

**Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on 'European neighbourhood policy review'**

(2012/C 54/04)

## THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- considers that greater involvement of local and regional authorities in neighbourhood policy can boost public awareness of, participation in, and support for the aims of, the policy, and counteract the impression that it is exclusively the national governments and the Brussels institutions which are responsible for governing our continent, in this sense, local and regional authorities can also help to overcome dangerous tendencies of isolationism or renationalisation which may otherwise jeopardise the stability of countries and regions both inside and outside the EU;
- attaches great importance to the work done and opportunities offered by the Euro-Mediterranean Regional and Local Assembly (ARLEM) which allows for the participation of regional and local authorities in the Euro-Mediterranean political debate, and gives the territorial dimension of projects selected by the Secretariat-General of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM). It also ensures the exchange of best practices and contributes to achieving the goals of the ENP;
- equally supports the Conference of Regional and Local Authorities for the Eastern Partnership (CORLEAP) as the network of multilateral cooperation between regional and local authorities from the EU and the Eastern Partnership countries which aims to further engage these authorities in the delivery of the ENP. It also intends to work with the local and regional authorities from Eastern partners to establish a permanent institutional framework of cooperation;
- recommends the intensification of neighbourhood policy in the whole Black Sea area. The continuing geopolitical importance of this region for the EU should be emphasised, as should the importance of the Black Sea Synergy. EU countries bordering on this area should receive meaningful EU support for their neighbourhood policy activities.

<b>Rapporteur</b>	Mr Jacek PROTAS (PL/EPP), Marshall of the Warmińsko-Mazurskie region
<b>Reference document</b>	Joint communication to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions "A new response to a changing Neighbourhood"
	COM(2011) 303 final

## I. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

### THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

#### Introductory remarks

1. commends the Commission proposal and its overarching objective, which strongly underlines the importance of supporting efforts to build deep democracy and political reform in the partner countries. Local and regional authorities in the Union have an undisputable role to play as democratic and political bodies and are central to building democracy. They will therefore be pleased to contribute to these neighbourhood policy efforts;

2. greatly welcomes the development of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) to date, with its growing diversification and adaptation to specific needs and situations. The Committee of the Regions welcomes the fact that the original 2004 "one size fits all" project is being developed into increasingly specialised, "tailor-made" instruments;

3. welcomes the developing specialisation of European Neighbourhood Policy into the Eastern Partnership, the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) and the emerging Black Sea Synergy;

4. considers that the diversification of the ENP should go further and that the neighbourhood policy should become a genuine component of an ambitious and coherent European external policy and an increasingly specialised instrument of this;

5. stresses that the neighbourhood policy pursued in the regions and by the regions can be an effective instrument for promoting the values underpinning the European Union - respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities;

6. recommends that neighbourhood policy should invite all regions of the EU to be involved, drawing on regional and local authorities' expertise and experience in the field of external relations;

7. considers it particularly important to raise public awareness of neighbourhood policy in the regions;

8. stresses the importance of developing both the governmental and people-to-people levels in the European Neighbourhood Policy. The role of local and regional authorities

can be particularly important in building targeted, responsible forms of cooperation with civil society organisations, but as public authorities, they should also play their part in building contacts at the administrative/official level;

9. considers that greater involvement of local and regional authorities in neighbourhood policy can boost public awareness of, participation in, and support for the aims of, the policy, and counteract the impression that it is exclusively the national governments and the Brussels institutions which are responsible for governing our continent, in this sense, local and regional authorities can also help to overcome dangerous tendencies of isolationism or renationalisation which may otherwise jeopardise the stability of countries and regions both inside and outside the EU;

10. stresses the importance of cooperation between non-neighbouring EU and non-EU regions;

11. recommends supporting not just economic growth per se, but also sustainable development in the neighbouring countries, with a particular focus on reducing regional and social disparities;

