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III

(Preparatory Acts)

COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

74th PLENARY SESSION 9 AND 10 APRIL 2008

Own-initiative opinion of the Committee of the Regions on 'Reforming the budget. Changing Europe'

(2008/C 172/01)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- considers it imperative to maintain a strong political and economic framework, with sufficient resources in the medium to long term, in order to be able to give expression to the collective will to achieve the goals which have been set,
- considers that the future Community budget must be based on the EU competences laid down in the Lisbon Treaty and on the subsidiarity principle and must reflect the enlargement of the legal bases of the Treaty and rejects the idea of competition between pre-existing policies on the one hand and the new areas of European activity on the other, or new policies made necessary by new global challenges,
- suggests that the development of the budget should, rather, be considered in the light of gradual progress towards integration, based on Community actions of an experimental nature, in clear contrast to the current trend to cut the size of the European budget,
- calls for the objective of exploiting the full potential of multi-level governance to be placed at the heart of the strategy of the European budget review and points out that the design, programming, co-financing and implementation of European policies can gain significantly from the contribution of regional and local authorities,
- is particularly concerned that the renationalisation of Community policies could result in insufficient, ineffective and incoherent responses at EU level and the loss of the leverage effect of the Union's financial intervention,
- reiterates that a stable multiannual financial framework, covering significantly more than five years, is an essential precondition for ensuring the effectiveness of the European Union's action and proposes therefore that the programming period of the multiannual financial framework be extended to 10 years, allocating all the funds only for the first five years and reassigning the amounts kept in reserve, for example 25 % as part of a genuine mid-term review; this approach would make it possible to ensure consistency with the European electoral timetable,
- considers that the new system of financing the Community budget must be based on transparency and on own resources which guarantee the principles of fairness, solidarity, stability, visibility, clarity, accuracy and simplicity with as few exemptions as possible.

Rapporteurs: Michel DELEBARRE — Mayor of Dunkirk (FR/PES)
Luc VAN DEN BRANDE — Member of the Flemish Parliament (BE/EPP)

Reference document

SEC(2007) 1188 final — Communication from the Commission — Reforming the budget, changing Europe — a public consultation paper in view of the 2008/2009 budget review

Political recommendations

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

EU budget review, strengthening Europe

1. considers that, in order to respond in an ambitious way to the expectations of Europeans, the EU budget review must serve primarily to reinforce the democratic pact of trust which binds the people to the Union, and thus to renew the partnership between the institutions responsible for policies at the various territorial levels;

2. points out that the European Union strives to create a global model for prosperity and cohesion, where a Europe-wide political blueprint is reconciled with the preservation of identity, and the promotion of participation and democracy at local and regional level;

3. is convinced that the European Union's added value resides in the peace, protection and stability it guarantees its citizens; the opportunities it offers Europeans to develop their full potential as individuals beyond national borders and at a European level; the creation of a European consciousness and solidarity between citizens of different nationality and culture through the promotion of economic, social and territorial cohesion; the creation of a space for Europeans to trade with each other in a single market; and the pursuit of common approaches to the challenges of the 21st century;

4. considers that the challenge of the budget review is to allow this economic and social model to progress, avoiding the dismantling of its foundations and drawing more on Europe's territorial wealth and its diversity, including cultural diversity, in the interests of its cohesion;

5. considers it imperative to maintain a strong political and economic framework, with sufficient resources in the medium to long term, in order to be able to give expression to the collective will to achieve the goals which have been set;

6. draws attention to the value of the Community budget which, being based on the principles of solidarity, the stability of its multiannual financial framework and the conditions attached to its benefits, is essential for ensuring the effectiveness and continuity over time of the action of the European Union as a whole;

7. is convinced that it is the multiannual financial framework of the EU budget which ensures long-term strategic continuity

of the broad lines of European policy and provides certainty for local investment;

8. reiterates in this context its support for the new Treaty, which represents progress in the process of European integration, with the reinforcement, updating or redefinition of policies which are already at the centre of European integration and with the communitarisation of other major policies;

9. considers that the future Community budget must be based on the EU competences laid down in the Lisbon Treaty and on the subsidiarity principle and must, wherever necessary, reflect the enlargement of the legal bases of the Treaty and rejects the idea of competition between pre-existing policies on the one hand, the objectives of which are still relevant, and the new areas of European activity on the other, or new policies made necessary by new global challenges;

10. suggests that the development of the budget should also be considered in the light of gradual progress towards integration, based on the implementation of measures conducive to social, economic and territorial cohesion;

11. would like to see the future European budget being able to accommodate Community actions of an experimental nature;

12. firmly believes in the need to adopt a global vision of public intervention and finances, against a general backdrop of budget constraints, at European, national, local and regional level. Means of financing other than pure subsidies should also be included, including the use of fiscal measures, and account should be taken of the contribution of other financial partners, such as the European Investment Bank;

13. considers that the objective of the European budget review is clear: equipping the European Union with financial instruments appropriate to the political, economic, social and territorial tasks and prospects conferred on it by the Treaties and providing it with a simple and transparent system which makes European added value clearly visible to the general public;

14. considers that Europe must seize this opportunity to become a more coherent political entity, to which our fellow citizens will be proud to belong, and which will give them confidence in the future and in their relations with the rest of the world.

