



Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development

Territorial solidarity: regional self-government or regional selfish government?

The 35th Session of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities
Strasbourg, 6-8 November 2018

Jean-Pierre GRIN, General Rapporteur of the Parliamentary Assembly
of the Council of Europe on Local and Regional Authorities

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am delighted to have this opportunity to address you on behalf of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, as the new General Rapporteur on Local and Regional Authorities.

Indeed, the issue of territorial solidarity is often at the heart of our parliamentary debates. I would like to mention a few examples:

Already in 2003 the Assembly adopted a resolution on the "Positive Experiences of the Autonomous Regions as a source of inspiration in the resolution of conflicts in Europe". In order to ensure the sustainability of autonomy, the report recommended the respect of a certain number of fundamental principles. This includes the establishment of a legal framework on the status of autonomy, a clear division of powers and the establishment of democratically elected legislative and executive bodies at the level of the autonomous region.

In 2007, the Assembly adopted a recommendation on "Regionalisation in Europe". In this recommendation, the Assembly suggests to member States to improve the regional system and to use it to resolve tensions and conflicts and to address the marginalisation suffered by large regions within the European institutions, with a view to overcome their current feeling of frustration.

More recently, during the October session of the Parliamentary Assembly, we discussed the report of Mr Luis LEITE RAMOS on the role of national parliaments in ensuring the success of decentralisation processes. Your outgoing President, Ms Gudrun MOSLER-TÖRNSTRÖM, took part in this debate. The conclusions were as follows:

- Decentralisation brings citizens closer to decision making, promotes the quality public services and strengthens accountability.
- The success of decentralisation depends to a large extent on how it is implemented.
- Parliaments are elected to represent the will of the people and must be key actors in these processes.

I come from Switzerland, where decentralisation by a federalist system is very present. Our authorities work on the 3 echelons, which are: the country, the cantons and the communes. Each echelon has its own autonomy, but must respect the framework provided by the higher echelon. This democratic process allows Switzerland to coexist, with 4 national languages and respect for different regional cultures.

Of course, territorial solidarity is a complex subject. Neither examples of good practice nor recommendations of the Parliamentary Assembly provide answers for all the challenges and solve all the dilemmas, which are specific to each country. However, we are convinced that a number of principles remain valid. In particular, the existence of clear and fair practical rules, applying to everyone, is essential. Democratic debate and decision-making - through parliaments - are also vital.

Furthermore, I am convinced that territorial solidarity is a matter of democratic security. In today's world it is not possible to ensure the prosperity of certain regions to the detriment of others. We have seen that people are moving - not only between countries but also between communities and regions - to escape poverty, insecurity or armed conflict. It is in our common interest to share our wealth. Otherwise, we all risk ending up in misery. Let us have the imagination, the sense of anticipation and simply the common sense to ensure the peace and well-being of future generations.

As we celebrate the 30th anniversary of the European Charter of Local Self-Government, the time has come to take stock of the progress made and the current challenges in this area, to give a new impetus to decentralisation, in order to bring democracy closer to the citizens, to improve the well-being of all and to strengthen democratic security in the Council of Europe member States.

To conclude, territorial solidarity is a difficult and controversial issue. Concerted action by the Congress and the Parliamentary Assembly on this subject is needed. For my part, it is an honour and a pleasure to have the mandate of the Assembly to support cooperation between the two bodies of the Council of Europe.

The challenges are great. Let's join forces to confront them.

Thank you.