



**European Committee
of the Regions**

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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



THE STATE OF REGIONS AND CITIES IN THE EUROPEAN UNION 2024

ADDRESS

BY VASCO ALVES CORDEIRO

PRESIDENT OF THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

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Madam Commissioner, Dear Elisa,

Mr. Vice-President of the European Parliament, Dear Younous,

Members of the European Committee of the Regions, Dear colleagues,

Dear guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of the European Committee of the Regions, on behalf of more than one million local and regional elected officials who, across Europe, embody this level of government, it is a great honour for me to declare open the 2024 edition of the European Week of Regions and Cities.

This year, it comes at a particular time.

It comes at a challenging time.

After millions of citizens voted in June, we are starting a new political cycle in the European Union with a renewed European Parliament, a renewed European Commission, and a renewed leadership of the European Council.

With this new political cycle, we will be able to count on the many Members of the European Parliament who experienced what it means to lead a local or regional community.

With this new political cycle, we are proud to count on António Costa as the next President of the European Council. His career and experience, starting as Mayor of Lisbon and then as Prime Minister of Portugal, will be a great asset for the Union.

A few weeks ago, President von der Leyen presented her college of Commissioners, including our First-Vice President, Apostolos Tzitzikostas.

To all of them, today I would like to extend the readiness and willingness of the European Committee of the Regions, the readiness and willingness of cities and regions across Europe to cooperate, to help, to join forces to make the European Union walk along a path that it is not one of division, resentment, and hate.

Willingness to join forces to make the European Union walk along a path of unity, diversity, and solidarity.

If we want to succeed, we must understand that the state of our Union starts with the state of our regional and local communities.

The strength of our Union starts with the strength of our local and regional communities.

And to understand our Union, its needs, its challenges, its powers, or its shortcomings, we need to first understand its regions and cities.

The path starts with regions and cities.

This is why, dear colleagues, it is a step in the right direction, it is a good sign that President von der Leyen, addressing the newly appointed Commissioners, asked them to engage more with local and regional representatives.

But let us be clear. European leaders here in Brussels cannot continuously call for Europe to be closer to its citizens if they keep approaching it from the top. We need to start in our local communities and in our regions in the context of a loyal, frank and committed partnership.

Cork, Novo Mesto, Västerås, Portimão, Lintrup, Saint-Etienne. In these cities, ahead of the European elections, thousands of citizens gathered for local dialogues, exchanging views and ideas with their representatives about this Union of ours.

We have this sense of dialogue deeply rooted in us. For thirty years now, the European Committee of the Regions has carried that flag high in the European debate.

The European Committee of the Regions was the first to launch its network of EU local and regional councillors.

Now, we welcome the commitment by President von der Leyen in her political guidelines to join forces on this matter.

This is the method we call for.

This is what we have already started with our new cooperation agreements with the European Parliament and the European Commission.

This is how, together, we can strengthen democracy in Europe.

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Dear colleagues,

Democracy and our fundamental values are what define us as a Union. We are not isolated.

The path we are walking today takes us through a complex world.

Ukraine has been resisting the big scale invasion for more than two years.

Our support is unwavering, whatever the cost and as long as it takes.

Regions and cities united have joined forces with their Ukrainian sisters to face the loss and destruction.

Our cities and regions will remain united for the reconstruction of a better future.

Putin's goal is very clear: deprive the Ukrainian people of a normal life, of the possibility to heat their homes, to cook, to have light.

As winter approaches, and as we have done since the beginning of the war, European regions and cities stand ready to lend their support.

To get through this period, I called on all our members and partners to provide electricity generators, power network components, high-voltage equipment, heating systems and water supply infrastructure components.

Kyiv, Kharkiv, Lviv and all Ukrainian cities and regions, we stand with you.

This is the spirit of the Alliance of Cities and Regions for the Reconstruction of Ukraine.

Slava Ukraini!

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Dear colleagues,

One year ago today, the terrible terrorist attacks carried out by Hamas against Israel took place.

We condemned them since the first day and we still condemn them. Too many hostages are still captive and they must be released!

Since then, violence has escalated in the region and I don't have words strong enough to describe the humanitarian situation there.

Beyond nationalities, beliefs or political convictions, they are first and foremost human beings.

What happened one year ago, but also what has happened since then to innocent lives, is inhuman, diabolical, in its most cruel form.

Israel must respect international law and we need a cease-fire now!

As Martin Luther King said: "*It is not the violence of the few that scares me, it is the silence of the many*".

