



ASSEMBLÉE DES RÉGIONS D'EUROPE  
ASSEMBLY OF EUROPEAN REGIONS  
VERSAMMLUNG DER REGIONEN EUROPAS  
ASAMBLEA DE LAS REGIONES DE EUROPA  
ASSEMBLEA DELLE REGIONI D'EUROPA

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**Dear Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,**

It is a great pleasure, both for myself, and for my colleagues from the AER Presidium, to have this opportunity to meet the regional, national and European media in Brussels. It is a rare occasion for us, to be together in Brussels, as the AER is more accustomed to organising meetings and conferences, in regional capitals and cities across Europe. Tomorrow, the AER Presidium will convene, and I would like to draw your attention, to **three of the subjects**, we will be discussing.

**The first concerns the expectations of the AER and its commitments towards the European Convention.**

**The second sets out the AER contribution to the future of regional and cohesion policy in an enlarged Europe.**

**And the third, confronts the effects of the processes of globalisation and the GATS negotiations on culture and education, and especially the role of public services in these domains.**

**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

Let me begin with the first point. We have made substantial progress towards the recognition of regional and local authorities, as the essential political representation for "grassroots democracy", authorities which are closest to the citizens, and fully understood by them. This is most evident in the debate on the future governance of Europe, and confirmed in the Laeken Declaration. Despite this, however, I have to admit, that a testing part of the work is still ahead of us.

Since the launch of the Convention on the Future of Europe last March, the AER has actively worked, in close cooperation with other interregional organisations, to allow the voice of the regions to be heard. However, until today, and despite general consensus within the members of the Convention, on the need to increase the political role of the regions and local authorities, in a new Constitutional Treaty, **there have been no well-defined proposals put forward in this field.**

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If there is a genuine will to create a Union, that will enjoy the support of its citizens, such a Union can only flourish, if it is firmly rooted in the regions and in the local authorities, which exist in the Member States. For us, for the Assembly of the European Regions, this regional dimension is crucial for the future of Europe. **Why?**

Decentralisation, a counterpart of globalisation, is progressing every year across Europe. The AER warmly welcomes the devolution process underway in the UK, the wide extension of regional competencies in Italy and in Spain, and the new phase of decentralisation launched recently in France by the new Prime Minister, Jean-Pierre Raffarin, who has been very active within our organisation for many years. We are also satisfied with the decentralisation reforms in the candidate countries, which are taking place alongside the enlargement negotiations.

Regions have become pillars of today's global reality and are the natural cornerstones of the political structures of tomorrow. Throughout Europe, regionalisation and decentralisation are understood as synonyms for an improved and more human form of governance, more able to answer the citizen's needs via appropriate policies, and involving citizens in their implementation. In economic terms, this entails the development of small and medium-sized businesses and greater levels of welfare. In economic sectors such as the environment, agriculture, transport or health, regionalisation represents governance coming closer to the people, on a smaller scale and with a higher quality. In social terms, it invokes greater solidarity. And at the European level, it enshrines the first essential steps to more democracy, and an efficient division of competencies and responsibilities. It also means closer cooperation and partnership between all levels of governance. Crucially, it leads to the greater involvement of citizens in the process of European integration.

Therefore, the AER fully expects that a European political system of the future resulting from the IGC in 2004 will place particular emphasis on the regions.

### **Ladies and Gentlemen, For what are we lobbying?**

In accordance with core European Union principles – **subsidiarity and proportionality**, the involvement of the regions in European decision-making processes must be a fundamental condition for the European Convention, which, after all, has a mandate to reinforce "bottom up" democracy and to envisage a Europe closer to its citizens. Regions and County Councils are directly dependant on decisions made by the Union and member states. Considered as natural partners, involved in a consultation process at an early stage, they could then contribute to improving decisions and making their implementation more effective, in order to increase the desired acceptance of the EU among the citizens.

The AER recognises that **the Union needs a constitutional framework** laying down all the elements underpinning the Union, including the Charter of Fundamental Rights, the goals and principles, the organisation, the decision-making structures, and processes, and the range of competencies. However, this future constitutional treaty should guarantee **respect for territorial structures within member states**. Furthermore, this should also include **explicit recognition of the principal of local self-government**.

For many years now, we, the Regions of Europe, have been calling for **a reordering of the division of powers within the Union**, essential if the EU is to be brought closer to the people



and made more transparent. It must be clear who does what and how, which powers are exercised by the Union, which institutions are implicated in the decision-making process, and which powers remain in the hands of the Member States and their regions? We welcome the ideas of the European Parliament, suggesting a clear delineation of tasks that would facilitate an understanding of the responsibilities of the Union, and what is decided at other levels, national or regional. Such classification would take into account **the principle of limited empowerment**, as currently set out in Art. 5 I of EC Treaty.

As the division of powers in Europe will remain largely characterised by shared responsibilities, the AER wishes to stress, once again, **the necessity of distributing these responsibilities in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity**. This is a starting point for the preservation of regional and local authorities powers within the structures of the member states. However, the involvement of the sub-national level in this founding principle has not yet been taken into account by the Working group on subsidiarity within the Convention. The AER considers that the general involvement of the sub-national level in the division of tasks, under the provisions of Article 5 II of EC treaty, would be a first step towards recognising regional authorities, as the third level of governance in Europe.

