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

“The cities and regions are the future of Europe”

Check against delivery!

Address by Karl-Heinz Lambertz
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#SOTREG
Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to thank the president of the European Parliament, David Sassoli, for joining us today. As elected representatives of and for the EU, we need to continue working together. For this reason, I would like to propose that we lose no time in holding a joint conference of presidents to consolidate our positions on the next multiannual financial framework and finalise the arrangements for the European Committee of the Regions’ contribution to the Conference on the Future of Europe.

** Cities and regions are the future of the European Union **

This speech on the State of the European Union from the perspective of local and regional authorities has become a tradition, so let’s see what’s changed since the last one.

A year ago, we were told that a populist wave would swamp the EU. This never materialised. Our Union is still cherished by most Europeans. This is obviously a good thing, but the clock has not been put back five years in the fight against the EU’s would-be destroyers. In 2017, France reminded us that this was also a national struggle. This has also become a local and regional challenge, as we saw in the recent regional elections in Germany and the mayoral elections in Budapest.

Otherwise, I would say that the hopes and fears remain the same.

Brexit is still on hold. Those who wanted to deprive their citizens of the EU in one stroke have sown the seeds of chaos and so far have only managed to deprive the Union of their commissioner. The difficulty the UK is having disentangling itself from EU sovereignty serves as a clear warning: the Union is not an accessory, it is central to our lives. Brexit will be remembered as an historic mistake, but we must not forget the major contribution of our British colleagues, with whom we would like to maintain close ties.

The debate on «more» or «less» Europe is not over; it has even intensified. The future of Europeans will not be improved by power struggles between the EU, Member States and cities and regions. The issue at stake now is not so much focusing on a
new division of powers as cutting back the overly luxuriant growth of EU legislation. We also need to invent new ways to share sovereignty, such as the mechanism proposed by the Luxembourg Presidency of the Council in 2015 to enable the law of one Member State to be applied locally in a neighbouring Member State. In May 2018, the European Commission turned this into a draft regulation, which we support because we always prefer cooperation to isolation.

Over the last year, our Union has not shrunk, but it is still hesitant to open up. The necessary strengthening of the EU must not make us indifferent to our partners’ efforts. Let’s not close the door on the Western Balkans after their citizens have put in so much effort. As you rightly said, Mr Sassoli, that would be an historic mistake.

The economy is doing better, but not everyone is benefiting from this. It was important that the new Commission did not forget the objective of promoting and safeguarding the social rights within its remit. In September, we published our first regional social scoreboard, which shows that, even though regions are making progress, there are still regional disparities within Member States. As it has been 10 years since territorial cohesion was incorporated into the Treaty, these data should provoke a response from EU decision-makers. They must make this vital territorial cohesion a political and budgetary priority.

With regard to the next multiannual financial framework, and more specifically the proposals of the Finnish Presidency of the Council, unfortunately I must once again convey the concerns of local and regional elected representatives. In total, funding cuts of more than EUR 40 billion are planned for cohesion policy. These are not just figures. This is how much less support there’ll be for energy renovations for schools, digital infrastructure, research projects and job creation. The elected representatives of the European Parliament and the European Committee of the Regions continue to ask Member States for a budget equivalent to 1.3% of gross national income (GNI).

Brexit must not become an excuse for further reducing the EU’s ability to act. Although he has only just taken up his role as president of the European Council, I urge my compatriot Charles Michel to consider the following: a budget that is too little, too late and that also reduces support for regional development would be an historic error for European integration. This is the message that our Cohesion Alliance has just given to the members of the European Council, who will meet next week. This message is aimed in particular at those Member States that advocate a low budget despite, as confirmed by the Commission, contributing much less if we consider their national wealth and the benefits they receive in return. Some even claim that the budget needs to be low to prevent the EU from becoming unpopular. As local elected representatives, we remind them that, when combined with a sound budget, accessible financial instruments, fair accounting rules and sufficient flexibility when implementing the Stability and Growth Pact, public investment is not a danger. Rather, it is an absolute necessity.

But make no mistake: local and regional elected representatives are not waiting for the Member States to reinvent the EU. We are proactively putting forward proposals. In this sixth Committee legislative period, we have approved 292 opinions and 38 resolutions in many areas affecting the daily lives of Europeans. In June, we adopted a resolution for the new EU term. As I promised a year ago, we drew up a blueprint detailing all this work, including 101 specific proposals. On your behalf, I have submitted them to Mr Sassoli, to the president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, and to all the members of the European Council. Mr Sassoli, we know we can count on you to make sure these proposals are taken into
account in the negotiations for the future multiannual work programme of the three institutions.

Our proposals provide a more detailed breakdown of the broad political guidelines set out by Ms von der Leyen. Let me give you some examples.

A European Green Deal: we are adopting a resolution on this topic during this plenary session because, like you in the European Parliament, local and regional elected representatives are declaring a climate emergency. This is also the message we are sending to the State representatives currently gathered at the COP25 climate change conference in Madrid.

An economy that works for people: our proposals include using the European Social Fund Plus to invest in the social economy, skills, employment and social inclusion, and regulating work on digital platforms.

A Europe fit for the digital age: we propose developing local dialogues on new digital solutions in cooperation with the Innovation Hubs of the Digital Europe programme.

Promoting our European way of life: this year, we launched the «Cities and Regions for the Integration of Migrants» initiative to facilitate the exchange of best practices at local level. After all, the essence of the European spirit is its willingness to welcome.

