

Editorial



Towns, cities and urban areas are of crucial importance for the European Union. They are powerful engines for growth and jobs and make a significant contribution towards its economic, social and territorial development. In this context, I look forward to the implementation of the Urban Agenda for the EU and improving the urban dimension in EU policy making, following the CoR's dedicated Forum in May, in Amsterdam. This Forum coincided with the informal meeting of EU Ministers responsible for urban matters, where the "Pact of Amsterdam" was adopted. With this new operational framework and its instruments: better policies, territorial impact assessment, more tailor made and place sensitive EU-funds, we hope to improve both EU governance and the quality of life in urban areas. Together with other Europeans dedicated to building a strong and united Europe, we will hold our breaths this summer as British citizens vote on the future of their EU Membership. No matter what the result of this referendum will be, the discussions around it will likely have an impact on the functioning and agenda of the European Union in the future. I personally believe that the "together" option has proven to be more beneficiary to Europeans throughout history. I therefore hope that this democratic exercise will lead us towards a stronger Europe, rooted to its citizens and in line with the spirit of subsidiarity.

Michael Schneider,
President of the EPP Group
in the CoR

eGovernment: the potential to solve local and regional challenges

Today, eGovernment is more than just taking up technologies. Modern administration should deliver public services for citizens and businesses, designed by citizens and businesses and on the demand of citizens and businesses. According to the European Commission proposal, by joining efforts at the European Union level, the availability and take-up of eGovernment services can be increased, resulting in faster, cheaper, more user-oriented digital public services. **Martin Andreasson**, CoR rapporteur for the action plan for e-government 2016-2020 explains "Digitalization is the big game changer of our time. In the private sector, it has empowered individuals, raised the quality of service provided and made delivery more efficient. Up until today, the public sector has not been in the forefront of this development. This needs to change.

eGovernment opportunities are especially important for local and regional authorities because we are responsible for delivering a large portion of all public services in Europe. We face monumental challenges with ageing populations and increased expectations from citizens. If we embrace the

potential, and handle the risks, then digitalization holds the key to solve a lot of our well known challenges." Mr Andreasson is a commissioner in Region Västra Götaland and head of the commission that coordinates the joint digital work for local and regional authorities in Sweden.



Time for action in the Arctic

The European Commission published a communication on an integrated EU policy for the Arctic on 27 April with a focus on responding to climate change and contributing to the Arctic's sustainable development. Specific interest for the CoR lies in the references to the structural funds and the Investment Plan, as resources to aid economic development in the region. There is also a specific reference to smart specialisation strategies, which are often region-

ally-led. Responding to the proposal, **Bruno Hranic**, the EPP Group in the CoR's coordinator for Environment, Climate Change and Energy Policy, said: "Climate change is faster and more severe in the Arctic than in rest of the world. Changes in the Arctic will not only affect local people and ecosystems but also the rest of the world-vegetation, animals, settlements and infrastructure-because the Arctic plays a special role in global climate. Implications are particularly great

for future generations that will face the consequences of current action or inaction. We can't just stand aside and do nothing: It is time that the EU steps up and takes concrete actions. Together we can help the Arctic region for a better tomorrow." For **Pauliina Haijanen**, CoR rapporteur for the Baltic Sea Region; the first macro-regional strategy, the global importance of an Arctic Strategy is clear from a safety and economic perspective. "In the Arctic, we clearly see the impacts of climate change, melting of the Nordic poles glacier as well as many other effects on our nature. In providing solutions to these challenges we need better cooperation, not only with the Nordic countries and Canada, US and Russia, but also with all EU countries. The Arctic is an enormous resource for us in Europe" she said before also underlining the need to promote sustainable development, following the COP 21 agreement in Paris. "The CoR should show its commitment in this very relevant topic and can offer support and advice for using cohesion funds and steps to achieve more strategic investment."



