

The European Council's Strategic Agenda and Europe 2020: A regional perspective

On 26-27 June 2014, at its first meeting following the election of the new European Parliament, the European Council adopted a "Strategic Agenda for the Union in Times of Change" (SA). The Strategic Agenda sees the new legislative cycle as "a moment of political renewal", making it clear that "the first purpose of the Union's work over the coming years must be to equip our societies for the future and to foster confidence". It sets five priorities: jobs, growth and competitiveness; empowering and protecting all citizens; an Energy Union with a forward-looking climate policy; freedom, security and justice; and the Union as a strong global actor.

With respect to growth and jobs, climate and energy, employment and social inclusion, the SA refers to the ongoing review of the Europe 2020 strategy as an occasion to bring the strategy fully in line with the priorities set in the SA.

Amongst other things, the SA addresses the issue of "facilitating long-term investments", more specifically, "overdue investment needs in transport, energy and telecom infrastructure as well as in energy efficiency, innovation and research, skills, and education".

Although the SA sets very general guidelines and does not anticipate the outcome of the review of Europe 2020, some key proposals the Committee of the Regions has made for the mid-term review of the strategy would seem to be crucial in order to translate the SA into practice.

A territorial dimension to make Europe 2020 targets more credible

The CoR's Athens Declaration on the mid-term review of Europe 2020 and its accompanying Mid-

Term Assessment Report² stress the need to adapt the strategy to existing regional differences in socio-economic conditions and growth potential.

To this end, the Committee advocates giving Europe 2020 a territorial dimension by setting regionally differentiated goals and targets. So far, the EU Europe 2020 headline targets have only been differentiated at the national level and many regions have seen them as either too ambitious or not ambitious enough³. Moreover, in some cases the current national targets do not cumulatively reach the overall EU target⁴.

The CoR proposes that the target-setting process at national level involve the local and regional authorities in a mixed bottom-up and top-down approach. This proposal is consistent with the place-based approach of EU cohesion policy – because it builds on specific regional assets – and would confer much stronger credibility on the Europe 2020 targets, at both the national and the EU levels.

Partnership and multi-level governance

The involvement of local and regional authorities and other relevant partners in the design and implementation of a renewed Europe 2020 strategy is the other main pillar of the CoR proposal.

To date, involvement of this kind has occurred in a number of cases. Overall, it is fair to say that it is increasing. However, the current state of affairs

falls short of full involvement of local and regional authorities, both in terms of design and implementation⁵.

Yet local and regional authorities have competences in most policy fields relevant to the SA and Europe 2020. At the EU level, they carry out two thirds of public direct investments and one third of the overall public expenditure. Local and regional authorities have greater knowledge of their territories policy needs and potentialities of their territories than their national governments. Being closer to the public than the higher levels of government, they are also in the best possible position to listen to people's needs and engage them in a political dialogue.

The proposals made by the Committee of the Regions include providing Europe 2020 with adequate funding, for instance through innovative solutions involving the private sector, improving administrative capacity and cutting red tape at all levels. The Strategic Agenda states that "the credibility of the Union depends on its ability to ensure adequate follow-up on decisions and commitments. This requires strong and credible institutions, but will also benefit from closer involvement of national parliaments".

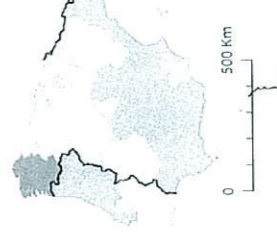
Indeed, multi-level governance, a territorial dimension, adequate funding and better administrative capacity will bring value added in terms of effectiveness as well as of ownership of the Europe 2020 strategy. It is a pity that the EU Heads of State and Government failed to mention regional parliaments and, more broadly, local and regional authorities, in this context. In view of the decisions to be taken by the new Commission and the European Council at the end of the mid-term review, expected in early 2015, the Committee of the Regions will set out its proposals in more detail in a "Blueprint for a renewed Europe 2020" to be published in December 2014.

² <http://portal.cor.europa.eu/europe2020/Pages/MTAR.aspx>

³ As shown by the CoR Surveys on the seven Europe 2020 Flagship Initiatives (<https://portal.cor.europa.eu/europe2020/Surveys/Pages/welcome.aspx>)

⁴ The implementation of the Europe 2020 targets and Flagship Initiatives was reviewed last March in both the CoR's Mid-term Assessment Report on Europe 2020 (<http://portal.cor.europa.eu/europe2020/Pages/MTAR.aspx>) and the European Commission's Stock-taking Communication on Europe 2020 (http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/europe-2020-in-a-nutshell/index_en.htm)

⁵ The agenda is annexed to the European Council Conclusions (26-27 June 2014) and can be found at http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/en/ec/143478.pdf



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Source: European Commission, 6th Cohesion Report

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