12. endorses the Commission's proposal to encourage and support partnerships. Long-term cooperation between all stakeholders in society promotes pluralism and commitment at a number of levels, which in turn improves the preconditions for sustainable economic, social and democratic development;

13. considers that the work and methods of the regions can make a particularly useful contribution to the European Neighbourhood Policy, supporting ENP instruments like TAIEX, SIGMA, regional and town twinning and ENP Action Plans;

14. endorses the Commission's suggestion that effective regional partnerships can be built in spheres such as SME development, the environment, education, youth opportunities, culture, transport, research, rural development and employment. Local and regional authorities in the EU have a great deal of experience and practical expertise in these areas and would welcome involvement in partnerships;

15. supports the main arguments set out in the Committee of the Regions' opinion on *A strong European Neighbourhood Policy* and draws attention to its importance and topicality;

16. draws attention to the role of the EU institutions in ensuring the effective use by partner countries of available resources and suggests that the focus be on practical cooperation bringing concrete results;

17. strongly emphasises that the EU budget for 2014-2020 must guarantee appropriate funding for implementation of the ENP;

18. commends the Commission's wish to simplify and streamline various financial instruments and underlines the potential impact and benefit of doing this;

### **Differentiation of neighbourhood policy, its methods and the role of the regions**

19. is convinced that the necessary differentiation of neighbourhood policy should not be purely formal in character, consisting of a geographical division into southern and eastern dimensions;

20. recommends that neighbourhood policy be differentiated in line with the degree of functioning democracy (i.e. democratic processes), respect for human and citizens' rights, the rule of law, as well as the progress of the process of systemic/economic transformation (with special emphasis on the implementation of free-market principles) in individual countries. The better targeted neighbourhood policy is, the more effective it will be;

21. considers it appropriate to create policy instruments making it possible to treat social, national or regional and local government action in a differentiated way in accordance with their respective characteristics and opportunities. Action in these different areas should be coordinated but need not, and often should not, be conducted in parallel;

22. considers that in the context of neighbourhood policy at government level the "more for more" principle is clear and justified;

23. considers, however, that at the level of society the "more for more" principle is less clear and too formal; its application could even be counterproductive, hindering existing bottom-up contacts. If social contacts are to be effective, there must be continuity and they must be as informal as possible;

24. moreover considers that the involvement of local and regional authorities cannot replace that of social groups and the third sector;

25. stresses that the participation of the third sector should be acknowledged as an important component of neighbourhood policy requiring specialised instruments;

26. emphasises the role of local and regional authorities in developing closer trade contacts and considers that closer economic integration can act as a catalyst for social and political change. Also encourages the ENP countries to set up free trade areas;

27. attaches great importance to the work done and opportunities offered by the Euro-Mediterranean Regional and Local Assembly (ARLEM) which allows for the participation of regional and local authorities in the Euro-Mediterranean political debate, and gives the territorial dimension of projects selected by the Secretariat-General of the Union for the Mediterranean (UFM). It also ensures the exchange of best practices and contributes to achieving the goals of the ENP;

28. equally supports the Conference of Regional and Local Authorities for the Eastern Partnership (CORLEAP) as the network of multilateral cooperation between regional and local authorities from the EU and the Eastern Partnership countries which aims to further engage these authorities in the delivery of the ENP. It also intends to work with the local and regional authorities from Eastern partners to establish a permanent institutional framework of cooperation;

29. urges the European Union, the Union for the Mediterranean, national governments and international actors to further work with ARLEM, which brings together the Committee of the Regions and the associations of regional and local authorities in order to ensure more coordinated and effective action around the Mediterranean;

30. recommends that social contacts should above all be of a direct, person-to-person kind. The important thing is the personal commitment of participants and not merely involvement in institutional roles and action;

31. considers that there is a need to interest cities and regions in cultural exchange. This is an area where the third sector can be particularly effective. This does, however, require clear support from national governments and local and regional authorities;

