

Speaking notes by Gunn Marit HELGESEN, Vice-President of the Congress

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Speech at the Annual Conference of the AEBR on „The future of Europe from the perspective of border regions” – 5 November 2020 (online) (15 min)

Dear President,
Dear Minister President,
Dear colleagues,
Ladies and gentleman,

It is a real pleasure for me to be able to join you today, even though we have been living and working in very special circumstances this year. I would like to thank the organisers for giving me the opportunity to address this annual conference.

First of all, on behalf of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, I wish to congratulate the new President of the Association, Karl Heinz Lambertz, on his election. Karl-Heinz is also Vice-President of the Congress, and his election bodes very well for pursuing and deepening the long-standing co-operation between the Congress and the Association of European Border Regions.

I am pleased to point out that the Congress supported the Association's creation in 1971, with a perspective of fostering a Europe-wide network of border regions and advancing their cross-border co-operation within and beyond the European Union. Over the past 49 years, the Congress and AEBR have shared the common objectives of strengthening co-operation between European regions as well as participation of regional authorities in defining and implementing European policies.

We have come a long way since 1971, but I began on this historical note to show that the importance of effective cross-border cooperation as key to European integration was recognised early on, as it goes to the heart of the European project.

Today, AEBR plays a fundamental role in the promotion of European cross-border cooperation, an area that has always been a priority of the Congress. This role has been especially evident during the current pandemic when border regions suffered in particular from border closures. In this regard, the Congress welcomes your proposal, together with the European Committee of the Regions, to create a special permanent mechanism for border regions.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We are convinced of the benefits and mutual enrichment of cross-border cooperation, not just in terms of better understanding and improving neighbourly relations, but also with regard to seizing economic benefits from sharing public services and infrastructures – schools, universities, hospitals, emergency services, airports, and so on.

Regional cross-border cooperation is often developed through the transfer of competences and financial resources as a result of decentralisation and regionalisation processes in the countries. This leads to a better capacity of the authorities to deal with cross-border issues resulting from the growing cross-border socio-economic dynamics. Through targeted collaboration between individual and institutional actors from different jurisdictions that are located in the same cross-border territory, common problems can be addressed, and synergies developed, considering the social, economic and natural characteristics of this territory.

Nevertheless, it is this vision of mutual benefits across borders that risks being undermined by the various challenges facing Europe today, particularly the current health crisis.

Indeed, the health crisis has put a strain on co-operation between border regions, with the adoption of restrictive measures often decided by national governments while ignoring or underestimating the voice of the regions. Such measures as border closures, introduction of quarantine periods or administration of health tests were often taken separately in different countries and applied differently. Implementation of border-closing decisions was sometimes discriminatory – for example, in some countries, citizens had to justify crossing the border in one direction while crossing from the other side was allowed without permission. These different measures then had an impact on daily life and the different needs that were behind border crossing (employment, health, studies, family life, etc.) by citizens living along the border. The crisis has prompted some governments to restrict the scope of action of sub-national authorities, considering that territorial pluralism cannot provide an effective response in times of crisis.

Nevertheless, to respond to crises, multi-level governance as well as co-operation and coordination between the different levels of government are crucial. The experience has shown that multi-level governance systems do not hinder responses to crisis situations – on the contrary, they increase the quality of decisions and allow greater flexibility in coping with emergencies as they are better suited to provide solutions tailored to specific needs. The effectiveness of response depends indeed on the right balance and interaction between centralised and decentralised capacities that must be present within the system. The pandemic has revealed the need for a stronger system of multi-level governance in which every level – local and regional – is equipped with proper competences, means and resources to respond to the emergency.

The sub-national level knows the needs of the territory. Fortunately, many regions have shown solidarity and cooperation with their counterpart in other territories, all the more so as the disruptive effects of the crisis have been particularly felt in cross-border regions. For example:

- There have been many patient transfers within the framework of pre-existing cooperation agreements between France (Grand-Est), Germany (Rhineland-Palatinate and Baden-Württemberg), Switzerland and Luxembourg.
- Also in Germany, the Minister-President of Rhineland-Palatinate has set up a cross-border task force with the Dutch and Belgian regions to coordinate actions against the coronavirus.

