



**European Committee
of the Regions**

Speech on **the State of Regions and Cities in the European Union**

Address by **Vasco Alves Cordeiro**, President of the European Committee of the Regions

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of the Regions**

Speech on the State of Regions and Cities in the European Union

by President Vasco Alves Cordeiro

“Regions and Cities as beacons of Solidarity, Progress and Hope”

151st Plenary Session of the European Committee of the Regions

Tuesday 11th October 2022

Dear colleagues,

I come to you at this moment and at this place to address the state of regions and cities of our Union.

I think I could do it with a fancy speech, nice words and sound bites.

But, right here and right now, I want to start by bringing out the voice of the ones who make our cities, our regions, our communities:

The voice of the worker, of the farmer, of the entrepreneur, of the business... The voice of the citizens.

So, let me be the voice of that young person who is eager to live independently, but who is lost in a relentless fight to find decent housing;

Let me be the voice of that parent who struggles to find decent and affordable day-care for their child.

Let me be the voice of that worker who doesn't know if there will be a decent job, once the factory closes.

Let us be the voice of the small business owner, who had to shut down their store and fire their staff because the costs have increased by ten times.

Let us be the voice of the one among the millions who fled a European country, Ukraine, leaving everything behind, their lives ravaged by a brutal and illegal war, and questioning themselves "what happens now?"

Let us be the voice of that tourist and camper who ran away from wildfires.

Let us be the voice of the ones who doubt if their grandchildren will be able to grow old in a liveable and breathable environment.

Let us, here and once more, be the voice of citizens who don't know if they are being heard...

The state of regions and cities can only be the state of people's lives across Europe, in all their diversities, the same way the state of the European Union cannot be fully and completely assessed if we forget the state of its regions and cities.

We, the local and regional democratic representatives, know - because we face them on a daily basis - that the doubts and fears of millions of Europeans exist, are legitimate and require answers.

All of us, bound by our political duty, bound by our democratic responsibility, we don't run away from providing answers.

And indeed, we have been answering. With solidarity.

Here, today, we can draw inspiration from many stories and this makes us proud. This should make our Union proud.

Proud of the city of Warsaw in Poland has mobilised 14 000 volunteers to welcome more Ukrainian refugees than Italy and France combined, providing them with housing, medical care, education and legal assistance.

Proud of the city of Antwerp, that has been a pioneer in addressing the mental health consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on the most vulnerable of us, especially young people.

Proud of Lappeenranta, in Finland, where seven artificial stormwater wetlands have been built in order to protect our biodiversity.

Proud of Moravia-Silesia, in Czechia, that is leading the way towards a climate neutral economy, reskilling 5000 people, now shifting towards electric and zero-emission cars.

Proud of La Rioja in Spain, which inspires us to anchor gender equality in the way they run their government: from budget to administration, creating plans to support work-life balance and pushing business to improve women's access to employment.

Proud of Poitiers in France, where – in the spirit of the permanent dialogue called for by our assembly – a citizens' assembly has been established bringing social housing tenants, volunteers, local businesses or civil society actors to shape their community.

And we could go on and on with so many other examples, so many other stories about regions and cities across our Union that show every day the way forward answering the doubts and fears people face and to offer a way forward.

These stories from across Europe I am sharing with you are a powerful testimony of regions and cities as beacons of solidarity, progress and hope. Regions and cities as beacons of European values and principles.

So, here and today I want to pay tribute to the essential work that mayors, local councillors, governors and regional ministers, along with all public administrations do across our Union every day, everywhere. *Vous faites l'Europe du quotidien.*

This cannot be forgotten by anyone.

This must be recognised by all.

* * *

Dear colleagues,

The state of regions and cities I bring you today does not happen in isolation, behind our borders or far from the challenges of the world.

It has been more than seven months now that Vladimir Putin unleashed his brutal war machine against Ukraine, bringing death and destruction in a way that our continent had long forgotten. This attack, which is not only an attack on a sovereign country, is also an attack on our values of freedom, democracy and the rule of law.

It is an attack on what the European Union stands for.

It is an attack on each and every one of us.

Since day one, regions and cities across Europe have answered to the sirens of war with the face of solidarity.

We provided shelter, opened our schools, set up dorms, distributed first aid kits, sent vehicles.

While we were first responders, we immediately looked into the future. A bright future with a reconstructed Ukraine, at peace and moving towards the European Union membership.