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

The regional and local authorities, partners in changing Europe on the ground

15. stresses that the new Treaty represents major progress in terms of multi-level European governance, with the extension of the subsidiarity principle to the local and regional levels and the addition of the territorial dimension of cohesion. This reinforces the link between the Union and its citizens and makes it possible to go forward while respecting identities and diversity;

16. stresses that the partnership between the European institutions, the Member States and the regional and local authorities constitutes a model of governance which is more appropriate to our era, where opportunities and challenges are often local while their repercussions are more widely felt;

17. points out that the design, programming, co-financing and implementation of European policies can gain significantly from the contribution of regional and local authorities, and in particular from their transnational, interinstitutional and intersectoral experience;

18. calls therefore for a credible European budget which makes it possible to adapt the major European objectives to specific local needs;

19. draws attention in this context to the fact that, as a result of a general trend towards devolution and decentralisation in a number of our Member States, the regional and local authorities have taken on more and more powers and responsibilities which are essential for their intervention in the areas which are most directly affected by the major challenges facing Europe;

20. also points out that the local and regional authorities have become leading public financial players on which the European budget can exert a considerable leverage effect in both quantitative and qualitative terms. In 2004 they were already responsible for more than 60 % of total public investment in the enlarged Europe;

21. agrees with the statement contained in the European Commission's Fourth Report on Economic and Social Cohesion that in a large number of Member States responsibility for public investment often lies as much with the local and regional authorities as with central government. They are also responsible for investment in the fields of education, housing, research and development, transport, public infrastructure and environmental protection. This trend has been reinforced over the last decade;

22. points out that, faced with the demand for integrated and flexible implementation of European policies, the regional and local authorities can translate strategic policies agreed at European level into specific action, working together with the European and national institutions;

23. considers that it is often up to the local and regional authorities to coordinate the various national and European policies, by combining the various sectoral policies on a regional and urban scale;

24. stresses the need to achieve the objective of social, economic and territorial cohesion, by assigning to it the necessary financial resources, using as a basis the principles of solidarity, integration, multi-level governance and territorial cooperation already implemented in Europe and drawing on the experience of extended institutional partnership already accumulated;

25. considers that the Treaty's new territorial cohesion objective gives an additional impetus to the process of designing and implementing all the policies of the European Union on a territorial basis. This impels us on the one hand to exploit the diversity of our regions and, on the other hand, to seek solutions to the disparities which persist at different levels of governance in the European Union;

26. calls for the objective of exploiting the full potential of multi-level governance and the contribution of the regional and local authorities to be placed at the heart of the strategy of the European budget review.

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

The leverage effect of the Community budget

27. considers that the European Union is currently going through a period of profound socio-economic change as an enlarged and still growing Community and major global player, and that it has to face major environmental, energy-policy, demographic, technological and security challenges;

28. notes that, in the light of these changes and challenges, the Member States are not always able to provide appropriate responses separately;

29. observes that, in most areas, the 'open method of coordination' has not yet demonstrated its ability to make good these shortcomings, even when used in a complementary way;

30. reiterates that common or Community policies and the 'Community method' are still an effective way of pursuing a collective political objective;

31. is particularly concerned that the possible — total or partial — renationalisation of policies financed by the Union could result in insufficient, ineffective and incoherent responses at EU level, or in a lag between global changes and fragmented developments on the ground;

32. draws attention to the fact that the renationalisation of Community policies would result in the loss of the leverage effect which the Union's financial intervention brings by multiplying the beneficial impact on the financing of the specific measures implemented;

33. points out that renationalisation would also impede the coherent and sustainable development of cross-border activities;

34. reiterates that the leverage effect of the Union's financial intervention goes well beyond financial multiplication, which is traditionally fed by systems of public co-financing; the leverage effect, from the operational and financial point of view, is also felt in the facilitation of public-private partnerships;

35. also stresses that the lever of Community financing supports the strategic orientation of other public investment policies carried out locally. It helps to improve substantially the programming and management capacities of public administrations and private operators and it is an essential part of the process of Community integration and of the public perception of this;

36. calls for an evaluation of added value which takes proper account of the various levels of governance (European, national, regional and local);

37. notes that the added value of European financial intervention may also derive from activities which are not necessarily regarded relevant or priority at national or sub-national level, such as, for example, cross-border cooperation;

38. considers that added value is closely linked to the application of the additionality principle, according to which Community intervention must not be used as a pretext for withdrawing financing at national level. The cohesion policy is an example of this;

39. calls for recognition of the general incentive value of Community budget intervention which, by encouraging the countries and regions lagging furthest behind to catch up with the others and modernise, generates benefits for the whole European socio-economic system.

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

A budget reflecting the values of Europe, responding to major challenges and guaranteeing territorial cohesion

40. recognises that Europe has to face major challenges, such as cohesion and competitiveness against a background of innovation, improvements in the quality and level of human resources and employment, climate change, modernisation of our energy model, demographic imbalances and migration pressures and security in Europe and worldwide;

41. stresses, however, that the Union's mission must not be restricted to responding to new challenges but must also pursue its objective of integration;

42. therefore considers it essential that the Union continue work on completing the internal market in the interests of

sustainable development, fairness and inclusion, drawing on Europe's territorial richness and cultural diversity;

43. calls for the Union, in order to promote its values and achieve its political objectives, to work to make the political life of the Union more democratic, promoting the development of local and regional autonomy and of civil society;

44. points out that the new challenges make it necessary, on the one hand, to get to grips with globalisation and, on the other hand, to ensure territorial cohesion throughout the European Union and at its frontiers;

45. stresses that, putting socio-economic gaps aside, the local and regional authorities of Europe have to face similar challenges, taking account of the specific forms which these take in different areas;

46. recognises that, in this process, which must be based on a system of multi-level governance, the local and regional authorities must also find room for exploiting their unused potential;

47. believes that the new Community budget framework must be able to ensure:

- a. that the least developed European regions as well as specific territorial entities with a permanent geographical handicap are able to consolidate their convergence path, e.g. by improving their competitiveness and thus ensuring more balanced economic, social and territorial development throughout the European Union;
- b. that wherever regions lose eligibility for support, fair and appropriate transitional arrangements are to be in place so that the results which EU cohesion policy has helped to achieve are not jeopardised. The regions concerned should be given equal treatment throughout Europe, irrespective of the Member States in which they are located;
- c. that such regions also receive targeted support for the development of skills, particularly in the field of innovation, as these already play an important part in ensuring EU competitiveness in a globalised world;
- d. that priority is given to a European policy for sustainable regional growth and competitiveness in which all EU regions would participate. Such a policy would enable all local and regional authorities to obtain appropriate strategic guidelines and financial resources for achieving the innovative investment needed to encourage the adaptation of their communities to structural changes in the economy, society and technology, as well as to exploit the specific conditions and potential of their territories in a global context, particularly SMEs, which form the backbone of the European economy;

