



**European Committee
of the Regions**

**ELECTION SPEECH BY PRESIDENT VASCO ALVES CORDEIRO
PLENARY SESSION OF THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS
WEDNESDAY, 29 JUNE**

Dear First Vice-President and other Vice-Presidents of the Committee of the Regions,
Dear Chairmen of the Political Groups,
Dear Colleagues,
Dear Secretary General,
Mr. President of the Regional Legislative Assembly of the Azores and ladies and gentlemen
members of parliament,
Mr Permanent Representative of Portugal to the European Union,

In this first intervention as President of the Committee of the Regions of the European Union, I would like to extend a friendly greeting to everyone, reaffirming to you and to all those who accompany us, my commitment to carry out the duties of this office and to serve this institution with the best of my effort, my work and my abilities.

I cannot, - and I think you will understand -, in these opening words of my intervention, fail to make two special references:

The first is to my predecessor, President Apostolos Tzitzikostas, greeting him and thanking him for his leadership and his work during these past two challenging and demanding years.

The Committee of the Regions and I count on your experience, your work and your contribution as First Vice-President to meet the challenges of the future.

The second reference is to the Parliament of the Azores, which is the house that gives me the democratic legitimacy to be a member of the Committee of the Regions, the house before which I affirm that it is because of my commitment to the Azores that I am here today. Without the first, the second is not possible. The Azores is the place I come from, it's the people and region I served as President of the Regional Government and I still have the honour to serve in the Parliament.

I address the President Luís Garcia, as well as the delegation of Azorean Regional members of parliament, made up of MPs Andreia Costa and Alexandra Manes and MPs Rui Martins, Gustavo Alves and Nuno Barata, to greet, praise and thank you for your presence here today, for what it means for this Committee of the Regions, for the Parliament of the Azores, but also for Regional Autonomy.

Dear colleagues,

The times we are living in are demanding.



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Times like these put politicians, governments, and institutions, at all levels, to the test.

But these are also deeply challenging and exciting times. I would even say that for politics, in the broadest and, - I dare say -, the most noble sense of the word, this is the time. Because of what is at stake, of the obstacles we must overcome, of the changes and transformations that we can and must drive.

This happens, not only on a global scale, in the face of challenges such as the climate crisis and the energy transition, but also at the European Union level, with the war against Ukraine, its social, political, and economic consequences, and even at the scale of our institution, in what concerns how we see ourselves and how others see us, particularly within the context of the conclusions of the Conference on the Future of Europe.

In this context, your choice to lead this organisation fell upon me.

A member of a Parliament, of a regional Parliament, a parliament of an island region, archipelagic, outermost, halfway between Europe and America.

More than on my possible merits, this choice says a lot more about this institution, its members, and the political and institutional significance of this decision by the European Committee of the Regions.

And if much can be said about this, there is one thing that is worth repeating: with this choice, the Committee of the Regions not only proclaims, but also bears witness to a Europe that is done by everyone, for everyone. For every town, city or region in Europe, no matter its size or its location. With your decision, the Committee of the Regions underlines and gives political testimony to the importance of political assemblies, regional political assemblies and asserts, in the clearest of forms, that everyone can, on equal terms, aspire to be a part and a protagonist of the European dream.

And in these turbulent times when so many people in so many places fight to emphasize what divides us, I see this election as a way of recognising, once more, the strength of what unites us, despite what may differentiate us.

Dear colleagues,

I have just described the demanding context we currently live in and which constitutes the starting point of this second half of the mandate of the Committee of the Regions.

We still live tormented by a pandemic which, directly or indirectly, has cost the lives of about 15 million people, according to the most recent figures from the World Health Organisation. This pandemic has also caused a real fracture in the life of our communities. It has also been a tremendous test for our institutions and our political, social and economic structures.



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In addition, since the beginning of the year, we are witnessing a tragedy from another time, which we did not think was possible on our continent: war.

A war borne out of a barbaric military aggression, which put down the very values on which our Union is founded.

There too, this open wound constitutes a genuine break, also at the level of our social and economic life.

