

Resolution of the Committee of the Regions on the 'Annual statement on the priorities of the committee of the regions'

(2000/C 226/13)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS,

having regard to the Strategic Objectives 2000-2005 of the European Commission (COM(2000) 154);

having regard to the Work Programme of the European Commission for 2000 (COM(2000) 155 final);

having regard to the Political Priorities of the Committee of the Regions (R/CdR 351/99 pt. 7);

having regard to the European Parliament's resolution on the European Commission's 5-year Strategic Programme (B5-0143, 0144 and 0145/2000);

having regard to the European Parliament's resolution on the European Commission's Work Programme (B-50228, 0229 and 0230/2000);

whereas a closer alignment of the priorities and objectives of all EU bodies will reinforce the impact of the initiatives and actions of the individual institutions;

whereas the Committee of the Regions, acting from its responsibility as voice of the local and regional authorities in Europe, wishes to react to the priorities proposed by the European Commission;

whereas the Committee of the Regions wishes to state its priorities for the coming year, in view of the forthcoming adoption of its Work for the Programme 2000-2001;

whereas in view of enlargement, the Union is particularly confronted with progressive fundamental reforms;

whereas the participation of the Committee of the Regions, as the representative of local and regional authorities in the EU institutional framework, will broaden the basis for EU action;

whereas in most European countries there is a growing trend towards decentralisation and a strengthening of the powers of sub-national institutions, and as a result those tiers of government are increasingly affected by and directly involved in European policies and choices

adopted the following resolution at its 33rd plenary session of 12 and 13 April 2000 (meeting of 13 April).

A. Reacting to the priorities of the European Commission

of the subsidiarity principle; these core tasks should be reviewed through further clarification of EU fields of action;

Strategic Objectives 2000-2005 of the European Commission

1. welcomes the European Commission's Strategic Objectives 2000-2005; is pleased that by making its main political aims for the coming years known, the European Commission has given local and regional authorities the opportunity to express their views and to present concrete proposals and suggestions;

2. notes with satisfaction that the Commission intends to concentrate on its core tasks, and feels that this is in the spirit

3. subscribes to the four objectives identified by the Commission and recognizes their importance and urgency, and wishes to contribute wherever possible to achieving the set goals as soon as possible;

4. recalls that the purpose of all European Union policy is to satisfy the expectations of European citizens and that restoring their confidence must be the first and foremost aim of all reforms to the Union's institutions;

5. for this reason emphasises the importance of economic, social, environmental and consumer protection issues;

Work Programme 2000

6. welcomes the Work Programme 2000 of the European Commission;

7. is concerned however, that such an ambitious and detailed Work Programme may prove to exceed the capacity of the European Commission and that a fragmentation of forces could lead to failure;

8. believes therefore that fewer actions and a strong focus on priorities — also in terms of targeted and effective use of available resources — will offer better chances of success than trying to strike on all fronts at the same time;

9. suggests that in the future the Work Programmes of the European Commission clearly distinguish between outlined priorities for that year and any additional actions;

10. is of the opinion that in many areas greater emphasis should be on improving implementation of current existing legislation, before commencing new initiatives;

11. urges that the Commission's priorities be brought into line with the objectives set out in the conclusions of the extraordinary Lisbon Summit;

B. Subsidiarity

12. believes that it is necessary in the next few years to take steps towards further European integration, in order to give Europe a leading role in the world, but that the integration must be limited to areas where the EU has a specific added value, in order to get the highest possible level of acceptance and to achieve that Europe can truly speak with one voice;

13. welcomes the aim of the European Commission to take measures against the lack of proximity of the EU, and the proposal to solve this problem by interlinking more closely EU policies and policies of the Member States and of its regions; is of the opinion however, that the application of the subsidiarity principle should be extended to local and regional government;

14. Considers situating political decision-making responsibility at the lowest possible level to be the best way of achieving closeness to the citizens, but warns against interpreting closeness to the citizens as nothing more than intensified PR for the EU and the representation of citizens by interest groups;