- e. that a solidarity-based policy can be established to ensure equal access for all to infrastructure and services in the fields of education and vocational qualifications in order to guarantee all our talented people the opportunity to profit from the most advanced research opportunities. Local, regional, national and European authorities need to join forces to bring about a meeting at local level between the worlds of academia, research and business in order to encourage their networking at European and global level;
- f. that freedom of movement, which underpins the European integration project, is given a new impetus by stepping up investment in trans-European transport networks. Policy must be used to promote sustainable transport, links between different transport systems and, in particular, an interconnected trans-European rail network, which would help to reduce CO₂ emissions and travel times and costs for both passengers and goods. There is also a need to foster the development of sustainable sea transport;
- g. that all European territories are equally well-equipped to face climate change, with the resources needed to prevent its causes and to adapt to its consequences, in particular for the benefit of the people and economic players hardest hit. Investment is needed in sustainable development models which clearly take account of local opportunities and constraints;
- h. that the Europe Union is equipped with a Community energy policy that is based on solidarity between Member States, security of supply and sustainability of generation, transport and consumption models and respects the freedom of Member States to choose energy providers. The local and regional levels are best placed to provide innovation and radical changes in consumer behaviour;
- i. that there should be a European response to the management of migration flows, using the best of the solutions already tried out at local and regional level. It is essential that those facing emergencies locally on a day-to-day basis should be able to count on European solidarity and cooperation;
- j. that the local and regional authorities should be recognised for their key role in the implementation of measures for adapting to the effects of demographic change;
- k. that Europe should have modern, competitive, diversified and sustainable agriculture which ensures European food security and preference and maintains its presence in world trade, without omitting the concept of Community preference. Agriculture should be given the necessary support to enable it to become an instrument which improves our quality of life, preserves that of future generations and contributes to the fight against global warming, the preservation of our environment, biodiversity and the quality of our countryside;
- l. that Europe should be able to continue its neighbourhood policy and carry out joint projects with more distant partners. The Union's external relations should be able to count on increasing transnational and devolved contributions from the regional and local authorities. Emphasis should be placed on cross-border cooperation, given its importance as a means of consolidating peace, identifying and establishing joint goals and values, and promoting territorial cohesion.

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

A reactive, effective, efficient and transparent budget

48. considers that in the Lisbon Treaty the European Union potentially has a more effective decision-taking mechanism to determine the structure of the budget;

49. reiterates that a stable multiannual financial framework, covering significantly more than five years, is an essential precondition for ensuring the effectiveness of the European Union's action and for enabling players to plan their investments in the long-term and to carry out territorial development projects;

50. proposes therefore that the programming period of the multiannual financial framework be extended to 10 years, without allocating all the funds immediately. In order to ensure consistency with the European electoral timetable, one possible way forward could be to divide the period in two: funding for the first five years would be fully allocated and there would then be a mid-term review to reassign the amounts kept in reserve, for example 25 %, to new expenditure in order to launch new initiatives or reinforce those policies which have the greatest need;

51. considers that flexibility offers useful ways of maximising the impact of Community spending and that it is necessary in order to be able to adapt to any changes in the situation, but that it also carries the risk, if it is not properly managed, of opening up the way to a multi-speed Europe;

52. considers that targeting mechanisms, such as those tried out for the 2007-2013 cohesion policy, can make it easier to coordinate key policy objectives through different budget headings;

53. calls for a specific percentage of the future Community budget to be allocated to support for experimentation, with this amount being separate from the resources earmarked for backing up general measures;

54. calls for clarification of the control mechanisms and more direct and effective application of sanctions, where necessary;

55. reiterates the need to implement the partnership principle practically during both the planning and implementation phases of the Community budget;

56. points out that the European Commission has launched and developed the idea of tripartite contracts and agreements on objectives, reiterates its proposal that these instruments be revised and, on the basis of the lessons learned from the experimental phase of tripartite agreements launched by the European Commission, proposes the establishment of European territorial pacts;

57. stresses that there can be no real partnership without a financial contribution from each of the parties to the agreement; proposes that the discussion of the question of the financing of European territorial pacts focus on possible synergies between the existing budget headings in the areas concerned and the Structural Funds at European level, and the available budget headings at local, regional and national level, considering the added value this could create; this should be done without establishing an additional Community regional policy financial instrument or calling for additional financial resources for this purpose;

58. considers that the European budget should aim for greater transparency, reinforcing partnership at local level and stepping up communication efforts at local, regional and European level.

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

A new system of financing the Community budget

59. Shares the view that Europe must reorientate its political action framework and financial resources, aiming for a sufficiently long time horizon, between 2020 and 2030;

60. points out that the agreed ceiling on own resources is currently set at 1.24 % of EU gross national income;

61. notes that the EU budget:

- a. has tended to shrink significantly throughout the previous and current programming periods;
- b. will, at the end of the 2007-2013 programming period, fall below the level of 1 % of EU GNP;

62. regrets that the gap between the resources actually available in the budget and the agreed ceiling on own resources continues to grow;

63. draws attention to the fact that calculations of a 'fair return' have progressively trapped the Member States in a

narrow mindset which is far removed from the European ideal and the interests of the people;

64. rejects any exacerbation of this mindset on behalf of the representatives of local and regional authorities. Such authorities are the essential driving force behind wealth creation at national level and which, in a number of cases, are also institutional players directly involved in drawing up national tax systems;

65. considers that a qualitative jump in the system of financing the Community budget has become essential in order to enable the various institutions concerned to share a forward-looking view of the same budget;

66. considers that the new system of financing the Community budget must be based transparency and on own resources which guarantee the principles of fairness, solidarity, stability, visibility, clarity, accuracy and simplicity;

67. asks the institutions with budgetary powers to draw up and implement a new financing formula which has as few exemptions as possible and is aimed at achieving the objectives that have been set out in connection with the promotion of the economic and social model;

68. announces its intent to continue to participate actively in the European discussions and debates on the budget review, e.g. in connection with the examination of the European Commission's review proposal;

69. considers that the review of the EU budget and its sources of financing must be accompanied by a strong and transparent communication policy aimed at the general public and the institutional and socio-economic actors most closely concerned. In this way the people would be better informed as to how their money is being used, which would bring them closer to the institutions responsible for the management of Community programmes and projects. The Committee is willing to engage with the other institutions in this democratic effort.

