

THE ROLE OF THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF "EUROPE 2020": MECHANISMS, ACTIONS, PROSPECTS

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Abstract: *This article examines the institutional tools and mechanisms that the Committee of the Regions is endowed with, in the process of implementing and checking the progress of the Europe 2020 Agenda. The emphasis first lies on the traditional consultative nature of the aforementioned body, which has nevertheless been striving for more prominence. The previous role in the evaluation of the Lisbon Strategy has provided the CoR with some experience, to the extent that the Monitoring Platform it is utilising in its activities pertaining to Europe 2020 are coherent and quite complex. We have performed an analysis of the current activities conducted by the CoR under the auspices of the Platform, including text analyses on its latest releases and assessments of its consultation and networking activities. Some recommendations have been filed to enhance the subnational dimension of the Europe 2020 Agenda, in the light of the findings of CoR panels.*

Keywords: Europe 2020; Committee of the Regions; Monitoring Platform; consultative body; Country-specific Recommendations

1. A view on the Committee of the Regions, in the post-Lisbon Agenda

One of the more recent institutional additions of the European Union, the Committee of the Regions, was created in 1994, in the light of the new decision-making approach initiated by the Treaty of Maastricht, as a consultative body which reflects the ever more prominent subnational dimensions of the Union. In the light of the Regional Policy and the management of the cohesion instruments at a regional level, the need for a body that might represent the various sub-national levels the member states are divided into has been growing stronger. Nevertheless, as the configuration of sub-national units still varies from one country to another, depending, amongst others, on their more or less centralised nature, the heterogeneous character of the CoR has only become more prominent in recent years, with the Eastern enlargement of the European Union, prompting us to wonder as to the usefulness of an increase in competences of the aforementioned body. (Panara and De Becker, 2010, p. 77)

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It is to be mentioned from the very start that the original purpose of the CoR was that of giving pertinent council to the decision-making triangle, under the auspices of the co-decision procedure, amid the growing impact of community legislation on the regional level, in extenso. The emergence of the democratic deficit and the resulting Eurosceptical political trends rendered the CoR more necessary and more present in terms of opinions provided either de facto, or on its own initiative, as non-binding input for decisions. The weight of the voices of regions is inherently different from one country to another and, indeed, from one region to the next, with lobbying becoming a powerful tool in the hands of affluent sub-national units in various industrial and service branches. (Breuer, 2012, p. 70)

The functioning of the CoR did not meet with any major obstacles, as the provisions regulating its activity borrowed configuration elements from the already-established European Economic and Social Committee, whose prominence in decision-making still bears much resemblance to the one of the newer consultative body. Sharing one of the most beautiful buildings in Brussels, in the European neighbourhood, namely the Jacques Delors headquarters, is yet another element that the two bodies have in common. (State, 2015, p. 156)

Our analysis in this article shall focus on the role of the CoR with regard to the implementation and additional mechanisms pertaining to the newest multiannual strategy of the European Union, currently in progress, in the light of the principles that lie at the basis of the functioning of the Committee. The latter revolve around the consolidated subsidiarity that has emerged in the aftermath of the intricate debate surrounding the Treaty of Lisbon and its particularly thorny ratification. (Panara, 2010, pp. 81-82) The fact that decisions are intended to be taken at the level which is as close to EU citizens as possible would normally render the CoR indispensable in decision-making, albeit the function of ensuring that subsidiarity rules are abided by is fulfilled by a joint endeavour encompassing the European Parliament and national legislators. That said, the multi-level governance that has made the EU stand out as a unique form of supranational construct would be incomplete in the absence of a genuine entity whose purpose is to protect the interests of its regions, as opposed sometimes to those of member states per se. In this respect, the CoR is undoubtedly meant to serve the role of a transparency forum, operating in the interest of local autonomies and regions in general.

