



**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



**#SOTEULocal**



## **STATE OF REGIONS AND CITIES IN THE EUROPEAN UNION 2023**

ADDRESS

**BY VASCO ALVES CORDEIRO**

PRESIDENT OF THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

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Dear Commissioner Elisa Ferreira,

Dear colleagues and friends,

Honourable guests,

Welcome to the European Week of Regions and Cities!

It is my pleasure, and truly an honour, to be here today with Commissioner Ferreira, to be here welcoming you, welcoming thousands of representatives from all over Europe to this historic and long-lasting partnership between the European Committee of the Regions and the European Commission that is intended to showcase the work and achievements of local and regional authorities that make Europe happen everywhere.

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A year has passed since the last State of the Regions and Cities address. During this time, a lot has changed, but one

central element remains the same... Citizens across Europe continued to turn, in the first place, to their local and regional representatives looking for answers, looking for action, looking for safety.

And I would like to take this opportunity to share with you, fellow colleagues, Members of the Committee of the Regions, partners and friends from the other EU institutions and bodies, what the regions and cities of Europe tell us, their expectations, their challenges, their needs.

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But I cannot start without a word on the atrocities we are witnessing on the Eastern shore of the Mediterranean.

So I would like to unequivocally condemn, on behalf of the European Committee of the Regions, the terrorist attacks perpetrated by Hamas. Our thoughts are with the families of all innocent victims.

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Ladies and gentlemen,

Over the past few months and years, regions and cities have been at the forefront of managing an increasing number of crises.

2023, in this context, is already a record year with the hottest summer ever recorded.

With high temperatures came forest fires, heat waves, extreme droughts, but also sudden storms and devastating floods.

In Alentejo, Catalonia, Emília Romagna or Le Marche, but also on the island of Corfu or in the Carniola valleys, climate catastrophes have claimed lives, displaced thousands of people, destroyed infrastructure, biodiversity and caused billions of euros of damage.

We have been, at every moment, reminded of the harsh reality of the climate crisis before us and its terrible impacts.

We increasingly see the global extent of what the Secretary General of the United Nations, António Guterres, has already designated as “climate carnage”.

It takes lives, destroys our economy, threatens our future.

Power grids, transport networks, communications systems, essential to run our communities' hospitals, schools and everything that makes our economy work, are at risk if we continue the worrying trend towards a three to four degrees increase in global temperature.

Our local economies, our tourism industry, our agriculture and food systems: all are being disrupted because of the climate crisis.

But the climate crisis also reinforces inequalities.

It has immediate consequences on our environment, economy and infrastructures; but it can also affect our political institutions and democracy.

We cannot waste more time.

We need to work together at all levels of governments, to achieve real impact.

Regions and cities are fundamental players for both climate adaptation and mitigation.

One in every two respondents to our annual report on the state of regions and cities make it clear that we need to listen more to the first responders to these situations.

And these first responders are regions and cities.

And it seems clear that there is a necessity, or should I say, an urgency to, not only reinforce the resources allocated to prepare and prevent this situation but also support the actions needed to avoid them.

Without the involvement, without the mobilization of regions and cities it is not possible to translate global commitments into local action.

Reality has been catching us again and again with an unbearable cost. And we need to act differently if we want faster and more palpable results.

Let us not continue to feed the illusion that we can have different results with the same actions.

So, my fellow colleagues, **on behalf of the Committee of the Regions I call for a new impetus of partnership between the European, national, local and regional levels of government on designing and implementing the global commitments of the climate transition to every and each community in Europe** through a renewed and deeper involvement of local and regional authorities.

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Dear colleagues,

2023 also marks the continuation of the war against Ukraine.

Regions and cities across Europe stand with Ukraine and will stand with Ukraine as long as it takes.

This a simple and clear message that expresses where the Committee of the Regions stands.

With no hesitation, regions and cities across the EU welcomed millions of Ukrainians, not only with a temporary shelter, but with a home for the longer term.

With the European Alliance of Cities and Regions for the Reconstruction of Ukraine, we are working hand in hand with our Ukrainian friends to boost peer-to-peer cooperation, support local and regional authorities to get familiar with the EU's acquis and to help build an independent, respected and duly funded level of subnational government.

I salute the decision of the European Commission to extend our temporary protection to Ukrainians in the EU, as we asked for it. Our doors and our arms remain open.

