

## European Alliance Group

### “A Europe of Values must be part of the Future of Europe debate”, says Karl Vanlouwe

Every day I am saddened to see how democratically elected politicians from Catalonia are being treated. Yet the EU institutions turn a ‘blind-eye’ to the erosion of the democratic values which are at the core of the EU project. It is now high time for the EU institutions, in particular the European Commission, to defend our fundamental values, and call for dialogue, mediation and indeed send a clear message that political repression is neither accepted nor tolerated in the EU. Only by doing this will we build a Europe of values and democracy for future generations.

Our group is also in favour of embracing, preserving and promoting cultural heritage. We welcome the debate with Commissioner Navracsics during the May plenary session of the CoR and on the 4 June we will follow up on this meeting by bringing together practitioners to show how regions and cities across the EU place value on their cultural and linguistic heritage.



Mr Karl Vanlouwe, member of the Flemish Parliament and president of the EA Group

Lastly, the UK withdrawal from the EU will have a huge impact on regions like my own, Flanders. I welcome the fact the Conference of Presidents of the CoR will visit Ireland and afterwards Northern Ireland. I am also delighted that COTER coordinators took up my suggestion and on 26 April visited the port of Zeebrugge which BREXIT will greatly impact. It is only through preparing that we can try and reduce the negative consequences of this process.

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## CoR delegation visits Port of Zeebrugge to discuss Brexit



Mr Karl Vanlouwe with Mr Stanisław Szwabski and Zeebrugge port CEO Mr Joachim Coens

On 26 April 2018, at the initiative of Karl Vanlouwe (N-VA), member of the Flemish Parliament and president of the European Alliance Group in the Committee of the Regions, a delegation from the CoR's Commission for Territorial Cohesion Policy and EU Budget (COTER) visited the Port of Zeebrugge to see the impact BREXIT will have on the port and the wider Flemish

economy. The Zeebrugge port CEO Joachim Coens and other key figures from the port spoke to the delegation.

Almost half of the total trade in the Port of Zeebrugge is with the United Kingdom, 67% of which is exported across the channel. A hard Brexit, without a customs agreement would thus have a huge impact on the work in the port. Preparing for Brexit is a

key priority for the business sector that is doing everything possible to mitigate the negative consequences. Unfortunately, during the Brexit negotiations the future relationship will only be dealt with at a later stage. The Port of Zeebrugge is trying to advance preparations as much as possible in order to anticipate consequences and devise new business processes.

According to Mr Vanlouwe, the visit came at a key time, "The Port of Zeebrugge is proactively preparing for Brexit and I wanted to share this good example with the representatives of the Committee of the Regions from different European countries. A no-deal Brexit may impact our port and the wider economy hugely and it is therefore imperative that we examine all options for our future relationship with the UK. This visit highlighted the Flemish concerns within the European Committee of the Regions and indeed a resolution on the UK withdrawal from the EU will be discussed at the next CoR Plenary in mid-May."

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**Karl Vanlouwe, president of the EA Group**



**European Alliance**

## EA Group to hold a seminar on Cultural and Linguistic Heritage in Europe on 4 June

On 4 June, the European Alliance Group will hold an extraordinary meeting and a seminar in Brussels dedicated to the promotion of cultural and linguistic heritage in Europe.

The seminar will address different aspects of preservation and promotion of Europe's

cultural heritage with senior-level speakers from EU institutions, international networks and local-level civil and business sectors. Members will hear about the best practices in the field of heritage tourism and opportunities offered by the European Capitals of Culture programme. They will learn about best practices from across the

continent through several case studies.

Fostering and promotion of cultural heritage is one of the main political priorities of the European Alliance Group and we are particularly happy to organize this and similar events in 2018 as the European Year of Cultural Heritage.

## Mikel Irujo's "Strengthening Innovation in Europe's Regions" opinion to be adopted by the CoR plenary in May

On 16 May, CoR members are set to adopt the opinion "Strengthening Innovation in Europe's Regions: Strategies for resilient, inclusive and sustainable growth", prepared by Mr Mikel Irujo Amezaga, delegate of the government of Navarre to the EU. The opinion responds to the eponymous Communication published by the European Commission last year and builds on Mr Irujo's earlier opinion "Smart Specialisation Strategies (RIS3): impact for regions and inter-regional cooperation" which was adopted in spring 2017.

In the opinion, Mr Irujo recommends that in the next programming period the EU should initiate a new phase of Smart Spe-

cialisation Strategies (S3), based on developing a "regional discovery process" in which regions pool their S3, involving the "interregional triple helices". To do that, he calls for a bottom-up approach, which would give regions the possibility of providing S3 "contact points" responsible for developing these processes. The draft opinion also suggests establishing a structured dialogue between the European Commission and the regional innovation ecosystem actors to ensure the viability of existing and new policies and financing instruments and argues for synergies and combination of funds at all levels (local, regional, national and EU) to support inter-regional projects.



*Mr Mikel Irujo*

Mr Irujo's opinion was adopted by the SEDEC commission on 21 February this year.

## Mairi Gougeon on the Scottish perception of Brexit at "The future of the EU and the role of the regions" conference

On 10 April, CoR hosted a conference "The future of the EU and the role of the regions"



*Ms Mairi Gougeon MSP*

which gathered representatives of local and regional authorities, European Parliament and academia to discuss the role for LRAs in the future of Europe.

Speaking on a panel workshop on democratic requirements for European regional governance, Ms Mairi Gougeon MSP gave the audience an insight on what Brexit means for the Scottish people and economy and what options the country has on the table to address all of its damaging consequences.

Ms Gougeon argued that for Scotland Brexit exemplifies a discrepancy between what people want at the regional (or country) level and what is decided on a member state level, which naturally leads to questions about the legitimacy of the current

representation system. She added that Scotland wanted continuity with the EU and deplored the lack of information-sharing and policy negotiation with the government in Westminster over the Brexit process.

