The political priorities of the European Committee of the Regions 2015-2020
Europe’s economic and political turbulence of the past years has left its mark on the European Union. The citizens’ call for a different kind of Europe and the answers to the pressing questions are not what they used to be. The dynamism of the Union has changed: there is now a clear will to incorporate the voices from regions and cities from the bottom-up into Brussels, and the European Committee of the Regions is the natural institutional body to represent these opinions and concerns in the EU legislation.

Our work is guided by our political priorities, agreed in the June 2015 Plenary for the whole five-year mandate until 2020. Our starting point is to show that the European Union can and must work for our communities and citizens. However, for this to happen, we need to achieve a mindset change – a transition towards entrepreneurship and open innovation, experimentation and action instead of planning, planning and planning.

We cannot be satisfied with how governance, public and private, solves today’s challenges in different parts of Europe and its neighbours. Innovation is not just apps, platforms or gadgets – it is a new way of thinking of how we do things, instead of only focusing on what we do. New cross-border and cross-institutional partnerships are needed and we must embrace a multidisciplinary approach. Large corporations and government bureaus are not the basic structures to create innovation. Innovation arises from the ground, from the everyday needs of the everyday users. Innovation is co-creation. Really getting people, researchers and businesses together with the public sector to think, plan and execute how we can do things better.

This is why the European Committee of the Regions can make a difference. Our focus is in kick-starting growth and giving citizens the fresh start they deserve. Local and regional authorities have proven their worth in identifying local needs, bringing partners together and stimulating investment in the real economy. Entrepreneurship, capacity building, smart specialisation and risk-taking must be the mantra of EU spending if we want our regions and cities to compete globally. Every region and city can be a pioneer in societal innovation.

The European Union must become a union of the citizens and the European Committee of the Regions has its role to play in reconnecting Europe with its citizens by encouraging dialogue with local and regional representatives as well as enforcing subsidiarity – taking decisions closest to the citizens. We need to show the European Union is willing to change and place its citizens at its very heart. Since 2007, the European Union has been experiencing different kinds of crises. The economic and financial crises were followed by social hardships in many Member States, which will take much longer to overcome than the stock-market dip. The migration crisis, which in many respects is more challenging than the economic one because it is a global crisis with a human face, and last but not least, the crisis in Ukraine. To these crises, the EU heads of states and governments have presented mainly intergovernmental answers. Meanwhile, the level of citizens’ confidence in EU institutions continues to decline. Surely this is not a coincidence.

Citizens do not have the feeling that their voice can make a difference and that they can therefore have even a small impact upon the course of actions taken. Our political message should be that civic, economic and social involvement at local and regional level can change things and that this involvement matters a lot for Europe. At the same time, it is obvious that we need a better EU and a different, more socially just Europe, which provides credible answers to the daily concerns of its citizens in the 21st century.

Without doubt, the European project has been ever since its beginning a success story, which is all too often taken for granted. Time has come to reconnect with citizens and convince them about the EU’s added value by showcasing concrete success stories on the ground. Local and regional authorities play a key role in this regard: not only as relays of the voice of citizens to the wider audience of European institutions but also as economic actors on the ground, responsible for more than half of public investments in Europe.

It will not be enough for the relaunch of the economy to flood the financial system with liquidity if low interest rates and credit availability do not translate into investment projects. One major priority is therefore to continue enhancing the investment capacity of local and regional authorities by encouraging flexibility in the application of European economic governance rules. Moreover, the European Union has to be associated once again with social progress rather than social regression. To do this, incentives for reforms are badly needed in order to accelerate the attainment of the social objectives of the Europe 2020 Strategy and promote services of general interest.
The European Committee of the Regions brings together political representatives from the levels of government closest to citizens of the European Union: regional, municipal and local councils. This proximity to local experience gives it a unique position on the EU’s landscape, and the Committee’s political programme for 2015-20 shows its closeness to the concerns of ordinary people. These priorities were agreed unanimously in the June 2015 Plenary for the first time for the entire five year mandate.

The Committee’s top priority is to kick-start Europe’s economy. To achieve its goal of smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, the EU needs to involve local and regional authorities more deeply. Smart investment should be based on local needs, draw on best practice at the grassroots level and encourage a new entrepreneurial spirit across Europe. The EU’s efforts to boost growth should consider the opportunities offered by new digital technologies.

The second priority is to ensure that growth is broadly based across Europe. The Committee will help to narrow the knowledge gap between regions and cities as a means of reducing the urban/rural divide. It will assess what impact EU legislation has on the ground, including the impact on cities. It will encourage cross-border cooperation, through the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC). Cohesion policy is the one of the main tools that the EU has, and effective use of that policy is a central concern of the Committee.