We will not stay silence, as European Committee of the Regions, as Europe's regions and cities, we call for peace!

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To the challenges of this time, we must add the growing impact of the climate crisis.

Every day, regions and cities are confronted with it.

We think of the flooded streets of Trusina in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Vienna, Krnov and Glucholazy, the droughts in the Sicilian farmlands, or the wildfires surrounding Athens or the northern part of Portugal. It is getting worse and Europeans are losing their lives.

Our societies, our economies and industries are also undergoing profound transformations.

We do not have time to lose anymore.

We do not have the luxury to sit around and wait for institutions to be freed from deadlock.

We cannot wait either for the rest of the world to solve these problems.

We cannot rely on the will of a few hundred voters in Arizona in November.

The conclusion is simple: Europe must be stronger.

And again, the path starts in regions and cities.

Regions and cities handle almost all climate mitigation and adaptation policies.

We are paving the way to the future, and we are doing it now.

Turku will be climate neutral already by 2029.

Gabrovo is making schools energy efficient.

Budapest develops flood protection systems.

Košice restores land and biodiversity.

Occitanie produces hydrogen to propel their trucks and tractors.

Bremen protects the groundwater in its harbour.

Across Europe, silently, regions and cities are the place where the green transition is happening.

For every ten euros spent on the environment, eight are spent locally. This speaks volume.

The green transformation is an ambitious task, requiring efforts and investments.

We need to invest up to 200 billion euros a year in climate adaption. Such investment will bring up to 440 billion euros per year in terms of economic benefits. This comes on top of the health of our people and our planet.

Our message is clear: Local and regional authorities are key for the success of the European Green Deal, based on multi-level governance and targeted financial support.

We cannot wait but we cannot do it alone.

Again, here, the path starts with regions and cities.

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With the green and digital transitions going on full speed, our industries must adapt.

Think of the coal production sites in Silesia, steel plants in Cantabria or manufactures in the Ruhr valley. Or here, a few kilometres away in Forest-Brussels, where a large car plant is closing its doors, leaving thousands of workers without jobs and hope. Once powerful strongholds, such industries are disappearing, leaving people behind.

We need a comprehensive European industrial strategy, with regions and cities at its heart, as hubs for innovation, community engagement and reskilling programmes.

We need to make the best of cross-border cooperation, engaging local and regional authorities, always bearing in mind the realities on the ground.

This is how you create real momentum bringing all actors on board. Trade unions, public authorities, and local companies. Sharing the benefits among all.

Dear colleagues,

A strong Europe is nothing if it forgets its people. If it forgets where they live.

We cannot ignore that still last year, one hundred million Europeans were at risk of poverty or social exclusion. One in five.

We cannot ignore and we cannot accept this.

Housing prices are skyrocketing.

In Copenhagen, one in five inhabitants spend more than forty percent of their income on rent!

In Ioannina, one in four!

Almost half of young Europeans must still live with their parents.

We can only welcome that the European Commission will put forward an Affordable Housing Plan!

But, here too, the path starts with regions and cities.

In rural areas, people earn twenty-two percent less than the European average.

In the Limousin or in Severen Tsentralen, you only have one physician for more than three hundred inhabitants. Medical deserts are a dire reality in Europe.

More than ever, we need to invest in quality public services. To invest in our people, ensuring decent incomes and good social protection.

More than ever, we need cohesion.

Not because this is charity, but because for decades, Cohesion Policy has meant progress in Europe. Lifting regions and cities and, with them, lifting people, families, individuals.

Last year, I shared with you my worries about the future of Cohesion Policy.

We have been sounding the alarm bell, while some were, - or should I say, are -, tempted to centralise. We have been fighting, rallying the Cohesion Alliance and hundreds of regions across Europe before the European elections.

Cohesion Policy is needed but it also needs reforms.

We need to keep what works and improve what does not, so we can help all regions and cities on their path towards sustainable development.

Cohesion Policy must keep its golden principles. Shared management. Partnership. Multi-level governance. Place-based approach.

Cohesion Policy must also become more flexible to address new challenges. And it must be simplified, to help the managing authorities, to help beneficiaries, to help auditing authorities.

When we see what it is a growing consensus about the importance, the need for a renewed Cohesion Policy, - the Letta Report, the European Council, the Strategic Guidelines, even the Draghi Report -, we cannot forget that the work does not stop here.

We need to go beyond words and have concrete results. Let us make it happen.

And let us make it happen with a good budget!

This is our clear and loud message ahead of the budgetary negotiations to come and the European Committee of the Regions will not tone it down.

