

# Europe: of or with the regions?

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## 1. What kind of Europe do we want?

The debate about Europe, the future of Europe and the place of the regions in the European architecture is not an unimportant or neutral debate. It is not about procedures, but rather about the kind of Europe we want. Is Europe just an economic area in which each Member State tries to protect its own interests to the greatest possible extent and which is consequently the sum of the individual national interests? Or is it a political project that is creating a democratic space for its people with respect for their national, regional and local identity and which wants to take its place in an increasingly globalised world in order to be able to ensure more prosperity and well-being for its citizens?

The policy areas in which we in Europe wish to cooperate, how we wish to cooperate and with whom, and the way in which we wish to take decisions all depend, of course, on the answers to these questions.

If we look at the future architecture of Europe, two striking worldwide, and at first sight contradictory, trends seem to us to be of importance. First of all, we see increasing globalisation at every economic and financial level. National boundaries still exist on maps, but are becoming less and less important in daily life. At the same time we see in Europe an increasing awareness of the importance and dynamism of smaller entities and regions, such as the Basque Country, Flanders, Bavaria, Wales and Scotland. At first sight this is paradoxical, because the more global problems become, the more people look for security and solutions to their problems to levels of government that for them are recognisable, within reach and approachable. In this globalising world and information society which "decentralises" and "flexibilises", we need a different political structure than that developed in an industrial society, char-

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acterised by centralisation and standardisation. Today's citizen is above all a citizen of his district and municipality. But in addition he feels that he lives in a world where decisions are taken at a level that is beyond his reach. And in order to have a say in this world, he needs to be part of a large entity of global importance. And that can only be Europe.

## 2. The importance of regions in European integration

There is a growing conviction that the regions are the vehicles of democracy, cultural diversity and socio-economic development in Europe. When I speak of a Europe of the regions, I mean that Europe is a continent of regions and of diversity. Europeans feel strongly attached to their regions, and their culture and identity are closely bound up with regional traditions. Furthermore, Europe has a stake in diversity. Respecting cultural diversity contributes to the European Union's democratic basis and economic strength. Studies show that there is a direct connection between cultural identity in a region, people's identification with their region, increasing confidence, growing entrepreneurship, initiative and economic growth. Moreover, our own cultural diversity makes it possible to be open in a constructive way to outsiders coming to the European Union. Diversity is the bridge to interculturalism.

I am not arguing for a Europe of the regions to replace the Europe of states. The Europe of the regions I am speaking about is not a different Europe; it is not an amalgam of pseudo-statelets that have nothing to do with the real Europe of Member States, of the European Commission, the Councils of Ministers, etc. On the contrary, the regions are actively participating in this real Europe. And many regions with legislative powers are doing this in a practical and everyday way.

This is how we will really achieve a "*European Union, on which the Member States confer competences to attain objectives they have in common. The Union shall coordinate the policies by which the Member States aim to achieve these objectives, and shall exercise in the Community way the competences they confer on it.*" I have just quoted the first article of the Constitutional Treaty of the European Union, as agreed by the Heads of State or Government at their meeting in Brussels on 18 June 2004. The creation of the internal market in the 1990s and of the EMU serves as a framework for this, but is not an aim in itself.

Regions, federated states and autonomous communities reflect democracy, cultural diversity and socio-economic development in Europe.

Flanders and Wallonia are striking examples of this, as are the German and Austrian Länder, the Spanish regions and autonomous communities, and gradually, the Italian regions.

They all wish to achieve their own political-social projects with democratically elected organisations, based on a particular cultural and historical identity – which has nothing to do with ethno-nationalism – and as economic entities. With their specific areas of competence, they can and want to cooperate on a European Union in which growth, welfare and employment are promoted on the basis of a joint foundation at the social environmental and fiscal level, a union in which cultural diversity is fully recognised.

In this sort of Europe, regions will increasingly emerge to safeguard democratic policies which are close to the people, and to determine the type of economic and employment policy on a manageable scale.

Thus the European Commission's plan does indicate the objectives and strong guidelines for an ambitious policy for employment in and for Europe, but it will, above all, be the regions which determine the specific content of this framework. In the Flemish dialogue on employment, we have certainly succeeded in putting forward a number of specific policy options together with our unions and management.

The regions exist in modern Europe and will become increasingly important. A realistic unification strategy cannot, and should not, turn this new reality into an abstract concept. I have noted that in the new Member States the regions are presenting themselves as the motor of socio-economic development and social emancipation. Regionalism is not an end in itself but an opportunity, to the extent that it has added value in making new developments possible or in creating new prospects. Regional entities are increasingly becoming the carriers of development in a global world. This is only meaningful under four conditions: (1) a contribution to the strengthening of democracy; (2) a guarantee for better governance and the provision of better services; (3) the strengthening of the general public's access to, and the participation and share in the social capital; and (4) the provision of the most sustainable possible quality of life.

