

**Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on the 'Northern Dimension — Second Action Plan 2004-2006'**

(2004/C 23/07)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS,

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

having regard to the decision of its Bureau of 8 April 2003, under 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 this subject;

having regard to the 2002 Annual Progress Report on the implementation of the Northern Dimension Action plan of 26 November 2002 (SEC(2002) 1296);

having regard to the Guidelines adopted by the Luxembourg Northern Dimension Ministerial Conference of 21 October 2002 which were subsequently endorsed by the EU General Affairs Council on 22 October 2002;

having regard to the opinion of the Committee of the Regions of 12 June 1996 on The Northern Dimension of the European Union and Cross-Border Cooperation on the Border between the European Union and the Russian Federation and in the Barents Region (CdR 10/96 fin) <sup>(1)</sup>;

having regard to the opinion of the Committee of the Regions of 15 September 1999 on the Communication from the Commission on a northern dimension for the policies of the Union [COM(98) 589 final] (CdR 107/1999 fin) <sup>(2)</sup>;

having regard to the opinion of the Committee of the Regions of 9 October 2003 (CdR 175/2003 fin) on the Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament on Wider Europe — Neighbourhood: A New Framework for Relations with our Eastern and Southern Neighbours;

having regard to its draft opinion (CdR 102/2003 rev. 2) adopted on 5 September 2003 by the Commission for External Relations (rapporteurs: Mr Lars Abel (DK/EPP) member of Copenhagen County Council Mr Uno Aldegren (SE/PES) Member of Skåne Regional Council);

having regard to the contributions of the Arctic Council and the Barents Euro-Arctic Council on the Second Northern Dimension consultation process, and the general experiences of the North Sea Commission on the cooperation of regional activities in the Northern Dimension area;

having regard to the views of the European Economic and Social Committee on the future of the Northern Dimension;

Whereas:

- 1) it is important to notice that the perspective of the area concerned by the Northern Dimension is changing dramatically with the new candidate countries entering the EU; this means that on the political and economical scene new challenges need to be addressed which is why the Northern Dimension policy is an important part of the puzzle in the new EU;
- 2) the debate on the new Action Plan on the Northern Dimension must gather all parties involved, including local and regional organisations, and sub-national authorities in the new Member States, to further the process of the Northern Dimension in the best way possible and making it more efficient, concrete and operational; it is important that the Northern Dimension is a part of regional policies and implemented on a regional and local level as well as national level;
- 3) it is appropriate to continue the work of the Northern Dimension in order to develop the enlarged EU and to further the cooperation with Russia and other relevant actors, e.g. Norway, Iceland and Greenland,

adopted the following opinion at its 51st plenary session, held on 9 October 2003.

<sup>(1)</sup> OJ C 337, 11.11.1996, p. 7.

<sup>(2)</sup> OJ C 374, 23.12.1999, p. 1.

## 1. The Committee of the Regions' views

The Committee of the Regions

1.1. welcomes the working document of the Commission on the second Northern Dimension Action Plan for 2004-2006;

1.2. notes with satisfaction that the Commission wants to involve a wide range of participants in this initiative, including the local and regional authorities;

1.3. notes also that the principles of inclusive participation, subsidiarity and complementarity form a clear basis on the Commission proposal, with an effective division of labour and overall coordination and monitoring of the strategic objectives, priorities and concrete activities;

1.4. welcomes also the specific reference made to the internationally recognised principles of sustainable development, good governance, transparency and participation, gender equality, the rights of minorities, and the protection of indigenous peoples, as well as the adoption of mutually reinforcing economic, employment and social policies by all partners involved, in line with the EU Lisbon Strategy;

1.5. considers that the Northern Dimension Action Plan should place a strong focus on cross-border and interregional cooperation in the light of the enlargement of the EU; the Commission's recent Communication 'Wider Europe — Neighbourhood' points to the Northern Dimension as an important factor in the new enlarged EU and Europe in general and therefore it is important to further cooperation also on the local and regional level;

1.6. stresses the importance of a bottom-up process for the Northern Dimension since the implementation of the EU acquis will for a great part be handled by the local and regional authorities and further stresses the importance of an effective coordination of all the Northern Dimension related efforts by the different DGs in the European Commission, e.g. by creating a specialised Northern Dimension coordinating unit in the European Commission.

