



**European Committee
of the Regions**

Brussels, 7 October 2021

Debate on
*Cohesion as an overall value of the EU within the framework
of the Conference on the Future of Europe*

Information memo for COTER members

1. *Cohesion as an Overall Value of the EU*

The European Committee of the Regions plenary has clearly indicated that one of the priorities for its 2020-2025 term of office is to promote the CoR's firm belief that not only cohesion policy, but also other key EU policies and initiatives, must be infused by cohesion, as an overarching objective and value of the EU¹. This means they need to embody a "cohesion spirit".

Based on this political mandate, the COTER Commission commissioned a study² with a contractor, the "Spatial Foresight" consultancy, to serve as a tool for further political debate. The study serves this objective by:

- providing evidence on how key EU policies (European Green Deal, EU Digital Strategy, the CAP, etc.) affect the cohesion of the EU and;
- contributing to the role of the CoR as a pro-active player in the wider debate on cohesion as an overall value and objective of the EU.

The Spatial Foresight consultancy provided two reports, which were the subject of discussions with a group of experts on 27 January and 30 September 2021.

In the first report, the contractor suggested that "cohesion spirit" is about addressing the growing inequalities that risk fragmenting and breaking apart Europe's economies, societies and places. The report also assesses the "cohesion spirit" of various EU policies, underlining the extent to which Europe needs a serious and broad debate about cohesion.

¹ CoR Resolution on the European Committee of the Regions' priorities for 2020-2025 - Europe closer to the people through its villages, cities and regions, adopted by the plenary session on 30 June – 2 July 2020: <https://memportal.cor.europa.eu/Handlers/ViewDoc.ashx?doc=COR-2020-01392-00-00-RES-TRA-EN.docx>.

² [LINK](#) to the Study.

In its second report, the contractor developed concrete proposals on how "cohesion spirit" could be strengthened in Europe and also provided initial ideas about the risks or costs of not doing so. The focus was on the need to broaden our understanding of cohesion so as also to include interpersonal, digital and ecological cohesion. This implies that cohesion needs to be seen in a broader perspective than just GDP.

Furthermore, although cohesion policy has a vital role to play, it cannot do so on its own. A broad range of EU policies need to be underpinned by a stronger "cohesion spirit". This includes discussions about long-term orientations for Europe, such as: the 'New European Bauhaus'; strategic foresight helping to future-proof EU policy-making to create an ever-more resilient Europe; and the Conference on the Future of Europe.

The next steps for this study: it has already provided input into a new edition of an Annual Barometer report of Cities and Regions, presented on 12 October this year, and will feed into the preparations for the 8th Economic, Social and Territorial Cohesion Report. The results of the research will also support the work of future COTER rapporteurs.

2. *The link between Cohesion and the Conference on the Future of Europe*

The Conference on the future of Europe³ is a unique and timely opportunity for local and regional authorities to promote the importance of boosting cohesion through all European policies and not only by means of EU regional policy.

In this sense, the European Committee of the Regions has identified "cohesion as a value" as one of the priority themes to be included in the Conference's discussions. The debate on the future of Europe requires an in-depth debate on cohesion as a value and, more broadly, on the concept of solidarity in EU policies. In principle this implies that we recognise mutual interdependence between economies, between societal groups and between places.

Although the Treaty mentions solidarity alongside cohesion, the recognition of mutual interdependence underpins the rationale for solidarity in order to ensure the well-being of the people of Europe and avoid unsustainable disparities which risk preventing Europe from building on its successes. Cohesion as an overall value of the EU and as part of a reinforced concept of solidarity within the EU should definitely be an important part of the debate on the future of Europe.

The Conference on the Future of Europe is entering a crucial period: as the European Citizen's Panels begin their work, ideas are being shared in the Multilingual Digital Platform and in the Conference working groups and plenaries, which should reach their conclusions by Spring 2022. This period provides the CoR with an opportunity to expand its influence on the process, with the aim of achieving its main objectives.

In order to support this strategy, the CoR set up a High Level Group (HLG) on European Democracy in December 2020. The HLG is composed of seven European "wise men and women" chaired by Mr Herman Van Rompuy, former Prime Minister of Belgium and former President of the European

³ <https://futureu.europa.eu/>.

Council. Among other tasks, this High Level Group is to exchange views and work closely with CoR members, notably the CoR's Conference of Presidents, the Bureau, its thematic commissions and members of the CoR delegation to the Conference on the Future of Europe⁴.

In this framework, the COTER Commission will host a discussion on *Cohesion as an overall value of the EU within the framework of the Conference on the Future of Europe* with one of the HLG members, Ms Rebecca Harms, former Member of the European Parliament (MEP).

Biography - Rebecca Harms:

Rebecca Harms was born in 1956. Fighting against nuclear power has always been important to her private and political life. A gardener by profession, Rebecca Harms was one of the co-founders of a citizen's group combating nuclear waste disposal in Gorleben. For several years she was chairperson of this group. In 1984, when her friend and combatant from the German district of Wendland, Undine von Blottnitz, was elected member of the European Parliament, Rebecca Harms became her parliamentary assistant. Together, they discovered both Europe and the Green Party. Also being a member of the "Wendländische Filmcooperative" (Wendland film cooperative), Rebecca Harms has contributed to plenty of documentaries. In 1994 she was elected to the regional parliament in Lower Saxony, where she was elected chairperson of the Green's parliamentary group in 1998. Since 1998 she has been a member of the Bündnis 90/Die Grünen party council. In 2004, Rebecca became a member of the European Parliament where she was the president of the Greens/EFA from 2009 to 2019. She is currently a member of the Volkswagen Sustainability Council.

⁴ <https://cor.europa.eu/en/engage/Pages/conference-future-of-europe.aspx>