There is a general recognition that local and regional tiers of government must have a substantial input into European decision-making. These local and regional authorities are not merely the executors of decisions taken in Brussels or subcontractors of other levels of government. Being closest to the people, they are on the front line in tackling

tangible issues and challenges, such as unemployment, health care, the environment and immigration. As these authorities are very much in touch with grassroots concerns, they also play an important role in channelling and disseminating information. Communication is the fuel that fires any properly working democracy. Without good communication, the engine of democracy shudders to a halt.

The ratification of the proposed European Constitution is a good example of just how important information and communication are for the European venture. I have already pointed out the paradox: the Constitution was set to improve the workings of the European Union and its democratic decision-making. Yet still it was rejected by two countries in a referendum. Does the public have the right perception of what Europe is and does? Are the politicians enthusiastic enough in conveying the European venture to our citizens? Do they succeed in assuaging people's insecurities and fears about job losses, increasing globalisation and the breakdown of society? Have not national politicians been too ready to blame "Brussels" for their own shortcomings? Mr Barroso, the Commission president, put it in these terms: "You cannot attack Europe every day from Monday to Saturday, then turn round and expect citizens to support it on Sunday." Have we not presented Europe too much as a foreign country when in fact it is our own home ground? Recent research in Germany has shown that approximately 80% of German legislation is nothing but the transposition of European law into national law. This shows clearly that it is becoming less important and less relevant at what level decisions are taken, but all the more important how the different tiers of government cooperate with each other and how far the public feels involved in the decision-making process. And because of this very involvement of the public and because of the democratic support for decisions, the question of how Europe is governed is very relevant. The European integration process itself is not questioned by people, rather the way in which Europe is governed: the "remoteness" of it, the top-down-approach, the orders from above, which are all ways of expressing the same feeling: What has this got to do with us?

### 3. **Subsidiarity**

And the answer to this feeling that people have has a lot to do with subsidiarity: which is the most relevant level of government at which to respond to the needs of the public? Subsidiarity is the method chosen collectively by the European Union as the means of government

for establishing and ensuring quality relations between political actors and citizens. It is also the only method that will restore the legitimacy of European policies for Europeans. Of course, not to all European policies, some will have to remain subject to uniform conception and application, but – let’s admit it – to most EU policies. But we must be careful. Subsidiarity should be used as a dynamic tool that can create “more Europe” in some areas and “less Europe” in others, whilst always prioritising efficiency and the democratic representation of our fellow-citizen’s interests. We should not allow it to become a weapon that backfires on us by locking us into conflicts of jurisdiction. We must be guided solely by the aim of a “better Europe”. Bearing in mind the progress made towards European integration during the last 50 years or so, on the one hand, and the external pressures of globalisation on the other hand, there is ample reason to believe that an objective test of subsidiarity would force us to acknowledge that the most appropriate level is often the EU and sometimes the national level. But we should never lose sight of the impact, which is often regional and local.

Allow me also to express my doubts and concerns regarding a purely legalistic or even jurisdictional perception of subsidiarity that sets levels of authority against each other and raises conflicts of jurisdiction.

#### 4. Multilevel governance

My perception of subsidiarity coincides with that of a modern European Union based on *multi-level governance*. Over the years, a multi-level governance system has come into being, thereby uniting the EU, its Member States, regions and local authorities in the implementation of its shared objectives: peace, freedom and prosperity. In the European Union we have given up the pyramidal, hierarchical approach which places Europe above the Member States, the Member States above the regions, and the regions above the cities and the local communities. Instead, we need a new partnership between these entities. This is the real meaning of subsidiarity, which implies an approach from the bottom up. Specific challenges and problems require specific solutions and an appropriate organisation. Multilevel governance has become a point of reference not only for achieving common objectives, but also for developing those objectives in a variety of ways. We are becoming a *community of interests* in which the various tiers of government work together as equal partners to give concrete form to common objectives in areas such as the environment, sustainable economic development,

employment, research and development, agriculture, education, culture and international policy.

In the Constitutional Treaty, the EU undertook to pursue and consolidate this political orientation. The Treaty reinforces European unity in several areas and in that context recognises under Article I-5 the Member States' "*national identities, inherent in their fundamental structures, political and constitutional, inclusive of regional and local self-government*". The drafters of the Constitutional Treaty fully incorporated the concept that responsibility must rest upon many shoulders and that the interactions of the various levels of authority required support. This technique of government is based on networking, rather than on the old idea of a hierarchy of decision-taking. The political actors here act as partners and work together on an equal footing to find solutions for the increasingly complex issues facing the public sector.