## 2. The Committee of the Regions' recommendations

The Committee of the Regions

*Priorities and Decision-making Processes — Horizontal and Vertical*

2.1. calls for an initiative in order to gather forums on the Northern Dimension on a regular basis bringing together representatives of the local and regional administrations of the Northern Dimension area;

2.2. wishes that the sub-national authorities in the countries of the Northern Dimension are consulted in the concrete planning of the programmes and projects taking place; hence increased decision-making power should be transferred to the local and regional actors in order to obtain more equal participation;

2.3. proposes to establish a consultative body preferably in an already existing organisation or instrument where both the horizontal and the vertical levels are represented — it being the EU, national governments, Council of Baltic Sea States (CBSS), local and regional governments, their organisations and trans-Baltic organisations like Baltic Sea States Sub-regional Cooperation (BSSSC) and Union of Baltic Cities (UBC), the North Sea Commission, the Arctic Council and the Barents Euro-Arctic Council; Russian local and regional representatives should be part of the consultative body in order to cover the whole Northern Dimension area; hence it would seem natural that the Committee of the Regions plays a central role in such an initiative along with the European Commission;

2.4. suggests that activities concerning the implementation of the Northern Dimension programmes on local and regional levels are evaluated and taken into consideration and that the European Commission and the states initiate and support strengthening of the sub-national administrative capacity where needed;

2.5. asks that the following areas should be given high priorities because local and regional authorities in most countries hold competencies in these sectors: human resources, education, health, environment, transport, business and regional development, and culture, supported by ICT;

2.6. suggests that the business cooperation is strengthened between the private sector and the local and regional authorities, e.g. by setting up a business advisory body for business oriented projects;

*Financial framework for the Northern Dimension*

2.7. calls for a dynamic debate between the policy making parties and the implementing parties at all levels to establish a financial framework for the Northern Dimension Action Plan;

2.8. draws attention to the Barcelona process to see if a parallel model is possible for the Northern Dimension;

2.9. wishes that the cohesion policy on the Northern Dimension is to continue as an EU responsibility like the MEDA programme and points to the fact that a financial framework is necessary to implement this policy;

2.10. proposes that a separate budget line be created for the Northern Dimension; the creation of an appropriate financial framework would be beneficial for all the priority areas of the Northern Dimension; the administration of the financial framework must be simple; access to resources must be as flexible as possible;

2.11. suggests that the national governments and the Council safeguard sufficient financial resources to local and regional level activities in human and institutional capacity-building in order to solve the existing financial problem of a lacking collective budget line on the Northern Dimension policy;

2.12. wishes to explore the possibilities of better involvement of international financial organisations in development projects under Northern Dimension policy;

#### *Cross Border and Interregional Cooperation — Tacis and Interreg*

2.13. points out the strong necessity to coordinate the current programmes of Tacis and Interreg more effectively; the existing programmes have shown that the present coordination between the two is not sufficient; the idea of a single proximity instrument should be noted as a possible future solution to the problem;

2.14. calls to expand the existing Interreg programmes beyond spatial planning to other priority sectors where the local and regional authorities also hold their competencies, and to accept the maritime national borders in the Baltic Sea as eligible for all strands of Interreg programmes; it is however important to notice that expansion will require financial means;

2.15. stresses the importance of creating smaller non-bureaucratic financial facilities for interregional programmes and projects within the Interreg and Tacis programmes;

#### *Northern Dimension Environmental Partnership and Northern Dimension Partnership in Public Health and Social Wellbeing*

2.16. draws attention to the approach of the Northern Dimension Environmental Partnership; it is important to include local and regional actors in the partnership since they also have competence on this field;

2.17. proposes that attention is paid to the Northern Dimension Partnership in Public Health and Social Wellbeing; an international temporary working group plans the partnership consisting of ministerial participation; it is important to include the local and regional levels since they also hold competence in the field;

#### *Kaliningrad, the Northwest Russian Regions and the Arctic Circle*

2.18. stresses the importance of paying special attention to the region of Kaliningrad in the Northern Dimension due to its geographical inclusion in the new enlarged EU for example by creating special programmes and financial solutions for projects within Kaliningrad and cross-border cooperation between Kaliningrad and its neighbours;

2.19. points to the experience that cooperation projects between local and regional authorities already take place and seem easier to facilitate than the ones at national level;

2.20. considers it important that not only Kaliningrad but also all the north-west Russian regions are given special attention since cooperation with the new EU also proposes challenges for these regions;

2.21. draws attention to the Arctic area where a very harsh climate, great distances, weak economic development and vulnerability towards external environmental influences make economic and social development difficult; it is therefore important to strengthen the circumpolar cooperation and to recognise the importance of reinforced circumpolar cooperation in all Arctic Circle activities; furthermore, the concept of the Arctic Window plays a central role in the conclusions of the Conference on the Northern Dimension and the Arctic Window in Ilulissat, Greenland, 28 August 2002.

Brussels, 9 October 2003.

*The President  
of the Committee of the Regions*

Albert BORE