15. notes with concern a tendency to call for EU action in areas where the Member States fail to introduce the necessary reforms or take difficult political decisions; this will risk to undermine the credibility of the EU;

C. COR priorities for 2000-2001

IGC, European governance and modernization of the EU institutions

16. will actively contribute to the process of Treaty reform in the Intergovernmental Conference; advocates an ambitious agenda for reform, as outlined in the CoR opinion on the Intergovernmental Conference 2000 (CdR 53/99);

17. welcomes the innovative approach of the European Commission in its initiative on new forms of European governance and intends to participate fully in the debate and the formation of new ideas and concepts for European governance, and put forward suggestions for improved law-making;

18. believes that the debate on new forms of governance should not be narrowed down to a simplistic vertical distribution of powers, but that it should be a wide concept that takes account of changing structures in society;

19. strongly supports the European Commission's commitment to undertake democratic ambitious internal reform in order to restore citizens' confidence in Europe and its institutions, believes that the reforms must go beyond a simple efficiency-operation, but that they must result in a modern and flexible work force, geared towards a new political culture; points out at the same time that the internal reforms may not distract from the external policies;

Enlargement

20. considers that the preparations for enlargement have highest priority in view of the decision of the Summit of Helsinki of December 1999 that negotiations will start with all candidates, including those of the second wave, and stresses in particular the necessity of involving local and regional authorities in the candidate countries;

21. will expand, intensify and streamline its contacts with all candidate countries, and aim at an increased involvement of local and regional authorities in the preparations for accession;

22. calls for coordination of activities and cooperation between the COR and the EU institutions, in order to arrive at greater synergy and better results for the applicant countries concerned and thus ensure better understanding and acceptance of the enlargement and integration process both in the Member States and in the applicant countries;

23. stresses, in addition, that enlargement strategy must be conducted in harmony with the strategies applied in areas outside the Union, especially the Mediterranean and the Baltic, in order to secure the advent of areas of peace and economic and social cooperation beyond the borders of the enlarged Union;

A Europe of values, close to its citizens

24. is convinced that the citizens will not adhere to a 'supermarket' Europe, but — as recent events have shown — to a Europe of values and fundamental rights, a political Europe; feels therefore that this must be the prime focus of the reform of the Treaty, the drawing up of a Charter of Fundamental Rights and the forthcoming White Paper on new forms of Governance;

25. considers that the need for local democracy must be included in the Treaty and that it is therefore indispensable that the Charter of Fundamental Rights be an integral part of the Union's Treaty;

26. calls upon the Member States to conduct the negotiations in the IGC with courage and vision; strongly believes that the IGC agenda must be an agenda of the people; it is therefore important to closely involve the Parliament and the local and regional authorities through the COR; welcomes in relation to this the European Commission initiative Dialogue on Europe and will gladly make use of the opportunity to give an active input to the IGC process;

27. calls on the European Commission to promote the visibility of the European Union's action both through effective communication and by improving the transparency of all its actions, in order to regain the confidence of Europe's citizens;

28. asks the European Commission, in view of the renewed threat of populist racism and intolerance, to strengthen its commitment to guaranteeing equal rights, equal opportunities and the protection of minorities throughout the Union, in order to ensure that all Europeans share the benefits of growing prosperity, security and solidarity;

Employment

29. welcomes the results of the Lisbon Summit and endorses its integrated approach and the emphasis on giving an impulse to new economic dynamism;

30. shares concern at the perennially high level of long-term unemployment in many regions of the Union and hopes that this phenomenon will be tackled using harmonised economic policies and welfare reform, to further the goal of full employment;

31. points out that promoting employment does not only demand specific action, but also entails creating favourable macro-economic conditions as well as coordination and integration of the relevant policy areas, while respecting the principles underlying the European social model;

32. reiterates the responsibility which the Community was given by the Treaty of Amsterdam to contribute to a high level of employment by encouraging cooperation between Member States and by supporting their action in this field;

33. encourages therefore any measures enhancing innovation, technological progress, the knowledge society and entrepreneurship; the adoption of any measures to assist the development of SMEs;