32. considers that there is a need to counter balance the differences of interest between groups of regions based on their different geographical locations. The overall coordination of EU foreign policy must ensure that differentiation does not lead to "competition" between the South and the East, and the specialisation by regions in individual areas of neighbourhood policy must not give rise to or accentuate differences of interest or rivalry in the negative sense;

33. considers that the institutionalisation of neighbourhood policy should facilitate and support involvement and action by regions "at a distance" (e.g. cooperation by Central European regions in the Mediterranean area, or by Western European regions in Eastern Europe). This would strengthen the regions' feeling of shared responsibility for the ENP as a whole;

34. considers that the special role of the regions located on sensitive EU borders in the East and South needs to be strengthened. These regions are directly concerned by the problems of the European neighbourhood. European Neighbourhood Policy should on no account be conducted over their heads and it should take account of their specific interests;

35. recommends that the EU's border regions should receive specific support under the European Neighbourhood Policy;

36. considers that the European Neighbourhood Policy should take account of the existing relations with third countries, notably Russia, particularly in the East. Regions should be made aware of this aspect of the ENP, and appropriate forms of cooperation with all the third countries concerned should be supported;

37. declares its intention of supporting the process of democratisation in individual neighbouring countries by continuing to co-organise election monitoring missions with the Council of Europe's Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe;

#### **Conditions for neighbourhood policy in individual countries**

38. considers that there is a need to take account of the specific conditions for Eastern Partnership and neighbourhood policy action in the Caucasus;

39. notes that Georgia requires systematic ongoing support under the Eastern Partnership in view of the effects of the 2008 conflict;

40. recommends the intensification of neighbourhood policy in the whole Black Sea area. The continuing geopolitical importance of this region for the EU should be emphasised, as should the importance of the Black Sea Synergy. EU countries bordering on this area should receive meaningful EU support for their neighbourhood policy activities;

41. considers Moldova to be a special case. Given the significant progress achieved by neighbourhood policy and the Eastern Partnership here, there is a need for the broadest possible interest in the development of this country. Even partial success here could have a major impact on the promotion of neighbourhood policy and EU external policy;

42. calls for attention to be paid to the specific situation of the Kaliningrad Oblast, which despite its location is not covered by neighbourhood policy. It is an unusually important and sensitive territory, not just on the borders of the EU but in fact surrounded by EU territory on all sides. The specific features of this region cannot be ignored when conducting neighbourhood policy in the EU's immediate vicinity;

43. considers that, despite disappointment over the continuing difficulties in Belarus, it is necessary to support neighbourhood policy involvement in this country;

44. recognises the need for systematic support for the democratic, political, economic and social transformation processes in Ukraine;

45. recommends that, against the background of the Arab Spring, neighbourhood policy should play a significant role in

developing contacts between societies. There should be a particular and intensive focus on this region in the short term. Involvement in this region should be regarded as a test of the responsibility of all EU members as states, regions and societies;

46. recalls that each of the countries in the Southern Mediterranean is different and that the EU's approach has to be tailor-made and adapted to each situation. Nevertheless, democracy-building and democratic transition is universal and begins first and foremost at the grassroots level and cannot be imposed from above if it is to be stable and strongly rooted in society;

#### **The importance of territorial cooperation as an instrument of neighbourhood policy**

47. considers that euroregions provide important experience for neighbourhood policy. They became a useful instrument in the accession process for the Central European countries, and after their EU accession a useful instrument for regulating relations with non-EU neighbours;

48. therefore offers its support for establishing lasting political and administrative decentralised structures, considering that the administrative and institutional capacities of local and regional authorities facilitates cooperation at sub-state level, improves efficiency and good governance and is fundamental to the process of democratisation;

49. recommends to explore the possibilities of strengthening existing euroregions by using the instrument of the European Grouping for Territorial Cooperation because this would improve the legal certainty for the parties concerned and the transparency of the structures that are created. Reiterates its request that EGTCs with third countries should be made possible on a bilateral-basis and calls on the member states that have not done so to take the necessary steps to facilitate the creation and implementation of EGTCs;

