

# European Committee of the Regions: Highlights of the January plenary

Portugal's Prime Minister António Costa returned to the European Committee of the Regions on 31 January to set out his vision for the EU. In the CoR's plenary session whose guests included Tomislav Donchev, Deputy Prime Minister of Bulgaria, and Frans Timmermans, First Vice-President of the European Commission, the EU's assembly for local and regional politicians said the EU27 must increase contributions to the future EU budget to protect regional investment, and threatened to go to the European Court of Justice if the EU tries to divert funds earmarked for regions and cities to help national governments finance structural reforms.

Message of reform from Portugal's PM : Prime Minister António Costa brought a message of economic urgency and political renewal on 31 January, telling local and regional leaders that the EU must complete economic reforms and focus on narrowing economic and social differences across regions and cities. A former member of the CoR and Mayor of Lisbon, Prime Minister Costa said that "In a globalised world Europe requires more cohesion and a more competitive economy" and that "we must not weaken the foundations of our Union, such as the cohesion policy". António Costa returned to the European Committee of the Regions on 31 January to set out his vision for the EU. In the CoR's plenary session whose guests included Tomislav Donchev, Deputy Prime Minister of Bulgaria, and Frans Timmermans, First Vice-President of the European Commission, the EU's assembly for local and regional politicians said the EU27 must increase contributions to the future EU budget to protect regional investment, and threatened to go to the European Court of Justice if the EU tries to divert funds earmarked for regions and cities to help national governments finance structural reforms.

Bulgaria's Deputy PM says EU faces "litmus test" : Speaking on behalf of the EU Presidency Tomislav Donchev, Deputy Prime Minister of Bulgaria, said that, "The debate on the next Multiannual Financial Framework and cohesion policy needs to be seen as a litmus test for the future of the Union" and as an "indication of how much we believe in the Union". He warned the next budget risks being seen as "rather a result of the current political whirlwind than of [an] ambitious agenda". He said that "Cohesion policy should create incentives for reforms".

**'Local and regional solutions where possible and necessary'**: In a wide-ranging debate with CoR members, which included a heated exchange on Catalan independence, European Commission First Vice-President **Frans Timmermans** emphasised that the Commission's proposals for EU reform, including the option of "doing less more efficiently", should reinforce the subsidiarity principle. As part of its effort to find the best level to

achieve the best result, the Commission has set up a '[Task Force](#)' that aims to find ways to better involve regional and local authorities in EU policy-making. Three of the six politicians in the Task Force are CoR members.

[European Commission in breach of subsidiarity](#) : In a [resolution](#) adopted with support across its political groups, the CoR said it will go to the European Court of Justice if European Commission proposals to offer Member States the possibility to use EU cohesion funds to support structural reforms are agreed. The CoR argues that the Commission's plan contravenes the principles of subsidiarity, multi-level governance, co-financing and shared management.

[Support for action against Poland](#) : In a resolution supporting the European Commission's decision to invoke Article 7 of the EU treaty, the CoR said that legal changes affecting the Polish judiciary are of "direct and immediate relevance" to local and regional authorities. It urged the EU, however, not to suspend funding for Poland's cities and regions, saying that sub-national authorities should not "be held hostage to policies pursued by national governments".

**Cohesion policy:** Having adopted its position on the future of cohesion policy in May 2017, the CoR elaborated its positions on four issues related to cohesion policy, including the [future of EU finances](#) . In recommendations crafted by **Marek Woźniak** (PL/EPP), Marshal of the Wielkopolski region, the CoR argues that in the wake of Brexit, member states should increase their contributions to the EU budget, and cohesion and agricultural policies should remain the major recipients of EU funds.

The CoR also warned against marginalising local and regional authorities. In an opinion led by **Oldřich Vlasák** (CZ/ECR), member of Hradec Králové council and former European Parliament Vice-President, the CoR identifies gaps in proposals from the [High-Level Group on Simplification for beneficiaries of EU structural funding](#) , while supporting the Group's call for greater local and regional. The CoR addressed how to increase the impact of cohesion funding through '[integrated territorial investments](#) ', in a report presented by **Petr Osvald** (CZ/PES), member of Plzeň council and chair of the CoR's Commission for Territorial Cohesion Policy and EU Budget.

[Annual Growth Survey](#) : The economic recovery in the Europe Union is being held back by its failure to recognise the potential of regions and consider regional variations in its economic reforms, the CoR concluded in a resolution on the EU's Annual Growth Survey 2018. The CoR also warned that an investment plan created in response to the crisis – the European Fund for Strategic Investments (EFSI) – is proving inaccessible to many regions in the EU.

[Maximising the potential of outermost regions](#) : The CoR backed an opinion drafted by the President of the Canary Islands, **Fernando Clavijo (ES/ALDE)**, that calls for a revised strategy to foster jobs, economic development, social cohesion and equal opportunities in the outermost regions. In the presence of MEP Younous Omarjee (FR/GUE-NGL), the CoR voiced support for investment in sectors such as renewable energies and the blue economy, suggesting that the EU's outermost regions could be test-beds for innovation.

**Europe on the Move** : CoR members addressed the local and regional implications of two legislative proposals in the European Commission's 'Europe on the Move' package. In an opinion by **Spyros Spyridon** (GR/EPP, from Poros council) the CoR tackled concerns about competition in the transport sector and the treatment of drivers associated with the Posting of Workers Directive, which sets the terms on which companies and their workers can operate outside their home country. In the presence of MEP Wim van de Camp (NL/EPP), members also set out ideas to increase compliance with EU legislation aimed at improving working conditions for drivers, road safety and competition.

A report by **Ivan Žagar** (SI/EPP), Mayor of Slovenska Bistrica, the CoR also backed Commission proposals to reduce formalities linked with toll systems on Europe's roads and to harmonise information provided by public transport.

**Digital single market** : In its mid-term review of the digital single market, the CoR emphasised that cities and regions are in a key position to harness the growth potential of the digital economy. The opinion, drafted by **Alin Nica** (RO/EPP), Mayor of Dudeștii Noi, warned that the EU must pay more attention to cyber-security, data privacy, and narrowing the digital divide.

**Blue economy** : The western Mediterranean is "highly" vulnerable to climate change, demographic and humanitarian challenges, **Samuel Azzopardi** (MT/EPP) of Rabat council warned in an opinion on sustainable development of the region's blue economy. The opinion sets out recommendations to make the western Mediterranean more secure, develop a 'smart and resilient' maritime economy, and improve sea governance.

**Small businesses** : **Robert Negoită** (RO/PES), Mayor of Bucharest District 3, won backing for proposals aimed at helping the long-term development of the COSME programme, which support the largest creators of jobs in local and regional economies – micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). A product of the EU's Small Business Act (SBA) of 2008, COSME eases SMEs' access to funding and foreign markets.

" **Erasmus for local and regional representatives** " : The CoR **called** on the European Commission to consider establishing an exchange programme for 2018-2020 that would provide local and regional politicians with training on EU policies. The opinion was drafted by **François Decoster** (FR/ALDE), Vice-President of the Haut-de-France Region and Mayor of Saint-Omer, who was one of the 100 participants in a pilot project in 2012-2013. MEP Mercedes Bresso (IT/S&D) stressed her support for the initiative.

**Improving the balance between conflict species and human activity** : rapporteur **Csaba Borboly** (RO/EPP), leader of a community – Harghita – that is home to one of the largest populations of bears in Europe, won backing for proposals aimed at reducing the number of difficult encounters with large predators. The EU is home to five large carnivores, at least one of them being currently found in 21 countries.

**Further material:**

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