And today it is also our clear and loud message, an unequivocal and unapologetic rejection of a recent idea of having one single programme at national level in the new multiannual financial framework, which – if true - would abolish the participation of regions and cities.

We strongly reject this, not only because of what it represents to regions and cities across Europe, but also because it contradicts everything we have been told in recent times about Cohesion Policy.

So, dear Colleagues, from this house of democracy, the European Parliament, I call upon its leadership and its members, I call upon the women and men that represent the people of Europe to rise and to take a stand, to rise and to defend what this proposal – if true - so bluntly intends to destroy: a Europe built by everyone for everyone.

Dear Colleagues,

From this house that is built by the will of the people of Europe I call upon the President of the European Commission to remain faithful and true to her own words when she said the new Cohesion Policy should have regions and cities at its heart.

Dear Colleagues,

From here today I call upon the regions and cities of Europe, to rise and take a stand against a proposal that – if true - implies that we will be excluded, side-lined, bypassed. And let us not forget that more than about regions and cities, this is about the Europe we want to have in the future.

Dear colleagues,

Throughout the past five years, we have been able to count on an excellent partnership with Commissioner Elisa Ferreira.

Her work, her commitment, her leadership in the Cohesion and Reforms dossier were essential, they were decisive, not only for the construction of a loyal and fruitful partnership, but also to defend and promote Cohesion in such turbulent and

challenging times as the ones we lived during the mandate of the European Commission that now comes to an end.

On behalf of the European Committee of the Regions, I want to publicly express our recognition and gratitude.

To the new European Commission, also on behalf of the Committee of the Regions, I say welcome, offering our complete availability to establish an honest, frank and loyal cooperation, in fulfilment of one of the main goals of the Union: economic, social and territorial cohesion.

Dear colleagues, but regarding Cohesion we must bear in mind that our work is not finished. We must convince those who are not convinced.

But, above all, we must remain vigilant and proactive.

Cohesion Policy is beneficial to all regions and so it must continue.

And this is fundamental, it is vital for the European project.

Dear colleagues,

A closer, stronger, and more cohesive Europe is the foundation we need for the future.

It is the condition for this path forward we are charting.

With everything I have mentioned already at stake, the future of Europe can only be an ambitious one.

Enlargement is not only a moral duty that lies upon us.

It is a geopolitical necessity that drives us.

It is a strategic move essential for our future.

To prepare for enlargement, we need regions and cities both in Member States and candidate countries to work hand in hand.

We are already doing so.

Zadar and Mostar have a joint programme on social inclusion.

Puglia leads cross-border cooperation on sustainable development with its counterparts across the Adriatic in Albania.

Velenje and Pljevlja are working on the energy transition together.

Jurbarkas and Kriuleni meet regularly to discuss cultural cooperation.

We, at the European Committee of the Regions, are already doing so.

We opened our programme for Young Elected Politicians to candidate countries. They are here with us today.

We have opened offices in our headquarters for our Ukrainian friends from Lviv, Vinnitsya and Dnipropetrovsk.

We support capacity-building to public experts in the administrations of candidate countries, via technical assistance and information exchange.

Today, I am proud to announce that we will launch a new training and internship programme for Ukrainian mayors, their deputies, and local and regional authorities' staff and specialists on project management, in cooperation with U-LEAD.

Here too, the path starts in regions and cities.

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But we know that enlargement does not only create expectations for candidate countries.

We also have a responsibility as a Union to ensure that it delivers for all. It will require time, dialogue, and efforts.

We need to go beyond short-termism and accept what is clear: we must reform the way we work in the European Union.

But first things first. The next multiannual financial framework of the European Union is key and must concentrate our attention.

This is why we call now for a stronger and renewed Cohesion Policy.

This is why we need to reform the Common Agricultural Policy.

This is why we will need new own resources.

This is our path forward.

This is how we make Europe more ambitious.

Dear colleagues,

By talking to the people where they live,

By taking the time to understand our communities,

We can picture the state of regions and cities.

It is diverse as much as it is united. Like Europe. United in diversity.

To all the new leaders in the EU institutions: this state of regions and cities must act as a reminder.

Good policies are done with your feet on the ground.

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

Strong policies are ones that are made with territorial realities in mind.

For thirty years, this assembly of local and regional representatives, the European Committee of the Regions, has acted as loyal and constructive partner for the European project. And it will continue to do so.

With the European Parliament. With the European Commission. With the European Council.

Because the path to a stronger, fairer, and more cohesive Europe for all starts with regions and cities.

Thank you!




**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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Read the
full report

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