The European Alliance of Cities and Regions for the Reconstruction of Ukraine, which we have launched along with our partner associations of local and regional authorities in the EU and in Ukraine, aims to contribute to the success of the reconstruction effort by fostering city-to-city and region-to-region cooperation. The Alliance has also the

role to stress the importance of local and regional levels of governance in the reconstruction effort.

Especially today, especially after yesterday's terrible attacks on Ukrainian cities, it remind us that the road to peace is still long and resolve must remain our compass. We stand for a sovereign Ukraine and its territorial integrity and unity. No sham referenda will alter this reality.

This is the message of solidarity and resolve I want to convey to the Ukrainian people and to Ukrainian regions and cities.

You are not alone and you have our full and continuous support in this terrible endeavour.

This is also the message I would like to convey to President von der Leyen and to the European Commission. The task to rebuild Ukraine is of historical proportions. We praised the announcement of 100 million euros to rebuild Ukraine's schools as a commitment for the future. The local authorities have an important role to play there, we are willing help!

I would also like to take this opportunity to present a concrete proposal in view of the Berlin Reconstruction Conference: a specific budget line available for regional and local cooperation in reconstruction efforts.

We answered the call and stand ready to do more.

Give us the tools and we will help get the job done!

* * *

Dear colleagues,

The social and economic consequences of this terrible war are also deeply felt among us.

The energy crisis we live in is hitting households, especially the most fragile ones, businesses and public administrations.

With winter approaching, we need to face the urgency and again regions and cities are the first on the line to cushion the burden on people's shoulders.

We hear worrying signs across Europe, with cities at risk of running out of electricity and struggling to provide essential services to their citizens, like public transport, waste management or simply to keep their children warm at school so they are not sent back home to learn remotely.

Reducing ambient temperature in public buildings, switching off night-time lighting on monuments, reducing speed limits on municipal roads, investing in renewables, raising awareness among the population. The initiatives taken at regional and local levels are numerous and diverse.

But this is not easy, and solidarity is again at stake in Europe. This is why local and regional authorities must be supported in their energy savings efforts and we will do our part.

A Union in which people have to choose between eating and heating is not a Union that can stand.

* * *

Dear colleagues,

The dire situation we face today in the field of energy is part of a larger equation, a larger transformation of our societies.

The speed at which now we are reducing our dependency from fossil fuels should not only be because it comes from Russia.

This is what we should have been doing already for decades to shift towards a climate-neutral economy. The terrible fires of this summer are another stark reminder of the climate emergency we live in today. This is a question of survival.

Tomorrow, we will debate our vision ahead of the COP27. As the global goal for adaptation is on the table, let's ensure that it finds its roots on what is done at local level. Overcoming global challenges such as the climate crisis will be faster, easier and more efficient if done with us and with citizens.

As an institution, we also have a duty to act. This is why we are already moving to put the Committee of the Regions on track to become a climate-neutral institution, with the objective of cutting our yearly carbon dioxide emissions by thirty percent by the end of 2030. We will also implement immediate actions as an institution to reduce our energy consumption.

This should not remain within the walls of our administration only and therefore, starting at our next external Bureau in Sweden next spring, I suggest having political reporting of our climate action. I count on every one of you to take part to this effort and again to lead by example.

* * *

Dear colleagues,

With the existential threat of the climate crisis and the consequences of the brutal war against Ukraine, let us not forget that we spent almost the last three years dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. We now live with it, with its human, social and economic cost.

All these challenges narrow down to the need to make our Union fit for purpose, making the lives of our people better every day in a healthy environment and with respect to our fundamental values. And this starts with proper investment.

For decades, cohesion policy contributed to the reduction of the territorial divide. I am proud to count on a strong partnership with Commissioner Elisa Ferreira, our closest ally.

The crises we face, from the pandemic management and its recovery to welcoming displaced people from Ukraine and the energy crunch, have heavily mobilised cohesion policy.

This is why it is now the time to start the debate on the future of cohesion policy. Tomorrow, we will launch a new Cohesion Alliance, together with the main associations of regions and cities in order to be the main arena for discussion, to mobilise allies but also those who are yet to be convinced of the added value of cohesion policy.

"Do no harm to cohesion" should not be a dead letter and the work starts now.

It must help us ensuring a strong territorial dimension across all EU policies with high territorial impact beyond cohesion policy itself.