50. underlines the practical usefulness of capacity building programmes within the context of the enlargement and the European Neighbourhood policies and – taking the Local Administration Facility pilot programme as a concrete example <sup>(1)</sup> – reiterates its suggestion that equivalent initiatives should be developed for the Southern Mediterranean countries in order to support their capacity building at local and regional level;

51. notes that the euroregion facilitates a broad spectrum of activities from the economic to the cultural spheres. It also facilitates spontaneous cooperation processes with the involvement of the third sector. The Euroregion has proved to be a flexible and unusually effective instrument for action at the borders of Central and Eastern Europe, the EU's external border region;

<sup>(1)</sup> The CoR already cooperates closely with the European Commission in supporting this pilot programme that is currently restricted to candidate and potential candidate countries.

52. recommends support for projects and the establishment of new euroregions (building on the experience of long-established euroregions), particularly linking regions in Algeria, Tunisia, Libya and Egypt with appropriate areas in southern Europe;

53. considers that the specific features of the European Union's southern border, being a sea border, should not be considered as an obstacle to the creation of euroregions. The importance of initiatives for the establishment of euroregions like Andalusia-Gibraltar-Morocco, Notio Egeo-Turkey, Vorio Egeo-Turkey and Polis-Trakiakent should be stressed, although they are still in their early stages;

54. considers that there is a pressing need for a fully operational Black Sea euroregion;

55. considers that the euroregions can effectively support ENP (ENPI) instruments like TAIEX, SIGMA, Twinning and ENP Action Plans;

56. underscores the added value brought by European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) and the macro-regional strategy as innovative forms of territorial cooperation at interregional and supranational level, as they can bolster the cohesion and the coordination of policy measures in various domains in the wider Mediterranean and Black Sea region, rationalising the distribution of funds and highlighting the role of regional and local authorities, on the basis of the principles of multi-level governance and with the broader involvement of civil society organisations;

#### **The citizens' dimension of neighbourhood policy supported by the action of the regions**

57. recommends that contacts between national governments or even regional authorities should not become a substitute for broader and deeper contacts between societies. All the Mediterranean countries should be linked by euroregions, facilitating contacts between the third sector and citizens;

58. recommends the kind of action which is typical of euroregions as an effective instrument for counteracting many stereotypes and fears arising from migration along the EU's borders, and believes that direct experience of cooperation and exchange can also help to overcome the stereotypical images of Europe and the West prevalent in many countries bordering on the Union;

59. considers that an active neighbourhood policy can be a way of limiting uncontrolled migration;

60. believes that a neighbourhood policy which assists the most active individuals and groups in the regions and countries bordering on the European Union can promote political and economic transformation processes;

61. maintains that assistance to individuals and groups actively working for democratic change and economic reform can increase the effectiveness of all activities;

62. stresses the importance of organising, under the aegis of neighbourhood policy, various forms of youth and student exchanges as well as scientific cooperation;

63. underlines the importance of strengthening the administrative capacity in partner countries and therefore welcomes the reinforcement of national programmes such as the Estonian Centre of Eastern Partnership focused on administrative capacity and the Eastern Partnership Academy of Public Administration in Warsaw, and calls on them to support administrative reform and capacity building also at the local and regional level;

#### **Interregional cooperation in neighbourhood policy**

64. recommends that southern euroregions should (like the regions) have partners in other parts of the continent. Links of this kind should in particular be created between euroregions on the EU's southern border and euroregions in Central and Northern Europe bordering on Eastern Europe. The ENP should not fragment into isolated strands and the European Union's regional policy should seek to prevent this. The European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation seems the right instrument for creating links of this kind;

65. considers that a systematic analysis of EU visa policy is needed with a view to facilitating the issue of visas to citizens of ENP countries as a way of promoting dialogue between societies;

66. stresses the potential benefits of the introduction of local border traffic on some of the Union's borders.

Brussels, 14 December 2011.

*The President  
of the Committee of the Regions*  
Mercedes BRESSO