Speaking on a panel debate "BREXIT: a regional perspective" which was held the same evening at the CoR, Ms Gougeon said that Brexit had made people in Scotland and the UK reflect on and evaluate the importance of Europe in their lives, something which had not been talked about enough in the past.

Ms Gougeon is a Member of the Scottish Parliament for Angus North and Mearns and a CoR and EA Group member since 2016.

## European Alliance members welcome the creation of the CoR intergroup on BREXIT

The first meeting of the European Committee of the Regions' BREXIT intergroup took place on the margins of the CoR plenary session in March this year. The intergroup will focus its work on preparing regions outside of the UK for the impact of its withdrawal from the European Union.

Cllr Enda Stenson from the Leitrim County Council said that he welcomed the creation of the group as he had seen the impact of

a border in Ireland over decades and he never wants to see a return to a hard border. Coming from an area which will be the most affected by Brexit he highlighted the need for local authorities to prepare themselves. Cllr Kieran McCarthy from the Cork City Council and Cllr Declan McDonnell from the Galway City Council also joined the debate and highlighted some of the major issues of concern to their cities.



*Cllr Enda Stenson, Cllr Declan McDonnell and Cllr Kieran McCarthy*

## Gilles Simeoni and Nanette Maupertuis call for special attention to insular regions in future cohesion policy at the EP Intergroup meeting



*Mr Gilles Simeoni and Ms Nanette Maupertuis*

On 24 April, Gilles Simeoni, President of the Executive Council of Corsica and Nanette Maupertuis, who is also a member of the Executive Council, took part in a meeting organised by the European Parliament Intergroup on Seas, Rivers, Islands and Coastal Areas with support of the CPMR islands commission, on the insular dimension of cohesion policy post-2020.

The conference, also attended by the European Commissioner for Regional Policy Corina Crețu and several MEPs, served as an opportunity for the island regions and territories to express their views on the way in which the future cohesion policy could meet the specific needs of islands.

Addressing the Commissioner for Regional policy Gilles Simeoni said that "consistent and particular attention to insularity,

as enshrined in Article 174 of the Lisbon Treaty, is currently missing from Cohesion Policy. The post-2020 Cohesion Policy must deliver legislative and financial conditions that will unlock the potential of island

regions for the benefit of the EU as a whole".

Ms Maupertuis who was also rapporteur on the CoR opinion "Entrepreneurship and territorial cohesion in islands" reiterated that citizens and businesses across the EU should have access to the same opportunities regardless of where they live and a full integration of islands' residents in the European single market must be ensured"

The meeting comes after the adoption of the Council conclusions where the Commission is invited to work on specific measures for islands and regions which suffer from severe and permanent natural constraints.

At its meeting in Aiacciu held in April 2017, the EA Group adopted a Declaration and a set of recommendations to advance territorial cohesion in islands and raise awareness of their specific needs



*During the March plenary session, EA president Karl Vanlouwe met with European Commissioner for Migration and Home Affairs Dimitris Avramopoulos*

## CoR members discuss EU enlargement with counterparts from the Western Balkans and Turkey

As every year, in the beginning of May EU enlargement was high on the European Committee of the Regions' agenda.

On 3 May, CoR members and their counterparts from Turkey and the Western Balkans held separate meetings of Joint Consultative Committees (JCC) and Working Groups (WG) which meet twice a year. The topics included protection of cultural heritage, digital transformation, waste management, city-to-city partnerships and the fight against corruption.

On 4 May, members of all JCCs and WGs met together for a plenary session, the so-called Enlargement Day, when they discussed the current state and the future of the EU enlargement process with representatives of the European Commission's DG NEAR, Bulgarian Presidency, think-tanks and networks of local and regional authorities from South-East Europe and Turkey.



Enlargement Day 2017

European Committee of the Regions currently has JCCs with representatives of local and regional authorities from Serbia, Montenegro and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, while cooperation with Turkey, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania and Kosovo takes place at the level of working groups.

EA Group members who took part in the events are Mr Jan Van Esbroeck (member of JCC Serbia), Mr Hughie McGrath (JCC Montenegro), Mr Declan McDonnell (JCC FYROM), Mr Józef Kotyś (WG Turkey) and Mr Virginijus Komskis (WG Western Balkans which includes Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania and Kosovo).

## Uno Silberg meets a delegation of Estonian municipal leaders

On 19 and 20 March, a delegation of Estonian local authorities paid a visit to the European Committee of the Regions where they learned about the impact of Brexit, negotiations on the Multiannual Financial Framework, cohesion policy, digital single market and migration. The delegation met the

president of the Estonian delegation in the CoR, Mr Uno Silberg who gave a presentation of the CoR's role and explained how the Estonian CoR delegation is working.

In October 2017, Estonia carried a big municipal reform, shrinking the number of municipalities from 213 to 79. The visit

was organized in cooperation with the European Commission Representation in Estonia to offer a possibility to new municipal leaders to learn about EU affairs.

Estonian CoR members have so far prepared 18 opinions in the CoR, out of which 5 have been delivered by Mr Silberg.



Mr Uno Silberg with the delegation of Estonian municipal leaders

## CoR/EA Group Secondary Schools Competition 2018 progress report

The EA Group's popular essay writing competition for Secondary Schools is well underway for the 14th year running. It is always a pleasure for our members to welcome the winners to Brussels and

the CoR during the July plenary. This year we have students from eight countries: Estonia, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Scotland and Slovakia all of whom have completed essays on the

topic of cultural heritage. We find that as well as learning about the CoR and the EU the young people benefit enormously from the opportunity to meet their contemporaries from other backgrounds.