The Committee of the Regions has been following this course for several years. It is the youngest European institution – an assembly of local and regional elected representatives – which aims to be the privileged discussion partner on behalf of local and regional government in the European Union. The Committee of the Regions is undoubtedly the EU body that has most frequently debated and taken a stance regarding the principle of subsidiarity. It has placed the principle of proximity at the heart of the political debate and defended the cause of multi-level governance and its institutional and legal implications before the European Convention.

In this kind of multi-level governance, the different tiers of government need each other. The regions need Europe, but Europe also needs the regions. Europe cannot afford to work without the regions. It is illusory to think that the European institutions – and only these institutions - will be able to take decisions which will command sufficient democratic support. It is likewise illusory to think that one level of government can provide answers to all the questions and problems which we face. Hence the importance of involving a number of actors, partners, levels of government in the European decision-making process through multi-level governance.

Let me illustrate this with two examples: the European information strategy and the Lisbon Strategy.

1) I have already pointed out the special importance of communication and information. The French and Dutch no votes in the referendums on the draft Constitution have evidently focused minds in Brussels.



The European Commission has launched a debate under the banner "Plan D": debate, dialogue, democracy. The European Union's 2008 budget includes additional funding for information. The European Commission has finally realised that information campaigns centrally thought up in Brussels, and then translated into the 23 languages of the European Union, have little effect. Europe can be brought closer to the people by the levels of government that are already closest to the people. Europe is therefore well advised to enter into agreements with the regions on information campaigns that make it clear that for us Europe is home, not abroad, and which can take into account the specific features of each region. The lack of knowledge about Europe is enormous. Therefore active campaigns are needed. We should not be content with a few trendy information stands in the entrance halls of regional governments buildings. As regions we should ourselves enter into cooperation agreements with trade unions, socio-cultural associations, environmental groups etc, so that Europe can be made more and more tangible.

2) Yes, Europe needs the regions and is well advised to work together with them. This is also demonstrated by the Lisbon Strategy. In 2000 the European Council approved the strategic goal of making the EU *the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion*. In order to achieve this goal, an overall strategy was envisaged that aimed at: (1) preparing the transition to a knowledge-based economy and society by better policies for the information society and research & development; (2) modernising the European social model, investing in people and combating social exclusion; (3) sustaining the healthy economic outlook and favourable growth prospects by applying an appropriate macro-economic policy mix. In 2005, five years after the start of the Lisbon Strategy, the Commission took stock. The results were only partly positive. The performance of the European economy in terms of growth, productivity and job creation were below expectations. The growth in jobs had slowed down and there was still too little investment in research and development. An evaluation report (the Kok Report) criticised the over-ambitious agenda, poor coordination and conflicting priorities. The conclusion was clear: the Lisbon strategy was scarcely known by the ordinary person and had not succeeded in bringing about the necessary sense of urgency in the Member States. The Committee of the Regions' own survey highlighted the very limited involvement of the local and regional authorities in the drawing-up of the national reform programmes, except in countries with strong regions such as Germany, Belgium, Spain and Italy. Furthermore, it appeared

the division of tasks and responsibilities between the different levels of government was very unclear. Only 17% of the cities and regions interviewed said that they were satisfied with their involvement in the preparation of the National Reform Programmes. In order to chart the contribution of the regions to the Lisbon Strategy more clearly, the European Council has asked the Committee of the Regions to submit a follow-up report to the 2008 Spring Summit. Indeed, it is the regions that provide the framework in Europe for productive innovative investments, that can speed up the creation of employment and can raise the level of education and training. It is the regions that can set up partnerships between research centres and universities. It is they who have at their disposal the necessary practical means to stimulate growth and jobs. And for that reason the regions occupy a full place in the Lisbon strategy. The Committee of the Regions has built up a network, the Lisbon Monitoring Platform, which currently involves 100 cities and regions that wish to make an active contribution to the Lisbon strategy. The principal aim of the platform is to help regions to keep pace with modernisation trends in Europe and to move beyond a purely national mindset. The platform is based on monitoring (to assess the situation), comparative analysis (to ensure transparency at European level and to learn from best practice) and, lastly, interactive forums through exchanges by Internet.

These two examples are merely illustrative of the inseparable link that exists between the European and regional levels. Regionalism is a new stimulus for the unification of Europe. After all, the region can serve as a bridge between the world which Europeans live in and the main policy areas which are mapped out at the level of the Member States, and increasingly at the European level. The regions can help to map out these policy frameworks to prevent them from being completely divorced from the reality in the field. The regions can also determine these policy frameworks in a very concrete way by means of action programs which take into account the specific needs and requirements of their people and their companies. If Europe is to become a closer unity, and I sincerely hope that it will, the regions will serve as a binding agent. Therefore it is important to make sure that in our ideas on the future of Europe, we give regions and regionalism the place which they deserve.

