

Opinion of the Committee of the Regions:

- **on the ‘Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament Wider Europe — Neighbourhood: A New Framework for Relations with our Eastern and Southern Neighbours’, and**
- **on the ‘Communication from the Commission: Paving the Way for a New Neighbourhood Instrument’**

(2004/C 23/10)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS,

having regard to the Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament on a Wider Europe — Neighbourhood: A New Framework for Relations with our Eastern and Southern Neighbours (COM(2003) 104 final);

having regard to the decision of the European Commission of 13 June 2003 to consult it on this subject, under the first paragraph of Article 265 of the Treaty establishing the European Community;

having regard to the decision of its Bureau of 8 April 2003, in accordance with the fifth paragraph of Article 265 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, to instruct the Commission for External Relations to draw up an opinion on the subject;

having regard to the Communication from the Commission: Paving the Way for a New Neighbourhood Instrument (COM(2003) 393 final);

having regard to the Declaration of the Euro-Mediterranean Conference in Barcelona of 28 November 1995 and the Association Agreements of the European Union with Tunisia, Israel, Morocco, the Palestinian Authority, Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon, Algeria, Syria and Libya;

having regard to the Conclusions of the Vienna European Council of December 1998 on the northern dimension and the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between the European Union and Russia and the Partnership and Cooperation Agreements between the European Union and Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus;

having regard to its Opinion on the Communication from the Commission on a Northern dimension for the policies of the Union (CdR 107/99 fin) of 15 September 1999 ⁽¹⁾;

having regard to its Resolution on Decentralised cooperation and the role of regional and local authorities in the Euro-Mediterranean partnership (CdR 40/2000 fin) of 16 February 2000 ⁽²⁾;

having regard to the Action Plan for the Northern Dimension with external and cross-border policies of the European Union (2000-2003) of 14 June 2000;

having regard to its Opinion on Regional and local authorities and the European Union's strategy for the Mediterranean (CdR 123/2000 fin) of 20 September 2000 ⁽³⁾;

having regard to the Conclusions of the Valencia Euro-Mediterranean Conference of 22 and 23 April 2002;

having regard to the Conclusions of the Luxembourg Ministerial Conference on the Northern Dimension of 21 October 2002;

⁽¹⁾ OJ C 374, 23.12.1999, p. 1.

⁽²⁾ OJ C 156, 6.6.2000, p. 47.

⁽³⁾ OJ C 22, 24.1.2001, p. 7.

having regard to the Progress report on the Communication from the Commission on the impact of enlargement on regions bordering candidate countries — Community action for border regions (COM(2002) 660 final) of 29 November 2002;

having regard to the Conclusions of the Copenhagen European Council of 12 and 13 December 2002;

having regard to its Opinion on the Report from the Commission: Explaining Europe's enlargement (CdR 325/2002 fin) of 13 February 2003 ⁽¹⁾;

having regard to the Resolution of the European Parliament on the conclusions of the negotiations on enlargement in Copenhagen of 9 April 2003;

having regard to the conclusions of the meetings of the General Affairs and External Relations Councils of 15 April, 30 September and 18 November 2002 and of 24 February, 18 March and 14 April 2003;

having regard to the Conclusions of the European Conference of 17 April 2003;

having regard to the Conclusions of the mid-term Euro-Mediterranean Conference held in Crete on 26 and 27 May 2003;

having regard to the Commission Working Document on the Second Northern Dimension Action Plan, 2004-2006 (COM(2003) 343 final) of 10 June 2003;

having regard to the opinion on the Northern Dimension — Second Action Plan 2004-2006 (CdR 102/2003 fin) of 9 October 2003;

having regard to the draft opinion (CdR 175/2003 rev. 2) adopted by the Commission for External Relations on 5 September 2003 (rapporteur: Mr Chaves González, President of the Region of Andalusia (ES-PES));

whereas:

1. new prospects are opening up for relations between the European Union and its future neighbouring countries following the fifth enlargement of the Union;
2. for decades the countries of the southern and eastern Mediterranean have represented a priority area for the EU on account of their strategic importance in political and economic terms and their human and cultural proximity;
3. the EU's relations with Russia, Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine will be of key importance to security and stability in Europe following enlargement;
4. in the Laeken Declaration, the European Union undertook to guarantee peace and stability through support for freedom, solidarity and diversity;
5. the European Union's external relations should be strengthened by supporting the political and economic reforms referred to in the Conclusions of the Copenhagen European Council;
6. political, economic, cultural and social cooperation between the EU and these regions must be stepped up in order to prevent the emergence of new fault lines in Europe, by creating an area of prosperity for these countries and the people of Europe as a whole;

⁽¹⁾ OJ C 128, 29.5.2003, p. 56.

