



European Committee  
of the Regions



# The State of the European Union: the View of **Regions** and **Cities**

"The cities and regions need the European Union.  
The European Union needs its cities and regions."

Address by Karl-Heinz Lambertz

President of the European Committee of the Regions

09 October 2018

#SOTREG



**«The cities and regions need the  
European Union. The European  
Union needs its cities and regions.»**

**Karl-Heinz Lambertz, 9 October 2018**

**In the presence of the President of the  
European Parliament, Antonio Tajani**

# Karl-Heinz Lambertz

President of the European Committee of the Regions

Mr Tajani,  
colleagues,

So often, when we meet local and regional representatives and actors, we hear them say: **“without the EU, it wouldn't have been possible”**.

*“Without the European Union we couldn't have built this bridge”.*

*“Without the European Union, we couldn't have set up this exchange scheme for university students”.*

*“Without the European Union, we couldn't have built this metro link”.*

I realised a long time ago that what the European Union has enabled us to achieve in my city of Eupen and my region, it is also doing right across

Mr Tajani,  
colleagues,

No State of the Union address would be complete if it mentioned only the Member States, leaving out the local and regional level. The role of our Assembly of elected representatives is to remind the other European and national institutions that the Union does not begin and end with the Member States. **The State of the Union is also - and perhaps above all - the state of its municipalities, its cities and its regions.**

Mr Tajani,  
colleagues,

**Yes indeed, our cities and regions need the Union.**

And it is precisely because they need the EU that they cannot accept any project for the future of the Union in which regional development is only partly supported by Europe, or not at all. How could we, as European local and regional elect-

Europe. In the past I have fought for Europe's support in helping my region to develop, and today I am fighting shoulder-to-shoulder with you to ensure that our cities and regions can build Europe.

Our Union's most concrete achievements go far beyond the Erasmus programme, which is so often - and rightly - cited as an example. Both back home but also here in Brussels, **our role is to remind people of these everyday successes, many of which would not have been possible without cohesion policy.**

When the European institutions are campaigning for Europe, it is crucial that they highlight the Union's direct contribution to improving the lives of Europeans.

We do not see Europe as two-dimensional, with only the institutions and the Member States. **We see Europe in three dimensions, with its 100 000 or so local authorities and 300 regions. This third dimension is the democratic foundation on which we must rebuild Europe, with and for our citizens.**

ed representatives, allow the Union to neglect or even abandon its cities and regions? It is simply not possible. **To weaken our municipalities, our cities, our regions is to weaken our Union.** This must not be part of our blueprint for the future. **Quite the opposite: by strengthening our territories we strengthen our Union.**

A year ago, together with our partners in the **Cohesion Alliance**, we launched **a call for a stronger Europe for its cities and regions**.

Cohesion is not the exclusive business of our Assembly: **cohesion is everyone's business**. As shown by the fact that **8 000 signatories have put their names to the call by the Cohesion Alliance**, which now covers almost the entire Union. Among them are of course many representatives of local and regional authorities, but also signatories from very different backgrounds, ranging from the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) to the European Association of Craft, Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises or the European Patients' Forum.

**Cohesion is not a relic of the past and young people in Europe know that**. I am delighted that the **European Youth Forum** has recently joined our Alliance. I can think of no more important or noble task than that of bequeathing to those who come after us a prosperous Union founded on the values of freedom, justice and solidarity.

Mobilising the Alliance has achieved results. As matters stand, cohesion policy covers all regions - an essential principle that was once under threat. But, make no mistake, we must remain on our guard.

**Because cohesion is a policy that helps our territories to develop;**

**Because cohesion is a policy for the future**, designed to tackle the great challenges of our time, while also meeting day-to-day demands;

**The local and regional elected representatives' fight to preserve the cohesion of the Union continues.**

How can the European Commission loudly declare that:

Mr Tajani,  
colleagues,

**An exhausted Europe, lacking the means to act, would represent a victory for those want to see its demise**. They are lying when they blame the Union for a bridge collapsing or for the under-funding of their own health system. And by destroying the Union they would also be weakening their own cities and regions.

**Paradoxically it is the very same people who are reluctant to do their bit, whether in terms of respecting common values or contributing to the budget, who also condemn Europe's**

*"[. . .] cohesion policy is vital to Europe, its citizens, its economy and its cities and regions [. . .]"*

while proposing a 10% cut in this same policy's budget?

