

Chamber of regions

First part of the 40th SESSION – Strasbourg, 23rd March 2021

Speaking points for the statement from the newly elected President of the Chamber of Regions, Harald SONDEREGGER (Austria, EPP/CCE)

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- I would like to thank you for the trust you have placed in me by electing me President of the Chamber of Regions for the next two and a half years.
- I know that I begin my mandate in a very challenging time. The social, economic and environmental tensions that have been building over the years are being felt today in our territories, in our regions. From the pandemic and climate emergency to the crisis of citizens' confidence and the rise in extremism, regional authorities are increasingly called upon to respond to problems that are not only local or regional but indeed global. Together, we must make sure that regions are fully equipped to find solutions, and that their voice is always heard in the dialogue with national governments and global institutions.
- Regional authorities are key players in overcoming the challenges we face. The crises we are going through show us the key role played by the regions, and the constant growth in their response capacity and in their ability to contribute to national policy making. The regional entity – in view of its strategic position and its assigned competences – is truly the best placed to respond to territorial needs that are not always covered by the national vision – due to the specificities of our communities.
- Our regions, our territories also remain a main reference point for citizens in defining their identity and their habitat, and it is not by chance that we, regional elected representatives, together with our locally elected colleagues, continue to enjoy the highest level of citizens' trust among all institutions of governance. I am convinced that we must use this trust capital of our regions to overcome the current challenges, to use regional democracy as a lever to find answers. Regions are an essential component of the state, and it is by strengthening their role and authority that we can collectively contribute to building resilient and sustainable societies.
- This range of challenges will be on the agenda of our Chamber of Regions because they have a direct impact on the regional dimension of Europe, and it is our duty to address them.
- We must continue our work to strengthen regional democracy throughout Europe as a crucial factor of stability. This includes the need for a permanent and constructive dialogue between the region and the state, as well as territorial solidarity.
- Today, it is not possible to ensure the prosperity of the regions without co-operation and solidarity between them. We have seen that people move – not only between countries, but also between regions – to escape climate change consequences, poverty, or insecurity. It is in our common interest to share our wealth and address common problems together, in the

framework of multi-level governance. Otherwise, we will be forced to share the misery. Let us have imagination, foresight and simply common sense, to ensure the peace and well-being of future generations.

- We must also encourage a culture of dialogue with our citizens. We must do more to involve citizens – women, young people, minorities - in decision-making. This effort is crucial, because the loss of trust of citizens in politicians and their feeling of exclusion from democratic processes has been growing over the years. The best antidote to this is to engage citizens, to get them to work alongside the authorities and to make them feel that they can make decisions about their future.
- Last but not least, I would like to thank the outgoing President, Gunn Marit Helgesen, for leading this Chamber over the past four years, and steering its work with great skill and success. I salute in particular her contribution to the reform of the Congress, which has made it possible to have a Chamber of Regions that is more committed and better adapted to take up the challenges that our continent and our regions are facing.
- Our Chamber has a major role to play in the European political dialogue, representing and defending the regional interest, and together with you I will do my utmost to promote regional democracy within our continent.