctic, Europe is built on cohesion.

Cohesion is not just about money, it is a fundamental value that brings added-value to everyone’s lives.

It is a unique tool that will protect citizens, tackle the pandemic, and build sustainable resilient communities, leaving no person or place behind.

Almost forty years after cohesion was enshrined in the EU’s Treaties.

Today, during the pandemic, Cohesion, once again, helped regions and cities in their time of need.

The 12,000 supporters of the “Cohesion Alliance” is united around the principles of partnership and multi-level governance.

Our “Regional and Local Barometer” makes it clear that the pandemic will widen disparities between regions and cities.

But cohesion can deliver results only if it is designed and implemented in partnership by all levels of government.

I therefore call on the European Commission and our regional and local authorities to:

• launch a joint campaign to showcase how cohesion funds have been life-lines for local communities;

• secondly, co-organise an annual “Forum on Cohesion and Resilience” to discuss the new EU
budget and Recovery and Resilience Facility;

- and finally, establish a permanent exchange between border regions in the field of health and emergency services.

**Dear President, dear members,**

Trust is what will pull us through this crisis.

Our recent poll shows that local and regional authorities continue to be the most trusted level of government by the people.

Most Europeans also believe that regional and local authorities must be given more influence so that the EU improves its ability to deliver.

**Dear friends,**

it is time for a stronger European democracy.

A European democracy that listens and is closer to people.

A Europe where better, simpler regulation makes a difference to daily life, guided by the principle of subsidiarity.

**Dear President,**

Europeans want to be more involved in politics.

The young people who fight tirelessly for real climate action are just one example.

Their voices must be heard in the Conference on the Future of Europe.

The Conference could be the moment to reflect about the future of our common house and crucially, together with our citizens.

Let me be honest: we are not interested in a “beauty contest” between the Brussels institutions.

We want a profound democratisation process that brings the EU closer to people.

We want less institutional complexity and more democratic representation of people’s vote.

Let’s join forces and hold local dialogues across Europe: the European Commission, its representation offices and European Direct Information Centres, together with our local and regional politicians in each and every member state.

**Dear friends,**

Our Europe is a house that has strong walls – the Member states – and a protective roof – the European Union.
This is the “European House of Democracy”.
But no matter how strong the walls and the roof are, no house can stand without solid foundations.
The EU’s foundations are its regions, cities and villages.
They are vital for a resilient, sustainable and prosperous Europe.
Dear President,
To achieve this, I am determined to work together.
Let me propose four ideas to make our partnership flourish:

1. jointly organise local dialogues on topics based on our people’s needs;
2. permanently assess the impact of EU’s decisions in our territories
3. include a regional and local dimension in the Commission’s annual State of the Union; we would be honoured if you could join us every year at our October Regional and Local Barometer debate;
4. launch a joint project to promote European values, identities and citizenship via education and culture at the regional and local levels.

Dear President, dear friends,
To restart Europe together, we must strengthen its foundations.
We must be guided by a simple principle: decisions must be taken as close as possible to the citizens, if we want effective solutions that answer people’s needs.
Thank you!
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.