

Plenary roundup: 11-12 May 2017

□The European Union's past, present and future and its Cohesion Policy were the main focuses of debate during the plenary session of the European Committee of the Regions (CoR), held on 11-12 May. In addition to an opinion on the future of Cohesion Policy after 2020, the CoR adopted detailed recommendations on budget rules, a 'code of conduct' on EU governance, entrepreneurship on islands, the bioeconomy, social innovation, young people, health, and relations with countries seeking to join the EU. It also discussed the rule of law in the EU and its neighbourhood with the president of the Council of Europe's Congress of Local and Regional Authorities.

THE FUTURE OF COHESION POLICY

"What we need is an alliance for a strong Cohesion Policy after 2020," **Michael Schneider** (DE/EPP), State secretary of the Land of Saxony Anhalt, said as he presented his opinion on the long-term future of the EU's principal investment policy, adding: "The Committee of the Regions can be at the core of this alliance." The opinion, which was adopted on 11 May, argues that the broader aims of Cohesion Policy – to increase economic, social and territorial cohesion – are "more topical than ever". Reflecting the assembly's belief that the EU's support for regional development is both a significant spur to economic development and a symbol of the EU's commitment to solidarity, the CoR stated that, "even after the United Kingdom leaves the European Union, the percentage share of the budget allocated to Cohesion Policy... should remain the same".

Jyrki Katainen, the European Commission's Vice-President for Jobs, Growth, Investment and Competitiveness, told the CoR that the EU needed to look at what it "could do better" to support growth, "especially in the current situation where the budget will most probably be smaller than it is at the moment", a reference to the United Kingdom's planned departure from the EU. Addressing the CoR on 12 May, **Günther Oettinger**, the European Commissioner for Budget and Human Resources, said that there was "as much a need for Cohesion Policy than ever", noting "huge disparities" between regions. He said that, based on the CoR's opinion, "I don't see any differences in approach as to how we can properly shape the modernisation programme" for the policy.

Press release: [EU local leaders want a faster, flexible and ambitious cohesion policy at heart of Europe's future](#)

Press release: [Cities and regions call for a more bottom-up European Semester process](#)

Press release: [Le Comité européen des régions demande l'intégration d'une clause d'insularité dans la politiques de cohésion de l'UE pour l'après 2020](#)

Press release: [Towards a knowledge-based bioeconomy: Cities and regions call for a review of EU policies](#)

BRINGING EUROPE CLOSER TO CITIZENS

The President of the European Parliament, **Antonio Tajani** (IT/EPP), told the plenary session that cooperation between the European Parliament and the CoR is of fundamental importance to bring Europe closer to its citizens, the first objective of his Presidency mandate. He welcomed the CoR's "Reflecting on Europe" initiative and added "As elected representatives in our regions you have a front role in making that objective a reality."

The CoR expressed regret that the White Paper on the Future of Europe, presented by the European Commission in March 2017, fails to recognise "one of the unique aspects" of the EU – its "multi-level governance". In a resolution adopted on 12 May, the CoR emphasises that "any discussions about the future of the European Union and reforms resulting from these debates must be bottom-up, involving all levels of governance". Among a series of elements identified as being "vital for defining a credible and ambitious scenario" for the future of the EU, the resolution identifies "multilevel governance and subsidiarity across all policy areas", full accountability, and a "comprehensive, properly financed and credible" cohesion strategy "incorporating the UN sustainable development goals". The result of the EU's deliberations should be "political solutions anchored in common solidarity – the fundamental principle of a united Europe" – rather than "minimalist compromises".

To contribute to the EU's process of reflection, the European Committee of the Regions is organising scores of town-hall and other meetings with citizens from across Europe. The feedback will contribute to an opinion by the CoR, requested by **Donald Tusk**, President of the European Council.

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In a debate with the CoR on 12 May, **Gudrun Mosler-Törnström** (AU/PES), President of the Council of Europe's Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, emphasised the record of cooperation over the past ten years between the two assemblies for local and regional politicians, as well as the complementary nature of the Council of Europe and the EU. "Our work provides the foundation for the work of the EU," she said. Ms Mosler-Törnström particularly emphasised the potential for cooperation between the two assemblies on corruption, the monitoring of local elections and developing relations with local and regional authorities along and beyond Europe's eastern and southern borders. In comments about current challenges, Ms Mosler-Törnström noted that the Council of Europe is addressing rule of law issues in Turkey, Hungary and Poland, where planned reforms of local government are "of concern". As part of its critique of actions by the Turkish government that the Council believes are damaging local democracy and "seriously weakening" civil society and political parties, the Council has

called for the annulment of decisions to remove mayors.

Separately, in a long series of comments on Turkey, its annual review of progress in the EU's enlargement process from the perspective of local and regional governance, the CoR expressed "concern" about the Turkish government's crackdown in the wake of the failed coup attempt in July 2016, "especially the detentions and removal from office of elected mayors", describing these actions as "seriously" weakening "pluralist democracy at the local level". At the same time, the CoR stated that "an effective working relationship between local and regional authorities on both sides can contribute... to rebuilding some of the trust between Turkey and the EU" and urged the Turkish government to heed a long-standing call by the CoR for an upgrade in contacts between the CoR and local and regional leaders in Turkey. The opinion, by **Rait Pihelgas** (EE/ALDE), Mayor of Ambla, presses the European Commission to report on local and regional governance in enlargement countries "more effectively and in more detail".

Audiovisual:

The CoR has produced a video [summary of the plenary session](#). Full proceedings from [11 May session](#) and [12 May session](#) are also available courtesy of EuroparlTV. Photos are available for download on our [Flickr account](#).

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