

Regions and cities gain prominence on the EU's R&I agenda



Members of the European Committee of the Regions have welcomed the European Commission's increased focus on regional and local innovation ecosystems. On 30 September, the Commission published a [communication on a new European Research Area for Research and Innovation](#). It promises strategic and coordinated support to regions and cities, building on successful initiatives such as the Knowledge Exchange Platform and Science meets Regions, which will be upgraded to a strategic level.

The CoR's Commission for Social Policy, Employment, Culture, Education and Research (SEDEC) hosted on 1 October a debate with **Jean-Eric Paquet**, European Commission's Director-General for Research and Innovation (DG RTD). Mr Paquet highlighted the good experiences from the Knowledge Exchange Platform, a concept jointly developed by the CoR and DG RTD to present new R&I solutions, innovative products and best practices in response to societal challenges facing the regions and cities of Europe.

SEDEC Chair **Anne Karjalainen** (FI/PES) said: "We warmly welcome the European Commission's intention to further enhance the strategic cooperation with the European Committee of the Regions through the Knowledge Exchange Platform. Local and regional authorities are the linchpin in the process of deepening at the same time the European Research Area and the European Educational Area, which is crucial for bringing Europe up to speed with the green and digital transitions underway."

Christophe Clergeau (FR/PES), Member of the Pays-de-la-Loire regional council, will lead the CoR's work on the European Research Area communication. The draft opinion will be adopted at the next SEDEC meeting on 25 November. The newly-appointed rapporteur stressed that "there is still need to improve local and regional authorities' role in the governance of research programmes and increase synergies between R&I and cohesion policy. The European Research Area should allow for a wider approach where all stakeholders work together and should develop in synergy with the European Education Area."

During the exchange of views with Director-General Paquet, various members also expressed concerns on the innovation gap between EU regions, which the brain drain phenomenon risks to exacerbate. SEDEC vice-chair **Matteo Bianchi** (IT/ECR) suggested providing support and fiscal incentives to companies that invest in innovation in less developed regions.

Director-General Paquet concluded that "Europe needs to team up across policy areas and work with citizens to make R&I not only the best science in the world with ground-breaking innovations, but also a policy framework which provides knowledge and solutions Europe needs on digital and green transitions and artificial intelligence".

The European Commission's Joint Research Centre published this week the [end of term report](#) for the [Science meets Parliaments/Regions](#) pilot project, concluding that there is need to further improve evidence-informed policymaking in all levels of government.

□The CoR will adopt in its plenary session on 12-14 October an [opinion](#)□ on the European Commission's [Regional Innovation Scoreboard](#) (rapporteur **Mikel Irujo**, ES/EA), the next edition of which will be published in 2021. The CoR will also publish the first Annual Regional and Local Barometer, which focuses on the effects of COVID-19 in EU regions.

More information:

During the meeting on 1 October, SEDEC members had a preliminary discussion on following two draft opinions that will be adopted at the next SEDEC meeting on 25 November:

□Following new rapporteurs were appointed:

- **Yoomi Renström** (SE/PES), Member of Övansjö Municipal Council, for the opinion A Union of equality: EU anti-racism action plan 2020-2025
- **Gillian Coughlan** (IE/Renew E.), Member of Cork County Council, for Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027. Resetting education and training for the digital age
- **Emil Boc** (RO/EPP), Mayor of Cluj-Napoca, for Achieving the European Education Area by 2025
- **Christophe Clergeau** (FR/PES), Member of the Pays-de-la-Loire Regional Council, for A new ERA for Research and Innovation.

[Belarus: Statement by the High Representative on demands to redu](#)



The demand of the Belarusian authorities that Poland and Lithuania withdraw

their ambassadors and significantly reduce their diplomatic representations in Minsk is unfounded and regrettable. It goes against the logic of dialogue and will only further isolate the authorities in Minsk.

Attempts by the Belarusian authorities to target certain EU Member States will not succeed in weakening EU unity, which was clearly reaffirmed by the European Council on 1 October when all EU Member States called on the Belarusian authorities to end violence and repression, release all detainees and political prisoners, respect media freedom and civil society, and start an inclusive national dialogue.

The EU continues to support the democratic right of the Belarusian people to elect their President through new free and fair elections, without external interference.