Celebrating democracy, citizenship and the values of Europe

“I’m proud and honoured to receive the Emperor Maximilian Prize 2016. It’s not only recognition of my work but also a confirmation that Sweden is an active part of the European cooperation. The local level is closest to the citizens of Europe. The key to solve the challenges that Europe faces is to strengthen

the local democracy by implementing the principle of subsidiarity and the Charter of Local Self-Government.” These were the words of **Anders Knappe** during the presentation of the Emperor-Maximilian-Prize 2016, which is awarded annually in Innsbruck on Europe Day.



Voting rights and democracy in Europe: what role for local and regional government?



With the age of 18, most young European citizens can exercise their voting rights at local, regional, national or European elections. Very often the topics debated during the election campaigns have a major European dimension. However, opinion polls repeatedly demonstrate that citizens feel that they are not very well informed about the EU or have a limited understanding of how the EU works. As local and regional authorities are close to citizens, they are ideally placed to promote a better understanding of EU citizenship and make people more aware of its real benefits for individ-

uals. As part of the project ‘European Regions Developing European Citizenship’, which is co-funded by Europe for citizens’ programme of the European Union, **Ivan Žagar** hosted a conference entitled “Voting rights from local to European level – political participation of EU citizens in constructing the community” in Slovenska Bistrica, Slovenia on April 13th-15th 2016. *“It should be recognized that the right to vote is a tool of citizens to decide their own future. The activity of politicians should inspire confidence among citizens and thus their participation in the elections”* he underlined.

Improving democracy through greater transparency and enhanced role for citizens

Initiatives to improve the quality of democracy were also debated at a study visit in the city of Murcia, which was organised on the initiative of **Pedro Antonio Sánchez López**, President of the Autonomous Community of Murcia, for the Commission for Citizenship, Governance, Institutional and External Affairs (CIVEX) on 4 May. President **Markku Markkula** opened the meeting stressing the need to build trust between governments and citizens. *“The entire inter-governmental system needs to get closer to citizens”* said President

Markkula, recalling CoR’s role in bringing the Union closer to civil society. This was echoed by the host, President López: *“An open government is the way to build confidence in a society, which is truly linked to the decision-making process. We are strongly committed to a culture of transparency and participation and we want to accomplish a culture that is built and shared by all. In this way, we respond to a social demand because citizens call for these kinds of approaches, not only with words or theories but with concrete and brave actions.”*



Awarding excellence in local journalism

“In a world where citizens are flooded with information, local journalism allows them to focus on their own environments whilst encouraging proximity and civil responsibility in cities and municipalities”. This is the belief of **Hans-Josef Vogel**, Mayor of Arnsberg and jury member of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation’s local journalism

prize. The award has been given annually in recognition of excellent local journalism in Germany since 1980 and according to Mayor Vogel, its importance is on the increase with the rise of social media. *“Networks of local newspapers should be encouraged and supported well as contacts between local journalists in Europe. This should*

not only focus on connections with Brussels, but among all cities and regions in Europe.” The EPP Group will continue its work to support local media once again this year through its Winter University in November. This year it will focus on the importance of data journalism and open data as a means to enhance transparency.

Development of active citizenship as a way to strengthen local democracy in the Eastern Partnership countries

We cannot be indifferent to developments in the eastern border of the European Union. We should, to the best of our ability, support the democratisation process and one of the key challenges is how to build on the civil structures in our neighbourhood. This is why I have authored a report dedicated to promoting local de-

mocracy in the Eastern Partnership countries for the Conference of Regional and Local Authorities for the Eastern Partnership, also known as CORLEAP. As a Mayor from the city where Solidarnosc was born, I am extremely interested in the development of civil society, which empowers the people living there. The report

pays particular attention to the role of modern communication technologies, such as Facebook and Twitter, and open data methodologies as a vital part of civil society, as well as more traditional democratic instruments such as town hall meetings with local people, public consultation or public information bulletins. It is also impor-

tant to identify the real possibility of assistance from the European Union, which could prove to be effective in the development of local democracy and for civil society development in the Eastern Partnership countries. This would be the right instrument for cooperation at local and regional authority level. Finally, analysing risks for the development of civil society, by the geopolitical situation in the region, is essential, including research into how the EU could minimise such risks. In the Eastern Partnership, I see an opportunity for democratisation and civil society development in six EU Member States as well as in Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia. Is it likely that progress in democratisation in these neighbouring countries will also positively affect civic awareness in the Russian Federation.