This being said, it is worth emphasising that, according to the treaties and, more precisely, to the Treaty of Lisbon, the prerogatives of the CoR shall not exceed those of a consultative body, with the European Commission and Council of Ministers being obliged to resort to the consultation of the CoR whenever a decision taken at either level is likely to affect the regional dimension of the Union. To elaborate, such consultations can be either mandatory or optional, if the EU institutions that are part of the decision-making triangle deem them necessary, even outside the framework established by the treaties. On the other hand, the CoR itself can choose to emit an opinion on any piece of legislation that pertains to the regional level, so as to raise awareness on matters that should be addressed by the EU. Moreover, in recent years, with the adoption of the Treaty of Lisbon, the CoR

has received the right to submit a plea to the European Court of Justice, on matters germane to the respect of the subsidiarity principle in the decision-making mechanisms at the Community level. (Piris, 2010, p. 235) This prerogative has undoubtedly provided the Committee with more prominence, even though there persist at least two institutional factors that decrease its stance in the complicated institutional framework of the Union. The former consists of the fact that it remains a body of the EU, inferior to the no fewer than seven institutions stipulated by the treaties - a number increased by the Treaty of Lisbon -, while the latter pertains to the nature of the legal documents the CoR is entitled to issue, namely recommendations, resolutions and opinions, none of which are endowed with a legally-binding nature.

As far as the structure of the CoR is concerned, it is worth noting that the same EU principle applies in the configuration of its 350 permanent seats (and an equal number of alternates), allocated to each member state on the grounds of digressive proportionality, albeit with more uniformity, ranging from a maximum of 24, in the case of the four largest member states by population, to a minimum of 5, for the three smaller ones in this respect. (Bache *et al.*, 2012, p. 235) Depending on the national regulations, the members, all of whom are elected at the local or regional levels, are local councillors, regional leaders (in Romania's case, for instance, presidents of the County Councils) and mayors. Proportionality between the most important parties from the European political families is paramount in the allocation of seats, with members benefitting from five-year mandates.

Once we have assessed the situation of the CoR in the current state of affairs within the EU, and acknowledged that it retains a consultative role, it is important to comprehend the nature of the Europe 2020 Agenda, in a nutshell, and the extent to which such a body as the CoR is likely to play a significant role in its implementation and monitoring.

2. Europe 2020 - priorities, mechanisms, assessments

The EU Commission-managed ten-year strategy of the Union which is currently mid-way through, namely Europe 2020, is a more complex heir to the somewhat ambiguous Lisbon Strategy. Constructed as a growth and development endeavour, the agenda deals with current economic and social concerns of the EU and its member states and instils a complex implementation and monitoring mechanism, reminiscent of the useful, albeit not always comprehensible, tools developed under the Project Cycle Management framework.

While it is not our intention at this time to perform a thorough analysis of Europe 2020, which we have already conducted and published in previous studies (Corpadean, 2014, pp. 267-283), we shall outline the general operational framework of the latter and then insist on the role of the CoR in the processes identified. Regardless, in not so many words, it is commendable that Europe 2020 is able to address some of the most stringent needs of the Community at this time, including the pressing matters of youth unemployment, school dropout, poverty and access to third level education. To this we may add a special focus, based on indicators and



progress milestones, on the matter of environmental protection, with such keywords as greenhouse gas emissions, energy efficiency and renewable sources of energy. Not least, member states are encouraged to spend more on research and development, amid the current geopolitical state of affairs, in which few of them are able to meet or even come close to the 3% of GDP criterion demanded by the agenda for the EU, taken as a whole. (Rodrigues and Xiarchogiannopoulou, 2014, pp. 130-131)

The implementation and monitoring processes pertaining to Europe 2020 are encompassed in the set of procedures known as the European Semester. (Steinbach, pp. 124-126) In keeping with the intricacies that define the multi-level governance system of the Union and the need to satisfy, to the extent that such a feat is possible, all the interests emanating from member states, the supranational level, regions, political families and European citizens, Europe 2020 has been endowed with its own mechanisms, which we shall attempt to briefly explain. This will enable us to subsequently address the role of the CoR as part of the European Semester and to evaluate its prominence and activity to date.