Developing trust of the EU at the local level is the third priority of the European Committee. It will promote the role of local government in European political debate, and help the EU make the business environment friendlier; it will also explain the benefits of the Union at the local level.

Local government in the EU can help stabilise countries in the EU’s neighbourhood; this is the fourth priority of the European Committee of the Regions. It will help develop economic and political ties with the six post-Soviet states in the EU’s Eastern Partnership. It will explore what can be done at the local level to promote cooperation with countries around the Mediterranean, and it will help would-be members of the EU to prepare for membership.

What is the role of the EU citizen in all of this? The fifth priority of the European Committee of the Regions is to: strengthen the EU’s relationship with its citizens. A fuller, richer dialogue is needed between the EU’s institutions, its citizens and local and regional authorities. The European Committee of the Regions will demonstrate how the EU can improve the lives of individuals and their communities.

Economic growth, a strong local economy, a stronger local voice in policymaking, a more stable international and regional environment, and a fuller voice in EU affairs: these are concerns that the average EU citizen has and that the European Committee of the Regions will pursue to achieve.
A bottom-up approach – which involves including regional and local authorities in European Partnerships – is needed to stimulate targeted investment in the real economy and to trigger an exchange of best practice. At the same time, this will address citizens’ demands for quality spending and sound implementation of public policies. A new entrepreneurial spirit, combined with a functioning Digital Single Market and Smart Specialisation, could lead to new skills, knowledge, innovation and employment.
A fresh start for the European economy

- **Modernised public services**
- **Human capital**
- **Sustainability**
- **Entrepreneurial Cities & Regions**

- **Energy union**
- **Circular economy**
- **Renewables**
- **Circular economy**
- **Resource efficiency**
- **Matching the needs of labour market**
- **Knowledge triangle**
- **Dual vocational system**
- **Youth employment**
- **Education**
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- **Education**

- **Knowledge triangle**
- **Matching the needs of labour market**
- **Dual vocational system**
- **Youth employment**
- **Education**

- **Flexibility of the Stability and growth pact**
- **Better synergy of funds**
- **Enhancing investment capacities**
- **Competitiveness of Small and Medium Enterprises**

- **Enabling better use of EU funds**
- **Horizon 2020**
- **Public and private**
- **EU/ National/ Regional/ Local**
- **ESIF**
- **EFSI**
- **Knowledge and innovation communities**
- **Smart specialisation**
- **Knowledge exchange platform**

- **Infrastructure investments**
- **Digitalised Public Service**
- **Key enabling technologies**

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- **Digitalised Public Service**
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- **European Fund for Strategic Investments**
- **European Structural and Investment Funds**
EU policies should bridge distances and knowledge gaps between regions and cities – turning territorial, economic, social, cultural, geographical and demographic characteristics into strengths in both urban and rural areas.

The territorial dimension of EU legislation matters

*Working in the interest of citizens, no matter where they chose to live and work*
The CoR must encourage debate on the questions of how to make it easier for Europeans to benefit from the added value that the EU provides, and how to help businesses to thrive. It is essential that the new initiatives will be transparent. Cutting red tape, improving access to finance for SMEs and promoting innovative public procurement shall continue to be at the heart of our priorities.
Simplification of EU legislation
Multi-level Governance
Subsidiarity and proportionality
The Lisbon Treaty – and Beyond

A simpler, more connected Europe

Input through the entire legislative cycle
Implementing Multi-level governance charter
Economic and Monetary Union (EMU)
European Semester
Inter-institutional debate
Transparency and co-determination
REFIT
Better Legislation
Cutting red tape
Territorial structured dialogue
Cooperation with other European Union institutions
Territorial impact assessment
The CoR should ensure that efforts to cooperate with our neighbours are founded on cooperation between local and regional authorities and people-to-people contact. Institutional and capacity building, political solidarity and city diplomacy have been successfully used in the past to establish European values in neighbouring countries and they should be the main tools for the future.
Stability and cooperation within and outside the EU

- Combating racism and xenophobia
- Legal migration

* Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP)
** Trade in Services Agreement (TiSA)
*** Conference of the Regional and Local Authorities for the Eastern Partnership (CORLEAP)
**** Euro-Mediterranean Regional and Local Assembly (ARLEM)
Europe of the citizens is Europe of the future

Enhancing forward-looking partnerships between the European Union and its people

The CoR must help to reconnect Europe with its people by encouraging dialogue with local and regional representatives, and citizens of all ages. We will also publicise our work effectively and focus on showcasing the added value of the EU and results achieved at home.
What is the European Committee of the Regions (CoR)?

We are an institutional body of the European Union. Our Members are elected Presidents of Regions, regional Councillors, Mayors and Local Councillors, democratically accountable to the citizens.