Brussels, 9 April 2008.

The President
of the Committee of the Regions
Luc VAN DEN BRANDE

Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on ‘Strategy for the outermost regions: Achievements and future prospects’

(2008/C 172/02)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- considers that the strategy for the ORs remains entirely valid and that, far from having run its course should be continued, built on and updated;
- notes that the issues identified by the Commission as challenges for the future of both the EU and the ORs — climate change, demographic change and the management of migratory flows, maritime policy and agriculture — are matters of enormous importance, are priorities for the European and world agendas and have a significant impact on the different EU regions;
- wishes, however, to point out that the Community strategy for the ORs identified by the Commission in its communication of May 2004 was based on a global and coherent approach, aimed at mainstreaming into all Community policies the strategy’s three objectives — improving internal and external accessibility, making the local economic fabric more competitive and strengthening the regions’ integration into the surrounding geographical area;
- calls on the Commission to take the specific features of the ORs into account in the context of the forthcoming CAP Health Check and any future reforms embarked upon, maintaining their exceptions in terms of decoupling and modulation, and ensuring that sufficient budgetary resources are earmarked for their farming activities;
- asks the Commission, as a matter of urgency, to adopt measures to offset the detrimental effects of including air transport in the emissions trading scheme, in order to take account of the specific situation of the ORs;

Rapporteur: Mr Paulino Rivero BAUTE, President of the Autonomous Community of the Canary Islands, (ES/ALDE)

Reference document

Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions — Strategy for the Outermost Regions: Achievements and Future Prospects

COM(2007) 507 final

Policy recommendations

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

1. The seven outermost regions — the Azores, the Canary Islands, Guadeloupe, French Guyana, Madeira, Martinique and Réunion — are full members of the European Union but also find themselves in a unique and special situation quite different to that of other regions within the Community;

2. this situation is characterised by the combination of a series of constant factors, in particular their remoteness, small size and economic dependence on a few products, which are the causes of the isolation and vulnerability afflicting these regions, as recognised in Article 299(2) of the EC Treaty;

3. these factors result in additional costs and present particular obstacles to the growth, convergence and economic sustainability of these regions, which prevents them from participating fully in the dynamics of the internal market, limits the opportunities available to their residents and reduces the competitiveness of their industries;

4. the ORs are also an asset to the European Union. Owing to their geographical location, they could become strategically important platforms on which to develop the role that the European Union wishes to play in the world;

5. these factors fully justify special treatment in the implementation of Community policies, so that the specific needs of these regions can be met and their capacity for locally-generated development increased;

6. support should thus be given to the calls made by the ORs and their national authorities, to consolidate, enrich, build on and update the coherent overall strategy to be implemented for these regions, resulting in a genuine Community policy for the Ors;

General comments of the Committee of the Regions

The specific treatment of the outermost regions: a coherent overall development strategy for these regions: broadly positive but with much still to be done

7. welcomes the fact that, since 1986, the European Commission has taken the initiative of establishing an appropriate framework for implementing Community legislation and

the common policies on these regions on the basis of the Programmes of Options specific to the remote and insular nature of the outermost regions (POSEI);

8. recalls that the adoption of a specific article in the Treaty (Article 299(2)), to take account of the situation of the Union's outermost regions, addressed a series of specific aims, namely:

- to confirm the unique nature of the ORs and the need to mainstream this into all the Union's policies, in particular by maintaining the priority assistance granted under the structural policy for economic and social cohesion;

- to adapt Community policies to the true situation in the regions by implementing specific measures and by laying down special conditions for the application of the Treaty when necessary for the development of these regions;

- to take account of the geographical environment of the Ors in the context of the EU's relations with neighbouring third countries;

9. recalls, therefore, the satisfaction expressed by the Committee at the adoption of the European Commission report of 14 March 2000 on measures to implement Article 299(2) of the Treaty, which sought to ensure a 'quantum leap' in the Community's approach to the Ors and which would launch a crucial new stage in defining a coherent overall policy for the sustainable development of the ORs;

10. recalls that the conclusions of the Seville European Council of June 2002 set out the need to press ahead with the implementation of Article 299(2) of the Treaty and to submit suitable proposals for the special needs of the Ors to be taken into account through the various common policies, in particular transport policy, and in the reform of some of these policies, in particular regional policy; the Committee would also like to take this opportunity to highlight the commitment given by the Commission to submit a new report on these regions based on a global, coherent approach to the special characteristics of these regions and to ways of addressing them;

11. thus expresses its satisfaction at the adoption, on 26 May 2004, of the Commission Communication *A stronger partnership for the outermost regions* and of the Commission report *A stronger partnership strengthened for the outermost regions: assessment and prospects*, on 6 August 2004. The Committee notes the recognition given to the unique situation of the ORs, which fully

justifies special treatment in the various Community policies, although the Commission proposal only partially and, therefore, inadequately fulfils the mandate given at the Seville European Council and the needs expressed by the regions and their States;