The European Semester comprises elements from the economic, budgetary and political fields, while involving all major institutional actors of the EU, in a genuine Gantt chart drafted on an annual basis, with some constants that we intend to underline in what follows. Hence, the year commences with the European Commission issuing its Annual Growth Survey, i.e. a guideline document addressing the priorities for the coming 12 months, in the light of the progress attained up to that time, along with an Alert Mechanism Report, for those countries which require special attention. (Albors-Llorens *et al.*, 2015, pp. 48-49) Then, in the spirit of the treaties, the Commission transmits the Annual Growth Survey to both Parliament and the Council of the EU, while the European Council, in the light of its impetus-provider nature, issues essential guidelines during the March summit, emphasising such aspects as fiscal coordination, macroeconomic policies and structural reforms. (Praussello, 2012, p. 193) After these supranational and intergovernmental steps, the member states kick in and prepare their own stability or convergence programmes, based on national reform priorities in the key areas stipulated by the agenda.

One particularly important tool which the Commission makes use of is the drafting of the Country-specific Recommendations, which become useful input documents in the preparation of national budgets for the coming year. These recommendations are submitted to the endorsement of the European Council and the approval of the Council of Ministers, a procedure which is normally completed by the month of July. (Novotný, 2013, p. 499) Unlike the less legally-binding Lisbon Strategy, Europe 2020 benefits from several coercive tools which prevent member states from ignoring the duties assumed, such as policy warnings and sanctions in the case of serious macroeconomic or budgetary mistakes or failures to meet the norms established by the multi-annual framework.

As with any major endeavour conducted at the EU level, the Europe 2020 Agenda should not turn into a remote initiative in the eyes of citizens. For this reason, member states should strive to involve the regional and local levels in the consultations and procedures implementing the strategy, all the more because in the

case of federal states and not only, many of the policy areas that fall under the interest of Europe 2020 are regulated at lower levels. The importance of the Committee of the Regions looms on the horizon in the light of this observation, as we shall pinpoint below, while the other key consultative body of the Union, namely the European Economic and Social Committee, has developed its own Steering Committee. The aim of the latter is to serve as a networking tool fostering the involvement of social entities, economic organisations, trade unions and the civil society per se in the discussions surrounding the key areas established by Europe 2020.

3. The Europe 2020 monitoring platform

The Platform defines itself as a “a network of regions and cities to contribute to the EU debate on smart, sustainable and inclusive growth and to monitor the implementation of Europe 2020” (CoR Europe 2020 Monitoring Platform), in keeping with the keywords that have become the leitmotifs of Europe 2020, but with special emphasis on two subnational levels that are specific of the activity of the CoR. In effect, the Monitoring Platform is a soft-power means placed in the hands of local and regional authorities throughout the EU, enabling them to provide ideas as input for the implementation and monitoring of the agenda.

This institutional tool given to the CoR so as to participate in an EU multiannual agenda is by no means a novelty, as during the enactment of the Lisbon Strategy, i.e. the predecessor of Europe 2020, the aforementioned body developed a Lisbon Monitoring Platform, although this instrument was only set in place in 2006, in the latter period of the Lisbon process. (Panara and De Becker, 2010, p. 120)

As far as the new platform is concerned, its purpose is to provide a link between the macro-goals of Europe 2020 and the subnational levels, so as to foster the involvement of such entities in the improvement and progress of the action. The Cohesion Policy is clearly influenced by the outcome of the multiannual strategy, which is why it becomes paramount to gather the appropriate feedback and indicators exhibiting the extent to which the former affects both regional development and economic and social cohesion across the Union. From the very nature of the goals established for the Monitoring Platform, it becomes evident that the means through which it is expected to fulfil its mission are in keeping with those the CoR has become acquainted with in its more or less two decades of activity, including reports, best practice exchange and information flows. In more concrete terms, there are five tools currently active within the Monitoring Platform, namely the website (with a user-friendly forum-based interface), the policy workshops (for liaisons with internal and external stakeholders), questionnaires and surveys (for swifter local and regional input), monitoring reports (available for the general public, as well as for EU institutions and bodies), and thematic initiatives (on niche subjects that arise in the monitoring activity).

In this communication-prone atmosphere, members of the Monitoring Platform take part every year in the Territorial Dialogue session conducted within



the CoR, which acts as a rather informal exchange forum with EU decision-makers invited to this event, on topics referring to the specific regional challenges of the Monitoring Platform representatives.