7. the development of regional and interregional cooperation is one of the most important foundations for implementing the neighbourhood policy in these areas;
 8. regional and local authorities have been pursuing cooperation policies as part of their own remit, particularly in connection with cross-border cooperation with third country bodies,
- adopted the following opinion at its 51st plenary session of 9 October 2003.

The Committee of the Regions

1. Wider Europe: accepting the challenge

1.1. welcomes this timely and necessary initiative by the European Commission, introducing a new political, economic, social and cultural perspective in relations with our neighbours to the south and east, especially at a time when the latest EU enlargement procedure is generating new and ambitious expectations among these countries;

1.2. believes that once the enlargement process is successfully completed, the EU is duty-bound to contribute to the economic and social development of the neighbouring countries, not only at European level, but also by redefining the role it should play within the world order and reflecting the on-going processes of globalisation;

1.3. agrees with the Commission on the need to launch new initiatives to promote regional and sub-regional integration in certain of its surrounding areas, allowing interdependence between these areas and the European Union to be created;

1.4. considers that the European Union also bears a crucial responsibility in promoting political and democratic stability, security, sustainable development and social cohesion among our neighbours, thereby creating a friendly neighbourhood based on real cooperation at all levels and across all sectors;

1.5. believes that fostering intercultural dialogue is a basic ingredient of the new neighbourhood policy, and that it should be reinforced through a series of measures demonstrating the diversity encountered across Europe, focusing on respect for human rights and the fight against discrimination, racism and xenophobia;

1.6. believes that the success of this new neighbourhood policy should be rooted in broader involvement and commitment on the part of civil society in the European Union and the neighbouring countries;

1.7. is convinced that glaring economic differences across national frontiers can only undermine social order in the affected regions and breed illegal immigration, trafficking, organised crime and other related problems;

1.8. considers that the achievement of a 'ring of friends' around the European Union will have a beneficial effect on the political stability and economic development of both the Member States and the neighbouring countries. However, a narrow focus on extending the internal market or security aspects will not by itself ensure full cooperation between countries. The European Union must also commit itself to promoting cultural cooperation, sustainable development and economic, social and territorial cohesion;

2. A new vision and a new offer

2.1. considers that the neighbouring countries should be offered worthwhile and encouraging prospects: continuing with the present association and cooperation approach is not enough. Stability, security and prosperity must be practical, achievable goals for both the EU and its neighbours;

2.2. therefore supports the creation of a common area embracing the EU and its partners paving the way for a single market, free trade, an open investment system, approximation of legislation and the use of the euro as a reserve and reference currency for trade with the neighbouring countries. The ultimate purpose would be to apply the concept of 'sharing everything with the Union but institutions', without thereby barring the prospect of EU accession for neighbouring European countries if they meet the Copenhagen criteria;

2.3. also urges a common approach to tackling the main threats presently facing us as regards crime, terrorism, illegal immigration and environmental challenges;

2.4. advocates the development of a new political dialogue based on a series of shared values and principles, specifically concerning policies such as the environment, transport, research, education and culture. The dialogue should be extended to society in general in order to counter stereotypes and facilitate mutual understanding;

2.5. highlights the existence of a range of policies forming part of this outlook which are of particular significance to regions, and consequently:

2.5.1. calls for a detailed examination of the problems hampering trade in border regions, and supports harmonisation of legislation and enhanced security as a means for promoting trade;

2.5.2. urges that special attention be given to the economic, social and humanitarian impact on the EU's regions and municipalities of integration in the field of legal migration and control of illegal immigration. There should be an overall review of the problems and opportunities arising from migration flows;

2.5.3. calls for a dedicated transport policy for these areas, whose remoteness and particular communication problems come on top of their combined land and sea borders;

2.5.4. supports the introduction of energy models integrating security of EU supply, promotion of renewable sources and conversion of energy sources presenting the greatest risks for the environment and populations;

2.5.5. underlines the need for the new neighbouring countries to commit themselves to measures ensuring environmental protection and enhancing and safeguarding biodiversity;

2.5.6. advocates financial support on the part of the European institutions, and more specifically the EBRD and EIB, to promote local production systems which, based on small and medium-sized enterprises, can ensure the success of the planned political and economic reforms in the countries concerned;

2.6. demands that such policies be allocated adequate financial resources so that they can take firm root and the credibility of the proposed initiatives is not undermined;

3. **Neighbourhood: different countries, common interests — a differentiated, progressive and benchmarked approach**

