



## **SEMINAR**

### ***No region left behind: promoting green and digital recovery in the EU's disadvantaged regions***

speech by the Vice President of the Sicilian Region  
and member of European Committee of Regions  
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1. I am honored to participate as a speaker in this debate because of the importance of the topic, the level of the speakers and the authoritativeness of the structure that has organized and hosts this debate: the *European Policy Centre*, one of the main think-tanks for analysis and debate on the problems of Europe.

It often happens that the debate of ideas and confrontation is underestimated and, above all, that we forget that it is only from in-depth analysis of social and political situations that proposals and solutions to problems are conceived.

2. "*No region left behind*" is the topic on which we have the pleasure to discuss.

No one should be left behind, we might add, starting from the pillar of the European Union constituted by Cohesion, codified in article 174 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union which states in its first two paragraphs: "*In order to promote its overall harmonious development, the Union shall develop and pursue its actions leading to the strengthening of its economic, social and territorial cohesion. In particular, the Union shall aim at reducing disparities between the levels of development of the various regions and the backwardness of the least favoured regions.*" In the Cohesion lives the spirit that gave birth to the European Union: the idea of a Europe of equal opportunities, where every person and every territory is guaranteed equal starting

conditions, as well as equal opportunities to measure and test their ideas and abilities.

The Covid-19 pandemic has certainly complicated the European path towards cohesion by weakening even more the weakest people, social groups and territories. Some territories in particular have been more damaged by the pandemic because the pre-Covid economic structures and employment indicators were already much weaker, and obviously serious damage creates repairable effects in a strong structure and irreparable damage in a weak structure.

The same damage is not caused if you take 1 out of 10 or if you take 10 out of 100.

For this reason, European funds for all measures resulting from the pandemic crisis cannot and must not be commensurate and proportional to the damage, but must take into account an additional parameter: the economic and geographical difficulties of the place where they intervene.

However, this difficulty could turn into an opportunity if there is a determined will to benefit those social and territorial areas in the sectors towards which the future of Europe must be directed, such as green development and digitalization.

The debate did not fail to include a position contrary to the principle of cohesion, which in my country is present in some areas of the more developed regions: that is, the thesis according to which it would not be worthwhile to invest in economically less structured places that would be unable to make the most of that aid, and that instead bringing development to areas that are already developed produces a greater multiplier of growth.

This is a selfish thesis, certainly, but above all it is erroneous and harmful even for the rich regions that should support it. In fact, it does not take into account the fact that unbalanced development will lead to an economy of assistance in the less developed areas and thus to the dragging of the weaker areas.

The already mentioned article 174 of the TFEU says it in a very effective way: "*In order to promote its overall harmonious development*"; this is the objective we must set ourselves; not the overall and quantitative development, but the harmonious and qualitative development.

The European Union that, with determination, is committed to overcoming the crises caused by the pandemic phenomenon, at the same time is going to face the most important challenges for its future. We will most likely be judged by future generations on how we achieve the transition to a green and digital Europe. Our ability and willingness to build a carbon-neutral Europe capable of using a new class of technologies will be the measure of our successes or failures.

An entire European political class, across differences, will receive the historical judgment of whether we achieve these goals.

The founding fathers of Europe, De Gasperi, Adenauer, Schuman, set themselves the goal of building it and sketching out a great project; this generation has the duty to strengthen it and lead it along the path of the six priorities set by the Commission for 2019-2024 and indicate to the entire planet the objectives of the environment, digital, work, international security, rights and democracy.

And when we say no region left behind, we must also say "*no area of the world left behind*".

3. Europe, which must be stronger in the world, must promote multilateralism and commit itself to guaranteeing a world order based on rules, rights and overcoming the tragedy of poverty and hunger.

Returning to Europe, never have we found ourselves in a historical moment in which all resources come into play.

Considering the long-term budget and the Next Generation EU, Europe is putting resources of more than 1,800 billion euros into the pipeline.

There are all the conditions to create levels of development capable of overcoming the worst effects of the crisis due to Covid 19 and initiate the green and digital transitions and do all this within the perimeter of economic, social and territorial cohesion.

The EU, through the Commission, has demonstrated to be looking to the future by launching measures of significant financial impact and proving capable of overcoming any initial national selfishness.

