

5. CALLS ON Member State governments to shoulder their responsibilities and ASKS them to put the Community interest before national interests, in order to safeguard the future of European integration, not least cohesion policy;
6. STRESSES in that connection that the inclusion of territorial cohesion as a Union objective is one of the fundamental achievements of the Convention's draft Constitution;
7. URGES the IGC to confirm the constitutional recognition of the role of local and regional authorities in the European venture and the new role given to the CoR on the monitoring of the principle of subsidiarity, as affirmed by the Convention;
8. REITERATES its recommendations to straighten out certain inconsistencies between the various sections of the Treaty without, however, undermining the institutional balance in order, on the one hand, to clarify the CoR's institutional status, firmly establish its areas of mandatory consultation within the constitutional set-up and strengthen its consultative role, and, on the other, to consolidate economic, social and territorial cohesion, among other things by establishing an explicit legal basis for interregional and cross-border cooperation;
9. CALLS ON Member State governments, to complete the Union reform process launched at the Laeken European Council;
10. INSTRUCTS its president to forward this resolution to the Council of the European Union, the European Parliament, the European Commission and members of the Convention.

Brussels, 12 February 2004

*The President
of the Committee of the Regions*
Peter STRAUB

Resolution of the Committee of the Regions on the 'European Commission's work programme' and 'the Committee of the Regions' priorities for 2004'

(2004/C 109/11)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS,

HAVING REGARD TO the Commission's legislative and work programme for 2004 (COM(2003) 645 final);

HAVING REGARD TO the European Parliament resolution on the Commission's legislative and work programme for 2004, adopted at the plenary session of 17 December 2003 (P5_TA PROV(2003)0585);

HAVING REGARD TO the Protocol governing arrangements for cooperation between the European Commission and the Committee of the Regions (DI CdR 81/2001 rev. 2);

WHEREAS local and regional authorities are responsible for implementing a large proportion of EU policies;

WHEREAS the fact that local and regional authorities help to define the EU's priorities will greatly enhance the democratic legitimacy of EU policies;

adopted the following resolution at its 53rd plenary session on 11 and 12 February 2004 (meeting of 12 February):

The Committee of the Regions

General observations

1. welcomes the strategic approach of the European Commission 2004 annual work planning;
2. considers that the priorities of the Committee of the Regions are reflected within those of the Commission. The CoR's priorities will be: to contribute to shaping the future of cohesion policy; to implement the Lisbon agenda; to complete enlargement, to prepare a new neighbourhood policy; and to strengthen the local and regional dimension of the Area of Freedom, Security and Justice;
3. reiterates its wish to be involved in the inter-institutional dialogue on the annual political strategy and the work programme and in this context is pleased that the Commission Communication on dialogue with associations of regional and local authorities on the formulation of European Union policy [COM(2003) 811] provides that 'The proposed systematic dialogue will be based upon a presentation of ... the Commission's annual work programme';
4. undertakes, especially with a view to the European elections in June 2004, to defend the achievements of the European Convention in accordance with its resolution on the results of the Intergovernmental Conference adopted on 12 February 2004;
5. considers it essential to step up consultation with the European Commission on the practical methods of evaluating respect for the principles of subsidiarity, proportionality and proximity, as well as the territorial impact of Community legislation, and recalls that in its resolution on the Commission's work programme for 2003 the CoR encouraged the Commission '... to implement forthwith the recommendation made by the Convention working group on the subsidiarity principle to attach to every legislative proposal a 'subsidiarity assessment' containing details making it possible to assess the extent to which the principle of subsidiarity is respected in it';
6. considers it necessary to continue the European Commission's trials promoting tripartite contracts in order to improve territorial cohesion, and asks the Commission to inform it about the results of these trials;
7. asks the European Commission to jointly evaluate the results of implementing the cooperation protocol with a view to revision before the end of 2004 and in the light of the new culture of consultation and cooperation and the new tasks assigned to the Committee;
8. welcomes the Council's adoption of a multiannual strategic programme for 2004-2006 [Doc. 15709/03 of 5 December 2003], which provides a useful reference for the strategic programming of the other European institutions;

The future of cohesion policy

9. undertakes to be fully involved in drawing up a new cohesion policy, drawing on its expertise and its members' in-depth knowledge of local and regional matters. Regions are not only the most appropriate level for taking cohesion policy decisions but are also the most efficient level ensuring their delivery;
10. welcomes the initiatives related to the European Year of Education through Sports and, as local and regional authorities are deeply involved by the organisation of sport events, asks to be more involved in the events organised by the Commission within the 2004 EYES initiative;
11. strongly supports a genuine European regional policy which promotes competitiveness in order to attain the goals of the Lisbon strategy and will reject any idea of re-nationalisation and the idea of replacing this by mere regional assistance for poorer Member States;
12. considers the objective of earmarking 0.45 % of EU GDP for regional policy to be the minimum needed to guarantee the Union a viable regional policy and refuses to accept that regional policy should be the EU budget-balancing variable in response to calls for cuts by certain governments of Member States that are net contributors;
13. rejects any move to make an agreement on the future financial perspectives and the amount of funding earmarked for cohesion policy conditional on alignment with the positions of the net contributors in the Intergovernmental Conference;
14. stresses that regional cooperation is an integrating factor and provides real Community added value in regional policy, which must be a fundamental pillar of the future Structural Funds;
15. reiterates the need to further simplify, streamline and decentralise the Structural Funds, as noted in the CoR Outlook Report and requested by grassroots interest groups during the broad consultations held on the matter;
16. reiterates its call for practical implementation of a Community rural development policy based on an integrated approach within a single legal and policy framework, in accordance with the Cork (1996) and Salzburg (2003) declarations; calls for the current concept of rural development as just an extension of agricultural activities to be abandoned and a policy to be introduced that embraces the diverse activities of farmers, tourism, support for crafts activities, access to the information society, services to the general public and to businesses, and housing policy;