This solidarity between territories is important because it helps to ensure that all European citizens have equal access to public services. These examples make it clear that cross-border cooperation is more crucial than ever to meet common challenges in times of crisis, and must be strengthened in the future Europe.

The consequences of this crisis should make us reflect on the future of border regions in Europe. It is true that the pandemic has taken us by surprise and that central governments have had to implement emergency measures quickly. It is also true that the regions have not really been involved in the decision-making process. In the context of an interconnected Europe, this should not be the case. This is why we must ensure that the voice of the border regions is heard in order to preserve all our achievements made over the decades of co-operation.

In this regard, yesterday, 4 November 2020, the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the 47 Member States of the Council of Europe met to discuss how to "respond effectively to a health crisis in full respect of democracy, the rule of law and human rights" in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Athens Declaration **resulting from this discussion** is a step on the way of improving our responses to crisis situations which will continue to happen.

Only over the past five years or so, Europe has experienced as succession of crises – the migration crisis, radicalisation and terrorism, a rise of extremist movements, crisis of public confidence, the health crisis we are facing today. All these challenges have been pushing the countries to restrict crossing their borders.

However, to overcome crises, we need more co-operation and coordination, not less, and national borders must not be seen as obstacles to such co-operation. We need more platforms to exchange experiences and give border regions their voice. In this regard, we welcome the initiative to hold the 1st Borders Forum "Cross-border territories on the front line", organised on 9-10 November by the Transfrontier Operational Mission of France, in cooperation with the European Commission and the European Committee of the Regions, as well as the proposal to create a "European Cross-border Citizens' Alliance".

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In the Congress, we are convinced that decentralised cross-border co-operation in general is a crucial factor for territorial development and territorial cohesion on our continent. The unification of Europe has opened excellent opportunities for establishing direct economic, social and cultural links across borders, leading to more efficient management of communities, better services for citizens and reduced disparities between territories.

The very concept of the border has indeed changed, with its focus shifting from that of a barrier to a perception of an **integrated transborder territory** with much of unexploited potential. In united Europe, borders are mostly seen as “scars of history”. It is obvious that an uncoordinated borders closure, in a cross-border context, damages the social and economic fabric of the local territory.

We are convinced that the future of border regions lies in building and strengthening such integrated transborder territories with shared services, infrastuctures, cross-border investment and people-to-people exchanges across borders. The experiences and good practices of municipal cross-border Eurodistricts, Euroregions and the 72 European territorial co-operation groupings existing today should be extended across the continent.

There is a solid legal framework for this – the Council of Europe’s 1980 Madrid Convention on transfrontier co-operation and its three Additional protocol, providing also for co-operation agreements between EU and non-EU border regions. At the time, AEBR provided its expertise to preparing the protocols, as it did to support the elaboration of the Council of Europe’s Reference Framework for Regional Democracy.

The Congress has already recommended developing this framework further, to include provisions for horizontal subsidiarity and the transfer of competences and resources to transfrontier co-operation bodies.

It is clear of course that European cross-border cooperation is not yet complete and that there are still obstacles in front of us, be it bureaucratic barriers, lack of political will or complex administrative structures that can be so different from one country to another. This is why our role is to change the way cross-border cooperation is perceived at national level and to try to multiply cross-border cooperation projects. Peace, stability and growth depend on good neighbourhood relations between regions bordering each other.

Today we have the legal arsenal to enable and promote cross-border cooperation. We need greater political will to do so. Our wish for the future of Europe is to see better multi-level governance and more decentralised cross-border cooperation, a Europe where border areas are transformed into a common economic and cultural space, and where the voice of border regions is better heard by their national governments.

This is our common goal, but your Association is perfectly placed to spearhead and advance this process. In almost half a century, AEBR has succeeded in promoting cross-border cooperation and the participation of regions in European policies, and has contributed to the establishment of deep ties between populations living along the borders, with the aim of creating between them a climate of confidence and mutual understanding.

In the Congress, we have worked side by side with AEBR over the past 49 years to expand cross-border co-operation on the European continent. Today, we reaffirm our commitment to this partnership, and we look forward to your 50th anniversary next year.

I certainly hope we will be able to celebrate this important event together with you in person next year. Thank you.