3.1. believes that if the objectives of the EU's neighbourhood policy are to be attained, new common mechanisms and structures must be introduced which go beyond the present agreements, lending fresh impetus to existing processes;

3.2. supports the Commission's proposal to apply a structured and progressive approach to moving forward with cooperation, based on mutual obligations and the ability of each partner to meet their commitments, and the establishment of specific targets against which results can be measured before moving on to succeeding stages;

3.3. agrees with the establishment of country action plans to be negotiated between the European Commission, the Member States and each of the neighbouring countries. However, the Committee of the Regions asks to be consulted during the negotiating process for each of the action plans, so that the active role of European regional and local authorities in neighbourhood policy can be taken into account;

3.4. believes that adoption of a common strategy towards its neighbours is a vital step in the EU's relations with its immediate surroundings. It notes, however, that these countries do not all start from the same point in their relations with the EU, meaning that it is essential to distinguish two differentiated lines of action: one for the Mediterranean and the other for Russia and the NIS;

Russia and the NIS

3.5. argues for a new initiative which, founded on earlier experiences (European Economic Area, Council of the Baltic Sea States, Northern Dimension, etc.) and comparison with other processes, such as the Mediterranean one, can upgrade existing cooperation between the EU, Russia and the NIS;

3.6. calls for increased cooperation between Russia and the EU, using the Northern Dimension framework as a catalyst, for which an appropriate financial framework must be created, and consequently urges that the Northern Dimension forum planned at the General Affairs Council held in Luxembourg on 9 April 2001 be set up and opened to local and regional authority representatives;

3.7. supports restoring the dialogue between the EU and Belarus in order to back democratic and economic change and progress on human rights in the country, and to enable EU local and regional authorities to offer their experience in this regard;

3.8. advocates a rapid and lasting solution to the Transdnistria problem, which is the main obstacle to Moldova's political and economic progress and is a source of regional tensions;

The Mediterranean

3.9. points out that an essential instrument for relations with the countries on the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean already exists: the Barcelona Euro-Mediterranean Conference, with its three political, economic and socio-cultural aspects. Although the Euro-Mediterranean partnership has not met the expectations created in 1995, it represents an innovative framework for relations between the European Union and the Mediterranean partner countries, with the ambition of setting up a free-trade area by 2010;

3.10. considers that the Barcelona Process should be further developed by gradually integrating the Mediterranean countries into all the European Union's policies, in keeping with the degree of mutual commitment;

3.11. considers that closer cooperation of this kind entails an intensified political dialogue, which is more necessary than ever in the wake of the war in Iraq and the unresolved Israeli-Palestinian conflict;

3.12. supports the creation of the European Investment Bank's Facility for Euro-Mediterranean Investment and Partnership (FEMIP), believing that this instrument should serve as a launch-pad for a fully-fledged Euro-Mediterranean Bank;

3.13. is of the view that the European Union's new neighbourhood policy towards the Mediterranean must be underpinned by a strategic concept fully covering all the issues. It therefore draws attention to the need to forge a real intercultural dialogue promoting knowledge of 'the Other' and mutual understanding, and fostering Mediterranean cultural diversity;

3.14. stresses that neighbourhood policy must be pursued differently, depending on the relations and commitment of each of the partner countries with the EU, and envisaging increased aid for those fulfilling their commitments. In this regard, it supports the Kingdom of Morocco's request to have special status vis-à-vis the European Union;

4. Broader and more proactive involvement of local and regional authorities

4.1. calls in general for the active involvement of local and regional authorities in this new policy, and in particular:

Common aspects

4.2. calls for backing for cooperation between European local and regional authorities and their counterparts in the neighbouring countries to the south and east of the EU. Such backing should adopt a 'bottom-up' approach to ensure they are integrated into the new neighbourhood policy;

4.3. asks that EU local and regional authorities be consulted before new neighbourhood policy initiatives are proposed, in keeping with the Commission's White Paper on European governance, particularly with regard to identification of objectives, benchmarks and the timetable for implementing the action plans for each country;

4.4. also calls for border regions to be involved in formulating, implementing and evaluating the action plans;

4.5. urges coordination and complementarity between cooperation initiatives funded by the European Union, its Member States and European regional and local authorities in the neighbouring countries, in order to ensure maximum consistency and synergy of the resources deployed;

4.6. calls for special attention to focus on border regions, providing them with proper means and instruments, reflecting the approach adopted by the November 2002 proposals for Community action for border regions;

4.7. proposes that an intensive and open debate on the EU's political limits be initiated, covering the different levels of governance, especially local and regional levels, as a means of ensuring that the diversity and uniqueness of geographical Europe is recognised;

