

I

(Resolutions, recommendations and opinions)

RESOLUTIONS

COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

110TH PLENARY SESSION, 11—13 FEBRUARY 2015

Resolution on the European Commission's work programme 2015

(2015/C 140/01)

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

having regard to the European Commission's Communication on its 'Work programme 2015' and to the cooperation agreement between the CoR and the European Commission:

1. welcomes the Commission's determination to reach out to EU citizens in order to build their trust in the EU; emphasises the role Europe's cities and regions can play to that effect;
2. welcomes the emphasis put by the Commission work programme on the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality and recalls that the CoR conducts subsidiarity monitoring to ensure that the added value of EU legislative action supports the more integrated policy approach, i.e. through working across portfolios; calls for the systematic territorial impact assessment of all new EU initiatives including REFIT;
3. recalls its determination to become involved in the entire legislative cycle in the areas where it can contribute by virtue of its competences and requests the Commission to be consulted on proposals which are substantially modified during the legislative process;
4. calls for an inter-institutional alliance to upgrade and complete infrastructures in the European Union, emphasising the utmost importance of dealing with bottle-necks, bridging the gaps between nodes and networks together with cross-border sections, since it considers connectivity and accessibility of all regions in terms of, transport, energy, telecommunications and digital infrastructure and services to be key for European territorial development and solidarity;
5. invites the Commission to address the still existing gaps in the European single market and to give particular attention to border regions; in this respect asks the Commission to develop common initiatives to be carried out with the support of its Platform for European Groupings for Territorial Cooperation (EGTC); special attention should also be given to regions with severe and permanent demographic disadvantages, as stipulated in the TFEU;
6. in this regard, calls on the European Commission to take into account in its initiatives the particular situation of the outermost regions, whose specific characteristics and need for adapted regulations are clearly defined in Article 349 TFEU, with a view to achieving their full participation in the European single market;

7. welcomes the Commission's commitment to receive the views of the co-legislators before proceeding with the withdrawal of the legislative proposals set out in Annex II of the work programme and requires to be accorded a like opportunity; calls on the Commission not to withdraw the circular economy proposal; considers that current waste legislation needs to be reviewed at the earliest opportunity;

8. supports the Commission's efforts to lighten the regulatory burden in order to promote investment, growth and jobs provided these do not compromise Europe's high levels of social, health and environmental protection and consumer choice; requests to be invited to participate in working groups on the simplification of European legislation as regional and local authorities are in many cases the implementing authority of EU law;

9. regrets that the work programme omits reference to specific initiatives in cohesion policy, rural development, the tourism industry and environment; regrets in particular the absence of new initiatives concerning the urban agenda, macro-regional strategies, territorial cohesion and demographic challenges; invites the Commission to work together with the CoR in developing initiatives in these areas.

Jobs, Growth and Investment

10. notes the European Fund for Strategic Investments (EFSI) intended to mobilise EUR 315 billion in additional investments in strategic areas over the coming three years;

11. underlines that the Investment Plan for Europe and the EFSI are complementary to cohesion policy and that strong synergies between the new EFSI and the operational programmes of the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) will be crucial in order to ensure coherence between investment projects and regional and local development strategies; recommends an adequate involvement of local and regional authorities in the process of project selection as well as the organisation of decentralised investment fora;

12. applauds the fact that Commission's Communication on how to apply the flexibility margins foreseen by the Growth and Stability Pact takes up the CoR's call for exempting national co-financing of EFSI and ESIF projects from the Stability and Growth Pact rules. The CoR is indeed convinced that a wider application of the 'investment clause' will hugely help removing obstacles to a relaunch of growth-enhancing investments;

13. is concerned about the continuing payments crisis in the EU budget and the steadily increasing level of unpaid bills. Expects, therefore, the European Commission to rapidly come forward with the plan to wind down the unpaid bills backlog it had committed to present as part of institutional agreement on the budget 2014 procedure. The revision of the multiannual financial framework should in a second stage provide the opportunity for a structural solution to avoid the unpaid bills backlog turning into EU structural debt. The revision should also include a reform of the EU's own resources system with the aim of reducing the vulnerability of EU finances to national disputes and aligning with the mid-term review of the Europe 2020 strategy;

14. proposes in the framework of the mid-term review of the Europe 2020 strategy that an indicator relating to the investment rate be included in the macroeconomic scoreboard;

15. urges the Commission to also assess the impact of the new ESA 2010 rules on the ability of local and regional authorities to invest;

16. welcomes the Commission's focus on combatting unemployment and stresses the need for strong measures in this area, with the close involvement of local and regional authorities and their associations; congratulates the European Commission on its proposal presented on 4 February 2015 to make EUR 1 billion available in 2015 to drastically increase the pre-financing that Member States receive in the framework of the Youth Employment Initiative and invites the European Commission to organise a structured dialogue with the CoR and the territorial associations to evaluate together how the European youth guarantee scheme could be better implemented on the ground;

17. urges the Commission and Member States to add a territorial dimension to the revised Europe 2020 Strategy and to align the European Semester to the long-term goals of Europe 2020; calls on the Commission to ensure the involvement of sub-national levels of government in the review of economic governance processes, including the European Semester; considers resource efficiency as a key element of the Europe 2020 Strategy to achieve sustainable growth and urges the Commission and the Member States to introduce a resource productivity headline target.