If we want to act effectively for our people and businesses, we must avoid bureaucratic silos or over-centralisation and encourage more pan-European coordination. The Conference on the Future of Europe is a good occasion to improve the functioning of EU democracy. Now is the time to ensure that, in addition to the national and EU authorities, regional and local authorities are recognised once and for all as one of the three dimensions of our European House of Democracy.

This is the perspective of the "*Declaration of the European Committee of the Regions on Local and regional authorities as actors of the European response to the COVID-19 crisis*" (submitted by EPP, PES, Renew Europe, EA and the Greens at the Committee)<sup>1</sup>: Covid-19 pandemic shows both a vulnerability in the EU's functioning and the extent to which the EU Member States and the EU citizens are connected. The EU can only resolve this crisis and any future crises if all levels of

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<sup>1</sup> *Bruxelles*, 8 May 2020

government (EU, national, regional and local), economic/social actors and citizens in the EU take their responsibilities.

Declaration that highlight that the impact of the unprecedented crisis for local and regional finances could seriously undermine the capacity of local and regional authorities to meet an increased demand for health, sanitary and social services for citizens, public transport, education and other public services, as well as for economic incentives to local businesses and for the implementation of actions towards sustainability and climate neutrality. For this purpose the declaration underline: *“any centralisation of new financial support schemes would further increase this risk, therefore, the CoR calls for access to the EU financial instruments which are responding to the impact of the crisis to be decentralised within the Member States and for the regional authorities to have their own direct access to these resources”*.

We are at a crossroads, we can tackle this crisis by looking at Europe and the role of the Regions, with a correct multilevel approach and it is the only path to development. Or this crisis and the opportunities it offers can be tackled with a statistic and bureaucratic approach, and failure will be assured.

The less developed regions of the European Union have the possibility of reversing their development models more easily than the more developed regions, and the transition to the new models is facilitated by the weakness in those territories of the previous models.

This is another reason why it is necessary to focus on maximum territorial cohesion, ensuring homogeneous development throughout the EU territory.

4. With regard to cohesion, I would like to raise one of the issues to which, also because of my territorial origin, I am very attached: that of insularity.

As President of the Regional Intergroup for Insularity of the European Committee of the Regions, I am aware that living on an island determines by itself a *“structural vulnerability”* that penalizes every aspect of one's way of life.

The distance from mainland regions; an economic environment strongly conditioned by additional island production costs; higher transportation costs to and from the mainland; highly threatened terrestrial and marine biodiversity are just a few aspects of the additional difficulties experienced by islanders compared to other citizens. The risk is that all insular territories and those who live in them will be left behind because of the disadvantages resulting from their insularity.

The *Regional Intergroup for Insularity of the European Committee of the Regions* has approved a *Manifesto for the European Islands* aimed at spreading awareness of the need to ensure substantial equality and equal treatment to islanders in the effective enjoyment of social rights.

On insularity it is important for the European Union to focus its attention, also in application of the third paragraph of Article 174 of the *TFEU*, which expressly calls for special attention in cohesion to regions which suffer from severe and permanent natural or demographic handicaps, such as island regions.

However, the islands have paid a higher price for the crisis caused by Covid 19 both because of the weakness of many of their economies, but also because of the enormous difficulties and often the blockage of the means of transport (air, train and ship) by which they are accessed.

Creating a post-pandemic Europe that is greener, more digital, and ready for future challenges must give the two thousand islands and the 17 million European citizens who live on them "special attention" as required by law.

Climate change is forcing a profound revolution in the way we think and act, and we must rise to the occasion. Many obstacles must be overcome in order to move towards a circular economy and guarantee biodiversity, substantially reducing pollution, but it is in these areas that Europe must win the challenge of the future.

Another challenge for the future is digital. Investment in data, technologies and infrastructure will be the most relevant in the coming years. Regulating the sector is essential for the digital decade that Europe will live in the coming years. The issues of digital technology are also at stake in the game of rights and democracy, and Europe has a duty to ensure maximum guarantees in this regard.

The Europe of equal opportunities, in which no one is left behind, is the Europe that knows how to turn every difference into an asset and that sees its own internal borders as signs of confronting cultures.

This is the "*Homeland Europe*" of which one of the founding fathers, Alcide De Gasperi, spoke at the 1954 Parliamentary Conference.