12. welcomes the Commission's willingness to present a progress report on its strategy for the ORs and the future prospects for this strategy in its communication entitled *Strategy for the Outermost Regions: Achievements and Future Prospects* and its appended working document assessing the progress of the OR strategy (SEC(2007) 1112);

13. considers that this strategy remains entirely valid and that, far from having run its course, should be continued, built on and updated. Proof of this is the fact that the status of the ORs has been enshrined in Article 299 of the recently adopted Treaty of Lisbon;

Towards the long-term consolidation of the coherent overall development strategy for the outermost regions: expanding and updating this strategy

14. firstly wishes to congratulate the Commission, as the new communication confirms its sensitivity towards the ORs, emphasising the need to recognise the specific characteristics of these regions and giving a commitment to continue the special attention it pays to these regions;

15. congratulates the Commission because, whilst acknowledging the need for the different Community policies to take account of the specific characteristics of the ORs, it also recognises the added value and the opportunities that these regions offer the EU in the global context;

16. notes that the assessment of the measures to build on the 2004 strategy is positive and that the way in which the key policies for developing the ORs have been revised and redefined is broadly satisfactory;

17. points out that the handicaps suffered by the ORs are permanent and common to all of them, regardless of their income levels, and that the problems facing these regions cannot simply be reduced to a matter of income but are rooted in a complex structural situation that profoundly affects the citizens of these regions and the competitiveness of their industries;

18. congratulates the European Commission on its desire to expand on each and every strand of the Community strategy for these regions by implementing additional measures and also on its desire to update and flesh out this strategy, adapting it to future global challenges; calls on the Commission to show the necessary consistency when drawing up proposals in these fields;

19. considers that the measures proposed by the Commission to be developed in the short term to reduce the accessibility deficit and to make the ORs more competitive are, broadly speaking, quite vague or do little more than offer guide-

lines for making more efficient use of the resources already allocated to these regions;

20. notes that the measures put forward for regional integration are more practical and useful, although they are inadequate and need to be complemented by others that help to ensure that the objective of integrating the ORs into their geographical surroundings is achieved in practice;

21. recalls that the ORs face the two-fold challenge of integrating both into the internal market and into their geographical surroundings. Their geo-strategic location also represents enormous potential for the EU and makes these regions key platforms from which the EU can launch its external action in those parts of the world;

22. congratulates the Commission on having started its work on fleshing out the Wider Neighbourhood Action Plan launched in its 2004 communication. The Committee notes, however, that efforts should continue to be made, in particular with regard to ensuring better coordination between the ERDF and the EDF, in order to achieve the aim of integrating the ORs into their geographical surroundings;

23. congratulates the Commission on the information it has given to the ORs as part of preparations for the EU's economic association agreements with the ACP countries. The Committee notes, however, that as negotiations currently stand, these agreements constitute an immediate threat to the ORs and that the opportunities they represent are long-term and even doubtful;

24. regrets that the Commission has not included practical proposals for measures to encourage SMEs in the ORs to invest externally, as it had announced it would, since this would help to better integrate these regions into their geographical surroundings;

25. notes that the issues identified by the Commission as challenges for the future of both the EU and the ORs and on which the Commission has launched a debate in its communication — climate change, demographic change and the management of migratory flows, maritime policy and agriculture — are matters of enormous importance, are priorities for the European and world agendas and have a significant impact on the different EU regions;

26. underlines that the impact might be even greater for the ORs which, due to their specific characteristics, are particularly fragile and vulnerable;

27. wishes, however, to point out that the Community strategy for the ORs identified by the Commission in its communication of May 2004 was based on a global and coherent approach, aimed at mainstreaming into all Community policies the strategy's three objectives — improving internal and external accessibility, making the local economic fabric more competitive and strengthening the regions' integration into the surrounding geographical area;

28. welcomes and agrees with the Commission's comment that the strategic approach adopted in Community action for the ORs is becoming increasingly cross-sectoral and that the contribution of all Community policies is crucial to the development of these regions and to their integration into the internal market;

29. reiterates the relevance and topical importance of the three strategic strands referred to above, which remain the fundamental strands of the Community's OR strategy and also insists that changes to the different Community policies should factor in and adapt to the economic situation at the time;

30. considers that the emergence of these new challenges and priorities on the European agenda and the revision of key policies such as the common agricultural policy, call for an assessment of the impact that these challenges and priorities could have on the three strands of the Community's OR strategy, with a view to providing a detailed analysis that would help to incorporate the specific situation of the ORs into the general discussion on how the EU should respond to these challenges;

31. stresses that the Commission should use the abovementioned method to assess the impact that the four areas identified could have on the three strands of the strategy and regrets, for example, the fact that the Commission has not taken sufficient account of this impact on a matter as fundamental and crucial to the ORs as air transport and has not proposed a more specific approach for these regions in its proposal for a Directive to include aviation activities in the scheme for emission allowance trading;

32. considers that the ORs have much to contribute in these four areas because these issues are of particular concern to them, due to their specific situation;

33. recalls that the ORs have a major maritime dimension, which gives the EU unrivalled opportunities in such spheres as innovation, research, the environment and biodiversity;

34. once again emphasises the need for an overall approach to the phenomenon of increasing migration, which has a particularly significant impact on the ORs, as the 'live' borders of the European Union. In this connection, the Committee wishes to highlight the conclusions of the conference on *The role of regions and cities in managing migratory flows*, held on 30 October 2007 in Adeje (Tenerife, Spain), and in particular, the need for greater involvement by the national and European authorities in managing this phenomenon, in sharing the financial burden and in assessing the impact of migration on the economic and social cohesion of the ORs;

35. with regard to the management of migratory flows, wishes to state that it is convinced of the fundamental importance of consolidating dialogue and cooperation with the countries of origin and transit; also wishes to point out that the local and regional bodies of the Outermost Regions have an impor-

tant role to play in promoting this cooperation, because they can act as platforms for cooperation with neighbouring third countries, to this end, making use of the European Commission programmes; and in particular welcomes the pilot project for joint planning for territorial cooperation between the Outermost Regions and neighbouring third countries;

