



European Committee
of the Regions



Understanding Europe through its regions and cities

Address to the European University Institute in Florence (Italy) by
President **Vasco Alves Cordeiro**

UNDERSTANDING EUROPE THROUGH ITS REGIONS AND CITIES

by Vasco Alves Cordeiro

President of the European Committee of the Regions

Dear representatives from the city of Florence,

Dear Secretary General, Marco Del Planta,

Dear Vice-President of the European Committee of the Regions,
Dear Luca Menesini,

Dear representatives from the academic community, dear
Professors,

Dear students,

Dear guests, dear friends,

Thank you, Professor Fabbe, for your introduction and I would like to start first by telling how honoured I am to speak to this audience, here in Florence, in this magnificent place that is the Palazzo Buontalenti.

We have just come down from the hills of Fiesole, where we have signed a cooperation agreement between the European University Institute and the European Committee of the Regions. It is therefore my privilege to start this cooperation by telling you a bit more about who we are and what we represent.

I do not intend to lecture you or to give you a long dissertation of what European integration means.

I speak before you today as someone who has dedicated his political career to his community and to the European project.

I come from the Azores, an archipelago in the middle of the Atlantic, which I had the honour to lead for 8 years, as President of the regional government, although I have been involved in regional politics, both in executive and legislative positions, for around 30 years

It is my engagement in political level that brought me one day into the European arena. And, one thing leading to another, I became

a bit more than two years ago, the President of a European institution that tend to be overlooked: the European Committee of the Regions.

For 30 years, the European Committee of the Regions has been the political assembly of local and regional representatives. We have just celebrated our anniversary earlier this week and therefore I am here today in Florence, full of the stories and hopes of local and regional leaders, who are making Europe happen every day, everywhere.

This is what makes me and what shapes my thoughts today.

You may expect to hear a lot of solutions or vision today. I actually hope that what I will share with you, the questions I will address, will trigger more answers. In the end, you are the experts.

When I think about the situation we are in in Europe nowadays, three challenges come to my mind.

Enlargement.

Democratic legitimacy.

And, the idea of Europe of the regions.

Let me walk you through them.

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First, is the challenge of enlargement.

But let me take a few steps back in history first.

Throughout history, communities became cities. And here, in Florence, we have a magnificent example. Cities of arts. Cities of ideas. Cities of science. Cities trading with each other. Sometimes – if not too often – fighting with each other.

Then, cities got together, building nations and empires. Nations exchanging with each other. Sometimes – if not too often – fighting with each other.

And once the fights had exhausted too many of us, devastating our countries and breaking our moral compasses, we decided to get

together again. This time as one single community. Guided by ideas that have roots in Florence.

However, the world we live in today is not the hopeful and peaceful that we may have thought it could become.

We have reached the sad milestone of 1000 days of war on the European continent and Putin is now launching intercontinental ballistic missile into Ukraine.

And war rages in many other parts of the world. Gaza, Sudan.

Democracy is being toyed with by wannabe dictators or even fully-fledge ones across the world and even within the European Union.

The fundamental ideas and values that have shaped the European project do not seem to make consensus anymore.

The idea one could get is that the lines of defence of a certain model of society based on tolerance, respect, democracy, peace, solidarity, are under pressure and some of them may already been broken.

In that turmoil, reason seem to have prevailed in some minds and therefore we can only welcome the renewed impetus that is given to the enlargement process.

This is not only a tribute to the courage of the Ukrainian people or a recognition of the progress made in the Western Balkans.

Enlargement is not only a moral duty. It is a geopolitical necessity.

It is a strategic investment.

Not only for candidate countries, but for current Member States. For all citizens. For the sake of our Union.

But with that comes an obvious responsibility and a real concern.

The need, the imperative reform of the governance of our Union.

It is not ready for 30 or 35 Member States. One may even question if it was ready for 27.

Governance, policies, resources. If we want enlargement to strengthen Europe, every aspect must be looked at carefully.

And I know that there is no shortage of ideas on how to approach this.

In Florence, three years ago, under the auspices of the European University Institute, a "citizens panel" gathered here as part of the Conference on the Future of Europe.

What happened with it?

What happened with the largest democratic experiment in Europe that was supposed to reform our Union after one Member State had left us?

What happened to the great ideas that were supposed to make our Union fit for the future, with new competences, new resources and a reinforced democratic structure?