3 main principles
- Subsidiarity
- Proximity
- Multilevel Governance

What is the European Committee of the Regions (CoR)?

CoR Members gather in Plenary 5 to 6 times/year for 2-3 days in Brussels to vote and adopt opinions.

The President
Markku MARKKULA
(from Espoo/FI)
Term of office: 2 and 1/2 years
- leads the CoR’s work
- chairs its plenary sessions
- acts as CoR’s official representative

The First Vice-President
Karl-Heinz LAMBERTZ
(from Eupen/BE)
Term of office: 2 and 1/2 years
- leads the CoR’s work in tandem with the President

Areas of responsibility
- Public health
- Economic and social cohesion
- Transport, trans-European networks
- Environment, energy and climate change
- Employment and social affairs
- Education, youth, culture and sport

Commissions
- 6 Commissions (groups of Members) prepare draft opinions and resolutions to be submitted to the Plenary Assembly.
  - Health (HEALTH)
  - Territorial Cohesion Policy and EU Budget (COTER)
  - Economic Policy (ECON)
  - Environment, Climate Change and Energy (ENVE)
  - Citizenship, Governance, Institutional and External Affairs (CIVEX)
  - Social Policy, Education, Employment, Research and Culture (SEDEC)

Membership
- 350 members from 28 member states

Output
- Over 70% of EU legislation has a direct impact at local or regional level

Platforms and networks
- To improve participatory democracy, such as the consultation process during the pre-legislative phase

In 2014, the CoR passed:
- 59 own-initiative opinions
- 23 own-initiative opinions
- 109 events

Structure
- 5 Directorates
- 2 joint services

Administrative level
- The Secretary-general
  Term of office: 5 years
  Role: heads the CoR administration

Public health, transport, trans-European networks, environment, energy and climate change, economic, social and territorial cohesion, employment and social affairs, education, youth, culture and sport

5 political groups
- PEPS GROUP
- PES GROUP
- EPP GROUP
- S&D GROUP
- DNCR GROUP
- ALDE GROUP
- IND/EFA GROUP
- GREEN GROUP
- EUROPEAN ALLIANCE
- ECR GROUP

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Looking to the future, we will need to raise awareness that involvement of the regional and local levels in the implementation of the EU’s Investment Plan will be crucial to its success. We plan to continue our work with local and regional media, so we can help to bridge the gap between the EU and its citizens.

We have a very important role to play in the process of reshaping the future EU Cohesion Policy. In doing so, we want to be an active partner in the redesigning of its financial instruments. The strengthening of the Urban Agenda and achieving the right balance between urban and rural areas also requires our focus and attention. We need to make sure that local and regional levels will play a significant role in the envisaged European projects, such as the Capital Markets Union, the Energy Union and the Digital Single Market.

In achieving these goals and the priorities adopted, we plan on extending our cooperation with other institutional partners, such as the European Parliament or the European Investment Bank. We will also closely assess EU policies and act together with our partners in the EPP family. Finally, we plan to continue our work with local and regional media, so we can help to bridge the gap between the EU and its citizens.

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The Party of European Socialists Group in the CoR reiterates its full commitment to the European project and will continue its work in order to give Europeans at grassroots level back hope and trust in the EU. Our key priority is to put in place the conditions for a re-launch of sustainable growth and job creation in EU cities and regions. To this end, we will work for a more flexible application of the rules of the Stability and Growth Pact (SGP), in particular by reiterating our demand for the national co-financing of European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) to be excluded from the SGP. We will also call on the European Commission to present a White Paper setting out an EU-level typology for quality of public investment, and demand that the newly launched investment plan supports projects in areas such as public transport, energy efficiency and broadband projects in rural areas.

Moreover, we will continue to put pressure upon the European Commission to propose incentive measures for achieving the social objectives of the Europe 2020 strategy and to include further key employment and social indicators. We also expect the European Commission to develop ideas for an EU unemployment Insurance scheme, as well as to come forward with ambitious proposals to improve labour mobility.

We will also call for a revision and strengthening of the energy efficiency directive, as well as for an Action Plan against energy poverty, which should improve the situation of most vulnerable consumers in the EU. In addition, we will persevere with our demand for binding climate targets, that is, 55% CO₂ reduction, 40% renewable energy and 40% energy efficiency by 2030.

We are also advocating a just asylum policy which is based on solidarity between Member States and regions in receiving refugees and asylum seekers. Likewise, we argue for a European migration policy which offers safe, legal channels for immigration, and which should not be limited to just highly skilled workers. A thorough overhaul of the Dublin regulation is also needed in this context.

Finally, we will continue to be vigilant over the impact of trade agreements on local and regional authorities. We will only support a Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) if it is compatible with existing EU standards and if it respects the freedom to provide public services of general interest.