This why the Committee of the Regions will work on ensuring that all EU policies integrate the 'do no harm to cohesion' principle introduced by Commissioner Elisa Ferreira earlier this year.

This is particularly timely also in view of the review of the Multiannual Financial Framework announced by the European Commission for next year. This budget was prepared in a different world and it needs to be repurposed to ensure Europe's strategic autonomy, to prepare for the reconstruction of Ukraine and to prepare ourselves for any new health threats. We therefore need to adapt it and make an ambitious budget that will deliver to all citizens. However, the review should not be used to affect fundamental policies such as cohesion policy.

Future EU investment policies and instruments should learn from the experience of Next Generation EU, which poorly engaged with regional and local authorities both in drafting and implementing it. Again and again, I repeat, only by involving regions and cities will EU policies and programmes achieve their best results and strengthen our communities.

Ensuring sustainable investments and engaging reforms that will make our Union fairer and more effective go hand-in-hand with the social contract that unite us. I have mentioned it already, the social distress is high today in Europe and as we are now devising the policies of tomorrow, let's not forget the initial mission of European integration: ensuring social progress.

As a Union, in our regions, in our cities, we shall ensure access to housing, lift children out of poverty, promote gender equality, provide quality jobs to all, educate our youth, develop our hospitals. As 2023 will be the European Year of Skills, we shall use all our local and regional talents to build this social Europe that leaves no one behind.

* * *

Dear colleagues,

Before hearing from you, about your views on the state of regions and cities in the European Union, I would like to talk to you about why we are all engaged in this mission. We are all engaged and committed to bringing change because we not only have a democratic mandate, but also a democratic duty.

Thirty years ago, as the Maastricht Treaty was being signed, a new dimension to European democracy was added, the one we represent today: the local and regional dimension, the guardians of the principle of subsidiarity, pillar of a democratic Union.

Thirty years later, as the Conference on the Future of Europe reached its conclusions, there are even more demands for stronger regional and local engagement in all EU policies and for new channels of participation for dialogue.

We had understood already at the Committee of the Regions, calling for a permanent dialogue with citizens. Democracy is not static and is bound to constantly expand its base and increase its avenues of participation in a subtle balance between representative and deliberative practices.

This is why we have been pioneers to engage with youth. Not because this year is dedicated to young people but because this what we stand for. I think we are all proud that we will launch at our next Plenary Session the EU Charter on Youth and Democracy, co-designed with young people and youth organisations.

This is also why the Committee of the Regions is ready to partner with Member States in organising initiatives to empower women in local and regional elections.

As we played an active role in shaping the conclusions of the Conference on the Future of Europe, we will play our rightful role to implement its conclusions at our levels and also to do our own internal work within the current treaties. Of course, should a Convention be launched – which this assembly supports – we will be ready to contribute and ensure the participation of local and regional voices in this constitutional exercise.

In the meantime, we will not stay put. As the assembly of elected local and regional representatives, we have a duty to ensure that local and regional voices contribute in due time to the debate at European level.

The Conference may be over but the work continues. We must start preparing the next European elections and the next legislative term. We should launch a series of initiatives to prepare ourselves and to shape a vision for the next Strategic Agenda and the next political guidelines of the future European Commission to be presented ahead of the next European elections.

We are a political assembly, with consultative powers, and our opinions will get their best value if they come at the right time when EU policies are being developed or decided upon. We need to be in the best possible place in order to strategically influence the next work programme of the European Commission and the next speech on the State of the Union.

* * *

Dear colleagues,

The list of tasks is long. The expectations are high.

100 days ago, you elected me as your President and I committed to work with all of you for a stronger and fairer Europe, to defend cohesion policy and to raise the political profile of our assembly.

We have a duty to deliver to help erase the doubts in the eyes and the fears in the voices of people in our cities and regions.

Let us deliver more solidarity, more cohesion and more democracy and the state of regions and cities in the European Union, and because of that, the state of the Union itself can only be stronger and brighter.

Thank you.



European Committee of the Regions

The European Committee of the Regions (CoR) is the EU's political assembly of 329 regional and local representatives from all 27 Member States. Our members are elected presidents of regions, regional councillors, mayors and local councillors - democratically accountable to more than 446 million European citizens. The CoR's main objectives are 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 have to consult the Committee in policy areas affecting regions and cities. It can appeal to the Court of Justice of the European Union as a means of upholding EU law where there are breaches to the subsidiarity principle or failures to respect regional or local authorities.

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