36. considers that action should be taken on the causes of illegal immigration by establishing an effective policy for legal immigration, combating the informal economy and addressing the problem of unaccompanied immigrant minors at source, by promoting education and employment;

37. agrees with the Commission on the need to address the huge challenges set by demographic pressure in fragmented neighbouring regions and stresses the need to promote, as soon as possible, studies of the implications for land-use planning, the labour market, education and training needs, and public services in these regions, proposing the appropriate measures where necessary;

38. agrees with the Commission that combating climate change and adapting to its effects pose a significant challenge for the ORs, given their geographical situation and their vulnerability; the specific measures required in this area to prevent a detrimental impact on accessibility, the economy and the inhabitants of these regions must be practical and effective;

39. agrees with the Commission that agriculture is a key factor in the economy of the Outermost Regions, which are handicapped by geographical and climatic disadvantages and thus considers that a forward-looking strategy should be drawn up to develop agriculture in these regions and thus tackle the challenges presented by tougher global competition;

40. considers that, because economic and social cohesion policy is the main instrument underpinning Community OR policy, it is particularly important to assess whether the issues opened up for discussion might have an effect on economic and social cohesion in these regions;

41. considers that the results of this assessment could make a useful contribution to the revision of post-2013 Community cohesion policy. They could also contribute to the Green Paper on territorial cohesion that the Commission plans to adopt in 2008;

42. thus takes the view that the new phase in developing the Community's OR strategy, which the Commission will launch when it concludes the consultation process, should incorporate these elements into its strategy in order to develop, build on and update it;

43. considers that the partnership between the ORs, their respective States and the European Commission should continue to play a key role in developing the long-term Community strategy for these regions;

44. wishes to state its firm conviction that the ORs still need the support of all Community policies in order to become more competitive and to continue the process of convergence in terms of economic development and of equal opportunities for their inhabitants in relation to the inhabitants of Europe's other regions;

45. lastly, wishes to express its support for the European Council, which should reaffirm and renew at the highest level the political commitment to the ORs and the need for rapid progress to be made on the Community strategy for these regions;

Conclusions and recommendations

46. urges the Commission to continue building on the 2004 OR strategy, implementing the measures announced in its communication and encouraging greater coherence and closer coordination between the different Community policies to ensure that the new phase of this strategy is truly global and coherent;

47. calls on the Commission to carry out a mid-term review that will help to gauge the strategy's impact on the economic development of the ORs that have abandoned the 'convergence' objective, and the impact of European funds on the actual convergence process for the remaining ORs;

48. asks the Commission, once it has evaluated the impact of the POSEI reforms that it will carry out in 2009, to propose relevant measures to guarantee appropriate support for traditional sectors in the ORs, which are essential to their economic viability;

49. calls on the Commission to take the specific features of the ORs into account in the context of the forthcoming CAP Health Check and any future reforms embarked upon, maintaining their exceptions in terms of decoupling and modulation, and ensuring that sufficient budgetary resources are earmarked for their farming activities;

50. urges the Commission to ensure greater protection of agricultural products from the outermost regions against the strong threats caused by the gradual liberalisation of imports into the EU, by adopting appropriate measures to prevent farming from being undermined in these regions due to the opening-up of the Community market;

51. calls on the Commission, in the forthcoming programming periods, to design specific rural development policies for the ORs and provide sufficient budgetary resources for these;

52. calls on the Commission to take account, without delay, of the specific characteristics of the ORs in current initiatives, with regard to the four issues opened up for discussion in the communication;

53. wishes to point out that the Outermost Regions clearly give the European Union a global maritime dimension and also form genuine natural laboratories for studying marine science. Considers, therefore, that priority measures should be taken swiftly in these regions to protect and enhance this potential;

54. asks the Commission, as a matter of urgency, to adopt measures to offset the detrimental effects of including air transport in the emissions trading scheme, in order to take account of the specific situation of the ORs;

55. reiterates that the ORs are entirely dependent on air transport for links both with the outside world and between the different islands, since there are no alternatives and given that the total quantity of CO₂ emissions on the routes serving the ORs is negligible in relation to the EU's total emissions;

56. calls on the Commission to address the issues of demographic change and managing migratory flows separately. The Committee wishes to make it clear that these are two distinct and complex problems that affect the ORs particularly acutely and that each consequently warrants the utmost attention;

57. requires an urgent and focused approach in order to alleviate the tragic situation caused by the arrival of unaccompanied immigrant minors and national and European authorities are, therefore, asked to shoulder their responsibilities for managing this phenomenon and for sharing the financial burden;

58. asks the Commission to carry out an impact assessment of the aforementioned four issues covered by the discussion of the three strands of the Community OR strategy;

59. calls on the Commission to assess whether these four issues might have an impact on the economic and social cohesion of the ORs, bearing in mind that economic and social cohesion policy is the main instrument underpinning the Community strategy for these regions.

Brussels, 9 April 2008.

The President
of the Committee of the Regions
Luc VAN DEN BRANDE

Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on 'e-Inclusion'

(2008/C 172/03)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- expresses its conviction that a lasting digital divide causes social and economic exclusion. Achieving equal opportunities in terms of digital access and skills is a social necessity; at the same time, it also offers yet untapped economic potential. It is important to use ICT as a new 'social instrument', linking ICT strategies to Community social policy;
- calls upon Member States to step up their efforts on e-Inclusion and to draw up programmes which are specific, of well-defined duration and easy to evaluate. It emphasises participation at local and regional level in national and EU initiatives on e-inclusion and believes that it is important to stress that local and regional authorities draw up specific plans for promoting the information society at local level;
- supports efforts to raise public awareness, to increase the exchange of experience between stakeholders and to ensure active cooperation at local and regional level, involving the ICT industry, public authorities, service providers, user and social organisations, in order to achieve the maximum possible impact;
- emphasises the key role and responsibility of local and regional authorities in helping to ensure affordable broadband access in areas where the market fails, in providing leadership on pilot projects for bridging the e-Accessibility gap, and in developing new approaches of citizen-centred public e-services;
- emphasises the importance of education and training courses which are geared to the needs deriving from the ongoing digital evolution of the whole of society, paying special attention to vulnerable groups such as the elderly, economically inactive, less educated people and those who have not acquired the digital knowledge necessary for the workplace;
- calls upon the Commission to apply indicators on the regional distribution and use of ICT, to provide a continuous source of conclusions which would be useful and necessary for adopting measures to bring about socio-economic and technological convergence between the regions.