Open when regions and cities welcomed thousands children during summer camps. And why not invite other EU institutions to join us, to join the European Committee of the Regions, in this initiative of solidarity and friendship.

Open when cities and regions are mobilised to assist reconstruction efforts across Ukraine.

Open when we stand ready to exchange views and practices about the work and the role of local and regional authorities.

As negotiations are ongoing for the Ukraine Facility, we recall the importance of its local and regional component, building on the principles of the EU regional policy.

Those principles are fundamental for our cooperation with Ukraine, the Western Balkans, Moldova, Georgia, and also Türkiye.

**I welcome the announcement by President von der Leyen of upcoming pre-enlargement policy reviews. The European Committee of the Regions will play its role to ensure that the local and regional dimension is taken into account and key policies, such as cohesion policy, continue to be a central investment capacity for the long-term across all territories.**

**Enlargement is not only a question of numbers and budget. It is a political commitment and it will happen in the interest of candidate countries but also in the interest of the European Union.**

**We need to be ready for this historical step in our common European project and we need to be aware that whatever**



**the cost may be, it would be much costlier to close the door of Europe to the ones who want to be part of this amazing political journey.**

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Dear colleagues,

Over thirty-two million Europeans are not able to afford a proper meal every day.

Forty million were not able to keep their homes warm in 2022.

Income inequality, long-term unemployment, homelessness, demographic change.

In face of this, social cohesion across our territories must remain our goal.

Local and regional authorities are the first to cope with the challenges and are the first to answer despite the costs.

We need European solutions, with local energy and food productions and tailor-made support to people in need, especially the most vulnerable.

I commend the actions already taken by our mayors and regional leaders.

The one-stop shop for renovation in Budapest. The transformation of the residential heating systems in Plovdiv. The ambition of Halki as the first Greek island to embark its journey to become a model in terms of energy autonomy. The work done in Tampere to eradicate homelessness. The zero long-term unemployment territories.

**Despite the crises, despite the challenges, let us never forget that the state of regions of Europe, as, by the way, the state of Europe itself, is no other than the state of its people.**

And that is why is so important to remain true to the values of solidarity, equality, social justice and respect of human dignity.

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Dear colleagues,

The state of regions and cities remains strong because despite those pressures, those challenges that pile up every day, regions and cities continue to build solutions, leaving no place, no one behind.

Regions and cities are front and centre when it comes to the successful implementation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals and the European Green Deal.

But we must recognise it, is easier said than done.

At least sixty percent of the SDGs targets will not be reached, at least sixty percent of the SDGs targets, without the engagement of local and regional authorities.

Several barriers remain to implement climate initiatives.

And this is not a question of bad will.

Regions and cities, such as Porto and Strasbourg, are embarking in Voluntary Local Reviews, showing how we can best assess progress towards SDGs.

Forty-five percent of cities and regions report that they have set a climate neutrality goal before 2050. We have more ambition than the EU's own target – the most ambitious in the world already.

Financial resources, more flexibility, better communication, coordination, transparency. There are many ways to offer a better and more consistent framework for sustainability. Accompanying regions and cities is the spirit of our Green Deal Going Local Initiative, providing tools and best practice towards climate neutrality.

Achieving the green transition is paramount. Alongside this, we need to master the digitalisation of our society and address the demographic change.

Public investment is the key.

Public investment to contribute to our objective of territorial, social and economic cohesion in Europe.

Together with Mayor Emil Boc, we have been working over the past months, consulting across levels of government and assessing the situation across Europe's territories and the future of cohesion policy.

**And the conclusion seems clear: cohesion policy needs an *aggiornamento*. But there is no doubt that Europe needs cohesion policy.**

**Making cohesion policy fit for future relies on simple ideas: flexibility, of course, but with predictability, partnership, and accountability.**

First, flexibility with predictability.

Supporting workers during the pandemic, welcoming Ukrainians fleeing war, supporting our energy transition. Crisis after crisis, cohesion funds have been mobilised. Solidarity is the driver of cohesion policy, but it cannot become a crisis fund.

We need flexibility for it to ensure the right balance between its long-term investments objectives and the need to be agile and responsive to unforeseen events. But

flexibility should be embedded within the policy so it can it can safeguard the predictability of what happens if an emergency arises.

**To decide how to deal with emergencies without guidelines and rules, is deciding in panic mode.** And that's not the best way to serve the policy, the people and the use of public resources.

Second, partnership.

The strength of cohesion policy is that it is built on shared management, on multi-level governance, on the principle of partnership.

