

**Apostolos Tzitzikostas, 1st Vice – President of the European
Committee of Regions Speech at 10th European Summit for
Regions and Cities, Mons 2024**

Prime Minister De Croo,
President Cordeiro,
Vice President Suica,
Distinguished Colleagues,

Without cities and regions on board, without citizens on board, there is no future for our Union.

We know that the people ask for a Union which is able:

To act and not just react.

To lead and not just follow.

To protect, innovate and inspire.

To look forward without leaving anyone or any place behind.

So in order to make our Union bolder and prosper,
we need to think differently,
we need to think outside the box,
we need to be brave and bold in our decisions.

Now, more than ever,
it is time to forge the Union's soul,
and give the chance to the people to co-create the common future policies.
Now, more than ever,
it is the time to strengthen those policies,
like Cohesion,
that are designed from the bottom-up.

Now more than ever
we need ambitious public investments

and new resources for the Union's budget to lead us towards a more connected, green, inclusive and prosperous future.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear Colleagues,

Every day, people ask regional and local leaders to find solutions:

We did it when the pandemic hit hard;

We did when we supported jobs and local businesses.

We did it when we kept our schools running.

We do it, every day, by implementing green and digital projects.

We will do it by reversing the demographic challenges, by closing the gap between urban and rural areas.

We do it every day, Ladies and Gentlemen, in partnership with the European Union.

Dear friends,

As Jacques Delors told us 30 years ago: "*The ball is in our field to bridge institutions and citizens*".

We do not need, necessarily,

to change the Treaty to walk that path,

as we have already many uncharted instruments to better involve citizens in the decision-making process,

through local and regional authorities.

Because we are the living laboratories of democracy,

where citizens and local actors engage

in shaping future legislation and budget allocations.

In fact,

as we are in Mons, Belgium,

Belgian local and regional authorities are front-runners

when it comes to participatory democracy,
and also the Conference on the Future of Europe
did promote new ways of interactions.

So let's not miss the opportunity,
let's not lose the legacy that the Conference left us,
to scale up to the European level the existing good examples of deliberative
democracy.

Dear colleagues,
Solidarity and sustainable prosperity
will indeed lead us to the future.
And they both start in our cities, in our villages, in our regions.

Our vision of Europe's future that we shape today must be rooted there, on
the ground, because there innovation, green, digital transitions, and
creativity happen every day.

And it is at the regional and local level that economic growth, social and
territorial cohesion, and sustainable development unfolds.

This is why we must further promote the Cohesion funds
that were envisioned by Jacques Delors
as the cement of the European construction,
since they are the only funds that allow all our regions to fairly compete
within the internal market,
making the whole European integration
progress.

Tomorrow,
on top of the free move of goods, people, services and capitals,

Europe needs to also grant its citizens the "freedom of choosing" where to live and work, by turning the brain drain into the brain gain, and the geographical vulnerabilities into opportunities. And of course, now more than ever, we need to reinforce the role of our Institution and turn it into the driving force for regional and local empowerment, into the place where the territorial dimension of the European policies, and the quality of our spending, are monitored, into the instrument to improve the EU legislation to the specificity of the territories we live in.

But let us be clear, our vision for the future of Europe is not merely a matter of institutional reform: It is a commitment to build a Europe that must be more responsive and resilient, a Union that leaves no region, no citizen behind; it is a call to action, to uphold the values and principles that bind us together as Europeans. It is a call to defend those values when they are under attack, as it is continuously happening in Ukraine, but not only there. Still today, in 2024, there is European territory in a European Member-State that is still under occupation. And I am referring to Cyprus. And this cannot be forgotten or become acceptable. This is something we must constantly emphasize on, constantly underline, upholding and defending our common European values until we find and reach in a viable solution.

Dear Colleagues,

Let's build the future of Europe in partnership:

The European Committee of the Regions calls on the Belgian Presidency and the new European Commission and Parliament to implement subsidiarity, which is not a mere administrative check, but it is a political commitment to shape the European policies from the bottom up.

Since European integration happens at our level of governance, let's go back to our roots, to our villages, to our cities and regions, let's bring the citizens' voice within the European Union, let's make the European legislation territorially proofed.

Dear Friends, as European Committee of Regions turns 30 this year I would like to conclude with a very clear message.

European Union was created top-down, but if we want the future of Europe to be solid, strong and prosperous, this future must be built from the bottom-up.

Thank you!