I had the honour to take part into it, representing the European Committee of the Regions and I could witness the vitality of the exchange, the ambition to make Europe better and with a stronger contribution of regions and cities. And I am not necessarily talking about the idea of the European Commission to launch a network of local councillors in parallel to the one of the European Committee of the Regions.

As times goes by, it feels like a wasted opportunity. It was the trust of European citizens that was at stake and I hope that leaders in Brussels and in national capitals will be capable to break the inertia we are in, looking away from the electoral cycles and sit together to craft the future of the European Union.

The enlargement will not be a success if we look at it with recipes of the past.

We need new approaches to policies, such as cohesion or agriculture.

We need new resources to deliver results. I mean own resources, that may bring new opportunities to development but also an added responsibility towards everybody, and therefore, a deepened sense of belonging.

It will also, and that is not irrelevant, make the Union less dependent of the goodwill of national treasuries.

We need a new model of governance, with all level powers involved, to reinforce the democratic legitimacy of our Union.

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But strengthening our Union brings together, not exactly a new challenge, not exactly a concern that is new, but puts more clearly the need to address the question of the democratic legitimacy.

Again, here, I will not go through a theoretical understanding of the concept. You are better placed than me.

But one thing is evident. Democratic legitimacy relies on the meaningful participation of all relevant actors and in a proper, functional and adequate process of checks and balances

I have told you in my introduction about the historical pattern that led from communities to cities. From cities to nation states. From nation states to the European project.

As the European Union consolidated itself, institutions were reinforced, competences extended to answer to evolving challenges.

In 1994, following the entry into force of the Maastricht Treaty, the European Committee of the Regions was created, thanks to the vision of the late President of the European Commission Jacques Delors but also thanks to the advocacy by the German Länder.

However, we have seen a growing tendency to centralisation in the European Union. A tendency to increase the use of executive policy-making.

Especially in the hands of the European Commission.

For example.

Since the financial crisis and the creation of the European Semester, the European Commission has increased its influence to overview national budgets and economic policy making by the Member States.

Over the years, the number of delegated and implementing acts – that grant so-called legislative powers to the European Commission

- has significantly increased, especially in times of crisis, with limited if no scrutiny by the European Parliament, though its tacit approval.

With more crises emerging, we can expect a more recurrent use of some sorts of fast-tracked procedures, but that does not mean handing all powers to the European Commissions. During the recent famous – or infamous - hearings of commissioners-designate, we have heard Members of the European Parliament asking the candidates for meaningful and loyal engagement in such emergency situations. The European Parliament even made it a clear point in its recent joint declaration with the European Commission on principle for cooperation.

Through subsequent multiannual financial frameworks, we have seen the management and allocation of funds, in various fields, becoming more and more concentrated at the level of the European Commission and its agencies. We have witnessed a silent transaction where nowadays the European Commission directly manages the most part of resources of the European budget when before it was managed by Member States and regional authorities. And I am not speaking only since COVID-19, it happened before.

With the Recovery and Resilience Facility, the European Commission was dealing directly with national capitals to design plans to invest billions of euros. The European Committee of the Regions consistently pointed the limited, if not the total, absence of involvement of local and regional authorities, depending on member states.

I could go on. And on.

One can of course make the case for this. The world is facing many crises that require quick actions, especially with the climate emergency but also with new health threats or growing geopolitical instability.

The evolution of our societies has led to the need to quickly react and answer.

But let's not forget the famous saying; alone you go fast, together you go further.

And today, I am concerned.

I am concerned because a vision of Europe is at stake.

I am concerned because there are some who think that we can keep going towards more centralisation, either in Brussels or in the hands of national governments.

I am concerned about this for two reasons: one because of the substance of the issue, the idea of centralisation. The other because of the process through which this is being made: not transparent, not democratic, not accountable to the European citizens.

We see this very clearly when it comes to the future of cohesion policy.

I am not here to give a political tribune on the future of cohesion policy; on what must be preserved and what must be improved.

I simply want to share with you my concern that under the disguise of efficiency or budgetary concerns, it threatens the contribution of local and regional authorities to the management of cohesion policy. It threatens the capacity of cohesion policy to deliver concrete results.

It threatens a policy that ensures essential public services. Hospitals, schools, waste management.

A policy that supports small and medium businesses while being hubs for innovations.

A policy that develops infrastructures, reinventing mobility, creating links between communities.