18. regrets that the European Commission's mid-term review of the Europe 2020 strategy, whose publication was expected for February 2015, is postponed; urges the Commission to present its proposals for the review of the strategy as soon as possible.

Digital Single Market

19. underlines the importance of completing the Digital Single Market in order to increase competitiveness of the regional business system, not least by means of incentives for investments in information and communication technologies; underlines the need to bridge the digital divide between urban and rural areas in Europe as a matter of urgency, to develop new and trustworthy public e-services and e-government accessible to all and to implement measures to increase citizens' digital literacy, initiatives that provide the necessary mechanisms to help solve the problems raised by the demographic challenges facing some parts of Europe's regions; suggests to improve the implementation of the Digital Agenda through a stronger territorial dimension of the annual Digital Forum.

Energy Union, Climate Change and Environment Policy

20. welcomes the proposed strategic framework for the Energy Union and calls for the new strategy to be based on realistic local and regional solutions for energy, climate change mitigation, and adaptation as well as sustainable development; asks the Commission to more closely associate the CoR on key aspects of local and regional interest in the areas of energy security, renewable energies, the internal energy market and Green House Gas (GHG) emissions reduction, notably retail energy markets and affordable energy, as well as decentralised energy production, new energy governance and the empowerment of citizens as energy consumers and producers; also asks the Commission to involve the CoR in the Citizen's Energy Forum and the Smart Cities programme activities;

21. stresses the important contribution of cities and regions in relation to energy supply and security issues and the future of energy policy and the role of Energy Union and suggests a strategic partnership between the Commission, the EIB and the CoR to develop concrete action plans;

22. asks the Commission to involve the CoR in the preparations of the legislative proposals to implement the 2030 Climate and Energy package;

23. stresses the importance of involving the regional system in order to secure more effective systemic governance of energy and climate policies;

24. calls on the Commission to strengthen and integrate the Covenant of Mayors with the Mayors Adapt initiative and to extend their time-horizon beyond 2020 in order to achieve the necessary coordination of energy and climate policy issues; underlines the key role it has to play in mobilising the local and regional authorities and seeks to be closely involved in the future development of these instruments;

25. seeks to contribute to the preparation of the EU position for the UNFCCC COP21 in Paris, and calls on the Commission to fully involve the CoR in all related negotiations and activities;

26. considers that the Commission should present in 2015 a Communication on the use of land as a resource, should undertake a thorough mid-term review of the EU Biodiversity Strategy and should draw up a new proposal for a Directive on access to justice in environment matters, and a legislative proposal on environmental inspections and enforcement, while it is necessary to check carefully that new legislative proposals or the provisions they contain are consistent with the subsidiarity and proportionality principles;

27. welcomes the emphasis placed in the European Commission Work Programme 2015 on a closer partnership with regions and cities for a better implementation of environmental legislation; looks forward, therefore, to stepping up the activities of the CoR/European Commission Technical Platform for Cooperation on the Environment as mentioned in the European Union 7th Environment Action Programme 2014-2020;

28. reiterates its call on the Commission to propose measures to guarantee a balanced milk market when milk quotas end on 31 March 2015, so as to prevent negative social and economic consequences, and risks to long-term investment in the sector;

Internal Market

29. points out that it is vital to foster investment in innovation and strengthen the European industry if the EU is to maintain a competitive advantage in the global economy;

30. calls for a follow-up to the Green Paper on a possible extension of geographical indication protection of the European Union to non-agricultural products ⁽¹⁾;

31. welcomes the focus on SMEs and highlights their contribution to growth and job creation at regional and local level in the EU; underlines its readiness to cooperate in the creation of a network of regional SME envoys; expects the new proposals regarding a Capital Market Union to help improve access to finance for SMEs;

32. welcomes the Commission's commitment to present a Labour Mobility Package, which should include a proposal for a revision of the Posting of Workers Directive; calls on the Commission to further clarify the entitlement to social security rights and other benefits for citizens having exercised their right of free movement; urges the Commission to also take into account the negative effects of labour mobility such as brain drain and skills mismatch;

33. with a view to strengthening the social economy and social entrepreneurship within the EU, urges the Commission to submit proposals for European statutes for mutual societies and associations and a revised proposal on the Statute for a European Cooperative Society, and to maintain its proposal on the European Foundation Statute;

34. calls on the Commission to continue its efforts to ensure that the **financial sector** becomes both safer and better able to perform its role of financing the real economy; awaits, in particular, the proposal on the resolution of financial institutions other than banks.

