

MAREK WOŹNIAK

BUILDING COMMUNITY THROUGH SELF-GOVERNMENT*

Today, when the European Union is experiencing the greatest crisis in its history, while its very idea is being severely put to the test, many are probably asking themselves: Is this the end, has a united Europe turned out to be yet another utopia?

There is no doubt that we have come up against challenges that barely a decade ago would have been hard to imagine. The economic crisis that has particularly affected the Union's young population, coupled with inadequacies in social communication, has caused disappointment, a growth in populism, and the rise of diverse forms of nationalism, while dramatic electoral campaigns in several EU countries have revealed the scale of this threat. The problem of refugees, one that Europe must resolve jointly, has become a litmus test painfully laying bare an absence of solidarity, particularism, and the playing out of internal interests on a European platform. Brexit in the meantime has proved an unexpected upheaval, its consequences still hard to anticipate. Perhaps, from the perspective of time, developments arousing understandable anxiety today shall prove essential though painful shock therapy, making the people of Europe realise what the word 'united' really means, and forcing the governments of several member states, Poland among them, to verify their policy of a besieged fortress.

The words of the founding fathers of the European Union, that it does not join states but people, may well seem but a truism today. However, perhaps it would be worth recalling them right now, at this difficult moment for Europe. That we perceive the European Union too often only in relation to the funds entering our country, free trade, or the open borders is a mistake. The European Union must, above all, signify a mental opening up. And on this level self-government units, treated in the European Union as one of the most important links in building community, have an enormous role to play.

Regional and local self-government units in the European Union are represented by the European Committee of the Regions (CoR), established in 1994 and comprising 350 representatives of all 28 member states elected at regional and local levels. Its crucial role was confirmed and reinforced in 2009 with the Lisbon Treaty.

Members from a single country form a delegation to the CoR. I have had the honour of chairing the Polish delegation since April 2008, and holding the

* Translation of the paper into English has been financed by the Minister of Science and Higher Education as part of agreement no. 541/P-DUN/2016. Translated by Jonathan Weber. (Editor's note.)

position of Vice-President of the European Committee of the Regions. Since December 2010 I have also been deputy chairman of the European People's Party in the European Committee of the Regions, one of five political groups embracing CoR members on an entirely voluntary basis. I also work in the CoR commissions for Territorial Cohesion Policy and EU Budget (COTER), of which I was the Chair for a few years, and for Citizenship, Governance, Institutional and External Affairs (CIVEX). Work in the commissions provides us above all with the opportunity to discuss, to present the arguments of individual self-government units in Europe, and to draw up opinions taking into account various needs and expectations. As such we are taking a practical lesson in democracy, since others have to be persuaded of our reasoning.

The European Commission, the Council of the European Union and the European Parliament are obliged—as part of the legislating process—to consult the European Committee of the Regions on matters affecting self-government units. If they do not do so, the European Committee of the Regions may file a case with the European Court of Justice. This is significant, since approximately 70% of EU legislation directly affects self-government. And around 50% of European Union citizens believe that their representatives elected at local and regional levels manage to better represent their interests at the EU level than officials working in Brussels.

The European Committee of the Regions gives an opinion following the receipt of a legislative proposal or on its own initiative. In the course of a year there are generally six CoR plenary sessions, during which opinions on approximately 50 EU legislative bills are adopted. In practice this means that we designate among ourselves a rapporteur, who consults the interested parties and drafts an opinion. This is initially discussed and adopted by the CoR commission responsible for the area concerned—and there are six such commissions functioning in the European Committee of the Regions. Opinions are adopted once the proposed amendments have been taken into account at the plenary sitting of the CoR, through voting.

Regional and local authorities, associations, non-governmental organisations, experts and scientists are encouraged by the European Committee of the Regions to participate in discussions, questionnaires, consultation and events. The European Union's civil dimension is realised via the CoR, and the voice articulated in opinions of the European Committee of the Regions is the voice of the residents of a united Europe. It is by no accident that only a person actually wielding authority in a self-government unit can be a member of the CoR. When one resigns from one's self-government function, or is dismissed from such a position, then this person's membership of the European Committee of the Regions automatically expires.