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Europe faces a historic opportunity. Since the Great Recession of 2008-2009, growth has been generally slow and painful. There are lingering problems with high unemployment, high debt levels, and most recently Greece’s financial tremors rattling the rest of Europe. European policymakers are also grappling with the challenge of growing numbers of migrants and asylum seekers fleeing upheaval in other continents. All of this has a direct impact on local and regional authorities.

The challenges are huge, but Europe has an opportunity. Now, more than ever, Europe needs to clarify its governance so that citizens know who at EU level is responsible for what, and how competences are shared across the different levels of government. That’s why the territorial dimension of EU legislation matters to us. Bringing the EU closer to the citizens and generating added value is a must for the Union. Fashioning the Urban Agenda at EU level would recognise the importance of cities and towns in achieving European policy objectives. After all, more than 50% of all EU legislation has to be implemented by local and regional authorities. So, for the EU to deliver concrete results, local and regional authorities must be on board.

Working in the interest of the citizens goes to the very heart of what ALDE believes in. Bringing the peoples of Europe closer together; strengthening the rule of law and fundamental rights; creating favourable conditions for private and public investments in all regions of Europe; combating climate change with a new economy based on low carbon technologies; reducing red tape to unleash the entrepreneurial potential of citizens; fighting to create more inclusive societies where all people are given equal chances regardless of their origin or background, and where all citizens are aware in equal measure of their responsibilities and rights – are just some examples of what ALDE will focus on in this mandate. Europe is at a cross-roads and the challenges are great. But so are the opportunities, and ALDE intends to help the EU seize them.

This mandate will be decisive in making the Europe 2020 strategy and the Investment plan a success which delivers real development and jobs at local level while guaranteeing balanced development across all the EU’s regions.

It is often very easy to focus on large-scale projects or on the capital cities of Europe but we would argue that local projects in towns, smaller cities and rural areas would maximise the impact on job creation and give citizens more visibility as to what the European Union is delivering for them.

The European Alliance Group (EA) will encourage the EU institutions, in close cooperation with local and regional authorities, to be closer to the citizens and promote better communication. It should not also be a one way process, whereby the EU works from the top down to influence policy on the ground and we will work towards bringing the bottom-up needs of regional and local authorities.

We will ensure the principle of subsidiarity is respected and that views, remits and competence of nations, regions and local authorities are duly taken into account in the EU decision-making process. We will keep supporting national and regional identities, ensuring that the respect of cultural and linguistic diversity is one of the basic principles underlying the process of European integration, which is not about levelling out differences or creating uniform identities, but fostering greater cooperation and understanding among the peoples of Europe.

The EA group will keep looking closely at the EU’s neighbourhood and will contribute to finding lasting solutions to major challenges and threats both in the East and South of the EU. We call upon the EU institutions to shape an ambitious neighbourhood policy in order to create conditions for peace and sustainable development. We cannot forget the EU was born to bring peace and prosperity and we have to cooperate with local and regional authorities from candidate and neighbouring countries to avoid conflict, promote stability and local democracy at the EU’s borders.
As the ECR Group in the Committee of the Regions, we will continue our work to achieve an EU led by greater localism and realism. These two guiding principles are key to achieving a better functioning and more democratic EU that is able to achieve and sustain balanced economic growth that benefits rural and urban communities.

The EU continues to face challenges that will require bold steps over the coming years. Policies that take into account local and regional realities will be crucial to correctly identifying and addressing them. EU policies will need to take into account not just towns and cities and their surroundings but cross-border and remoter areas too. EU supported investment will also have to be resilient to disasters if it is to benefit future generations.

In light of the enduring challenging economic climate, it continues to be crucial that the EU is as cost effective and administratively efficient as possible. The EU needs to concentrate on areas where its action can bring added value and must allow for local specificities to be capitalised on rather than taking a one-size-fits-all approach. It is through such a focused necessity based approach that EU action can help our local businesses compete globally and help generate jobs and growth.

For a better functioning EU, local and regional authorities voices needs to be heard in the EU’s decision-making process so that local challenges can be correctly identified and the impact of potential legislation correctly measured. We believe that the CoR’s role is in ensuring that the Council, Commission and European Parliament are fully aware of the views of local and regional government when drafting legislation. Our Group will continue to play a full part in trying to establish and communicate those views. Our Group will work on the principle that local and regional government has a full part to play in a thriving EU but will only be able to play that part if the legislative and financial framework provides them with the freedom to do so.

Local and regional authorities implement most of the decisions taken at the EU level and in turn, must have a strong voice in the EU’s regulatory fitness work. We must also have a seat at the negotiating table for the EU’s institutional negotiations when legislation is being created, so that the local and regional impact can be fully taken into account when compromises are being found.
The political priorities of the European Committee of the Regions 2015 - 2020