Economic and Monetary Union

35. welcomes the Commission's intention to review the Economic and Monetary Union, including its social dimension, and invites the Commission to closely work with the CoR to come forward with concrete proposals;

36. welcomes the Commission's objective of stepping up efforts to combat tax evasion and tax fraud and to move to a system in which the country where profits are generated is also the country of taxation; supports the Commission's effort to make a proposal on the automatic exchange of information between tax authorities on cross-border tax rulings.

Free Trade Agreements

37. urges the Commission to deliver a strategy paper outlining the EU's wider trade policy objectives which would set higher transparency and consultation standards during the negotiations and guaranteeing meaningful market access, the promotion of high environmental and social standards and the full respect of the autonomy of public authorities at all levels in carrying out public services;

38. supports the Commission's recent efforts to increase transparency in the negotiations of trade agreements and in particular the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP); insists that small scale local and regional economies should not be negatively affected by the outcome of the negotiations, that regionally labelled food products should continue to be protected and that European health and environment standards as well as the legal structures and procedures of the EU and the Member States will be safeguarded; expects the cultural and media sovereignty of the Member States to be guaranteed by explicitly excluding culture and the media from the negotiating mandate; asks that it is kept informed in a transparent and regular way so that it can play its role as intermediary between the Union and local and regional authorities;

⁽¹⁾ COM(2014) 469 final.

39. calls on the Commission to associate the CoR in the follow-up of the negotiations on the Trade in Services Agreement (TiSA), which is due to replace the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), considering that key provisions under negotiation — such as scope, definitions, market access, national treatment and exemptions in relation to the provision of services — relate to the competencies of local and regional authorities;

40. urges the Commission to develop a communication strategy to inform people about the potential benefits of such trade agreements for the daily lives of European citizens.

An Area of Justice and Fundamental Rights

41. notes the Commission's commitment to equality of opportunity for people with disabilities and equality between men and women, but regrets the absence of specific new initiatives;

42. supports the Commission's efforts to put in place a comprehensive European policy on migration that protects EU borders, fights human trafficking and irregular immigration, while respecting migrants' fundamental rights, creating safe and legal ways for migrants to reach the EU, enhancing cooperation with countries of origin and transit, building genuine solidarity among the EU Member States and fostering European competitiveness by enhancing the potential of migrants to contribute to the economies of EU Member States;

43. calls for a coordinated immigration policy and underlines that the proposed new approach to migration has to include measures and instruments reflecting the important role and capacity of local and regional authorities in the reception and integration of migrants based on the principles of solidarity;

44. invites the Commission to launch together with the CoR a consultation of local and regional authorities to better evaluate the existing challenges on the ground before launching new European initiatives and legislation.

The EU as Global Actor

45. welcomes the Commission's intention to review the European Neighbourhood Policy to which the CoR will contribute via ARLEM and CORLEAP and calls for a strengthening of the mechanisms and programmes for cooperation between the EU and partner local and regional authorities and calls for stepping up initiatives supporting decentralisation processes in the partner countries; proposes to expand the scope of the Local Administration Facility programme to all the partner countries;

46. welcomes the Commission's intention to publish a Communication on the post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals and stands ready to contribute the experience and initiatives of local and regional authorities as key partners in decentralised cooperation for development; asks to be closely associated to the development of the EU's position in the global negotiations and to the initiatives in the European Year for Development 2015.

Governance and citizenship

47. welcomes the European Commission's commitment to propose a new Inter-Institutional Agreement on Better Law Making to which it asks to be associated;

48. strongly welcomes that cutting red-tape is prioritised; the effective identification of red-tape, in particular with the support of local and regional authorities and businesses, will be crucial to increasing impact;

49. considers restoring trust in the European Union a very important priority and invites the European Commission to further develop the inter-institutional partnership on decentralised communication; will continue to promote active EU citizenship and follow the revision of the Regulation on the European Citizens' Initiative;

50. notes the European Commission's intention to propose a new inter-institutional agreement which includes the Council, on a mandatory transparency register, and demands that the Commission submit a legislative proposal for the establishment of such a register on the basis of Article 352 TFEU. Local and regional institutions and their representative associations should not be required to register in this, as local and regional authorities are an integral part of the EU's multilevel institutional system, whose representatives are democratically elected by the citizens and do not represent partisan interests;

51. instructs the president to forward this resolution to the European Commission, the European Parliament, the Council and the President of the European Council.

Brussels, 12 February 2015.

*The president
of the European Committee of the Regions*

Markku MARKKULA