A policy that makes Europe happening everywhere, every day, delivering public goods, ensuring cohesion among its people, its regions, its cities.

A policy that delivers on a fundamental objective as per the Treaty on the European Union.

It puts at risks the idea of a European Union built with all its components. A European Union made by everyone, for everyone.

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And this brings us to our third challenge. The idea of Europe of the regions.

If you have been listening carefully so far, you may see in me a defender of the idea of Europe of the regions, as I keep stressing the importance of the involvement of regions and cities in European policy-making.

Beyond nation-states, a Union made of its regional components.

But that idea is not without any dangers.

Let me explain.

In such a model, you would see a direct power relationship between the European institutions, such as the European Commission or the European Parliament and regional authorities.

Without the current intermediate level of national governments in between.

This would risk creating an asymmetric dynamic, in the absence of fully developed checks and balances at European level, as they are often more developed at national levels.

Therefore, I am not making the case for such a vision of Europe of the regions.

What I encourage is a democratic method where each levels moderate each other.

What I call for is multi-level governance. Some sort of federal structure in which each level of powers plays their relevant role, balancing each other and hence reinforcing the democratic legitimacy of the system.

Multi-level governance is more than a theory. It is a method. A fundamental one. It is a matter of democracy.

The Conference on the Future of Europe had already concluded that active subsidiarity and multi-level governance were fundamental principles for the functioning of the European Union and democratic accountability. It called for more channels for the involvement of local and regional authorities, notably through the European Committee of the Regions.

Calling for the meaningful participation of regions and cities in the EU policy and decision making is not just a matter of pride for local representatives. It is simply to make better policies. It is for a better outcome.

It is simply common sense as local and regional authorities implement 70% of EU policies. They also channel 50% of public investments and are responsible for 30% of public expenditures. How can you keep them out?

Local and regional authorities are the key to all the successful realisation of the EU objectives.

Take the European Green Deal. We have countless examples of projects and initiatives at local level that help delivering results. From schools' renovation in Bulgaria to hydrogen-fuelled trucks in France. And with the recent floods in Spain, but also here in Italy and in central Europe, climate adaptation and mitigation policies are key. Again, regions and cities bear the vast majority of the responsibility in making it happen. They have no choice.

And we can go on about the various aspects in which regions and cities make the European project real on the ground.

This idea of the Europe of the regions, built on multi-level governance is ultimately the idea of a Europe that delivers better policies, because they are done with the feet on the ground.

Fairer policies because they are done by taking the pulse of the people wherever they live.

Stronger policies because they are ones that are made with all territorial realities in mind.

This is the Europe of the regions I stand for, where all can play a role.

A Europe that is fit for the future and stronger democratically speaking.

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Dear friends,

I started my intervention by stressing the I was bringing more questions than answers.

I can only hope that what I have shared with you may be of some use for your reflexion, your research, your thinking.

That is – in a nutshell – the spirit of the memorandum of understanding that we have just signed between the European University Institute and the European Committee of the Regions.

I can only hope that the challenges and concerns I have shared with you will inspire a further look into multi-level governance, at the intricacies of local politics and how they are affected by transnational dynamics, and how the European project is shaped by its territories, its regions and its cities.

All politics is local in the end.

This is the very essence of the European project. United in diversity means this. You take the variety of realities that make Europe and you bring them together for the greater good.

You can only understand the state of the European Union, if you understand the state of its regions and cities.

The European project is constantly a work in progress. But progress does not mean bringing all the roads to one central point. Progress must account diversity and dynamism.

Otherwise, we will always have blind spots, leaving some if not all behind.

So, to conclude, I want to share a few words by a former President of the European Parliament, the late David Sassoli, a son of Florence.

Quando saremo arrivati al termine della costruzione europea, Ci sarà che l'Europa saranno le nostre città.

Europe will be our regions and cities.

Thank you for your attention.



European Committee of the Regions

Created in 1994, the European Committee of the Regions is the EU's political assembly of 329 regional and local representatives such as regional presidents or city-mayors from all 27 Member States, representing over 446 million Europeans.

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Rue Belliard/Belliardstraat 101 | 1040 Bruxelles/Brussel | BELGIQUE/BELGIË
Tel. +32 22822211 | e-mail: visuals@cor.europa.eu | www.cor.europa.eu

 @EU_CoR |  /european.committee.of.the.regions
 /european-committee-of-the-regions |  @EU_regions_cities

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