To achieve the green and digital transitions, we need to work in partnership with all regions and cities. This why we need to reinforce the Code of Conduct on partnership.

Third, accountability.

Trust is fundamental for the success of the policy. Some may say that cohesion policy is too cumbersome, too slow or inefficient.

To ensure a successful partnership, we need accountability, transparency and participation of all relevant stakeholders: managing authorities, beneficiaries and auditing bodies.

We propose to undergo a wide-ranging assessment of simplification measures. Let's learn from the Recovery and Resilience Facility!

**The task ahead of us is great. Transforming our societies, making them greener, reinforcing our digital connectivity, making them more inclusive, supporting the development of new skills: this will contribute to progress only if we leave no territory behind. The cities, the rural areas, the islands, the outermost regions, the northern sparsely populated areas let's unlock their potential.** We have seen it in Kiruna for example, and we will see it soon in Logroño.

Let's do this by avoiding competition and overlapping between funds and programme. Let's do this with the spirit of partnership. Let's do this by doing no harm to cohesion.

The task ahead of us is not easy. We may be among friends here, today. But, let's face it, there are many sceptics out there. In national capitals and in EU institutions.

The debate on the future of the EU budget and the key questions it underpins will be crucial in the coming years – and I quote President von der Leyen – *"what it finances, how it finances it, and how it is financed"*.

This debate cannot take place without ensuring a stronger cohesion policy, fit for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

You can count on the Cohesion Alliance.

You can on the European Committee of the Regions.

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Dear colleagues,

The success of our ambitious policies relies on one crucial element: trust.

Across Europe, millions of citizens have placed their trust in more than a million local and regional elected officials.

Polls even show us that they have more confidence in them than in their national governments and in European institutions.

Mayors, local councillors, regional ministers and presidents work every day, everywhere and for everyone.

Together, with their administrations, they are the first to provide public services. They are the promoters of European values, through education and culture. They put forward new democratic practices. They welcome refugees. They face the concrete reality of inequalities.

This is why, today, from this tribune, I want to pay tribute to them.

I also want to firmly condemn those who act with violence against our elected officials. Whether physical or verbal or even online, violence is never a solution.

\*

Dear colleagues,

**Local and regional leaders do not avoid discontent. But they work to channel it into solutions.**

Looking at the broader European institutional context, when you know that seventy percent, seventy percent, of EU policies are implemented by local and regional authorities, you can only wonder why they don't have a stronger say.

Involving all levels of governments – in respect with the principle of active subsidiarity – is a precondition to have – ultimately – more efficient policies and hence, a higher level of satisfaction.

Citizens told us, in the Conference on the Future of Europe, that they wanted a stronger role for regions and cities and also for the European Committee of the Regions.



We will play our part. But we will also not wait until it is done to act and to do our work.

**A stronger role for regions and cities in the EU will be crucial ahead of the great challenges we face, ahead of enlarging our Union. This can only strengthen our common democratic fabric.**

This message will be ours in the months to come in view of the European elections and the next legislative term.

Policies thought on the ground and a reinvigorated European democracy, with regions and cities at the heart.

All of us must carry the message. Members of the European Committee of the Regions, Young Elected Politicians, members of the EU network of local and regional Councillors. Friends and allies.

Europe counts on us!

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Dear colleagues.

Next year, the European Committee of the Regions will turn 30 years. It is time that our assembly gets a reinforced place in the institutional architecture of our Union.

Treaty changes or not, we will spare no effort to increase its representativeness, bringing more women in our leadership, its legitimacy, strengthening the link between our opinions and the strategic priorities of the Union, and its influence, reinforcing its political role towards other institutions, like the Commission, the Parliament or the Council.

Next year is also the moment where our citizens will be called to cast a vote for the next European elections.

Next year, we will open a new chapter in the political life of the European Union.

We, the Europe of the Regions, have a role to play even though our names might not be on the ballot.

We have a responsibility to show that democracy delivers at all levels.

We have a responsibility to counter disinformation.

We have a responsibility to foster a democratic debate.

We have a responsibility to stand for our common values.

We have a responsibility to put forward a vision for the future of our Union.

This is why, I put great expectations in our next European Summit of Regions, the 10<sup>th</sup> Summit, that will take place in a defining moment for Europe.

I invite all of you in making this Summit a success, to continue writing our history and to reaffirm together that the state of regions and cities in the European Union is and will always be strong.

Thank you.



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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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