[Sudan: Statement by the High Representative Josep Borrell on the](#)



The signing of the Peace Agreement between the civilian-led Transitional Government and the Sudan Revolutionary Movements today is an historic achievement paving the way for inclusive and comprehensive peace in Sudan. The EU acknowledges the role of South Sudan in hosting and mediating the Sudanese peace talks.

All stakeholders are expected to implement the different aspects of this peace agreement in good faith and with continued spirit of collaboration for the benefit of the Sudanese people, who deserve and wish for peace, stability and economic development.

Those who have not yet joined, in particular the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North-Abdalaziz Al-Hilu and the Sudan Liberation Movement-Abdul Wahid Al-Nur, should follow and engage in serious negotiations with the Transitional Government.

The European Union will continue to support the country's political and economic transition, which offers a unique opportunity to work towards a peaceful, democratic and prosperous Sudan.

Remarks by President Charles Michel after the Special European Council meeting on 2 October 2020



Nous venons de clôturer le Conseil européen avec, vous le savez, un menu intense à notre agenda. Nous avons longuement débattu des questions internationales, avec la capacité de démontrer, une fois encore, c'est important, notre unité sur des sujets qui sont difficiles, stratégiques, et importants pour l'avenir. Aujourd'hui, nous avons eu l'occasion d'aborder d'autres thèmes.

The first topic that we addressed today is the coordination related to the COVID-19 crisis. You know that our goal is to limit the spread of the virus. It means that it is important to make more progress between the member states, with the support of the Commission, and the rotating Presidency, and we have worked a lot, in recent days and weeks on that. We took the decision to strengthen our coordination, our cooperation on the basis of the concrete proposals put on the table by the Commission, with the involvement of the rotating Presidency, and we also took the decision to make more efforts to work together in the perspective of vaccines. The Commission had the opportunity to explain in detail what we are trying to do together as the European Union to be able, when vaccines will be available, to make sure that it will be possible for the different member states in Europe but also for our partners, to have access to those vaccines. In our opinion, this should be considered as a common good. It was a long, a substantive discussion, and we agreed that we will have the opportunity at our next European Councils to come back again to this very important topic. This was my first point.

Another important point: I had the opportunity this morning to present to the colleagues the Leaders' agenda for the next months. I think it's very important to have a clear vision about what are the strategies, the topics that we will discuss at the level of the European Council between today and June next year. This is a concrete proposal that I put on the table, knowing that this agenda would be flexible, based on the circumstances. We will probably adapt our way of working and I intend to continue to try to develop a strong preparation for each European Council. We have experienced the last two months, smaller formats, smaller video conferences in preparation for some difficult topics. We used these tools, smaller formats, for example, to prepare our position regarding China. We did the same regarding Turkey in the

Eastern Mediterranean. We think it's an effective approach, in order to be certain that we have space for real interactivity, political interactivity among the leaders.

Then today we agreed formally our conclusions on the digital and single market. This is a very strong signal. This is a very important step that we are taking today.

Vous le savez, nous avons l'ambition de considérer que, naturellement, l'Union européenne est totalement mobilisée en faveur d'une économie ouverte. Nous croyons dans les vertus du libre échange et nous croyons dans le même temps que l'Union européenne doit être plus résiliente, plus en mesure de développer des priorités, plus en mesure d'affirmer sa capacité à être dans des secteurs stratégiques moins dépendants que nous le sommes parfois. C'est ce que nous avons constaté de manière parfois douloureuse dans le cadre de la crise du COVID-19. Et en cela les conclusions approuvées ce matin sont un signal fort que nous envoyons, puisqu'il y a là une capacité de développer des priorités très concrètes pour la souveraineté digitale, pour renforcer nos capacités et notre renforcement sur le plan du marché intérieur. Et chacun comprend que nous ne voulons pas simplement réparer le marché intérieur, mais travailler pour le faire mieux fonctionner, et faire en sorte que ce grand atout qui rassemble les Européens puisse continuer à être développé au service de notre projet et de nos valeurs. Et je voulais vraiment remercier très sincèrement la Commission pour le travail remarquable qui a été mené en coopération avec les États membres afin d'être en mesure de d'agréer sur des propositions qui sont concrètes, qui sont ambitieuses et qui fixent un cap stratégique extrêmement clair pour l'Union européenne tout au long des prochaines années.