34. underlines therefore the need to integrate anti-discrimination policies into employment guidelines, as well as the need for measures for groups hit hardest by unemployment, like women, young people, older people, ethnic minorities and disabled people;

35. welcomes the announcement that a new social action programme is to be introduced; the COR hopes the programme will be sufficiently ambitious to match the challenges of the new economic dynamism;

36. Welcomes the proposal that more common European targets and indicators should be established within the economic, employment and social strategy, and underlines that not only quantitative targets but also qualitative targets are of great importance in all policy areas in order to develop sustainable growth and employment;

37. calls for a report of the European Commission on the imbalances between regions with high unemployment and regions currently facing a shortage of labour, and the role of labour market mobility in this, in order better to target measures to be taken to improve social and economic cohesion and to reduce the disparities between regions; The CoR declares its willingness to cooperate with the Commission in this area, and to bring the hands-on experience and know-how which the Regions and Municipalities of Europe have in the field;

38. the CoR reaffirms the need for European policies to focus primarily on the Europe-wide promotion of local development and on unleashing all the potential of the resources available throughout the EU's regions. In this context, it asks that the European Employment Pact be given a broader focus and calls for widespread introduction of the Territorial pacts for employment, taking into consideration the knowledge and experience of local and regional authorities;

39. The Committee of the Regions welcomes the decision to hold an extraordinary European summit every spring to provide guidance and coordination for Community actions and national policies. The Committee of the Regions, which represents Europe's local and regional authorities in their capacity as promoters of growth and employment, asks to be a fixed partner in the initiative;

Environment

40. is looking forward to the publication of the 6th Environmental Action Programme; endorses the realistic and result-driven approach announced by Commissioner Wallström, and supports in particular the strong focus on implementation of existing legislation;

41. notes with concern that environment seems to move down on the political agenda, at a time when the need for strengthened environmental protection is more urgent than ever; regrets to see that environmental considerations have not been sufficiently integrated into other policy areas, and urges the European Commission to come forward with concrete measures;

42. feels that environmental catastrophes in recent years have made sufficiently clear the need for improved cooperation with non-EU countries, including cross-border cooperation, in particular with the candidate Member States; points out that the Polluter Pays Principle needs to be implemented correctly;

43. favours a well-balanced link between economic policies and environmental requirements, as sustainable growth is a necessity; and calls for the need to develop co-ordinated policies to promote sustainable development and associated activities in rural and peripheral areas;

44. underlines the special role of local and regional authorities, both in the implementation of European and international policies, but also as the level confronted most directly with the consequences of environmental damage;

Information society

45. stresses the importance of all citizens having access to the information society, particularly during the internet revolution which is currently taking place, since it is access to information which ultimately empowers the citizen.

Underlines the important link to be made between the information society and employment, through new types of employment such as electronic commerce and teleworking, leading to a modernization of the economy and integrating areas which are not easily accessible, and the rural environment into the economy.

Would hope that the need to provide education and training of the citizen in the use of the new technologies is given a high priority, with special emphasis on school education and on facilitating free Internet connection for centres of education.

Notes the important contribution that new technology can make to develop intelligent and multi-modal transport systems to reduce transport problems faced by citizens in their every days lives.

Urban policies

46. recalls that 80 % of European citizens live in urban areas, and that cities are vital to ensure competitive regions and a competitive Europe, and realises the value of developing urban, rural and peripheral areas in a balanced, co-ordinated and sustainable way;

47. points out however, that despite this fact there are no European policies targeting specifically the urban areas and that the urban dimension in other policy areas is weak;

48. encourages (new amendment) the European Commission to come forward with a comprehensive approach to urban areas and their specific needs and to finally put into practice the renewed focus on cities in Agenda 2000, with special attention for sustainable urban development.

49. will adopt its annual Work Programme on the basis of this resolution;

50. instructs its President to forward this resolution to the European Commission, the European Council, the European Parliament and the Economical and Social Committee.

Brussels, 13 April 2000.

*The President
of the Committee of the Regions*
Jos CHABERT