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Regional diversity: “Rebuild Europe from the regions”

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As long-standing partners of the Congress in promoting regional co-operation and democracy, European regional organisations and associations can help bring citizens closer to a Europe from which they often feel far removed. This was made clear in a debate held by the Chamber of Regions on the role of these bodies on Thursday 19 October.

European regions carry out practical and pragmatic work to respond to the daily needs of citizens, said Magnus Berntsson, President of the Assembly of European Regions (AER), but they must “give a better explanation of what Europe is”. The task of bringing citizens and Europe closer together also falls to European regional associations, which, in addition, help build bridges between project creators and investors.

He added that interregional co-operation and regional democracy can often “succeed where national democracy fails”. The AER, which publishes a report on the state of regionalisation in Europe every five years, is nevertheless concerned about certain setbacks it has noted in this area. At the same time, Mr Berntsson highlighted the vitality of the work programmes which the AER conducted with the Congress, which had just been redefined for the next two years.

Stefan August Lütgenau, Director of Foster Europe, Foundation for strong European Regions, expressed disappointment that Europe no longer managed to convince citizens and was primarily regarded as a financial transfer mechanism. This disaffection was illustrated clearly by the low turnout at European elections in several countries. However, Europe could be given a new lease of life and “be rebuilt from the regions up”. While they were close to citizens, regions should nevertheless enjoy greater democratic legitimacy. In his view, interregional co-operation was an “alternative to the sclerosis seen in Europe” and he called for stronger and more democratic regions, capable of promoting both union and diversity.

Do central governments distrust regions?

During the debate, Giuseppe Boschini (Italy, SOC) pointed out that central governments were not always very favourably disposed to interregional co-operation, as they were afraid of being weakened by it. “On the contrary, we must show that a Europe of regions is not a threat to states,” he said, before pointing out that it was “more dangerous to restrict self-government than develop it”. For instance, his own region of Emilia Romagna had recently signed an agreement with the Italian state on boosting its autonomy, which had taken place “without a referendum or tensions”.

Irene Dourou (Greece, SOC) also said that “central governments distrust regions”, as demonstrated by the current crisis in Catalonia. She urged regions to be “cautious” and was

afraid that legitimate demands for regional autonomy might end up feeding political movements that could undermine regional policies in Europe. For her part, Anna Magyar (Hungary, EPP/CCE) said that regional co-operation worked well between Hungary and its neighbours, in particular Serbia and Romania.

Regions need to have a higher profile in politics

Herwig van Staa (Austria EPP/CCE) nevertheless noted that although the Congress had given regional policies in Europe real impetus, it had not succeeded in having a European Charter of Regional Self-Government adopted, and only a non-binding reference framework had been agreed instead. In reviewing all the institutions operating at regional level in Europe, he regretted the fact that too few regional presidents or political leaders were involved and urged them to play a greater part and adopt a higher profile, which was a prerequisite for being taken into account more effectively at political level. This point of view was shared by the President of the Chamber of Regions, Gunn Marit Helgesen (Norway, EPP/CCE), who pointed out that the members of the Chamber were also ambassadors for the regions and that a strong Europe required strong and engaged local and regional authorities.

Lastly, in reply to a question from a Swedish youth delegate concerning the added value of regional policies in fields such as health, Magnus Berntsson said that the AER had set up a thematic committee on the subject and called for e-health to be developed at regional level.