

## Chamber of regions

**Second part of the 40<sup>th</sup> SESSION**  
**Strasbourg, 16<sup>th</sup> June 2021**

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### **STATEMENT FROM THE PRESIDENT OF THE CHAMBER OF REGIONS**

**HARALD SONDEREGGER**

8 minutes

Dear members of the Chamber,  
Dear guests of the session,  
Excellencies,  
Dear colleagues,

We are meeting here today at a time when the pandemic continues to affect our daily lives. The fact that this session is held online is a stark reminder of this.

However, today, 15 months after the first lockdown, the health situation seems to have been brought under control, at least here in Europe. The falling infection rates and the progress with vaccination give us reason for hope and optimism.

Today, we must start planning for the post-Covid future, for the recovery of our societies and our economies, drawing lessons from our experiences during the crisis. The pandemic has certainly influenced the way we operate and interact; it gave a genuine boost to the use of digital technologies and virtual way of doing business, revealing at the same time the worrying inequalities of access to digital services and the possibilities of their use.

But the pandemic has also highlighted the urgent need for better interaction between the different levels of governance, a better system of multi-level governance based on constant dialogue and coordination between the State and the region, but also between regions and within the region, with municipalities and local authorities. An improved system of multi-level governance would also mean a better distribution of competences and resources and better equalisation systems – which must now be reviewed and strengthened, as a key lesson learned from the crisis.

The need for strengthening multi-level governance in Europe was also recognised by the Council of Europe member States in the conclusions of their Ministerial Session in Athens in November last year.

But beyond systems and procedures, the pandemic has brought to the fore the importance of solidarity and partnerships in responding to the challenges faced by our societies. It is the collective effort of local and regional authorities, national governments, international organisations, business and scientific communities, academia and civil society, and citizens of all professions and walks of life – it is our collective effort that has allowed us to speak today about an end to the crisis.

The pandemic has provided an opportunity to build, or renew, partnerships between the region and the State, between the region and local authorities, and between regions within and across national borders to take up the problems of post-crisis recovery and to address the issues shaping the future of Europe. The challenges are multiple indeed: the environment and climate changes, migration and intercultural dialogue, citizens' confidence in the institutions of governance and their participation in democratic decision making, equality and social justice, inclusion and protection of minorities – these challenges may have been eclipsed by the health emergency but they did not go away. Quite the opposite: in many aspects, the pandemic has highlighted and even worsened the existing inequalities in our communities.

We need a genuine partnership within the multi-level governance system to move forward – a partnership with the State and a partnership with citizens. This is the major lesson learned from the crisis.

The region has played a central role in the crisis management. May I remind you that lockdowns and deconfinements were implemented on a territorial basis, with some regions and provinces being isolated while others enjoying relative openness. The pandemic had a special impact on border regions

and cross-border economies when national borders were closed. The region had a primary responsibility for coordinating the implementation of response measures within territories and redistribution of supplies and assistance.

This special place of the region as a bridge between the State and the local community, between national authorities and citizens, defines its special role in multi-level governance. The region must play a central role in the social and economic recovery of our communities after the crisis.

But beyond recovery, the region has a key responsibility in advancing territorial democracy and building inclusive and sustainable communities, in partnership with the State, the local authorities and the citizens. This Chamber is a representative voice of regions on our continent and beyond, a platform for dialogue and experience sharing between regional elected representatives. It is our main task and duty to lead in the reflection on policy responses to the challenges faced by regions, to determine regional contribution to national policy making and to uphold the regional dimension of the future Europe.

At this session, we will start with debates on the lessons learned from Covid, post-crisis recovery and the need for territorial solidarity. At future sessions, we will take up further issues of territorial integration, dialogue with the State, regional identity and the democratic functioning of institutions of regional governance – and other subjects of relevance for regional communities.

In our work, we shall be guided by the priorities adopted by the Congress last March, which are focused on improving the quality of democracy for our citizens, reducing inequalities and addressing the digital divide as well as the challenges posed by the environment, in order to build cohesive and sustainable communities equipped for the future. This Chamber is called upon to make its contribution, the contribution of regions, to achieving these objectives.

I know that we are up to this task. This Chamber has been reformed and renewed to have membership truly representative of regional interest, and I count on your commitment and active participation in our work and discussions – starting from this, very first full session of the Chamber.

I look forward to our co-operation and joint effort, to have the voice of regions heard loud and clear in Europe, by both national governments and our citizens.

Thank you.