

MISSION TO IRELAND

JOINT COMMITTEE ON EUROPEAN AFFAIRS

INTRODUCTORY SPEECH + OTHER TOPICS

INTRODUCTORY SPEECH

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me start by thanking all the members of the Joint Committee on European Affairs, for our meeting today.

Let me also thank my colleagues,

the members of the Irish Delegation in the European Committee of the Regions,

one of the strongest and most active delegations of our House,

whose dedication and hard work both on the ground and in our
Committee,

has been so important and valuable during these very
challenging times.

Just take a moment to think about it:

In the past two and a half years, the crises we have gone
through

has turned our longer-term challenges into urgent priorities.

Digitalization made a difference between

having students attending their classes or not, or having
companies surviving or not.

Energy transition and building a sustainable green Europe,

is no longer only an environmental priority, but a geopolitical necessity.

And all this time,

from the utmost horror of the war in Ukraine,

to the ongoing suffering of COVID,

to the impact of Brexit,

and from the ultimate threat of climate change,

to Europe's unhealthy dependence on Russian gas and crude oil,

European regions and cities are on the front line of these historic crises:

protecting citizens,

delivering vital services,

accelerating green and digital transitions,

diversifying energy sources

saving businesses and jobs,

and of course providing help and shelter to the millions of Ukrainians,

who left their country because of the war.

It is regional and local and leaders,

who have, right from the start of the attack against Ukraine,

organized humanitarian aid and welcomed refugees,

in the bordering regions and in every corner of Europe.

At the same time, the European Committee of the Regions,

has swiftly put in place a web-based Ukraine Info-Support Hub,

a platform that matches needs and offers for help.

We have called for improving the access to emergency EU
funding,

to make it easier and faster for regions to access these funds

and provide rapid support and manage the humanitarian crisis.

We have also put forward another important initiative, to host children from Ukraine in Summer Camps across Europe.

And now, we are building a European Alliance of Cities and Regions for the reconstruction of Ukraine,

linking local and regional authorities in Europe in order to coordinate and facilitate contacts and cooperation

with the Ukrainian local and regional authorities,

following the proposal of President Zelenski and the support of President Michel.

And this is my call to the Irish regions and cities today,

to join our Alliance and our initiatives for the children and the reconstruction of Ukraine.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

All these consecutive and parallel crises have shown

that no matter the size, strength and power, no one alone

can deal with the challenges and meet the real needs of the people.

So this is how the European Committee of the Regions sees our European House of Democracy:

The EU being the protective roof.

The Member-States, the strong walls.

And the regions and cities, the solid foundations.

All levels of government working together to bring results.

So I welcome the fact that with the Irish Program for Government, for the first time there is a clear commitment to regional development, as a policy implementation objective.

And I trust that the role of regional and local administrations, will be enhanced to deal with the huge challenges,

including the access to affordable housing and the crisis of the rise of the cost of living.

At the same time, I deeply regret

that the Trade and Cooperation Agreement,

lacks "territorial depth" and does not duly recognize

the role of local and regional authorities in the EU-UK
relationship.

As I understand, internal political matters are the reasons why
the United Kingdom

failed to assure a voice to local democracy in the Joint
Partnership Council.

Moreover, we support a joint and responsible approach

to the implementation of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement,

including the Northern Ireland Protocol and the respect of the level-playing field.

For this reason, I am deeply worried about the unilateral interpretation by London of the Protocol

which could turn into a de facto hard Brexit,

a disruption of the UK-EU trade

with very strong repercussions for Ireland, and the risk to jeopardize the Good Friday Agreement.

For us one thing is clear.

There are many regions in Ireland and all over Europe,

who are so heavily impacted and so heavily invested in partnerships with UK devolved nations and local governments,

so there are so many untapped opportunities in areas of mutual interest, such as:

providing humanitarian assistance, managing in a sustainable way the North Sea, the Channel and the Irish Sea,

as well as fighting against climate change, and implementing the Sustainable Development Goals,

that the role of regional and local authorities is irreplaceable.

Ladies and Gentlemen.

Let me conclude by saying that our Union can survive and
move forward,

only if our citizens care about it and believe in it.

So we must build a bottom-up future for Europe,

with more democratic representation of people's vote and less
institutional complexity.

We must win back the trust of the citizens.

Their trust in all three levels of government,

The trust in the three levels of elected politicians:

European, national and regional and local.

These three levels of trust are interconnected and can only succeed if they reinforce each other.

If one of these levels is missing, the whole European house of democracy collapses.

To put it in simple words:

We need a lively parliamentary democracy with a stronger European Parliament, stronger national parliaments

and the European Committee of the Regions, as well as Europe's cities and regions, at its core.

Thank you!