We reject these disproportionate cuts, just as our colleagues in the European Parliament's Committee on Budgets recently did. Common sense tells us that, whether we are talking about cohesion, the Common Agricultural Policy or any other policy, especially with a European budget that is already inadequate, we cannot do more with less.

We likewise reject any weakening of the role of cities and regions, such as centralising management arrangements. **Centralisation is not a method for the future. It is a relic of the past**. And, as pointed out by the representatives of French local and regional authorities in their Marseille appeal<sup>2</sup>, **decentralisation is a model under which decisions and investment can be more closely aligned with real needs**.

Of course there are budget constraints, there is Brexit, there are Member States who balk at contributing to the European effort, even though this is very modest for a population of 510 million, and although most of it flows back to the Member States.

**We must aim high because time is short**. The President of the European Commission has called on the Member States to reach an agreement in principle on the budget before the European elections. The leaders of the Member States sometimes give the impression that they are avoiding or putting off the work of agreeing the next European budget. This time-wasting is creating great uncertainty, just when **Europeans need prospects for the future**.

**weakness - for which they themselves are partly responsible.**

And when Europe proposes solutions, they are never happy. It is always too much . . . or too little. They seek the destruction of a Union that has brought us more than 60 years of peace. We must never forget that "nationalism means war". To which I would add the obvious corollary, that **"Europe means peace"**.

**Our municipalities, cities and regions, and their elected representatives are a factor for trust and**

**stability for the Union** at a time when divergences and antagonisms are growing at national and European level. This stability is vital if we are to continue building a shared future. Local and regional elected representatives very often display pragmatism, not to say courage. They cannot take refuge in a virtual world of 280-character electronic polemics. Every day, they are in the front line, facing up to practical realities. They have to act.

Sometimes, it is possible for a local representative to do what a head of state or government claims is impossible or even intolerable. When the Hungarian Prime Minister refuses to do anything to take in migrants or promote integration, then

Mr Tajani,  
colleagues,

**European democracy breathes with two lungs.** The **European Parliament** of course, whose members are elected in our cities and regions.

And then the **European Committee of the Regions**, where local and regional elected representatives, from the smallest municipalities to the largest regions, work for the good of European citizens and the European project.

**Next year, our Assembly will celebrate its 25th birthday.** It is still young in terms of a person's life, and even in terms of the history of the European Union, when you consider that the European Parliament was born in 1952, the European Commission and the European Economic and Social Committee in 1958. **Our institution must continue to grow, carried forward by a simple, powerful idea that is gaining ever more support: to build Europe together, from the bottom up, with the people of Europe.** Our *raison d'être* is clear for any convinced European. It is up to us to make the most of our unique features to strengthen our contribution to European integration.

As Europe is buffeted by uncertainties, **our Committee must continue to bind itself more closely to the European Union and anchor itself more deeply in every municipality, city and region of Europe. Our Assembly must become a forum where Europeans come together to shape their Europe.**

Mr Tajani,  
colleagues,

**We have to measure the "major" European debates against needs in the field.** The debate on

our colleague Bart Somers invites him to his home city of Mechelen to show him that day after day, our cities and regions are building co-existence and successfully upholding the idea of unity in diversity. While **the Council talks endlessly about "migration", at the grassroots I hear the word "integration" far more often.** Dear colleagues, without wishing to make a great song and dance about it, this is where true responsibility and the European spirit are to be found. And this is also why, **in cooperation with the European Commission, we are going to launch a campaign to highlight the integration projects being implemented in our cities and regions.**

**Elected representatives from local and regional authorities are elected representatives of the Union.** Dear colleagues, here at the heart of the Union, you represent your own territories. In your municipalities, cities and regions, you represent the Union.

Within the institutions, **our added value lies in the fact that we bring local and regional concerns to the European level and, in return, bring European concerns back to the grassroots.** We must identify areas in which the Union could bring added value in support of local, regional and - of course - national action.

**Some may think that there are "minor" and "major" debates, but I cannot think of any of our citizens' concerns that are minor or that can be neglected.**

Back home, people tell us of the need for affordable housing, decent jobs, education for their children, transport, security, access to digital networks, business start-ups, development of rural areas and all the other things that are essential to the daily lives of Europeans. **Our role is to convey these concerns, for which women and men in Europe expect responses, at whatever level of government. The European Union must not be kept out of the picture,** when it can bring added value.

the budgetary and accounting rules for example. We have to show how and why **the Union**

**must mobilise local public investment**, which alone accounts for half of all public investment. **Europeans need this investment, which also creates wealth.**

Public investment has been held back by the 2008 financial crisis and by the mismatch between the European rules and the needs of local and regional authorities.