4.8. restates the essential part that European regional and local authorities are taking within the various cross-border and interregional cooperation processes as key players in decentralised EU cooperation;

4.9. calls for a support instrument to be set up for regional and local authorities, especially in border regions, so that they can effectively discharge their responsibilities in the field of integration and social awareness regarding immigrants. In this connection, it advocates including the local and regional dimension in the EU's migration policies;

Russia and the NIS

4.10. urges the establishment of a forum for local and regional authorities to assess the level of political and administrative decentralisation in Belarus, Moldova, Russia and Ukraine, so that the local and regional players from the EU and these countries can draw together strategically;

4.11. calls for regions to be involved in shaping transport infrastructure schemes so that border areas can be better integrated and structured;

4.12. urges that backing be given to a programme to replace nuclear energy with more environment-friendly models and to encourage new, renewable sources of energy;

4.13. advocates increased cross-border cooperation in customs control and management as a means of preventing people-trafficking and normalising trade in goods;

The Mediterranean

4.14. renews its call, pursuant to the Barcelona declaration and the conclusions of the Stuttgart conference and the Cologne European Council, for regional and local authorities to be more closely involved as frontline players in establishing an area of peace, stability and progress in the Mediterranean;

4.15. repeats that this requires the establishment, within the Euro-Mediterranean institutional framework, of a regional and local body which would bring together regional and local authorities from both sides of the Mediterranean, and which would promote the partnership and develop programmes to be carried out throughout the Mediterranean;

4.16. regrets that, although the Barcelona declaration envisaged that city and regional representatives would hold meetings to take stock of their problems and exchange experiences, no such meetings have yet been held; calls, therefore, for them to begin this year;

4.17. reiterates its request for decentralised Euro-Mediterranean cooperation to be made one of the pillars of the Barcelona process, and also requests that, on behalf of the European Commission, regional and local authorities administer the Community financial resources earmarked for the Mediterranean partner countries under decentralised cooperation;

4.18. calls for the Euro-Mediterranean Foundation to be an overarching body embracing all national, regional and local initiatives throughout the European Union and the southern and eastern Mediterranean. The Foundation should act as a catalyst and forum for dialogue between the Christian, Islamic and Jewish cultures and serve as a model for involving local and regional authorities from around the Mediterranean by drawing together civil societies. It accordingly emphasises the importance of pursuing a specific information and awareness programme actively involving regional and local authorities and targeting Mediterranean populations.

5. A new neighbourhood instrument

5.1. supports the strategy and guidelines contained in the Commission Communication: Paving the way for a New Neighbourhood Instrument;

5.2. considers that the measures proposed by the Commission should ensure the necessary coordination between the various programmes for cross-border and interregional cooperation between the European Union and the neighbouring countries. The lack of such coordination, as highlighted by the Committee of the Regions and other Community institutions, has hitherto blocked the cooperation which is fundamental for contributing to the harmonious development of neighbouring countries;

5.3. considers that this new instrument should strengthen current methods of cross-border and interregional cooperation so as to enable local and regional authorities to participate more actively in such cooperation;

5.4. agrees with the Commission that the new neighbourhood instrument should have a single approach to cooperation, thus facilitating the joint programming of actions between the administrations of the European Union and neighbouring countries;

5.5. stresses the importance of the participation of local and regional authorities in shaping, applying and further developing the new neighbourhood instrument. To this end it calls on the Commission to organise conferences and seminars explaining and analysing the fruitful cooperation being carried out, with their own resources, by local and regional authorities across borders;

5.6. supports the establishment of the new neighbourhood instrument in two phases. With regard to the first phase (2004-2006), the Committee stresses that it is important for the neighbourhood programmes to be up and running at the beginning of 2004. By the same token, it considers that the Commission should take account of the programmes that EU regions and municipalities are in the process of developing with administrations in neighbouring countries, supporting pioneer cooperation initiatives such as the Andalusia-Morocco cross-border Development Programme financed by the governments of Andalusia and Morocco;

5.7. stresses that, besides the cross-border cooperation linked to Interreg III A, the new instrument should cover the

interregional cooperation provided for in Interreg III B. In this connection, and for those specific areas which have borders with neighbouring countries, the Committee calls for the launch of programmes to tackle integrated development, with a special focus on spatial planning, the environment, SMEs, employment, economic and social policy, culture, and the management of migratory flows, with special attention to safety, reception and integration;

5.8. with regard to the second phase, calls for the participation of the Committee of the Regions in the formulation and definition of the post-2006 new neighbourhood instrument, involving it in the process of discussion and approval.

Brussels, 9 October 2003.

The President
of the Committee of the Regions
Albert BORE