Rapporteur: Mr SZALAY (HU/ALDE), Municipal Councillor, Veszprém

Reference document

Communication from the Commission on the 'European i2010 initiative on e-Inclusion — To be part of the information society'

COM (2007) 694 final

Policy recommendations

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS,

1. is committed to promoting and implementing sustainable social and economic cohesion, and therefore welcomes the European Commission's communication on the *European i2010 initiative on e-Inclusion — 'To be part of the information society'*, which promotes e-inclusion and provides it with a new impetus. As in the case of applying, using and developing information and communication technologies (ICT), the absence of such technologies also has a spill over effect, resulting in a constant widening and deepening of the digital divide;

2. welcomes the concise nature and the clarity of the Commission's analysis in its Communication and of the strategic framework for action based on it. The CoR approves the intention to pursue a EU-wide approach to the issue ⁽¹⁾;

3. agrees with the statement that e-inclusion is a key enabler of the goals of economic and social progress of the i2010 initiative ⁽²⁾ to develop an information society for growth and jobs, and thus of the Lisbon agenda;

4. shares the view that investment in ICT provides local and regional players as well as municipalities with an important tool which they can use to deal with equal opportunities related problems in various areas; draws attention to the importance of actively involving regions and local and regional authorities in the preparation of strategies and programmes to obtain and use EU funding, given that they operate at the level which is closest to citizens, deal directly with local concerns and are sensitive to emerging needs;

5. appreciates that the document identifies areas for clear action and specific tasks for the various actors concerned with e-Inclusion — individual users, the ICT industry, service providers, public authorities and NGOs;

6. notes the initiative's support for various proposals for practical measures to develop an equitable information society set out in previous CoR opinions, on subjects such as ageing in

the information society ⁽³⁾, bridging the broadband gap and e-government ⁽⁴⁾, the demographic future of Europe ⁽⁵⁾, ICT research ⁽⁶⁾, and the situation of persons with disabilities ⁽⁷⁾;

7. acknowledges that current indicators point to a risk of not achieving the Riga targets by 2010. Efforts by the Member States remain fragmented and cooperation is lacking. The Committee therefore calls on the Member States to step up their efforts and, in future years, to draw up programmes which are specific, of well-defined duration and easy to evaluate;

8. feels that it is important to emphasise participation at local and regional level in national and EU initiatives on e-inclusion, given that this is the level where the most innovative and appropriately targeted measures to implement a digital society for all are possible;

9. believes that it is important to stress that local and regional authorities draw up specific plans for promoting the Information Society, and digital development at local level, through the implementation of 'Digital Local Agendas';

10. asks the Commission to involve the CoR fully in initiatives to revise the agreed strategy once it has been implemented;

11. wishes to be informed of the results and conclusions of the interim evaluation report on implementation of the i2010 strategy, which should be made known in good time, and to give its views on them;

12. welcomes the European Commission's 'e-Inclusion, be part of it' campaign planned for 2008, which received a substantial initial boost from the CoR's seminar on promoting e-inclusion at local and regional level, held in December 2007 in Lahti, Finland. The CoR would like to play an active part in the 2008 campaign and to help ensure that participation in public consultation is as wide-ranging as possible. In connection with this, it would emphasise its own role as a provider of impetus through the development of campaigns, strategies and programmes at local and regional level;

⁽¹⁾ CdR 252/2005 fin.

⁽²⁾ COM(2005) 229 final.

⁽³⁾ CdR 84/2007 fin.

⁽⁴⁾ CdR 272/2006 fin.

⁽⁵⁾ CdR 341/2006 fin.

⁽⁶⁾ CdR 155/2005 and CdR 150/2005 fin.

⁽⁷⁾ CdR 312/2003 fin.

13. welcomes the holding of a ministerial conference on e-inclusion in late 2008, and the presentation of a European e-Inclusion award at the conference. Stresses its willingness to take part in the work of organising the conference, including selection of candidates for the European e-Inclusion award;

14. expresses its conviction that a lasting digital divide stands in the way of creating and maintaining social cohesion and prosperity, and causes social and economic exclusion; the i2010 initiative will help to improve the quality of life for individuals and society in general;

15. agrees that achieving equal opportunities in terms of digital skills is a social necessity; at the same time, it also offers enormous and as yet untapped economic potential;

Bridging the broadband gap

16. suggests that the Commission pay special attention to the less economically developed regions, so that they can make use of the opportunities for effective convergence offered by ICT and can avoid the risks of exclusion;

17. confirms its commitment to active incorporation of objectives relating to an inclusive information society into regional development plans, and to playing an effective part in the *Regions for economic change* ⁽⁸⁾ networks;

18. agrees with the European Commission that EU structural and rural development funds must support efforts to improve broadband infrastructure and the development and use of electronic services, especially in remote and rural areas, thus reducing the disparities in the development levels of town and country;

19. feels that access to broadband at affordable prices throughout the EU is a basic prerequisite for guaranteeing the quality of public services, promoting competitiveness and productivity in the areas concerned, and enabling extensive development of the information society and knowledge;

