



Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development

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Regional identity and the integrity of the Nation State

Unity versus diversity - how to bridge the divide?

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Dear Excellencies,
Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear Colleagues,

1. Introduction

It is a great pleasure for me to address you today in my quality of General Rapporteur on Local and Regional Authorities of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. In this capacity, I follow very closely the activities and debates taking place in the Congress. I am convinced that the Congress plays a crucial role in bringing the core values of the Council of Europe – human rights, democracy and the rule of law – closer to the people. It also provides an essential forum for debate, for sharing our experiences and for developing common solutions to new and arising challenges.

I also have a special interest in our debate today, as I am currently preparing a report on “The Role of National Authorities in Decentralisation”. We are planning to hold a debate on this report at the plenary session of the Parliamentary Assembly in October later this year. The President of the Congress will be invited to this debate. While the topic of decentralisation is somewhat broader than the theme of regional development, in the sense that it covers all types of delegation of responsibilities from central to local and regional authorities, these topics are very closely connected. I am delighted to have the opportunity to explore this connection with you and to propose a number of questions for our discussion.

2. Regional identity – a threat or an opportunity?

Regional identity is a powerful force for development. It has produced remarkable achievements in many parts of Europe. Be it in Finland, Germany Italy or Portugal- we have seen many examples of how regions can emancipate, flourish themselves and help others flourish too. The Açores, Portuguese autonomous region, which is by the way one of the most beautiful in the world, - and we have the privilege of having here today with us Mrs. Ana Pereira Luís, the President of the Regional Parliament of the Açores, - is a very good example of this capacity of emancipation and development.

Should it not then be a goal for all our countries, to give to regions as many responsibilities as they are prepared to take, and to support them in fulfilling these responsibilities successfully?

At the same time, strong regional identity can be seen as a threat to national integrity, and can be feared and resented. We have seen some vivid illustrations of this with recent developments in Spain. But virtually any State is wary of the potential domino effect that the statehood granted elsewhere might have on the communities within its own jurisdiction. Indeed, is not the State the guarantor of stability and security for the people within its' jurisdiction, and does it not have a legitimate concern and responsibility for the integrity of its' own territory?

3. Putting an end to “frozen” conflicts within countries – a shared responsibility

Regretfully, we have seen in many parts of Europe that regional aspirations have led to “frozen” or violent conflicts within countries. Such conflicts undermine economic development, they are a drain on scarce financial and human resources, and they have a lasting negative effect on the lives of people, and - in extreme cases – to the loss of life. Not only are such conflicts a threat to security and stability on our continent, they are a human tragedy and a disgrace for Europe – a cradle of democracy. And in many cases these conflicts cannot be resolved by any single country alone.

Should this not be our common concern? Should it not be our shared responsibility? Should we not all do what we can to resolve and to prevent such conflicts in Europe? And should we not set an example to the rest of the world of how this could be done?

4. What makes decentralization work well?

Already in 2003, the Parliamentary Assembly produced a Report on “Positive experience of autonomous regions as a source of inspiration for conflict resolution in Europe”. “Autonomy, - points out the report, - allows a group which is a minority within a State to exercise its rights, while providing certain guarantees of the State’s unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity”. Interestingly, it was considered in the report that there is little evidence suggesting that autonomy can be a first step towards secession. Today, we are witnessing that in certain cases autonomy does lead to statehood ambitions. Does this mean that autonomy is to blame? Or is it the way the autonomy is being dealt with that we need to look at?

Most probably, the autonomy is best described as a tool. And it is up to us to make full use of its potential. I am currently looking at the latest conclusions of various partners, including the OECD, the EU Committee of the Regions, and the monitoring reports of the Congress and PACE, with an aim to identify the key factors that determine the success of decentralisation. It is not without reason that all these important organisations are looking today into these questions. And it is not without reason that one of the findings seems to be common for all these reports.

That is that one of the most challenging areas identified is the manner in which consultations are held between central authorities, local authorities and other actors. Again and again, experts came across either the lack of formal mechanisms for consultation, or inadequate consultation and insufficient use of the existing mechanisms or controversial nature of the means of consultation and limited time-frame. Quite often, initial input is requested, but no or little feedback is provided on whether and how such input has been taken into account. Relevant mechanisms might exist in law, but are not well used in practice. Conversely, there might be consultations, but they remain sporadic, because they are not institutionalised or legally binding. This – inevitably – leads to frustration and conflict.

I am very interested to hear from you. What are in your opinion the key factors for success in decentralisation? How do you make sure that the power is distributed in a way that allows both regions and countries to prosper equally? What do you do to maintain relationships with the national authorities that are effective and sustainable?

5. Building a culture of dialogue – between and within the countries

Finally, I would also like to mention the role of education. The Council of Europe published last year the Report on the State of citizenship and human rights education in Europe. One of the findings of the report was that there is a lack of awareness of relevance of such education in everyday life. But it is through such education, in particular at school, but also throughout our lives, that our ability for dialogue is formed and our willingness to acknowledge diverse points of views is fostered. If schools fail in this task, the functioning of democratic societies – including decentralization processes – is bound to fail as well. Is this something that you deal with in your daily work? Can we all do more to support and to promote such education in our countries?

6. Next steps

Along with the national authorities, both the Congress and the Assembly have an important role in the above-mentioned areas. The mechanisms and fora for decentralisation need to be developed and translated into relevant legislation, the culture of dialogue needs to be promoted through education and awareness raising, and we can all benefit both from success stories and from lessons learned in different countries. The forthcoming debate in the Parliamentary Assembly in October 2018 can be the next opportunity to draw attention to our respective responsibilities and to propose practical steps for the years to come. From your perspective, what can be a concrete outcome of this debate that could help us advance in alleviating the tensions between regional identity and the integrity of the nation State?

7. Conclusions

To sum up, over the past decades many different approaches have been tried, some worked, and others failed, but they allowed us to learn important lessons. The Council of Europe provides a valuable forum, where these experiences can be shared, debated and turned into guidance for action. The Council of Europe is a unique platform, which brings together governments, parliaments, local and regional authorities and non-governmental organisations, with one shared goal in mind – to promote unity among the member States, thus laying the foundations for a lasting peace and prosperity on the European continent. Let us make full use of the opportunities that the Council of Europe provides.

Let us build a Europe where conflicts are resolved without violence and where regional, national and other identities all flourish side by side, without fear or hate.

This is an ambitious endeavor in Europe stunted by the economic crisis and torn by political conflicts.

But it can be done.

Where there is a will, there is a way.

Thank you.