Concerning the monitoring of the **application of the principle of subsidiarity and of the distribution of competencies**, the AER calls for a **right to appeal for the regions to the European Court of Justice**. Consideration should also be given to granting the Committee of the Regions the right to refer a matter to the Court for violation of the principle of subsidiarity.

In addition, we suggest **simplifying Union regulatory instruments in accordance with the principle of proportionality** (Art. 5 III ECT). In line with the Laeken Declaration, a desire to introduce greater transparency into European structures also requires clear delineation of, and restriction on, the number of instruments for implementing the EU's powers. They should be restricted to framework conditions and avoid detailed regulations. This is the only way to maintain the necessary scope for decision making process in the member states and at the regional and local level.

**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

Let me now consider how a future European regional and cohesion policy could help regions to be more prosperous and more competitive. We know that **Enlargement is an unprecedented challenge for the Europe of tomorrow**. I for my part am absolutely convinced that the benefits to be gained from Enlargement will be enormous for Europe as a whole. I sincerely hope that most of you share my convictions and play your role in conveying the message via your media. But the EU must not forget that Enlargement of the Union concerns not only the economy; it is a project for our citizens. We politicians and journalists, have a crucial role to play in convincing people that they have no reason to fear the future. Therefore, **communication with people, particularly at local and regional level, where many people have fears, especially a fear of the unknown, is vitally important**. I know from my own experience as a regional politician for over 30 years how fruitful dialogue can be at all levels if we adopt open and frank discussions.

One of the basic principles of the AER is **solidarity** between the Member Regions. We accept that the same principle governs the regional and cohesion policy of the Union. It is entirely



legitimate to mobilise considerable funds with the objective of reducing the gap in living standards across Europe by investing in less advantaged areas. The AER has insisted on this principle for many years, as other interregional organisations have done, despite sometimes substantial differences between member Regions.

Moreover, the Assembly considers that **social, economic and territorial cohesion must remain among the main EU's objectives** and we oppose any attempt to pass this responsibility on to national governments. Cohesion cannot be reduced to a 'mere' intergovernmental policy; on the contrary, cohesion must be a joint supra-national achievement. The AER deems this the fundamental condition of a commitment to the balanced development of the European space and its economic and social convergence.

The effectiveness of future regional policy will depend on the ability to adopt a **more decentralised approach based on subsidiarity and "bottom up" thinking**. The AER believes the proposal of Mr Barnier on the creation of three-party contracts between the EU, the States and the Regions is a step in the right direction. However, the position of the Regions remains to be specified.

For the AER, **the Regions have an essential role to play as actors within cohesion and regional policy**. They must be better integrated, not only at the programming stage, but in deciding future objectives of Community cohesion and regional development policies well in advance of the actual planning stage. This automatically requires that the Regions have their own decision-making bodies and adequate financial backing.

In order to involve the AER member regions in the elaboration of the future regional and cohesion policy, we are preparing **the first Conference of the regional Presidents and Ministers which will be held in Pecs, in the Hungarian region of Baranya, on the 14th and 15th November**. There, the Regions of Europe will define their own project for European regional policy and provide clear indications to States and the EU. EU Regions that have benefited or are still benefiting from structural funds – and Regions in candidate and even non-candidate European countries, will be invited to exchange their views, know-how and expectations regarding the aims and means of a new cohesion policy. Those Regions with experience of the management of structural funds, and their assessment of the added value of Community measures and the role of national States in this context will be a major focus of discussion.

**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

The AER has been active in the Cultural and Educational sectors since its creation. On a personal note, this field is of special importance to me as I held the post of President of the AER Committee on "Culture, Education and Training" for the 4 years before I was elected President.

In today's context, one essential question must be asked: **"Are culture and education barriers to free trade at international level or alternatively, key elements of national and regional identity which need to be protected?"**

Today, we are facing a new problem: how to deal with the impact of globalisation and the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) negotiations on our schools and



universities, on our education systems and programmes, and on our libraries and museums..., and also on national and regional assistance policies in these areas.

The outcome of the current talks within the World Trade Organisation (WTO) could have far reaching consequences for regional authorities with regard to their powers and their freedom to act. Between now and 2005, the GATS will be extended to roughly 160 service sectors, including education, health and social care, environmental health and land use planning, many of which are currently regulated by national or regional governments.

It is our duty to remain vigilant, to ensure the involvement of the regions of Europe in these processes and to avoid negative impact on European citizens. **We must contribute to a joint strategy for the preservation of cultural diversity and for a high quality of free education in Europe! It is for this reason that the AER is organising the 2nd European Conference of Regional Ministers of Culture to be held on 18th October, in Brixen, in the Italian region of Bozen-Sudtirol.**

**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

Before I conclude, there is one more point I would like to mention. The next General Assembly of the AER will be held in Naples, on the 27-28th November. I would like to thank here the President of Campania, Mr Antonio Bassolino, for his kind invitation. The representatives of the 250 AER Member regions from 26 countries will participate in this event, which aims to put forward the political role of the regions and to develop new projects of cooperation between the regions from West and East, North and South of Europe.

And now, you have probably heard enough from me. I invite you to continue this meeting in a more informal manner and I am sure that my Colleagues from our four Committees will be delighted to answer all your questions. Thank you for your attention.