Mr Tajani,  
colleagues,

**I said earlier that our cities and regions need the Union.**

**I would add that the Union needs its cities and regions.**

Mr Tajani, in May 2017 you told our Assembly that:

*"In our system of subsidiarity (we) are the closest to the citizen. (That you) need (our) help in getting Europe closer to its citizens. (That) we must listen more than we speak, and we must make sure that the ideas and concerns of the citizens pass through to our decision-making process".*

You are right.

Our ties with the people of Europe must be strengthened, not least by talking with them about their Europe. That is what we have been doing for two years now. **180 debates have been held in the 28 Member States. 176 members of our Assembly, from all the political groups, have taken part, meeting Europeans in 110 regions and 156 cities.** Congratulations to all of you. The final record of these citizens' dialogues will be forwarded to the members of the European Council to feed into the discussions at their December meeting. The report has also been used for a Committee opinion<sup>4</sup> on rebuilding trust in the European Union, requested by President Donald Tusk and drawn up by our Vice-President Markku Markkula and myself.

**No-one has a monopoly over citizens' dialogues.** Many national and European actors have also taken this positive step: the European Commission, the European Economic and Social Committee, MEPs and the Member States. Apart from the need to work together, we can draw four lessons for the future from this exercise:

- **These dialogues help boost the democratic dimension of the European Union** by mo-

**It is essential to adapt these budgetary rules in economic and social terms.** The European Union must heed the voice of the grassroots, such as the Declaration by the Mayors of EU Capital Cities adopted last month in the City of Brussels<sup>3</sup>. **An important first step would be for Structural Fund co-financing, together with future investment, to be left out of the calculation of debts and deficits.**

bilising and encouraging the broad involvement of civil society, whether this means community organisations, the social partners or foundations, for example;

- **We need to get real feedback on the EU's policies.** Listening is not enough. Citizens' dialogues must be organised and there must be follow-up to improve Union action in specific areas;
- **Local and regional elected representatives must play a key role in organising and following up on these dialogues on the ground, and within the European institutions;**
- **This European citizens' dialogue mechanism must become a permanent fixture after the May 2019 European elections.** A sudden halt as soon as the elections are over could give rise to even greater frustration. Citizens' dialogues must be more than part of an election campaign.

**We must get down to work straight away to strengthen the post-2019 democratic life of our Union.** We must bring together people of good will. **That is why I have proposed to the President of the European Economic and Social Committee that we work together to sketch out a permanent, European mechanism for citizens' dialogue. Our joint proposal, aimed at strengthening the link between the Union and its citizens in this way, will be the proposal of the representatives of civil society and of regional and local authorities - those who are closest to the people of Europe.** We will share the outcome of our discussions with the Parliament, the Council and the Commission.

Mr Tajani,  
colleagues,

Democracy also means being close to the people, and hence subsidiarity.

**Let's put things in perspective: it would be ridiculous to limit the application of the subsidiarity principle to a matter of time changes.**

**Maybe Europe needs to change its clocks: but above all it needs to change course.** How can we still hesitate over finally creating a social Europe,

Mr Tajani,  
colleagues,

Let me return to subsidiarity. **Because, while the Union is in need of a change of course, it is just as much in need of a change of method,** if we are to succeed in tackling the great challenges and changes we face, such as the climate, demographics and the transition to a digital society.

**Subsidiarity means a better Europe, because it works better.**

Yes, subsidiarity must allow us to progress together towards a Union and Member States that work better. That is why Michael Schneider, François Decoster and I have advocated the **active subsidiarity** concept, as set out in the report of the European Commission's Task Force on Subsidiarity<sup>5</sup>.

The aim is not for action to be set in stone at any particular level of government. Neither is it a matter of stripping one level of government of its competences to the benefit of another. In any case, the Task Force, chaired by Frans Timmermans, **has not identified any areas in which competences should be taken away from the Union.**

To quote from the Declaration on the Future of the Union of the State Governors of the Austrian Regions<sup>6</sup>: *the future of the Union cannot be reduced*

Mr Tajani,  
colleagues,

**The May 2019 European elections concern us all as they will be decisive for the future of Europeans and of our Union.** Europe's actions must not be focused exclusively on this period.

when inequalities are growing and almost one person in five is living below their country's poverty line? We see social need and distress every day at grassroots level. We see public services gradually crumbling. **The Union must respond to these cries for help. Social rights must be recognised on the same footing as economic rights.**

**Europe will be stronger if we first help those in the greatest need.**

to "more" or "less" Europe. The guiding principle should be **"more Europe where more is needed", and "less Europe where less is needed"**.