A pandemic and a war at our doors: in both cases, the regions, the cities and the villages of Europe have risen up to the challenge. They have responded by putting in action our values of solidarity, mutual assistance and recovery on the ground.

In the case of the pandemic, going to the limit of their powers and resources to help our fellow citizens, families, and businesses in each community with measures that could not only help save lives, but could help save and recover jobs, businesses, and income.

Measures that helped ensure that, after the storm passed, we could still have a future.

In the case of the brutal military invasion of Ukraine, it has been and still are the regions, cities and towns of Europe, in particular those of the countries closest to the conflict zone, which promptly made shelter for refugees, opened buildings and mobilised resources to take them in and protect them, and at the same time, in an impressive show of solidarity, have supported those who have stayed in Ukraine to fight for their homeland and, too – we should never forget it - for the Freedom of us all.

Similarly, it is the regions, cities and towns of Europe that are at the forefront of the support for Ukraine's integration process into the great European family, as is clear from the Resolution adopted by this Committee at the last plenary session, with a rich awareness of what this means for every single one of us, but also with the realisation that the Ukrainian authorities know exactly what this requires of them as well.

Yes, we want to support our Ukrainian partners now and in the future for the reconstruction. This is why we are launching the Alliance for Ukraine during this plenary.

But the context that surrounds us in this second part of the mandate also brings challenges that are already known to us, even if they take on a greater sense of urgency.

That's the case of the climate emergency and the need to reaffirm and act immediately for the green and digital transitions.



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Here too, either by their direct competences or because their action can make a difference, for better or for worse, it is important to recognize that it is the regions, the towns and cities that are at the forefront of these fights.

Dear colleagues,

In addition to the aspects mentioned above and which are conditioning factors for our action, there is another element, this one of a political nature, which cannot fail to be mentioned in relation to the context of the Committee of the Regions' action until 2025.

This is the conclusion of the Conference on the Future of Europe and the real challenge, of action, credibility and even trust, which constitutes the behaviour of all European institutions in this matter.

The Committee of the Regions, an active and committed participant in the work of the Conference, had and has a very clear understanding and position on this matter, preparing itself to, in this plenary session, debate and vote on a resolution on this new.

Therefore, this will not be the most appropriate time for an in-depth pronouncement on this topic. However, what is evident cannot fail to be mentioned:

It is not possible to invite and urge citizens to participate politically in this exercise of democracy in order to define what they believe Europe should be and it should treat, and then consider that, for example, whatever might imply a change in the Treaties is a taboo matter.

When this is done, it is not just one or another specific proposal that is compromised or harmed. When this is done, it is certainly the citizens' trust in the credibility of the process that is jeopardized, if not, the trust in the good faith of its promoters.

It is important to make it clear that we are not, and cannot be, oblivious to the complexity of a process of this type, especially at this stage in the life of the European Union and given the most recent developments in some Member States.

Nor do we ignore the risk, with evidence here and there, of instrumentalisation by some of this issue and of this process for immediate political gains, namely, in the 2024 European elections.

However, what was required was that, before or at the beginning of the process, the rules of the game were made clear and not changed at the end or after the game was over.

It is, therefore, with a mixture of frustration and regret that we witness the almost ashamed way in which the European Council of the 23rd and 24th dealt with the issue of the conclusions of the Conference on the Future of Europe.



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Dear colleagues,

Given the complexity of the context in which we find ourselves, how is the Committee of the Regions positioned and how should we position ourselves moving forward?

It is certain that we have our political priorities adopted, in which we fully recognize ourselves. But if we can point out two or three aspects that seem decisive in the future action of our Institution in the face of this reality that surrounds us, I would first like to mention, that what the present times require is a stronger and fairer Europe, for all.

A stronger Europe that advances, exactly, from the unapologetic affirmation of its values and foundational principles, such as Freedom, the respect for Human Dignity, Tolerance, the Rule of Law and Democracy, among others.

Here, exactly in this last component, this means, first, a stronger internal democracy resulting from greater proximity and better information to our fellow citizens. A stronger democracy with more transparency, resulting not only from procedures, but also from objectives and purposes.

A stronger Europe that is also based on promoting greater and systematic citizen participation in the decision-making processes.