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1. Conference on the Future of Europe

More than ever, Europe's future is debated and is at the heart of all our discussions. For over a year, we held exciting conversations and debates with citizens in the framework of the Conference on the Future of Europe. I am delighted with the final results which take into account the recommendations and priorities of citizens, as well as those of the European Committee of the Regions 30-members delegation of local and regional representatives, who have been heavily involved in the process.

Examples: On democracy (proposals 36), we need to increase **citizens' participation and youth participation at all levels of governance**, and ensure that their **voice is also heard during elections** and that their participation is effective.

Concretely, by creating a **system of local EU Councillors**, as a way to **reduce the distance between the EU institutions and European citizens**; to **involve more youth** via the creation of **local Youth Council structures**; or by dedicated **"Houses of Europe"**, at the local level to provide **resources, information and advice** to citizens on EU matters (proposal 37).

We need to reinforce **European democracy by strengthening its foundations**, via active participation in elections and ensuring that citizens' pre-occupations are heard and lead to a specific action by their elected representative.

Only **active subsidiarity and multilevel governances** are the key principles and fundamental features of a **well-functioning EU democratic accountability** (proposal 40).

I'm profoundly glad that the final report of the Conference **recommends the Reform of the Committee of Regions** and giving it **an enhanced role in the institutional architecture** on matters with a **territorial impact**, and yes, it is possible to give the Committee of the Regions more power without amending the Treaties.

That is why we have asked to have an observer role in the negotiations between the three institutions; European Parliament, Commission and Council. At the moment it is a legal and juridical deficit that we are facing; this has to be corrected, because if we want to guarantee a more democratic and transparent process.

At the next European Council in June, the Heads of State will discuss the implementation of the results of the Conference: I count on the President of Ireland, and your lobbying to your government to promote a pragmatic approach to ensure a more democratic and efficient EU.

2. House of Democracy

We know that we cannot take democracy for granted and that democratic principles are fragile and can be destabilised. Our European House of Democracy is precious. And we have to protect it.

The foundations of democracy in the EU lie within its 240 regions, 90,000 municipalities and over 1,2 million locally and regionally elected politicians, representing 450 million people. Born locally about 2500 years ago in the "polis", democracy can only survive in the EU if it is well rooted on the ground and practiced every day. Above all, **democracy is accepted if it is legitimised via people's trust and if it delivers results at the level closest to the citizens.**

That is why, we need to promote a model of a "House of European Democracy" built on a three-dimensional legitimacy: **solid foundations represented by regional and local authorities, strong walls represented by the 27 member states and a protective roof provided by the EU.**

We need to adopt a **bottom-up approach to decision-making in the EU institutions will bring the EU closer to people's hearts and minds** and will restore trust in the EU as a democratic project based on strong electoral representation, that respects gender equality.

Elections are a fundamental tool for the functioning of representative democracy through the work of political parties. We must ensure that, beyond European elections held every 5 years, **key topics of European relevance are discussed ahead of national, regional and local elections**, considering that 70% of the EU legislation is implemented at local and regional level.

A more democratic EU needs to address the existing **political and legal legitimacy gap** and make its regions, provinces, cities, towns and villages an indivisible part of its decision-making mechanisms.

We, the European Union's local and regional leaders, want a EU that responds more effectively to the needs and aspirations of citizens.

3. The CoR Delivered

Worked intensively to secure a **strong cohesion policy** to deliver on EU-wide political priorities, **especially the green and digital transitions**.

Strongly pushed for a solid **EU investment plan to support the recovery from the corona pandemic**, for all our regions.

Called for improving the **access to emergency EU funding** to help manage the **humanitarian crisis resulting from the tragic war in Ukraine**, because drastic measures are required to make it easier and faster for regions to access these funds to provide rapid operational support.

Swiftly put in place a **web-based Ukraine Info-Support Hub, a matchmaking platform to link overburdened local and regional authorities** with those from other EU Member States that have more capacities to help.

We are also launching a **European Alliance of Cities and Regions** for the **reconstruction of Ukraine** to link local and regional authorities in Europe and to coordinate and facilitate contacts and cooperation with the EU institutions and between the EU and Ukrainian local and regional authorities.

4. Ukraine War and Reconstruction

At this moment, national, **regional and local governments share a huge responsibility** in coping with the persisting consequences of the pandemic while dealing with many implications of the tragic war moved by Russia against Ukraine.

Your country, **Sweden, has welcomed with open arms** thousands of **refugees** in its regions and cities since the beginning of the war, and has been assisting Ukraine by providing medical supplies.

I'm deeply moved by the mobilization and decisiveness of local and regional authorities throughout our Union, to stand with the Ukrainian people.