Towards implementation of the Lisbon strategy objectives

17. calls for more intensive and more decentralised implementation of the Lisbon strategy, and adequate budgetary resources for achieving this;

18. welcomes the strong impetus to the Lisbon agenda given by the Commission Communication to the spring European Council and asks the spring Council to take the necessary steps to implement the reforms required to stimulate competitiveness, innovation, sustainable growth and stability; considers that local and regional authorities should be regarded as partners in the implementation of the Lisbon strategy and emphasises their contribution to realising these objectives and narrowing regional disparities;

19. considers, however, that the structural reforms needed to attain the Lisbon objectives should not be prejudicial to social cohesion and must therefore be accompanied by substantial economic, social and educational investment; in this context, the Committee of the Regions supports the need to tighten up the criteria of the Stability and Growth Pact, taking into account public investment, including infrastructure spending and measures to promote labour market and social inclusion;

20. calls for the further and stronger inclusion of environmental concerns in all policy areas in accordance with the Gothenburg strategy, taking economic efficiency into account;

21. welcomes the priority attached to promoting investment in networks and knowledge, in particular the development of the European Research Area and the implementation of the action plan to increase investment in research and development in line with the 3 % GDP objective and to attract adequate human resources in research;

22. calls for increased focus to be given to the role of education and training and investment in human resources in promoting Europe's growth and achieving the Lisbon strategy;

23. looks forward to the Commission's follow-up to: (a) the Court of Justice 'Altmark Trans' ruling on the financing of public service obligations and (b) the Green Paper on services of general interest, in which the Commission set out only a limited number of proposals for legislative or regulatory action;

24. stresses the essential role of a review and adjustment of the eEurope 2005 initiative in the enlarged Europe, in particular the development and use of a European secure broadband infrastructure, and is looking forward to the revised eEurope Action Plan 2005;

25. urges the Commission to ensure that the process of increasing concentration in the media sector does not lead to creation of an oligopoly jeopardising pluralism, cultural diversity and consumers' freedom of choice;

Enlargement of the European Union

26. expresses its concern at the insufficient involvement of local and regional authorities by the Commission and the national authorities in preparations for enlargement and asks that cohesion policy should play a vital role in the integration of the new Member States;

27. notes with satisfaction that the Commission has included further development of administrative capacity among its top priorities for the accession countries; points out that the local and regional authorities of the accession states in particular still need more support; invites the Commission to introduce urgently new innovative measures to reinforce the administrative and implementation capacity of the local and regional authorities of the accession states;

28. strongly recommends that the local and regional authorities be better involved in the ongoing and future accession negotiations; notes that the problems currently faced by the first ten accession countries are also due to lack of implementation and administrative capacity, which could have been avoided if more attention had been paid to the needs of the local and regional authorities in the enlargement process;

29. fully endorses the neighbourhood policy of the Commission and the stability element it is based on; notes again with regret that the Commission work programme still does not provide for consultation of the Committee of the Regions on most enlargement- and neighbourhood-related issues;

Neighbourhood policy

30. stresses the importance of promoting cultural diversity in an enlarged Europe; looks forward to actively pursuing its priorities to respect and promote cultural and linguistic diversity as a source of wealth to be preserved;

31. considers that development of the trans-European networks is also an indispensable means of enhancing stability at the frontiers of the EU;

32. recalls that if the Wider Europe policy is to be a success, it is absolutely necessary to distinguish two differentiated lines of action - one for the Mediterranean and the other for Russia and the NIS;

33. recommends that the Commission take full account of the experience of the new members of the Committee of the Regions from the accession countries with their Eastern and Mediterranean neighbours and involve the local and regional authorities of the EU-25 in shaping the new 'ring of friends' policy; reflecting this concern, the CoR will focus on the Eastern dimension of the Wider Europe policy by organising a seminar on this issue in Kaliningrad in the second half of 2004;

34. calls, in accordance with its resolution of 28 November 2003, for closer involvement of local and regional authorities in the Euro-Mediterranean partnership, which means setting up a body within the partnership that would represent local and regional authorities and making decentralised Euro-Mediterranean cooperation one of the pillars of the Barcelona Process, with guidelines for an interregional and transnational cooperation programme for local and regional authorities around the Mediterranean; the focus here should be on specific training programmes for administrative capacity building;

35. asks for the Thessaloniki agenda to be vigorously pursued and for the local and regional authorities of the Western Balkans to be involved in all programmes and networks of the EU which further their integration into Europe in all fields, be they economic, social or cultural;

Area of Freedom, Security and Justice

36. stresses the local and regional dimension in relation to implementing the Area of Freedom, Security and Justice; calls for this dimension to be taken into account when defining policy further to the Tampere programme, which the CoR would like to see completed within the deadlines confirmed by the European Council in Thessaloniki, and asks to be consulted on this matter;

37. notes with satisfaction the increased consultation of the CoR in the field of asylum and immigration policies; regrets however that the Commission refused to consult the CoR on

certain documents in this field which the CoR specifically asked to be consulted about;

38. points out that integration of immigrants and social cohesion are highly topical issues in most EU countries, and considers that integration should be a key issue in all relevant EU policy areas, notably the common immigration and asylum policy;

39. recommends that the Structural Funds also be used to support and develop instruments for realising the Area of Freedom, Security and Justice in sensitive regions and municipalities;

40. instructs its President to submit this resolution to the European Commission, the European Parliament, the Council, the Irish and Dutch presidencies, and the governments and parliaments of the accession countries.

Brussels, 12 February 2004

*The President
of the Committee of the Regions*
Peter STRAUB