Nous avons beaucoup travaillé ces derniers mois sur l'agenda digital, la grande transition pour laquelle nous sommes mobilisés grâce au European Green Deal présenté très rapidement par Ursula von der Leyen quand dont elle a pris ses fonctions.

Nous avons aujourd'hui, avec ce message, fixé un cap pour l'autre grande transition, la digitale. Et vous savez qu'il y a des liens très étroits entre les deux transitions. Enfin, deux derniers points.

We had a short update about the negotiations, the ongoing process of negotiations with the European Parliament in order to implement what we have decided in July: the MFF, the own resources and the Recovery Fund. We will have the occasion in the next days to be involved in order to try to make progress. We know that there are some difficult topics between the member states and with the European Parliament that we need to solve. We know that we know that our agreement in July was a political package and it's very essential to be able, as soon as possible to deliver, to implement what we have decided. It's a question of credibility and I feel a strong political will to make progress and to be able to implement the MFF and the Recovery Fund, but we will continue to work very hard in order to reach this goal.

And finally, just one word about Brexit, just an information point. We had the opportunity to have an update by Ursula (von der Leyen) and also an

analysis by the Irish Prime Minister. But we didn't open the debate today because you know, we will have the occasion in October, during our next meeting, to have a more substantial exchange of views. And we will take into consideration the possible developments between today and the next European Council. We trust the Commission. We trust Michel Barnier. We have a clear European position. We are united. We are very calm. We have expressed very clearly the last weeks what we think about the current situation. And we will have the occasion in October to tackle this important topic.

Vous voyez, il y a beaucoup de points substantiels qui ont été abordés dans cette réunion. Nous avons un agenda qui est intense sur le plan politique à l'échelle du Conseil européen et cette réunion fut encore l'occasion de faire fonctionner ce que j'appelle la magie européenne. Les sujets sont difficiles, les sujets sont complexes, ils sont stratégiques. Mais cette volonté de dialogue, cette volonté de débat, d'aller au fond des choses, nous permettent d'avancer, nous permet de progresser. C'est en tout cas la manière dont je veux envisager cette ambition européenne.

[Visit the meeting page](#)

When member states are divided, how do we ensure Europe is able



At the European Council, [leaders give their strategic guidance on many key foreign policy issues, from our relations with China, the conflict in Nagorno-Karabach and the poisoning of Aleksei Navalny](#). On the Eastern

Mediterranean, we will pursue dialogue with Turkey on outstanding issues. And European leaders tasked me to organise a multilateral conference which could address issues on which multilateral solutions are needed, including maritime delimitation, security, energy, migration and economic cooperation. We clearly prefer the path of constructive relations but the political line is clear: in case of renewed actions by Turkey that breach international law, the EU will use options at its disposal.

One big decision that leaders took was to finally impose sanctions on Belarus. There is no point denying that this decision took a long time: almost two months have passed since the rigged Presidential elections. [Many observers and commentators have pointed out](#) that divisions among member states were hampering our collective ability to take a stand, even on issues that are core to the EU's founding principle. In short, our credibility was at stake.

As long as the EU has been working on developing a common foreign policy, it has had to deal with this kind of splits. From the break up of Yugoslavia, to the Middle East Peace process, the war against Iraq in 2003, the independence of Kosovo or Chinese actions in the South China Sea.

This is of course not the first time that we experience divisions. As long as the EU has been working on developing a common foreign policy, it has had to deal with this kind of splits. From the break up of Yugoslavia, to the Middle East Peace process, the war against Iraq in 2003, the independence of Kosovo or Chinese actions in the South China Sea: there have been many examples where divisions among member states have slowed down or paralysed EU decision-making, or emptied it of substance.

The underlying reasons are not hard to state: history, geography, identity. Member-states look at the world through different prisms and it's not easy to blend these 27 different ways of defining their national interests into a united, common European interest. Having been Minister of Foreign Affairs of Spain I have sat at both sides of the table. And I know all too well that in the Council we discuss a common EU line, but as soon as we get home, minister focus above all on conducting their national foreign policy, with their own priorities and red lines.