Who takes part in the EU 2020 Monitoring Platform? At this time, there are over 160 regions and cities across the EU that have representatives within the Platform, with an open procedure accepting applications from any eligible entity. For instance, Romania is currently represented by six participants, belonging to two levels, i.e. four cities (Cluj-Napoca Timisoara, Brasov and Cugir) and two regional bodies (the Regional Pacts for Employment and Social Inclusion North-West & Bucharest-Ilfov). As the Platform does not yield any legally binding documents, its typical activities include surveys, workshops, information exchange and consultations that may, however, become food for thought in the preparation of CoR documents within the non-compulsory decision-making at the EU level.

It was only in September 2012 that the CoR Bureau, at its Nicosia meeting, decided to establish a detailed set of procedures on the functioning of the Monitoring Platform, under the general title of *CoR's New Strategy on Europe 2020*. This gave rise to a steering committee for the Platform, led by a Political Coordinator and including a representative appointed by each political group. As an interesting fact, the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe appointed Romanian Alin Adrian Nica as a member of the Steering Committee, as mayor of the commune of Dudestii Noi, in Timis County. French socialist Michel Delebarre has led the Platform since its creation, with a second mandate that is due to end in 2020. (CoR Europe 2020 Monitoring Platform)

A number of six activities have been conducted under the auspices of the Monitoring Platform in 2015 to date (15th May), including an online consultation, a call for applications for the European Public Sector Award, an analysis of the European Semester Country Reports for 2015, an online survey conducted jointly with the OECD, a seminar on good governance and a consultation report. (CoR Europe 2020 Monitoring Platform) As a relevant case study, one that we deem indicative of the activity and role of the CoR Europe 2020 Monitoring Platform, we have opted for a brief analysis of one of the recent outputs of this entity, prior to making a general assessment on its prominence and that of the CoR per se with regard to the implementation and monitoring of Europe 2020. The document which appears to bear the most relevance in this regard is the *Territorial analysis of the 2015 Country Reports and accompanying Communication*, released in April 2015.

After a methodological explanation of how the European Commission deals with its pivotal role in the European Semester, the report outlines the improved functions of the CoR in its feedback-provider mission with respect to Country Reports, the former benefitting from three months to analyse the Country-specific Recommendations' progress for the previous year before formulating its viewpoints for the new documents. Moreover, the report refers to the 33 Country-specific Recommendations from 2014 that pertained to local and regional authorities and which were identified in 18 of the EU member states. These matters referred to "public finances, employment/social policies, public administration reform and structural reforms" and the report presented the general progress

assessment in each case, painting a rather bleak picture, and outlining the need for concrete policy interventions. On the other hand, the document explains how CSRs with specific regional or local chapters were being addressed to member states, their number and spread depending on a set of indicators that encompass GDP/capita, public administration reform and regional disparities within a country. Concrete examples of CSRs with regional disparity-related implications are given in the case of six member states, with such important issues as childcare problems in Austria, school dropout rates in Belgium, entrepreneurship in Estonia, fight against corruption in Italy, competition in Latvia, or healthcare in Croatia. (Territorial analysis of the 2015 Country Reports and accompanying Communication)

With this data in mind, the report moves on to the Country Reports produced by the European Commission for 2015, so as to once again raise awareness on the occurrence of territorial matters across the member states, as all CRs exhibit such preoccupations at this time. Interesting statistical analyses reveal that the three most common key phrases in such matters are *labour market*, *public administration* and *structural, fiscal and taxation issues*, with Finland having the most territorial problems in the CRs, namely seven. Nevertheless, overall, it is the countries with more internal regional disparities that exhibit a larger number of recommendations, with , for instance, receiving such observations in areas like Corruption and transparency, Management of EU funds, Public procurement and e-governance, as well as Administrative burden and administrative capacity (Territorial analysis of the 2015 Country Reports and accompanying Communication).

The lucid conclusions of the report stress that indeed, local and regional issues within the Country-specific Recommendations are more difficult to implement than national ones, to the extent that 63.6% of the former are described as exhibiting no or limited progress in 2014, compared to only 47% of the latter. The fact that the 2015 CRs include territorial concerns in all member states is perceived as positive by the CoR, which thereby issues the recommendation that "EU and country-level strategies for growth, jobs and the modernization of the public administration need to include a territorial dimension". Finally, the document emphasises that the member states that exhibit the most (and the most serious) problems at the local and regional levels are also those that were hit the hardest by the economic crisis, with such issues as administrative capacity, corruption and transparency at the core of the debate. (Territorial analysis of the 2015 Country Reports and accompanying Communication)