Without resorting to the right to veto, without negotiations, misunderstandings and understatements, local and regional authorities have been **active, present and supportive.**

Despite the still very precarious situation, President Zelensky has asked EU regions and cities to establish twinning agreements with their Ukrainian counterparts with a view to the reconstruction of infrastructure of villages and cities. President Zelensky and Michel have both asked to European Committee of the Regions to provide expertise and know-how for this reconstruction process. Two weeks ago, a Communication of the European Commission framed the way forward for reconstruction, with a clear role of cities and regions for a peer-to-peer cooperation. In this context, we have proposed to **build a new Alliance of cities and regions for the reconstruction of Ukraine**, from the bottom up.

To this end, a Reconstruction Facility must be created soon, and we need to make sure that it will be **directly accessible for European local and regional authorities**, to insure a "**build back better**" principle to anticipate the green and digital transition and an effective system of multi-level governance based on the OECD principles of public investment across all levels of government.

5. Health Union

The pandemic strengthened EU solidarity, highlighted the severity of health disparities between regions and made it abundantly clear that the EU needs **a stronger health policy**. Our health systems were stretched to the limit yet our medical professionals not only lived up to their Hippocratic oath but, with the support of EU, national and local governments, found ways to respond to the lack of drugs and gear, developed new protocols and worked to save as many lives as possible.

We want **both national and subnational responsibilities established based on subsidiarity, recognising local and regional competencies in health** seen during the pandemic. The European Health Union we want need a real pragmatic health pact for European citizens. We want **a solid - yet flexible - European framework, that is able to support our cities, regions and states in health promotion, prevention, service provision and research and innovation**.

To succeed, we need to accelerate the transformations initiated during the pandemic and build resilience. First, we need to **consolidate the progress in digitalisation and take it to the next level: the European Health Data Space**. The final report of the Conference on the Future of Europe is clear - citizens want their health data both portable and secure, readily available in an EU health passport.

Second, we need to **reduce our vulnerabilities**. The COVID-19 exposed our soft underbelly: **lack of regional industrial capacity, fragile local supply chains, lack of strategic stockpiles and missing cross-border links**. The Health Emergency Preparedness and Response (HERA) must address some of these issues; yet the potential of regions and cities to boost Europe's strategic autonomy is yet to be fully tapped into. We need regular and more updated information about the state of our health at a regional level, so we can identify and support those regions most in need.

Third, we need to profoundly transform our health systems to make them future proof, it is vital to redefine our priorities and refocus funding. Better mental health care, smarter prevention and healthy lifestyle promotion, health literacy.

This needs a **fundamental shift in thinking that places medical practitioners, health services, local and regional governments and our communities at the centre of the European Union**. Our common goal is one: to best serve our people.

6. BREXIT/NORTHERN IRELAND PROTOCOL

Even though, the European Committee of the Regions did not have a formal role in the negotiations of the Brexit, our institution has provided a platform for political dialogue which brings together the interests of representatives of local and regional authorities across the EU.

In this quality, our institution has been following closely the negotiations and positioned itself as the promoter of the territorial perspective in the dialogue with the other EU institutions and analysed the territorial consequences on our regions and cities.

In this context, the CoR has organized consultations, debates and carried out "territorial impact assessments" aiming to assess the consequences of the UK's withdrawal at sub-national level. Ireland and Northern Ireland are among the most exposed to the consequences of Brexit. But the territorial consequences are hitting beyond the Channel, in Spain, France, Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands.

This is why we strongly regret that the Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA), which fully entered into force on 1 May 2021, lacks "territorial depth" and does not duly recognise the role of local and regional authorities (LRAs) in the EU-UK relationship.

In February 2020 we have established a CoR-UK Contact Group (CG), which is the only institutional channel for providing a forum for continued dialogue and political partnership between the EU and UK LRAs and for exchanging know-how, in particular on territorial cooperation and cross-border issues.

Therefore, we call for its formal recognition under the TCA in order to provide an assessment of the subnational dimension of the key policy and legislative issues that will have an impact on the UK-EU bilateral relationship.

We support a joint and responsible approach to the implementation of the TCA, including the Northern Ireland Protocol and the respect of the level-playing field.

For this reason, we are worried about the unilateral interpretation by London of the Protocol which could turn into a de facto hard Brexit, a disruption of the UK-EU trade with very strong repercussions for Ireland, and the risk to jeopardise the Good Friday Agreement.

In this context we support the Peace programme and the dialogue between the two communities, as well as we suggest to promote the setting of European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTCs) across the border.

The opposition in Belfast is stopping the majority to form a government in Northern Ireland with the risk to transfer once more the government of

Northern Ireland to London and to weaken the Good Friday Agreement: the CoR, through its Contact Group with UK's devolved administrations and local government remains at disposal of Ireland to promote confidence building measure, involving dialogue between two communities in the spirit of the Good Friday Agreement and the Protocol framing the partnership after Brexit.