The principles of multi-layered governance, of proximity, and of subsidiarity are realised at the CoR level. Although there are five political groups functioning within the European Committee of the Regions, we strive not to bring party conflicts from our home countries into this forum, and this is probably why it is easier for us to achieve consensus and reach agreement on matters crucial for country and self-government. An example of working in this way could be the participation by the Polish delegation to the European Com-

mittee of the Regions in the drafting of the CoR's position regarding cohesion policy after the year 2020, or the energy union. I have enormous satisfaction from my personal contribution to the drafting of these documents at all stages of their preparation. The vast majority of amendments that I submitted on behalf of the Polish delegation were included in the opinion adopted by the European Committee of the Regions regarding the future of cohesion policy post 2020. The most important of these were ensuring appropriate financing for the cohesion policy, creating uniform principles for management of the Regional Development Fund and the European Social Fund, and greater flexibility for regional operational programs making it possible to better tailor them to the requirements of the area concerned.

According to the self-government units represented at the CoR, cohesion policy is and should remain a key investment policy, and one of the key policies of the European Union, since it ensures balanced development for all of its members and enables regions to build development paths based on their internal potential. Among other things, faster economic growth for the Wielkopolska region and our rise in the EU from the category of poorest regions to that of 'transitional' regions was possible thanks to the cohesion policy. Poland is the largest beneficiary of EU funds. In the current financial perspective it has received close to 80 billion euros on the cohesion policy, and of this almost 40% is spent in the regions.

Debate is underway in the European Union on what the shape and scope of cohesion policy should be in the next programme period. The joint voice of the regions and local self-governments is a clear and powerful signal in favour of retaining a strong cohesion policy, which in its scope should embrace all regions after 2020. We have also indicated the need for creating at an EU level an integrated and uniform development policy, and for an increase in the role of regional authorities in executing the cohesion policy.

Cohesion policy post 2020 must take into account such challenges as demographic changes, counteracting social exclusion, creating jobs, supporting innovation and competitiveness, and decarbonisation of the economy. One also has to realise that the most important challenges connected to the migration crisis are going to have a direct impact on the future shape and direction of the cohesion policy. Another one of the key elements in the debate regarding cohesion policy is finding a coherent approach, ensuring strengthening of the connections between urban and rural areas, and satisfying concrete needs that these areas have.

We deal with these issues on a daily basis in the Commission for Territorial Cohesion Policy and EU Budget (COTER) functioning within the EU. On many an occasion we have drawn attention in this forum to—among other things—how dangerous centralistic tendencies are; they obstruct proper allowance for the diversity of territories in the European Union, which should be a key issue.

Another priority topic in discussions this term at the European Union is that of the energy union. In the future its shape will determine not only the energy security of the European Union, but will also have a significant impact on its economic potential and development, on social issues, and on climate

matters. During its plenary session in October 2015 the CoR adopted an opinion entitled *Energy Union Package*. I was involved in work on this document from the very beginning, and submitted 13 amendments, which gained broad support among members of the European Committee of the Regions. They were supported by almost the entire Polish delegation, the Czech and Lithuanian delegations, and by many members from Latvia, Slovakia, Romania and the Netherlands. The amendments that I proposed referred among other things to the aid member states should grant themselves in crisis situations, the necessity of increasing the transparency of the gas and electricity market, diversification of suppliers, and sources and routes for the transport of raw materials.

From the point of view of Polish self-government units, key issues include the security of supplies protecting the Union from the detrimental effects of import dependence. The formation of a transparent gas market means that it will not be possible to make this resource the object of political pressure. The European Union should also enable the joint and discretionary purchase of gas. Creating an energy union is a project for many years through which citizens will benefit thanks to falling energy prices. Worth adding is that the energy union is a Polish initiative (proposed in 2014 by the then Prime Minister of the Republic of Poland, Donald Tusk), which the European Commission acknowledged as one of the priority areas in its work for the years 2014–2020. The Polish proposal corresponds with European expectations.

I would like to draw attention to one more very topical issue, in which the Wielkopolska region wishes to become significantly involved. The difficult situation in which the European Union currently finds itself requires broad discussion with its residents—regarding the direction in which the EU should head. Civil dialogue is needed, and youth must play an important role in this: on the one hand, they feel left out in discussions over the EU's future, while on the other it is they, after all, who will be responsible for shaping their future.

