



**European Committee  
of the Regions**

**LH FORUM**

**«LE RENDEZ-VOUS INTERNATIONAL DES VILLES & TERRITOIRES»**

**LE HAVRE 27 SEPTEMBER 2019**

Ladies and gentlemen,

The most recent European elections have shown that the majority of citizens still believe that their future lies with the Union.

However, this remains a fragile victory, when only just over half of Europeans believe that their voice counts in the EU.

Too many people see the EU as too remote from their daily lives.

A sentiment that isolationists have no hesitation in exploiting, to the detriment of common sense and their own best interest.

The current Brexit chaos reminds us of this every day.

Yes, there is a battle between these anti-European populists who want to distance the Union from its people and those who defend our Union with pragmatism and idealism.

The only way we shall win this battle is by bridging the gap between the Union and its citizens.

Deepening the single market will not be enough to rekindle the European project. We need more than an economic and fiscal union.

So how can we make the EU more meaningful to the people of Europe? By getting everyone involved.

However, in the minds of Europe's leaders, this is a Copernican revolution.

We have to realise that European democracy is not only the 751 MEPs and 10 000 national parliamentarians.

There are more than a million local and regional leaders. They too are elected representatives of the EU and have the closest contact with the people of Europe. Setting them apart from European democracy would be irresponsible.

Cities and regions are the third dimension of European democracy.

Each region, each city, each municipality is Europe.

In each of these regions, these towns and municipalities, people are ready and eager to shape the Europe of tomorrow.

It will not surprise you that the 350 elected local representatives in the European Committee of the Regions have set out many tangible proposals to re-energise the Union from the ground up.

Only yesterday, I presented these ideas to the new president of the European Commission, Ms Von der Leyen.

Let me take this opportunity to mention some of these ideas.

The first request of the elected representatives in the Committee is to be able to participate with the EU Member States and institutions in deepening European integration.

We call on the European Commission to propose a new working practice that involves every level of government involved in the EU decision-making process – this is what we call “active subsidiarity”.

Involving cities and regions in the EU decision-making process means it is not only when there are elections that the public can be involved.

As you know, at the initiative of the French President, many Member States and EU institutions held citizens’ consultations before the elections.

This is a good thing. But if nothing happens as a result, there will be frustration.

I have proposed that cities and regions hold consultations on a permanent basis and turn the ideas into proposals for the EU institutions and the Member States to follow up on.

It is not enough to only consult, you have to make proposals. A way of working that brings local and regional politicians on board in the decision-making process is essential.

It is equally important to involve them in the European project.

That is our second request.

Because local challenges cannot be separated from global challenges, the Committee therefore calls for a European work agenda that addresses the challenges facing the world and brings cities and regions on board.

The EU must take ownership of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals remembering that, according to the OECD, 65% of the 169 targets can only be achieved with the involvement of regions and cities.

Here, too, the international and European community cannot do without cities and regions.

For example, as long as national governments are unable to reach agreement on taking in migrants, it is the regions and cities that are on the front line expressing European solidarity that should be driving us all.

When it comes to combating climate change, local and regional governments are taking the lead shouldering their responsibilities. In fact today, more than 9 500 cities and towns have joined the EU Covenant of Mayors to voluntarily exceed the EU's climate and energy targets.

Ladies and gentlemen,

All what I have set out today will not be enough to achieve Europe's ambition of social and economic progress. For that, our locally and regionally elected representatives call on the Member States to have the courage to give the Union the finances needed.

This is the third key request of our Committee.

The EU budget is derisory for a Union of 500 million people. With the departure of the United Kingdom, those with the least ambition think they have found another pretext to cut Europe's resources. And this when the current budget was already smaller than that from the previous period.

How can we change Europe if we do not give ourselves the means? We are aware of the justified commitment of the French authorities to the Common Agricultural Policy, but let me take the example of another policy that must be defended: cohesion policy.

Cohesion is vital, since there can be no Union without cohesion.

This is why our Committee, together with over 12 000 supporting associations, cities and regions, launched a "Cohesion Alliance" calling for EU regional policy to remain one third of the EU budget, for all regions and cities.

Between 2007 and 2013, cohesion policy created a million jobs – a third of all new jobs in the EU in that period. It supported more than 400 000 SMEs and built 4 900 km of roads.

However, despite this evidence, the outgoing European Commission, the "last chance" Commission, proposed shrinking the policy.

The Member States and European EU institutions should not diminish the ability of regions and cities to deliver local and regional, economic and social cohesion. This is all the more true as cohesion policy, despite being already moderately resourced, also helps in coping with new challenges such as the integration of migrants, climate change and security.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to leave you in no doubt about one thing: the cities and regions are not asking just for financial support, they are insisting on room for manoeuvre when it comes to investment – in other words, accounting rules that do not hamper them.

This is a big taboo among Europe's leaders, but more than ten years after the outbreak of the financial crisis, it is high time to stop seeing public investment as a danger to our economies and to see it instead as a necessity to assist the people of Europe.

Ladies and gentlemen,

As you see, my message to national and European leaders is simple: if cities and regions need Europe for their own development, Europe has just as much need of the cities and regions to consolidate itself.

Our elected representatives are ready to rebuild the Union.

Thank you.

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