

Chamber of regions

First part of the 40th SESSION – Strasbourg by videoconference – 23 March 2021

Statement from the outgoing President of the Chamber of Regions, Gunn Marit HELGESEN (Norway, EPP/CCE)

Check against delivery - Seul le prononcé fait foi

First of all, allow me to congratulate you, dear Harald, on your election as President of this Chamber, and to wish you success in this position.

Dear colleagues,

Over the past four years, since I took office as President of the Chamber of Regions, I had the privilege and the pleasure to lead its important work of representing the interests and concerns of regions in Europe, and providing a forum of experience sharing and exchange of ideas. I would like to thank all of you, dear colleagues, past and present members of the Chamber, for your confidence and support during this period.

These past four years were not a smooth sailing by any means – not for this Chamber, not for our regions, not for our continent. They were fuelled by numerous challenges in an increasingly fragile European context, marked by a rise in extremism and violence, a crisis of citizens' confidence, climate emergency, and an increase in trends for recentralisation of power – even to the point of endangering the democratic values on which our societies are based. Last year, the health crisis was added to this list of challenges facing the regions, the continent and indeed the world.

In our Chamber of Regions we have been working to propose effective responses, and pursuing our efforts to strengthen the role and voice of regions in the European democratic development, and in the future of Europe.

We have reaffirmed the importance of upholding regional identities in full respect of territorial integrity, and of improving dialogue between the region and the state. We have debated the need for territorial solidarity and better distribution of financial burden and financial support to our regions and territories. We have addressed the issue of migration flows to our regions and the need for the proper reception, integration and protection of migrants, with the necessary support from the state. We have called for recognising the role of regions in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals, responding to the consequences of climate change and addressing the challenge of sustainable development of our territories.

We have also discussed mechanisms to foster a more open regional government based on transparency, accountability and citizen participation, in order to bring public decision-making closer to the citizens and rebuild citizens' trust in politicians and institutions of governance. Finally, we stressed the role of culture and cultural heritage as a factor of regional development, and the need for better cultural interaction across borders. It is our responsibility not only to preserve, but also to revitalise and promote our common cultural heritage for present and future generations.

Throughout our work, we reaffirmed the role of the regional dimension on our continent and the principles of regional governance, as we have launched the reflection on the relationship between the region and the state, on the evolution of European regionalism and the future prospects of its development as well as its increasing role in the construction of European democracy. The 10th anniversary of the Council of Europe's Reference Framework for Regional Democracy, just over a year ago, was a good occasion to give this process a new momentum.

I am convinced that this reflection on the role of regions in the future of Europe must continue. The Chamber of Regions is a pan-European platform for experience sharing and dialogue between regional elected representatives, and it is our responsibility to watch over and strengthen the dimension of regional democracy in the national and European political and territorial architecture, in response to the current challenges. It is important that the increased economic and social responsibilities of the regions are matched by their stronger political role.

The Covid-19 pandemic was a stark reminder of this role and responsibility of regions toward citizens. 2020 was indeed a year that changed everything, as the pandemic has affected every aspect of our life. Regional authorities, together with local authorities, have been in the frontline of the fight against the spread of the pandemic, working tirelessly to protect citizens, coordinate relief efforts, sustain public services and support local economy. Indeed, the crisis had an important territorial dimension, as the measures taken at national had to be applied and adapted to the circumstances of local communities. Regions were in the best position to respond to the emergency because of their competences, but also because they had a better knowledge of the real situation on the ground.

I would stress two key lessons learned from the pandemic. The first is that the state needs the support of local and regional authorities to respond to such crises. However, territorial authorities must be given adequate powers and means, including the necessary autonomy in decision-making and financial resources. The second lesson is the crucial importance of co-operation, coordination and solidarity between the different levels of governance – European, national, regional and local – which is fundamental in the fight against a crisis. It is critical to use effectively the mechanisms of multi-level governance and to involve regional and local authorities in the national crisis management.

Dear colleagues,

In the face of the challenges in front of us, the Chamber of Regions itself had to be reformed and adapted, to be able to address them more effectively. The reform of the Congress in the last two years has made it possible, on the one hand, to give all our members the same status and voting rights and, on the other hand, to let the national delegations freely choose the number of their members sitting in the Chamber of Regions. As a result, we are starting today with a renewed Chamber within a renewed Congress, more focused and ever more committed to respond better to the transformations taking place on our continent.

I am proud today that I was part of this process and was able to contribute to this remarkable effort over the past four years. But we have an equally important task ahead of us. We must define and uphold the role of regions in the post-crisis recovery, in building back our societies in the wake of the pandemic. We need to ensure balanced and sustainable development of our territories. We need to look closely at the opportunities offered by digital technologies and include them in our territorial integration strategies. We need to improve tools and mechanisms for engaging citizens in regional governance, and in particular young people. Today, many young people face a difficult transition to work, and are often marginalised from the political process, and I believe we should do more to support the culture of active youth participation, as a means of better social cohesion and the anchoring of democratic principles within our regions.

Dear colleagues,

For me, these were both exciting and challenging four years at the helm of this Chamber, and I want to thank you again for your support and your commitment.

We can be proud of our achievements, of what we have accomplished together. Europe's regions have a crucial role to play in the renewal of our societies, the renewal of democracy and the future of our continent. The high degree of confidence shown by our citizens allows us to place great hopes in territorial democracy, a democracy that is close to the needs and concerns of citizens.

Our Chamber must continue to strengthen its role as the voice of Europe's regions, representing and defending regional interests across the continent. I wish the newly elected President every success in this ambitious task, and I look forward, dear colleagues, to our continued work together.

Thank you.