EU decision takers are aware of the dangers, and this is why—in order to ensure active participation by citizens in the debate regarding the European Union's future—the President of the European Council, Donald Tusk, asked the members of the European Committee of the Regions in November 2016 to draft an opinion entitled *Reflecting on Europe: the voice of regional and local authorities in rebuilding trust in the European Union*. In December the President of the European Committee of the Regions informed that the consultation process had begun, to serve as the basis for the document in question.

Measures involving social consultation will be carried out mainly in 2017, a year of special significance for EU integration, since the Treaties of Rome were signed in Rome 60 years ago. These established the European Economic Community (ECC) and the European Atomic Energy Community. The economy became an area of agreement and cooperation, as well as a significant step towards broader unification.

In the Wielkopolska region we decided to turn to our youngsters to speak up in the matter of the European Union's future. With this in mind, we organised a competition in high schools, vocational schools and technical schools in our region, its goal being to interest youngsters in all aspects of the opera-

tions of the European Union, the opportunities created by integration, and the threats to its development. Above all, though, it was about creating civil responsibility for Poland and Europe, about stimulating discussion regarding its future shape as expected among young people. This debate among the youth under the slogan 'Reflecting on Europe', organised through an initiative of the European Committee of the Regions, is very necessary and of enormous significance in strengthening European integration and emerging from the current crisis. I am counting on a high level of involvement by young people in this, and a great many interesting initiatives resulting from it. The conclusions and postulates drawn up by the youngsters will be delivered in collective form to the European Committee of the Regions, where the CoR opinion is being drafted within the Commission for Citizenship, Governance, Institutional and External Affairs (CIVEX). Thanks to this, we will have our own very concrete contribution to setting out the directions for the development of the European Union.

I treat being appointed for the role of rapporteur for the opinion of the European Committee of the Regions regarding union finances, which will be one of the most important documents in the deliberations over the future of Europe, as a distinction—but above all as an enormous challenge. The opinion will refer to the document published in June 2017 by the European Commission entitled *Reflection paper on the future of EU finances*, which opens the debate on the subject of EU finances up to 2025. The starting point for the opinion of the European Committee of the Regions is a so-called reflective document. This is a continuation of the *White Paper on the Future of Europe* published earlier, on 1 March 2017 by the European Commission, in which possible paths for the EU's future development are described in five scenarios.

In the 2025 perspective there are many issues that have to be analysed in the context of the EU's finances. This applies among other things to the need for including in the post 2020 European Union budget new EU priorities connected to migration, security, defence and control of the EU's external borders. Verification of whether the funds spent are contributing to the creation of added value at a European level is also essential.

After Great Britain leaves the EU, the union budget will have to finance more tasks for less money. Hence both maximisation of the effects of measures undertaken, and seeking new sources of income beyond contributions by member states, become the priority. All the more so as the European Union also wants to retain its leading role in providing humanitarian aid and in fighting climate change.

The work of the Polish self-government units' representatives in the European Committee of the Regions is supported by representative offices of the Polish regions in Brussels. The Information Office of the Wielkopolska Region in Brussels was one of the first to be opened, thanks to good cooperation between our region and Hesse in Germany, Emilia-Romagna in Italy, and the French Aquitaine. The regional offices have the task of monitoring current events, EU resolutions and other legal acts on a daily basis. The offices are responsible both for representing the regions at the European Union, and for popularising EU subject-matter in their home countries. The representative

office of the Wielkopolska region in Brussels is among the most active. The meetings it organises, the conferences involving EU experts and the discussions serve well the interests of the country and region. On the one hand our permanent presence in Brussels allows for the initiating of solutions most favourable for residents of the European Union, while on the other it means that proposals detrimental to the development of European self-government units can be identified at the stage of consultation.

Self-government is the basis of democracy, of communication with citizens and the representing of their interests. Community in Europe cannot be restored without the participation and involvement of its citizens. Unfortunately the Polish government is systematically curtailing the autonomy of self-government units via the centralisation of successive areas of their operations. The incapacitation of Polish self-government is contradictory with the policy of the European Union and the principle of multi-layered governance, and is leading to the disassembly of the democratic state and denying its citizens their voice.

Marek Woźniak

Marshal of the Wielkopolska Voivodeship