We should work on regulatory density and the added value of European regulation rather than engaging in demarcation disputes between levels of government.

**Subsidiarity also means a strong Union that uses its local and regional authorities to get closer to its citizens.** As President Jean-Claude Juncker pointed out at the presentation of the Task Force's report<sup>7</sup>:

*"Our Union cannot be built without the active and equal participation of local authorities, the EU institutions and all the intermediate levels of government"*.

We will present all these arguments concerning the way our Union is organised, which we have set out in our Innsbruck Declaration<sup>8</sup>, at the Bregenz conference being held in November by the current Presidency of the Council of the European Union.

And we will put our ideas into practice by setting up a **new pilot network of regional hubs to support reviews of policy implementation.**

We will set out our proposals for the future of the European Union, giving a voice to as many local actors as possible. **Our mission is to unite people to convey a unifying message.** In the

coming days, I will, on your behalf, be calling on the local and regional elected representatives of Europe to develop a message together to be set out in the ***Declaration of our Eighth Summit of Cities and Regions in March 2019***.

The guiding theme of this summit will be ***re-building the European Union from the bottom up, in other words, starting from the municipalities, cities and regions of Europe***.

***Our call will be addressed to the participants at the Summit of Heads of State and Government in Sibiu in May***. And it will also be addressed to the leaders of the next European Parliament, and the next European Commission and Council Presidency.

Starting with the Declaration of our Bucharest Summit, we will continue our work by drawing up a ***blueprint containing our ideas for the next European Commission, explaining why, in every way, the cities and regions need the Union and why, in every way, Europe needs its cities and regions***.

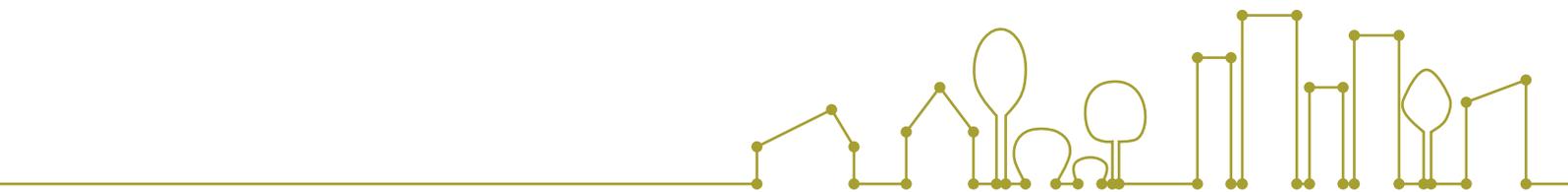
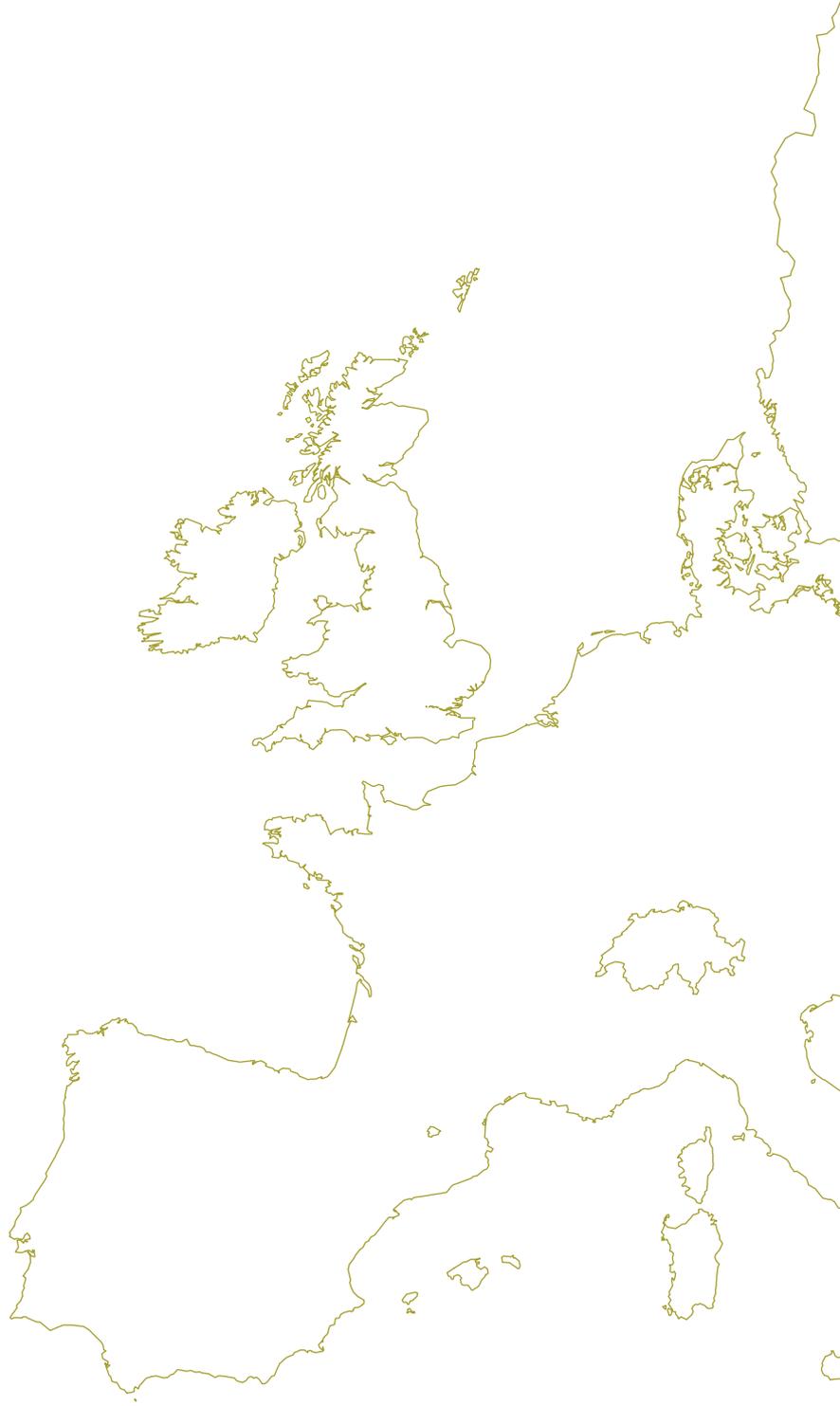