Pawel Adamowicz,
Mayor of the city of Gdańsk,
Poland



Ongoing opinions

CIVEX

- Enlargement Strategy 2015-2016, Anna Magyar
Adoption foreseen June 2016
- Legal Migration Package, Olgierd Geblewicz
Adoption foreseen December 2016

COTER

- Mid-term revision of the Multiannual financial framework, Luc Van den Brande
Adoption foreseen June 2016
- The future of Cohesion Policy beyond 2020, Michael Schneider
Adoption foreseen 2017

ECON

- European Deposit Insurance Scheme, Hans-Jörg Duppré
Adoption foreseen June 2016
- Tackling the Investment Gap, Markku Markkula
Adoption foreseen February 2017

SEDEC

- State of play of the EU response to the demographic challenge – Experiences and demands from Europe's cities and regions, Juan Vicente Herrera Campo
Adoption foreseen June 2016
- EU eGovernment Action Plan, Martin Andreasson
Adoption foreseen 12 October 2016

ENVE

- Waste Legislation Review, Domenico Gambacorta
Adoption foreseen June 2016
- Towards a new EU climate change adaptation strategy, Sirpa Hertell
Adoption foreseen February 2017

NAT

- Price volatility, Jacques Blanc
Adoption foreseen December 2016
- Tourism: a driving force for investment, jobs and sustainable growth in Europe's regions and cities, Hanspeter Wagner
Adoption foreseen December 2016
- Sustainable Food Systems, Arno Kompatscher
Adoption foreseen Feb 2017

We should be grateful for what Europe is today

During a visit to Innsbruck on Europe Day, President Markku Markkula recalled what Europe stands for with this message: “Too many lives were lost in Europe's divisions and wars. Too much hate and cruelty has shattered

this continent. Too much blood and too many tears were shed. It took decades of hard work until we reached the level of freedom, welfare and peaceful unity which we enjoy today. Even if there are economic, social and political problems

which we have to overcome, they seem small in comparison to those our grandparents had to live with. Europe Day reminds us also of this reality. And we should be grateful for what Europe is today!”



What is Europe Day?

Europe Day held on 9 May every year celebrates peace and unity in Europe. The date marks the anniversary of the historical ‘Schuman declaration’. At a speech in Paris in

1950, Robert Schuman set out his idea for a new form of political cooperation in Europe, which would make war between Europe's nations unthinkable. Schuman's pro-

posal is considered to be the beginning of what is now the European Union and is celebrated with a wide range of events across Europe's regions and cities.

News from the EPP family

Members of the European People's Party gathered in Luxembourg on 30 May to celebrate forty years since its foundation in 1976. Local and regional governments from across Europe were represented by Michael Schneider, President of the EPP Group in the European Committee of the Regions (CoR), and Markku Markkula, President of the CoR.

Ján Figel becomes EU's envoy for freedom of religion

European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker appointed on Friday, 6th May, the first special envoy for the promotion of freedom of religion or faith outside the EU. The envoy's term of office is one year and is renewable, announced the European Commission.



Enlargement Day 2016

Seven consecutive enlargements, spanning over half a century, have provided geopolitical stability in Europe and facilitated trade and

economic growth. Currently, the EU is considering further expansion towards the Western Balkans and Turkey. In this process, the EU

is weighing fundamental values against security concerns, public scepticism in some member states and past experience of letting in

countries that were not prepared. In addition the economic, security and refugee crises are making the EU more cautious about enlarging

further. It is against this backdrop that the European Committee of the Regions held its Enlargement Day on 1-2 June.

