



Assemblée des Régions d'Europe
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**Article by the President of the Assembly of European Regions Riccardo Illy
on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the speech by Winston Churchill on the
United States of Europe
(Zurich, 19 September 1946)**

Sixty years have passed since, on 19 September 1946, Sir Winston Churchill delivered his famous speech on the United States of Europe at the University of Zurich, a proposition that led to the establishment of the Council of Europe, in London in 1949, paving the way for the long and fruitful experience of peaceful cooperation that culminated in the Maastricht Treaty of 1992 and the founding of the European Union.

The European construction process is going through a difficult time today. The new European Constitution, as presented by the Convention, is a feeble document, lacking in courage, and it is clear why it failed to meet with the approval of the citizens of France and Holland, who rejected it in the constitutional referendums. It is particularly important at this point, at this standstill in the European journey, to bring back and relive the propelling ideal of the founding fathers: Churchill, as well as Robert Schumann, Konrad Adenauer and Alcide De Gasperi.

The younger generations must be reminded that European institutions have been the bulwark first of all of peace in a continent that, from time immemorial, has been regularly and inexorably torn by fratricidal conflict, culminating in the twentieth century – the century of nationalist extremism and ferocious totalitarianism – in two world wars with devastating human, moral, and material consequences.

The tragic wounds of the second world war were still fresh in 1946, when Churchill delivered his speech in Zurich. The statesman, who had led Great Britain and western democracies to victory against nazism and fascism, recalled that “*over wide areas are a vast, quivering mass of*

tormented, hungry, careworn and bewildered human beings, who wait in the ruins of their cities and homes and scan the dark horizons for the approach of some new form of tyranny or terror”.

Such horrors, Churchill admonished, can still return. There is however a remedy, and that is – in the words of the British statesman – *“to recreate the European fabric, or as much of it as we can, and to provide it with a structure under which it can dwell in peace, safety and freedom. We must build a kind of United States of Europe. In this way only will hundreds of millions of toilers be able to regain the simple joys and hopes which make life worth living”.*

Churchill added: *“[Europe is also] the foundation of Christian faith and ethics, the origin of most of the culture, arts, philosophy and science both of ancient and modern times. If Europe were once united in the sharing of its common inheritance there would be no limit to the happiness, prosperity and glory which its 300 million or 400 million people would enjoy”.*

Looking back at the past serves to understand the long and extraordinary journey that the European ideal has made since the end of the second world war. The ideal heritage of the founding fathers was the inspiration in the mid-80’s to the then President of the European Economic Community Jacques Delors who, with his quiet strength, with courage and far-sightedness, laid the groundwork for the establishment of a single market. Today Europe needs to find again that same courage and far-sightedness that have led to the achievement of extraordinary results over little more than ten years, and that many had deemed impossible: after the single market, the Schengen agreements on the free circulation of people, the single currency, and, lastly, the enlargement to ten new member States.

In order to overcome the current standstill in the European construction process the European citizens need a new, ambitious goal. This would be the transformation of Europe into a truly political union: a Confederation of States that is able to express strong leadership and efficient government, with a foreign and defence policy to face internal and external threats, international terrorism, and instability in the Balkan area.

That same courage is necessary to show the way to future European enlargements, to include not only Bulgaria, Romania, and Croatia but also the Countries of South-Eastern Europe that

stemmed from the dissolution of former Yugoslavia, with the aim of contributing to the development and the democratic stabilisation of the area, thus defusing the risk of a future crisis in the Balkans. Courage also in welcoming Turkey into the Union, in the full awareness of the centuries-old relations, the conflicts, but also the mutual influences and contaminations, that have occurred between the European civilisation and the Ottoman world, in an area that has always been a bridge between Europe and Asia by virtue of its geographical position and cultural sensitivity. Turkey could build today a bridge towards moderate Islam and the whole area of the Mediterranean basin.

As President of AER, I have often had the opportunity to stress that Regions can and must play a key role in boosting the European process, by contributing both to integration through cross-border and international cooperation, and to economic development through the achievement of the objectives set out by the Lisbon agenda. The challenges that lie ahead for Europe can be met only by thinking globally and acting locally. It is for this reason that Regions represent a fundamental level of government in that they are able to adapt to the local dimension, and therefore apply in an adequate manner, the political strategies of the European Union.

In 1946, Winston Churchill's proposition for the establishment of the United States of Europe could appear a utopia at best, at worst a harmless good intention, in the wake of the still fresh wounds of the second world war and the rancour and division that the conflict had left in the living body of Europe. And yet that very utopia has come a long way and borne extraordinary fruit, when its path was crossed by courageous and visionary leaders like Churchill, Adenauer, Schumann and De Gasperi, like Delors. Courage, vision, and leadership are the elements that Europe needs today to win back the support of its citizens and resume its journey.

Riccardo Illy

President of AER (Assembly of European Regions)