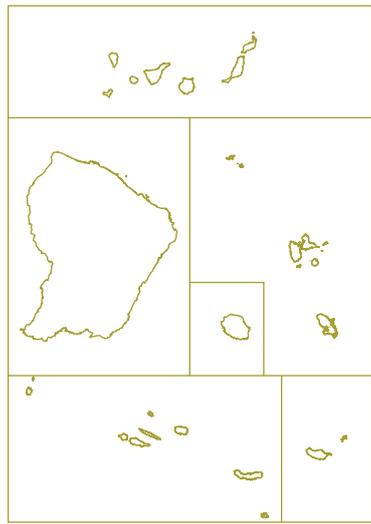
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## Endnotes

- 1 Seventh report on cohesion, European Commission, September 2017.
- 2 The Marseille appeal for local freedoms, 26 September 2018.
- 3 Brussels Declaration by the Mayors of the EU Capital Cities on Public Investment, Cohesion Policy and the Urban Agenda for the EU, Brussels, 25 September 2018.
- 4 Reflecting on Europe: the voice of local and regional authorities to rebuild trust in the European Union - COR-2018-01230.
- 5 Task Force on Subsidiarity, Proportionality and "Doing Less More Efficiently", Report to the President of the European Commission, 10 July 2018.
- 6 Erklärung der Landeshauptleute : EU –Zukunftsszenario der österreichischen Länder, 10 November 2017.
- 7 Brussels, 10 July 2018.
- 8 Adopted by the Bureau of the European Committee of the Regions, 14 September 2018.







## European Committee of the Regions

Created in 1994 following the signing of the Maastricht Treaty, the European Committee of the Regions is the EU's assembly of 350 regional and local representatives from all 28 Member States, representing over 507 million Europeans. Its mission is to involve regional and local authorities and the communities they represent in the EU's decision-making process and to inform them about EU policies. The European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council are obliged to consult the Committee in policy areas affecting regions and cities. It can appeal to the Court of Justice of the European Union if its rights are infringed or it believes that EU law infringes the subsidiarity principle or fails to respect regional or local powers.

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