An interview with **Johannes Hahn**, European Commissioner with responsibility for European Neighbourhood Policy & Enlargement Negotiations

1. The 2015 EU Enlargement Strategy reiterates that no new countries will be ready to join the EU during the mandate of the current Commission. Despite this, the Commission remains committed to working with enlargement countries on the “fundamentals first” principle. What does this mean in practice?

Indeed none of the current enlargement countries will be able to complete the demanding reforms necessary for accession during this Commission's mandate. Exactly because of this need of further reforms, the Commission continues its 'fundamentals first' approach. Building an independent judiciary and functioning democratic institutions, fighting organised crime and corruption and protecting fundamental rights, as well as addressing the shortcomings in economic governance and competitiveness, all are difficult processes that take time. Therefore, it is crucial that these issues are tackled early on in the process to ensure sustainable results.

In practice, we expect the countries not only to adopt relevant legislation and set up the necessary institutions; what really matters is implementation. It is not enough that things look good on paper. For the credibility of the enlargement process and for the enlargement countries to be able to reap the full benefits of their future EU membership, it is indispensable that we see real results on the ground. The fundamentals first approach makes this perfectly clear,

but also helps the countries focus on what is expected from them.

2. Where do you see the role of multi-level governance fitting into this principle and are you offering any specific support to local and regional authorities here?

Local and regional authorities play a key role in the Commission's 'fundamentals first' approach. They need, for example, to implement anti-corruption measures and public administration reform within the remit of their responsibilities. They know the local economy best and thus play a key role in improving competitiveness and strengthening the economic development of their regions, cities and towns. And they are often the direct contact points for citizens. Therefore, local and regional authorities play a crucial role not only in implementing reforms, but also in shaping public perception of the state of reforms.

They are also involved in preparing, implementing and monitoring pre-accession assistance (IPA). This mirrors the partnership principle as is used with Member States for the EU cohesion policy. Specific support to governance and public administration is part of IPA priorities. In this context, IPA programmes include a number of initiatives to support decentralisation of public services and local self-government, in particular to ensure more effective and focused delivery of local service. We also support improving capacity of local authorities to facilitate a more favourable business environ-



ment that can bring investments and increase employment.

3. As former Commissioner for Regional Policy, you are well aware of the importance of structural and cohesion funds. Do you think that lessons can be drawn from your work in this field and transposed to the pre-accession funds?

Both pre-accession assistance and structural funds need to be managed according to the same principle of sound financial management, which in practice means that already now enlargement countries need to strengthen their capacity to manage EU funds properly, focusing on efficiency of public financial management and public internal control. Support through pre-accession assistance to measures in these areas is therefore a priority. In parallel, IPA also supports elements which are the priorities of the regional policy, such as competitiveness and growth

in the broad sense. So indeed there are many cross-cutting issues and my experience in regional policy comes very handy.

4. The Enlargement Strategy is anchored on a country specific approach. Despite this, do you think there are common challenges at the local and regional level, which could be tackled with support from the European Committee of the Regions?

The fundamentals are a challenge for all current enlargement countries, and often we see that different countries face similar issues. In particular, there are a lot of parallels between the Western Balkan countries, given their historical and regional links. Local and regional authorities have a key role in implementing the 'fundamentals first' approach and carrying out difficult reforms in core areas. For example, they usually deal with building permits, conduct public procurement

procedures and provide local services. This can put them at the front-line in the fight against corruption and underlines also the need to establish a professional and impartial civil service at local and regional level. In all enlargement countries shortcomings in this regard persist. The European Committee of the Regions is well placed to support the local and regional authorities in implementing a difficult reform agenda by sharing best practices from within the EU and providing advice on how to best tackle the existing problems. The Committee also plays a key role in advising the countries on the question of decentralisation. While there is no *acquis* in this area and different Member States have widely differing models, the Committee has the expertise to help the enlargement countries identify what level of decentralisation could work best in their specific case, taking into account the differences in size and set-up of the countries.