

Chamber of Regions

48th SESSION
Strasbourg, 26 March 2025

[CPR(2025)48-01]
25 March 2025

STATEMENT FROM THE PRESIDENT OF THE CHAMBER OF REGIONS

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Distinguished guests,
Dear Members of the Chamber,
Dear Youth Delegates,

It is my difficult duty now, as per tradition, to make for the first time the general opening statement.

Looking around to what is happening in the world and how this can impact the regions of Europe, I see many negative new facts and trends, but also some positive ones.

I will start with the negative ones. First and foremost, the war in Ukraine continues to claim numerous lives and to produce incommensurate destruction. And I am not even speaking about the impact on the environment. Our support to our member Ukraine is of course unwavering, but we do hold the hope that first a ceasefire will stop the killings and then a just and perduring peace will ensue. In face of security threats and mixed signals coming from across the Ocean, European leaders have decided to invest more in their own defence capabilities.

Second, in the Middle East, Israel has resumed the bombing of Gaza, killing scores of civilians. In retaliation, Houthis of Yemen have attacked ships, and the US has bombed Yemen and is threatening with the opening of a far larger, more dangerous war on Iran.

Third, while the toppling of Bashar Al Assad has brought new hope for peace in Syria, there is worrisome information about exactions being committed against civilian population, Allawites in particular, which may amount to an attempt of ethnic cleansing in this country.

I will also briefly mention here a few other recent worrisome trends of democratic backsliding. The arrest of the Istanbul mayor, the banning of the PRIDE activities in Hungary, the foreign agent law in Georgia are but some examples. They don't directly concern regions, so I will not delve on them, but they show that indeed democracy is under threat, that fundamental values are no longer respected and there is increasing contempt for and legislating against, such values as diversity and personal freedoms. They also show that in a situation of increased uncertainty we need to prepare and build our resilience – resilience of the services we offer and resilience of democracy at all levels.

What does this all mean for European regions?

First of all, it means that the wave of refugees which our regions have had to welcome and host is not about to reverse, not even stop. We need to be prepared, together with central governments and local authorities, to imagine solutions in order to offer humanitarian aid, as

well as short-to-medium term hosting and living conditions to a new wave of immigrants. We need to build our resilience and capacity to respond to such man-made disasters.

Second, steeply increasing defence expenditure at both European and country levels will likely impact regional resources as well. Most European countries are heavily indebted so there is little room for financial manoeuvre, and we can expect that regions will be called upon to contribute to this effort. We are a fundamental part of democratic governance, weakening us will mean weakening subsidiarity, the quality of services and the capacity of citizens to influence them. But we are already seeing worrying trends of recentralisation, which is not good news for our citizens. After the 2008 economic crisis, then the Covid one, which were used by some central authorities as a reason (or maybe a pretext?) to reduce the autonomy of local and regional authorities, this call for arming can harm local and regional democracy, which is not what our citizens want.

Third, all these trends and facts have exacerbated divisions and polarisation, including in respect of hate speech on one side and the calls for censorship on the other. Democratic processes have been affected, civil dialogue on political aspects and in electoral campaigns has become difficult, claims and fears of foreign or undue electoral influence continue and our regional democratic process have been and remain affected. We need to invest time and patience to educate people about what regional powers are, what they do and how they work, involve them in our policy making and try to calm down excessive emotions which may endanger our regional democracy, governance and the trust of our citizens.

Dear colleagues,

What about the good news?

First, in respect of Ukraine, for the first time since the negotiations in Istanbul, we have seen some serious diplomacy at work, trying to offer a solution to the war in Ukraine. This is not more than a modest beginning, but we still can hold the hope that it could lead towards a just and lasting peace in the Eastern part of our continent. It is not, for the moment, more than a modest glimmer of hope, but we need it and need it to turn into reality.

Second, very importantly, there is today a common understanding in Europe that democracy is backsliding and that resolute steps need to be taken to not only stop, but also reverse this process. And the Council of Europe in general and the Congress in particular are very well placed to be instrumental in offering solutions in this respect. The Secretary General of the Council of Europe has launched the preparation of a Pact on Democracy and of an Action Plan and I have reasons to hope that we, the Congress, will have a prominent role in this enterprise.

I believe that improving, or even, as needed, restoring full democracy needs to go through the rebalancing of three relationships, of three axes of power.

The first one concerns the traditional checks and balances between the legislative, the executive and the judiciary. In the Council of Europe, this is mainly the role of the Venice Commission and, to a certain extent, of the Parliamentary Assembly. However, the Congress is also bringing its contribution, by starting or continuing to work on the issue of human rights at local level and of the implementation of the decisions of the European Court on Human Rights, in co-operation with public authorities of the country concerned.

The second set of checks and balances which need to be improved concerns the vertical relation of power and resources between levels of government. I have already mentioned the recentralisation tendencies which are not in line with democratic principles such as subsidiarity and with the desires of citizens. And I believe that the role of our Congress here, through its exchanges, its reports, its recommendations, its resolutions, as well as the practical work of its Centre of Expertise, is paramount.

The third axis which needs rebalancing concerns the relation between citizens and the elected representatives who take decisions on their behalf. This is not to question representative democracy, but it is clear that just casting a vote every four or five years does not guarantee sufficient influence of citizens on public policies, so elections need to be complemented by other forms of participatory democracy. And among all such forms which have been tried over the years, it looks like deliberative democracy, meaning the various types of randomly selected citizens assemblies, juries and panels, is a very positive and useful development. And here as well, the Congress has a very important role to play. A vast majority of these experiments of deliberative democracy are done at local and regional level and the Congress has accumulated significant experience in this field. It was the first to adopt a Recommendation on this topic, followed by the Committee of Ministers, which subsequently adopted a Recommendation which is still today the only international standard on deliberative democracy in the world. Moreover, the Centre of Expertise has implemented such activities in difficult contexts in countries like Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia and Ukraine. There is, I believe, a lot of work ahead of us in this field.

Dear friends,

We will be discussing today three topics of utmost importance. I will introduce them one by one when the time comes, but I would like to tell you that the Bureau chose them for a very good reason. They are important for many of our members, but they are all very important for our Ukrainian partners. Financial decentralisation and management, the role of subregional tiers of government and the role of regions in the process of accession are important topic of

debate in Kyiv. As you know, Ukrainian authorities have launched, in close co-operation with our Centre of Expertise, the revision of the Decentralisation Concept of Ukraine, a document presenting a unique vision of the territorial organisation of public authority after the war.

Dear participants,

I want to apologize for being a bit long in this first communication of mine as Chamber President, but the actuality is rich, and I wanted to include as much of it as possible in this presentation.