

Keynote speech of Ana Brnabić, Speaker of the National Assembly of Serbia, in Session II of the Conference of Speakers of the European Union Parliaments:
Closer to voters: regionalism in Europe, and safeguarding Europe's cultural identity
(Hungarian Parliament – 12 May 2025)

Honorable Presidents of Parliaments,
Esteemed hosts, Ladies and gentlemen,

I'd like to thank you for the invitation to participate in this important session, and I would in particular like to thank Hungary - our **host**, our **neighbor**, **partner**, and **friend** - for this opportunity.

The topics which we are **discussing** today are **one of those** that **go to the very heart of our democratic societies** - how we can bring Europe closer to its citizens, and how do we preserve the unique cultural identities that make Europe what it is.

The theme “Closer to the Voters” raises a **fundamental question of legitimacy and trust in democratic institutions** – a question that is not only important for the European Union but also for all countries aspiring to join this community of values.

At a time when challenges are increasingly complex, from security and migration, and from climate change to digital transformation, citizens rightly expect **decisions to be made closer to them, to have an impact, to be heard, and to be included.**

At the same time, at the time of social networks, trust in democratic institutions, as well as ability to differentiate between truth and fake news, also **present a unique challenge.**

This is precisely why the strength of Europe lies in its diversity – and in the legitimacy of institutions that recognize and reflect it – in the voices of

regions, local communities, and cultural identities that are recognized and respected.

The European Union's own treaties call for decisions to be made "as closely as possible to the citizen." **Strengthening regional institutions is one way to bridge the gap between citizens and governance.**

In recent years, the pressures on democratic legitimacy, evident in rising voter apathy and political fragmentation, have only heightened the urgency of empowering local and regional governance.

Empowering regions does not weaken national unity – it strengthens it through trust, relevance, and responsiveness.

By bringing decision-making closer to the citizens it affects, **governance can more accurately reflect their nuanced needs.**

In Serbia, we have been working, on one hand, to **devolve** competencies to local governments and, on the other, to **increase** their competences through continued training and education. We have also invested heavily in **digital public services** to **increase transparency** and **make citizen participation easier at every level**, from municipal to the national.

It is through such efforts that we can build trust in democratic processes and ensure that governance remains relevant to people's everyday lives.

Cultural identity is something we are born into, and it plays a key role in our relationships, friendships, and even business. **Not acknowledging and respecting the way it affects the functioning of societies, economies, and politics would be a mistake.**

While diversity can undoubtedly enrich a nation, it requires thoughtful management, both institutionally and socially. If not properly managed, diversity can unintentionally deepen divides and complicate social cohesion. **To be united is not to be identical. To embrace diversity is to embrace strength.**

Migration has become one of the most sensitive challenges of recent years.

Inherently, it does not have to pose a threat – but cohesion can only be preserved when integration is meaningful, supported, and inclusive.

In Serbia, we are navigating our own diversity – whether **ethnic, religious, or regional**, and we are working to preserve minority languages, particularly in Vojvodina, while ensuring the successful integration of migrants.

We also recognize the importance of partnerships with our neighbors, and I would like to take this opportunity to highlight the excellent cooperation between Serbia and Hungary in regional development initiatives.

Serbia is fully committed to the European Union's values and principles.

As a candidate country, we are deeply engaged in reforms that are not only necessary for EU accession, **but are also vital for the stability and progress of our own society. They are vital for our people.**

From preserving minority languages in Vojvodina, to active participation in Interreg cross-border projects funded under the €8 billion EU program for regional cohesion, including with our neighbor, Hungary, **we are living proof that European values can thrive even beyond the Union's formal borders.**

Serbia has also been investing in twinning partnerships with EU municipalities and managing IPA pre-accession funds to align rural development with EU regional policies.

Clusters are not just administrative categories – they are our roadmap.

Cluster 3 – on Competitiveness and Inclusive Growth – is not only about the economy, but about **how to build a society worth staying in**. Competitiveness is not just about faster economic flows – it is about **creating a knowledge-based society**. In line with the European Commission’s repeated positive assessments, **we expect to open this cluster in the near future**, and I would like to use this opportunity to ask you for your help and support.

Cluster 4 – the Green Agenda and Sustainable Connectivity – is not just about energy, but **a vision of sustainable development**. The Green Agenda is not merely environmental policy – it is **a moral choice about the world we leave to future generations**.

And in Cluster 1, we are not building foundations on paper, but **on institutional integrity**. The law must be an instrument of justice, not a bureaucratic shield. Reforming the administration cannot just be a phrase, it must mean ‘citizen at the center’ of policy and decision making.

Educating our youth in democratic values and cultural awareness is key to sustaining both identity and unity in the generations to come.

The future of Europe must not only be shaped in decision-making centers, but also in places where European values are lived out in the everyday lives of citizens. In smaller towns and municipalities, or in coastal towns and islands that have contributed to Europe’s identity, we build what we call democratic culture – **not through declarations, but through trust**. It is through empowered local communities and respect for cultural diversity that we can foster stability and progress for all.

Serbia aspires to enter the EU not as a country that is desperate for support, but as a confident partner – ready to contribute to its shared future.

On behalf of the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia, I reaffirm our readiness to build this future together.

Thank you for your attention.