The analysis we have performed on the most recent comprehensive report pertaining to the implementation and monitoring of Europe 2020 and stemming from the CoR reveals that awareness of local and regional matters can and should be reflected within the European Semester, as the elected representatives at those levels are able to provide consistent feedback on subjects that fall into the areas of competence of the agenda. The contributions of the CoR to the analysis of the Country-specific Recommendations and the Country Reports that assess the progress of such documents, aiming to address the priorities of the new CSRs, are an important prerogative of this EU body and have played a useful part in the



European Semester, with the already known limitations stemming from the non-binding character of all documents emanating from the CoR.

4. In guise of conclusion

The CoR has become an attention-grabbing entity within the institutional framework of the EU, one that may well reflect some of the contradictions that more or less define the manner in which the Community method functions. On the one hand, we have a body - not an institution - that has been striving during the course of its still rather short history for more prominence and has not refrained from issuing opinions at key moments, on its own initiative; in so doing, it gets nearer to the undoubtedly desirable aim of the Union to consult its citizens ever more closely and to involve more locally and regionally-elected figures in consultations, if not decision-making per se. On the other hand, there is little that we have found in the work and prerogatives of the CoR, amid the ongoing European Semester, which would enable us to claim that this body is moving towards a genuinely harder stance in decision-making, as opposed to its traditional advisory role that we have become accustomed to over the years.

Even so, the actions emanating from the CoR are not to be taken for granted, as its soft position has not prevented it from acting as a lucrative networking forum, i.e. a meeting place for ideas, people who do not hold the toughest reins of power, and projects built around recurrent challenges in numerous EU regions. It is not our intent to make a judgement on the variable prominence of regions from one member state to another, let alone to refer to the Romanian case at this time, but the very fact that the CoR has been officially endowed with the Europe 2020 Monitoring Platform is a positive sign of openness towards more subsidiarity and citizens' involvement.

The implication of the CoR in the two consecutive multiannual agendas of the EU, namely Lisbon and Europe 2020, has definitely yielded numerous analytical documents which reflect the subnational concerns that ought to be echoed by concrete priorities especially in the aftermath of the economic downturn. By going over the *Consultation of European Regions and Cities on a New Strategy for Sustainable Growth*¹, a document in which the CoR performed a lucid and somewhat critical assessment of the outcome of the Lisbon Agenda, it becomes apparent that Europe 2020 was shaped with clear contributions from this body. The ongoing involvement of the CoR in the monitoring of Europe 2020 is evident and translates into such useful documents as the *Blueprint for a renewed Europe 2020 strategy from a territorial perspective*, published in December 2014, in which seven proposals are made so as to increase the effectiveness of the endeavour, from a regional and local perspective. Such priorities include target setting at a subnational level - an interesting novelty for a multiannual agenda of the Community -, more emphasis on multilevel governance, more territorial focus

¹ For further details see: https://portal.cor.europa.eu/europe2020/news/Documents/EN_Consultation%20Report.pdf



within the European Semester, better territorial connections with the Flagship Initiatives, investment support, enhanced administrative capacity and more interactive mutual learning.

Such are the current priorities stated by the CoR within the sinuous implementation and monitoring of the Europe 2020 Agenda, an endeavour which should learn from the mistakes of its predecessor and turn more often to regional and local inputs so as to become more concrete and less dependent on unquantifiable priorities, veiled in more or less ambiguous terminology. On the contrary, the SMART approach relying on a set of indicators that the monitoring of Europe 2020 depends on should collect data at as low a level as possible, and adopt sub-indicators whenever the latter serve the purpose of better assessing achievement on a limited area. The recommendations issued for countries are expected to take into account their particular problems at the subnational level, stemming from specific discrepancies, which will enable territorial units to play a better-tailored role in the common effort that is the 2020-bound strategic approach the Community is striving to direct so many resources to.

Future research on the subject will collect more reports emanating from the Monitoring Platform of the CoR and attempt to corroborate the recommendations stipulated therein with the priorities set by the Commission, with special focus on the extent to which the latter will be capable of addressing local issues more thoroughly and of verifying progress at this level in a more quantifiable fashion.

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