The EU as a global actor: in this regard, the Committee is carrying out projects in the Eastern Partnership and Mediterranean countries, particularly with a view to supporting the efforts of local and regional authorities and young entrepreneurs. We need to develop similar initiatives in the Western Balkans.

We will always be constructive partners, but we will also be attentive and demanding. For example, we ask that the Just Transition Fund for EU coal regions be financed by means of additional funds rather than from the budget allocated to the European Structural and Investment Funds. We also intend to make sure that the relationship between cohesion policy and structural reforms does not come at the expense of this policy.

In her first speech to the European Parliament, Ms von der Leyen spoke an obvious truth: «Our Union’s democratic system is unique, bringing together directly elected parliamentarians at local, regional, national and European levels with elected Heads of State or Government». This is a good start to meeting her objective of giving fresh impetus to European democracy.

As I often say, European democracy means the 751 MEPs and the 10,000 national parliamentarians. However, it also means the million local and regional elected representatives. It’s unfortunate that, in practice, our European democracy attaches so little importance to the largest number of elected representatives. Can we bring the EU closer to its citizens while continuing to overlook them? No. And it’s not just us who say it. As proof, I refer to the Commission Communication on subsidiarity from October 2018, which states that greater efforts are needed to ensure that the experience and views of local and regional authorities and regional assemblies are captured better in the policy-making process. This also applies to implementing these policies on the ground and planning ahead.

In the declaration we presented to the Romanian president, Klaus Iohannis, at our eighth summit in March this year, we stressed the need to work together at all levels with the EU institutions and Member States. But what has the Council done about it? At best, the Sibiu Strategic Agenda states that «the talents of regional and local actors should be harnessed for the benefit of the overall effort.» That is much too vague. This is why I’m appealing again to the president of the European Council: let’s combine the strengths of the Member States and their regions for the benefit of the EU. Coming from a federal state, I know that Mr Michel will be particularly receptive to this message.

Long ago, before Copernicus, the people running the world thought that the sun revolved around them. Nowadays, Member States still too often think they are the centre of the Union.
It’s time for a Copernicus-inspired revolution to inject some common sense into our working methods. To involve local and regional elected representatives in the EU decision-making process, I would like to put forward for debate a simple proposal that is included in our 25th anniversary declaration: let’s involve the European Committee of the Regions in the trilogue, which too often resembles the Bermuda Triangle, with proposals disappearing from sight or changing without any assessment of their compliance with the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality. This is why I have suggested that the chair of the European Parliament’s Committee on Regional Development (REGI) invite our rapporteurs to come and learn about the state of play of the negotiations on the budget. This is just a small first step, but it’s essential.

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The EU institutions have a golden opportunity to signal their willingness to work with local elected representatives; specifically, the Conference on the Future of Europe. Mr Sassoli, I have also asked you to involve the Committee fully in this. We were observer members in the European Convention. Eighteen years later, I can’t imagine us not being fully involved this time.

We would obviously like to contribute to the citizens’ dialogues that have been announced. Along with the president of the European Economic and Social Committee, I suggested to the other institutions that we work together on a permanent citizens’ dialogue mechanism where local and regional elected representatives would organise debates and turn them into specific proposals.

However, there is more to the conference than citizens’ dialogues: it will also address institutional issues and working methods. It’s an opportunity to find ways to make our EU work better and make it more democratic, which isn’t limited to the issue of the Spitzenkandidat. Let’s have a discussion within the institutions – but with Europeans observing – on the involvement of local and regional elected representatives in European integration. Excluding cities and regions from these discussions on how our EU works and limiting them to communication exercises would ensure that we remain stuck in the past.

When we prepare our contributions for the conference, we must ensure that all local and regional authorities can let us know their priorities, requests and proposals. Let’s organise debates in local and regional parliaments and step up dialogue with European and national associations of local and regional authorities.

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Now, I would like to talk about us and our Committee. Under my presidency, we have tackled four focus areas to ensure that each and every one of you can play a more active role in our work. For example, we decided to hold a topical debate at each plenary session. Since our last summit, we have also tried to work systematically with young EU local and regional elected representatives because they’re our future. Evolving also means having an assembly with more female members. This is why I asked the Council to require Member States to take the gender criterion into account in their nominations.

I don’t know what the Committee will be like in 25 years’ time. We’ve commissioned a study on our history, which points out that, even before our Committee was set up, there was the idea of creating a real European senate, a second chamber. This idea does not need to be reinvented, but in my view, it can only be implemented as part of a broader institutional overhaul process.

After 25 years, it’s definitely time to confirm the Committee’s position. This was also recently called for by the heads of government of the German states as well as the governors of the Austrian states and the presidents of the Austrian state parliaments.
We need to bring the EU closer to citizens but also to local elected representatives. The reality is that many local and regional elected representatives don't know how to set up an EU project or who to contact. Let's restructure our Committee to more directly meet the specific needs of the EU's local and regional elected representatives.

We must also be the institution that fully harnesses at EU level the potential of the 20,000 twinning projects and the thousands of people-to-people projects, which reflect the diversity of our people and cultures, so as to revitalise the European project and make it more tangible.

Indeed, it's the municipalities, cities and regions that will achieve our goals. As I'm sure you understand, my objective for the future of the Committee is first and foremost to continue focusing all our energy on anchoring the EU and the Committee in the daily lives of the million local and regional elected representatives. This is where our real strength and legitimacy comes from.

Mr Sassoli,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Two years ago, I said that the elected representatives of cities and regions were also elected representatives of and for the EU.

One year ago, I said that the EU needed cities and regions just as much as they needed it.

Today, I say that cities and regions are the future of our EU.

Thank you.
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.