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Breaking the spiral of crises

By Claudio Martini (*)

Who could have imagined, last year, when the Committee of the Regions decided to organise the European Summit of Regions and Cities in Prague, on 5 and 6 March 2009, that events would take such a turn? Six months after the financial earthquake of September 2008, and while its shock waves are spreading further and deeper into the real economy, the Prague summit will not only bring together local and regional elected representatives responsible for more than two-thirds of Europe's public investment, it will also be an opportunity for the 'emergency doctors' to examine a real economy which is in a very poor state.

For the regions – and I can vouch for this fact – are the resonance chambers of the economic crisis. They may not all possess the same arms with which to confront it; they may not all be affected to the same degree by its symptoms; but no region is invulnerable. Closures, lay-offs, short-time working, unemployment and the social repercussions of these; the increasing scarcity of financial and budgetary means, either from their own resources or from their public and private partners; these are matters of concern to all regions. And they are all doing all they can today to find the appropriate short-term emergency solutions to repair the immediate damage and keep the chain reaction under control. Each region, within the scope of own its powers, budget, and organisation is fleshing out the EU's and member states' recovery plans, taking what it judges to be the most appropriate measures: urgent social measures, measures to combat the undermining of social stability, to support employment, direct aid to business and reinforcing access to credit. Many have adopted a partnership approach, inviting the social partners, employers, banks and local authorities to the negotiating table. Here we have an exam-

ple of the 'richness' of the territorial diversity of Europe at work.

These immediate responses to the economic situation are essential if we want to alleviate people's suffer-



Martini: "Regions are the resonance chambers of the crisis"

ing. But these responses must also form part of a renewed vision of the future, a new stage in regional development. Otherwise they will be counter-productive and will only hinder the economy's capacity to successfully start up again once the crisis starts to fade. So, although no region has total control – any more than do the states or international organisations – over the parameters of the crisis or their repercussions on its territory, each one must nonetheless continue to think medium and long-term in its policy-making. Many regions have decided to increase their investment budgets in 2009: additional efforts are being made in areas such as vocational training, the development of renewable energies, energy saving and cleaner transport.

It is at the intersection of the short and the long term, of the immediate emergency and the future, where interests could be, but should not be, conflicting, that regional leaders can have a useful debate. The outcome of

this exchange should help us to formulate clearly what the European territories expect in terms of the values and policies of the European Union in the short, medium and long term.

Confronted with economic and social turmoil on such a scale, and with energy and environmental challenges that are more pressing than ever, now is not the time to be overcautious. The regions will not hesitate to make radical proposals if these are necessary. The CPMR [Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions] will address these issues throughout 2009, by organising an exchange of experience between regional elected representatives before the summer and a political seminar to put forward proposals in Marseille towards the end of the year; the latter, we hope, with the participation of the new European Commission and Parliament.

The European Summit of Regions and Cities, on 5 and 6 March, which will prepare the ground for this debate, comes just at the right time. We also welcome the partnership approach adopted by the Committee of the Regions, which has made sure that all the regional and local government organisations, including the CPMR, are involved. The final declaration to be adopted at the close of the summit invites the EU bodies and member states to draw up a concerted European response to the crisis, in collaboration with all the territories. For this reason, the CPMR fully supports the declaration. The extent of the crisis is such that we cannot – in contrast to what happened with the Lisbon Strategy between 2000 and 2005 - wait five years before mobilising all our efforts. ■

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