The real question is what to do about this. For me it is clear that the main long-term answer lies in the creation of a common strategic culture: the more Europeans agree on how they see the world and its problems, the more they will agree on what to do about them. That is in part what we intend to do with the work on a Strategic Compass. But all this is a long-term process. And in the meantime, we have to be able to take collective decisions, on tough issues, in real time.

And this brings us to the question of *how* we take decisions on foreign

policy. For decades we have agreed that foreign and security policy must be decided by unanimity, with every country holding a veto. In foreign policy we work a lot with so-called discrete instead of continuous variables. This means many of our decisions are binary in nature: you either recognise a government or not, you launch a crisis management operation or not. And this leads to a lot of blockages and paralysis. In the same way, there are other important policy fields such as taxation or the multi-annual EU budget where the unanimity requirement has also created serious difficulties to find adequate solutions.

The contrast here is with those areas of the EU, from the single market to climate to migration, where the EU can take decisions by qualified majority (55% of member states and 65% of population). And crucially, market rules or climate targets are not secondary issues of lesser sensitivity. Indeed, big national interests at stake, which often clash just as much as in foreign policy.

What matters in the EU is not how a discussion begins; what matters is how it ends.

Moreover, it is striking that even in the areas where the EU can take decisions by QMV, it mostly doesn't. Why? Because the ethos of the club is to work for compromises, something everyone can buy into. But for this, all member states need to move and invest in unity. Simply sitting on one's position creates blockages. And in this specific sense, having the QMV option is important: not to use it but to create an incentive for member states to move and search for common ground. This is how, outside foreign policy, the EU can take decisions on important topics with big interests at stake, even if member states are divided. What matters in the EU is not how a discussion begins; what matters is how it ends.

Right at the start of my mandate I argued that if, in foreign policy, we want to escape the paralysis and delays of the unanimity rule, we ought to think about taking some decisions without requiring the full unanimity of 27. And in February when we were blocked on the launch of Operation Irini to police the arms embargo on Libya, I raised the question at the [Munich Security Council](#) how reasonable it is for one country, which would anyway not participate in the naval operation because it lacks a navy, to prevent the other 26 from moving forward.

Let's be clear: we will not have majority voting across the board. But one could limit it to aspects where we have been frequently blocked in the past – sometimes for completely unrelated reasons – such as human rights statements or sanctions. In her [State of the Union](#), President Von Der Leyen repeated this proposal (it was actually the line in her speech that attracted the largest amount of applause).

Since then, there has been renewed debate on the merits and risks associated to this idea. For instance, the [President of the European Council](#) has warned that dropping the unanimity requirement would risk losing the legitimacy and buy-in that is needed when it comes to implementing any decisions. This is

without any doubt, an important issue. [Others](#) have pointed to the fact that the national veto is an 'insurance policy or emergency brake' to protect especially the ability of small countries to defend their core national interests (larger member states may not even need the veto to protect their core national interests).

Abandoning the unanimity rule would not be a silver bullet. But we need to create the right incentives for member states to come together. Just appealing to the need for unity is not enough.

I welcome this debate. I am clear that abandoning the unanimity rule would not be a silver bullet. But we need a discussion on how to create the right incentives for member states to come together. Just appealing to the need for unity is not enough. Which decisions we make and how credible they are, depends crucially on how we make them.

Going forward, some possibilities seem pertinent to me, to be evaluated and discussed:

Maybe it could be better, sometimes, to accept to issue a quick statement at 25 with good substance than wait for several days and come with a lowest common denominator statement at 27?

Maybe it is also better to think not mainly in terms of introducing QMV but also of 'constructive abstention'? This was a possibility introduced to enable a country to abstain without blocking the Union from moving forward. For example, this was how the EULEX mission in Kosovo was launched in 2006.

And finally, as we are certainly not going to abandon unanimity across the board, could we define areas and tools and instruments where it could make more sense to experiment (for example sanctions, statements, demarches) and, if so, with what kind of safeguards?

I hope that in the weeks and months ahead, for example in the framework of the Conference on the Future of Europe, we can debate the pros and cons of these options, knowing that there is a great and urgent need for the EU to protect its capacity to act in a dangerous world.