

Introduction

The Committee of the Regions (CoR) brings together elected local and regional government representatives from across the EU to discuss European policy. It is one of two 'consultative bodies' of the European Union (the other is the European Economic and Social Committee, EESC). The European Commission and European Parliament have to consult the CoR before making decisions, but they are under no obligation to take its advice. The Committee aims to involve European citizens, through their local representatives, in decisions that affect them.

History

The CoR was set up in 1994 under the Maastricht Treaty on the initiative of the Spanish and German governments. It has gained power under subsequent treaties and since 1997 has been trying to gain recognition as a full EU institution. Its stated political aim is to create a strong, open and transparent Europe where decisions are made closer to its citizens; a principle known as subsidiarity. It is a more politically motivated organisation than its sister organisation the EESC and has focused particularly upon promoting cohesion within the EU. The Committee sees itself both acting as a watchdog of integration and promoting the concept of 'belonging' to a European community.

The Lisbon Treaty (2007) strengthened the role of the CoR, obliging the Commission to consult the Committee throughout the legislative process.

In 2010 the Commission proposed to increase the CoR's involvement in the legislative process, yet there were reports that some Commissioners wanted it to be disbanded to save money.

How does the Committee of the Regions work?

The CoR has 344 members drawn from local government who sit in political groupings. These members take part in the work of the CoR's six Commissions, which look at different areas of policy: finance, employment; social policy; the environment; vocational training and transport. Issues raised are then discussed in plenary sessions that take place five times a year. These in turn make recommendations to the Commission and Parliament. Every two years it elects a President and two Vice-Presidents. A Bureau oversees implementing CoR recommendations, while the entire operation is supported by a small secretariat.

Apart from its consultation role, it is also very active in organising conferences and meetings for regional organisations from across the EU. The most notable of these have been the Conventions of Regions and Cities, where delegates from local authorities across the EU come together to discuss problems that affect them all. It also attempts to supervise the way in which two key structural funds operate – the Regional Development Fund and the Cohesion Fund, which aim to bring the standard of living in poorer EU regions up to the average.

Facts and figures

- ❖ The Committee of Regions has 350 members, comprising of regional and locally elected representatives from the 28 EU countries.
- ❖ The 2015 budget for the CoR is just under €90 million.

Arguments

For

- ❖ The Committee of the Regions is a positive effort to bring EU decisions closer to the European public.
- ❖ Because it is made up of local elected representatives, it has democratic legitimacy.
- ❖ Because member states' political and cultural models vary hugely, it is useful to have a place where community leaders from different places can meet and discuss common problems.

Against

- ❖ The idea that the EU is made up of 'regions' and not countries is dangerous because it challenges the idea of the nation state. It is a way of creating deeper EU integration through by-passing national governments.
- ❖ Since it was established, the CoR has been pushing to get more power and be recognised as an EU institution. This would just create yet more EU bureaucracy and expense.

"It is very important that regional and local authorities work together throughout Europe. Such co-operation boosts mutual understanding."

Jan-Pieter Balkenende, Dutch Prime Minister, 2004

"The Committee of the Regions has made it possible to go beyond the view of European integration restricted to the objectives of economic and territorial cohesion."

José-Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, Spanish Prime Minister, 2004

"Since the Maastricht Treaty signed in 1992, the European Union has... stood for a European Union of the Regions – a network of relations that is leading to ever closer integration."

Ferenc Gyurcsány, Hungarian Prime Minister, 2004

Technical Terms

- ❖ **Subsidiarity:** this idea, contained in all EU treaties, is designed to ensure that all decisions are taken at the closest possible level to the citizen.
- ❖ **Cohesion:** term used to describe moves towards ironing out differences of wealth and economic performance across the EU.

Links

- ❖ <http://www.cor.europa.eu/pages/HomeTemplate.aspx>
- ❖ http://europa.eu/institutions/consultative/cor/index_en.htm
- ❖ <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/budget/data/DB/2015/en/SEC07.pdf>