## **5. Current points of discussion**

If we should look at the Constitution for Europe, we cannot make an unequivocal positive evaluation. In spite of some positive notions,

this Constitution doesn't take into account the regional reality in Europe. The Constitution recognizes European diversity; respects the national identities, inherent in their fundamental structures, political and constitutional, inclusive of regional and local self-government; the principle of subsidiarity is applicable at the national, regional and local level. The notions and the principles, so far so good.

As far as the regions with legislative powers are concerned, progress was hardly made. These regions could not obtain their place in the European policy making process, although they have to transpose European decisions into regional legislation. Concerning the application of the principles of subsidiarity, the parliaments with legislative powers are not directly involved. Where appropriate, the national parliament will consult the regional parliaments with legislative powers... and this within six weeks from the date of transmission of the Commission's legislative proposal...

The regions in Europe cannot be satisfied with the beautiful principles if these principles are not "translated" into the institutional framework of the European Union.

Unfortunately, I am afraid that we have a long way to go...

And the prospects for the immediate future are, moreover, not so promising. Europe has known high points and low points, successes and failures, weaknesses and strengths.

When the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, perhaps nobody could have considered it possible that barely 15 years later many of the countries behind that wall would be full members of the European Union. The way this enlargement came about can unquestionably be subject to criticism. Many people will say, not without reason, that Europe was insufficiently prepared for the enlargement to 25 and now 27 countries, but enlargement will surely be recorded in European history books as one of the political successes and highpoints of European unification.

And today nobody would deny that Europe is going through a difficult period. In 2003 the European Convention put Europe on the road to workable institutions and procedures, to fundamental rights for the peoples of Europe, more transparency and involvement,... The various treaties were combined into one comprehensive document, namely a Constitution for Europe. The European Convention was an unexpected success : 105 representatives of 25 national governments, 25 national parliaments, the European Parliament and the European Commission – each one with their own insights and interests - were in agreement

about a common document. Moreover, the final document was later adopted by the Intergovernmental Conference without any significant amendments. However, the rejoicing was short-lived: the referendums in France and the Netherlands rejected the proposed European Constitution. Although the aim of the European Constitution was to restore a clear vision to Europe and to involve the people more actively in the decision-making process, the citizens of both these countries said no to the draft Constitution. That was the paradox of the referendums. Europe was plunged into a deep crisis. The German presidency is currently attempting to save the draft Constitution – or at least its main points. But that will be extremely difficult, because once again apparently the discussion will be dominated by voting weights in the Council and by veto rights. Poland, the Czech Republic and the Netherlands are even coming up with new proposals such as the possibility of national parliaments being able to veto European legislation. And the Czech Republic, moreover, is calling for a kind of “opt-out”-formula whereby a country or group of countries would not participate in certain European policy areas. A Europe of different speeds would then be a fact. And a Europe consisting of different like-minded groups would not be far away.

Today nobody can predict what the outcome for the draft Constitution will be, but heads of government would be making a great mistake if they were to drop the cautious approach to the recognition of regional reality of the draft Constitution. Developments in this field cannot be ignored.

## 6. Challenges and conclusions

To conclude, I can say that the regions with legislative powers didn't get room in the European constitution. The challenge and mission is to resume a creative reflection about the place of the regions with legislative powers in the European institutional framework. This reflection is needed because of the so-called European paradox. The paradox is that small states, such as Luxembourg, Slovenia, Malta, Cyprus, Estonia, etc. are directly involved in the European policy making process, whereas “nations without a state”, such as Flanders, the Basque Country, Scotland, the German Länder, etc. are deprived of a direct involvement in the European affairs. This untenable situation has to come to a solution and deserves a reflection on new partnerships to give power to the regions at the European level in order to create an equal partnership between nations and states.

Regions are not the subcontractors of the state. In this intervention, I developed several arguments for the direct involvement of regions in the European policy making process. Amongst others I mentioned: the policy level close to the people, the application of subsidiarity, awareness of the specific needs of the people, etc.

For all these reasons, it is important that regions can participate in the preparation of European policy and can deal with these issues which are of their own competences, even if these nations are not states. It is time that Europe and the Member States acknowledged this justified concern.

We are faced with the enormous task and also challenge of adapting regional reality to fit in with the European architecture. We must give creative thought to the way in which the different tiers of government (local- regional – national – European) can work together so that the European citizen can take part in that policy and thus give it a democratic legitimacy. We must continue to work hard for a proper place for the regions with legislative powers.

