



Françoise Chotard (FC): The OPEN DAYS were first born out of a desire to highlight the regional offices and bring them closer to the Committee of the Regions. Later, they became an opportunity for our representatives and administrations to come to Brussels. It all feeds into one of our office's missions: that Europe gets closer to our local authorities.



Pascal Goergen (PG): I think it's fair to say that the objectives have changed a bit since 2003. At first, it was just us. Later, it was more about getting people to come to Brussels. In the end, we were a bit disappointed since we were supposed to organise our own seminars and we couldn't go to any of the others. Then I understood that the OPEN DAYS really had become European Week of Cities and Regions, a truly unique event.

SM: Yes, and as time went on, the OPEN DAYS became more professional...

PG: Nowadays, of course, it's the regional experts who come, the civil servants, the administrators, the representatives. Between individual offices the links are there but maybe people know each other less well than before.

FC: I think we know each other in a different way. At the time, the Hesse region organised receptions for all the regional offices which were much less in number. I think that's something you don't see as much these days in the regional offices in Brussels. Still, the offices got organised and we've learned to work together.

SM: I think the OPEN DAYS did help integrate the new regional offices. On that note encouraging the ones of the new Member States' to join existing conglomerates was a good idea.

FC: When the offices started having to take part through conglomerates, there was a change of perspective. The focus was no longer only on opening up the offices. It became more about bringing Europe deeper into the regions. This was helped by the various local events.

The voice of European regions and cities

PG: Focusing the whole event on regional policy was a stroke of genius: **the OPEN DAYS have placed regional policy firmly at the centre of policies.**

FC: Thanks to the OPEN DAYS, local authority representatives and offices have started to come to Brussels regularly and understood how things worked. At the time, it was very hard to get our representatives to understand that the operational programmes for 2007-2013 had to be prepared as early as 2003. This long term preparatory work has become evidence today. And the offices' work has therefore changed as well. Nowadays we try to argue a case, and show that we do exist as a large metropolitan area.

SM: Nowadays there is often a political decision in the choice of a conglomerate. The first year, Catalonia took part by itself. In 2004, we took part via the 'Four motors for Europe' conglomerate, and then there was the policy project for the Pyrenees-Mediterranean Euroregion. For some years now, it's been Pyrenees-Mediterranean and Alps-Mediterranean, the very political objective being to make this Euroregion more widely known in Brussels.

FC: Where regional conglomerates are set up around shared views, you can band together to defend common positions. In the past as regions and capital cities we could prepare cases that were presented during the OPEN DAYS. There's a dynamic to it. Beyond that, everyone has their own particular influence strategy.

In recent times we've worked with capital regions and cities. This is of course only one aspect of an influence strategy. For instance, there also are the networks we belong to, such as Purple, ERRIN, and others. The OPEN DAYS are a key opportunity to put the spotlight on the positions developed by our local authorities.

PG: Everyone knows that the OPEN DAYS are in the first or second week of October, so we try to make sure we arrive at the event with a joint position. We've always tried to work like that, although we haven't done it every year since there hasn't always been a need to take a joint position. For example, our lobbying on the urban dimension, utterly absent in regional policy in 2002, has borne fruit.

FC: If you look back to the beginnings of the OPEN DAYS in 2003, it was all about preparing for 2007-2013. One can really see today that there has been a shift from a cohesion or regional policy towards an investment policy with a cohesion dimension. Today cohesion policy is more than ever relevant, while there was a time when it could have disappeared or have only focus on certain European regions. All the debates that happened during OPEN DAYS were crucial in that respect. The OPEN DAYS have meant that cohesion policy has stayed strong and, crucially, that it's a policy for all the European regions. Until four years ago, I don't think that battle had been won.

¹ Catalonia, Baden-Württemberg, Lombardy and Rhône-Alpes have been drafting common positions within the framework of the "Four motors for Europe" initiatives in a number of policy areas since the mid-1990s.



Europe with the regions

PG: In ten years, we've gone **from a Europe of the regions to a Europe with the regions** – that's a huge difference because Europe of the regions means that the regions are central to and active in the debate. Europe now needs its regions, its territories. We need more than European summits to get out of the crisis. Who actually makes policy in the territories? It's the local and regional authorities. The very fact of bringing together civil servants and experts in the OPEN DAYS encourages networking, exchanges and sharing. That's what drives ideas and processes forwards.

FC: For us, the OPEN DAYS are also a factor in the issue of European governance. What's important is that the regional and local levels shouldn't be absent from that governance. What we're really touching on here is the issue of democratic deficit. It feels these days as though regions aren't always very present. Council discussions about the period 2014-2020 on the issue of partnership contracts, with the Parliament pushing for local and regional authorities to become proper stakeholders in the contract, are important. The Parliament even goes as far as discussing the possibility of territorial agreements, echoing the territorial pacts concept launched by the Committee of the Regions

for the implementation of the Europe 2020 strategy at national and regional level. But that's not the whole battle won at the Council. As soon as you touch the infra-national level, it's more difficult again.

PG: Isn't one of the objectives of the OPEN DAYS to place regions and regional policy at the centre of the European policy agenda? The OPEN DAYS Open Days show the importance and mobilization in Brussels of Europe's regions and cities. With its 243 regional representations offices, Brussels has become the world capital of local and regional lobbying. The Committee of the Regions and the OPEN DAYS has contributed to this reality.

Pascal Goergen is nowadays Secretary General of the Assembly of European Regions (ARE). Santiago Mondragón is a member of the private office of Mercedes Bresso, President of the Committee of the Regions. Françoise Chotard is still Director of Ile-de-France-Europe, the association for the European development of the Ile-de-France region.