This is ultimately particularly important and relevant in the light of the conclusions of the Conference on the Future of Europe, but above all in the light of the rich political heritage that regions, towns, and cities have in promoting mechanisms for citizen participation.

We will overcome the challenges that the current context poses to us, also by advocating for a fairer Europe for all, underpinning this call for a strong commitment for the social dimension of Europe, in the way it is expressed in the Porto Summit Commitment, adding particular attention and focus to social issues in all areas.

A stronger and fairer Europe for all cannot exist without empowering women in our societies and within our political bodies. 2025 is the year that the European Commission set to make significant progress towards a gender-equal Europe. 2025. We can, and we must do better.

A stronger and fairer Europe for all cannot exist without addressing the discrimination against LGBTIQ people across our continent. Making all our cities and regions LGBTIQ Freedom Zones would not only be a political signal but it also brings protection, respect and hope for everyone.

But we must never forget that a stronger and fairer Europe for all also means that besides all that, the EU also pays attention to the need to create jobs, to help families access education and health, that is side by side with the European citizens about addressing their concerns over the future safety of their families, their kids, or their elders, their jobs and their commitment.



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Dear friends,

This stronger and fairer Europe for all, which is achieved on European soil, cannot and must not reduce its reach and should also be assumed as a beacon of values and principles throughout the world.

Last Friday the world was reminded that there are values and principles that we can never take for granted.

So we must also take as a priority of our action the defence of a stronger and fairer Europe for all because it means the construction of a society, here in our own Continent, that prefers bridges to walls, that prefers the unbearable lightness of freedom to the agonising weight of oppression.

A Europe that, in essence, fulfils its citizen's aspirations and those of others that share the same values in a world that so badly needs it.

A second imperative that the current context impels the Committee of the Regions to take on, has to do with the need for the firm, unequivocal and uncompromising defence of a Cohesion Policy that potentiates and supports economic, social, territorial and environmental cohesion.

Cohesion Policy is a pillar of the implementation of the European project.

But the truth is that, for some time now, it has been seen by some just as a set of resources that, without any hesitation, can be directed to other topics and put to serve other goals.

This entails a real and present risk of Cohesion Policy being seen only as a budget available in the short term to address any emergency, and not as a policy to support medium and long-term objectives. Cohesion Policy has been instrumental in fighting against the immediate social and economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. And it is providing support to people fleeing the war in Ukraine. But we must not lose sight of what the policy is about: a long-term investment policy to support the European model of society based on territorial cohesion and the reduction of regional disparities!

The dilution of Cohesion Policy in the post-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework is a risk that should not and cannot be overlooked.

The Committee of the Regions must therefore hold its ground in the defence of a policy which has still much to give for achieving the idea of leaving no one behind, that is, the Union's own ideal.

To this end, let us all know how we can work to update its objectives so that, properly equipped with the necessary resources, it can fulfil its role of building and achieving our Union.

From our side, the work on the future of the Cohesion Policy starts here and starts now.



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Dear colleagues,

We have a third dimension or priority, which has to do with the very functioning of the Committee of the Regions, how we see ourselves and how we are viewed.

Everyone praises the local and regional dimension of the European Union and European Democracy. But few seem available and committed to recognise this institution as a true Political Assembly, the Assembly of Local and Regional Authorities of the European Union.

It is, therefore, time to stress the political profile of this institution, combating misunderstandings and ignorance, bearing in mind that the vastness of the areas which this statement can and should cover is equal to the potential that remains to be made, as to the decisive contribution that Europe's local and regional authorities can make to its implementation, for its renewal, for its perpetuity.

Dear colleagues,

In conclusion, from this Assembly where the voice of thousands of local and regional authorities resonates, from this Assembly which carries the voice of more than a million elected politicians, I offer, in the name of the Committee of the Regions, to the European Parliament, to the Council and to the European Commission, without forgetting, of course, our sister institution the European Economic and Social Committee, our loyal, determined and frank collaboration in the construction, improvement and implementation of this European Union which is ours, and which every time again, in those trouble times we live in, sign of hope and trust in a better future.