20. emphasises the key role and responsibility of local and regional authorities in view of their involvement in providing various services and educational facilities and of their closeness to citizens; they can therefore help to ensure affordable broadband access in areas where market mechanisms are insufficient on their own. Measures by local and regional authorities can serve as examples of user-centred e-government solutions to promote digital literacy and ensure conditions which are conducive to business and research activities in the ICT field;

21. stresses that one of the main focuses of the modernisation objectives of European cohesion policy for 2007-2013 is on making Member States, regions and cities more attractive through accessibility and the provision of services which are of

an adequate standard; feels that developing e-government services supports these efforts, and helps to enrich knowledge by stimulating research and innovation capacities;

22. recalls that ICT are a key factor for improving coordination and cooperation in various fields between local, regional national and European authorities, and between them and European citizens;

Bridging the e-Accessibility gap

23. referring to the Amsterdam Treaty, which prohibits disability-related discrimination, calls for accessible public websites, and notes that much work still needs to be done before this objective can be achieved, judging by the current situation; emphasises that regions and municipalities can help to remedy these problems, not only by purchasing, developing and providing the requisite products and services, but also by encouraging the emergence of an economic environment which offers businesses better opportunities for accessing larger markets; it may thereby be necessary for local and regional authorities, also in large urban areas, to invest in ICT and infrastructure expansion;

24. agrees with the European Commission that local and regional authorities must provide leadership on pilot projects;

25. shares the view that those in charge of developing and managing public services also need new competence building programmes to enable implementation of the measures set out in the action plan;

Tackling the digital competences gap

26. feels that there is still a significant digital competences gap, affecting, in particular, the elderly, economically inactive, less educated people and those who have not acquired the digital knowledge necessary for developing their digital skills in the workplace

27. welcomes the Commission's plan for 2008 to carry out an EU-wide study on digital competences, and to provide guidance on digital competences policy for the most vulnerable groups by the end of 2008;

28. emphasises the importance of education and training courses which are geared to the needs deriving from the ongoing digital evolution of the whole of society, paying special attention to vulnerable groups;

29. agrees that the role and responsibility of authorities at all levels of government in helping to ensure digital skills is crucial, and supports active participation and cooperation by industry and social organisations in achieving this objective;

⁽⁸⁾ COM(2006) 675 final.

Modern public e-services

30. ICT provide a major opportunity to improve public services. The Committee agrees that developing and propagating ICT could provide an opportunity for European cities to consolidate their role as drivers of development, centres of knowledge, and genuine incubators of innovative services and associated knowledge;

31. feels that if the aim is to link development of ICT to consolidation of the role played by European cities, it is above all vital to strengthen the role of local and regional authorities, enabling them to pursue strategies to preserve and promote competitiveness;

32. emphasises the importance of a new approach to providing citizen-centred public e-services, and draws attention to the role of local and regional authorities, which are responsible for developing such an approach. This is a task of particular relevance to remote, outermost and rural regions and island communities where the socio-economic benefits of developing ICT are vital for cohesion and offer the greatest added value;

33. recognises that promoting e-inclusion at local and regional levels can enhance the quality of life, boost participation in local community life, and act as a catalyst for competitiveness, business start ups, and the development of better, more effective and more personalised public and private services;

34. calls for the reinforcement and new impetus to be given to prevent, tackle and resolve network and information security problems in good time, a task which is promoted by the European Network and Information Security Agency (ENISA);

ICT solutions for the socially disadvantaged and groups at risk of exclusion

35. in anticipation of demographic change, feels that it is desirable and necessary to put in place and develop conditions for telemedicine⁽⁹⁾; this can help to improve healthcare and support the elderly in living independently, enjoying an enhanced quality of life and integrating into society, so that it can benefit from their accumulated experience and knowledge. In addition, more widespread use of ICT might help to enhance existing ICT-based health services and facilitate the establishment of new products and services, thereby helping to improve people's overall health, give them better access to public health services, and generate long-term savings in the costs of social security systems;

⁽⁹⁾ CdR 256/2004 fin.

36. taking into account the needs of the market, emphasises the importance of developing and providing products and services which meet the actual needs of those concerned; In view of this, calls for the alignment of divergent regulatory systems and, with regard to technologies, advocates using mainstream solutions;

37. recommends that ICT services for the elderly be given greater emphasis in the *Regions for economic change* initiative;

38. welcomes the emphasis in research programmes (the Seventh Framework Programme, ICT Policy Support Programme) on e-inclusion as a means of addressing ageing and disability issues;

39. continues to point out the need to maintain cultural and linguistic diversity;

40. points out the need for digitalisation of the written European cultural heritage so that it can be preserved for future generations. This effort must be made in all languages, for all regions and for all countries of Europe⁽¹⁰⁾;

Integrating e-Inclusion actions to maximise lasting impact

41. places particular emphasis on close professional cooperation and partnership between stakeholders;

42. stresses that consistent and coordinated dismantling of regulatory, technical and other barriers is crucial if e-Inclusion is to be fully sustainable and effective;

43. emphasises the need for involvement by local and regional authorities not only in the implementation of strategies, but also in their formulation; this will help to ensure close contacts and communication with stakeholders and to make programmes more effective;

44. strongly supports the approach advocated by the European Commission to increasing the volume and quality of ICT research in Europe. Besides research and development, emphasis is also needed on mechanisms to promote the dissemination of specific research findings throughout European industry;

45. is pleased that rich information content, interoperability and security of transactions are priorities for research programmes;

46. agrees with the importance of using ICT as a new 'social instrument'. To this end, ICT strategies must be linked to Community social policy;

⁽¹⁰⁾ CdR 32/2006 fin.

47. emphasises the need to develop fundamental measures in areas which are horizontal priorities to promote equal opportunities (e.g. making public websites universally accessible, developing broadband infrastructure); state intervention is essential here;

48. acknowledges that an EU-level policy on e-Inclusion offers added value (coordination, cooperation, forum, partnership, funding); agrees that there is a need for greater transparency in this field and for increased awareness of social responsibility;

49. is in favour of a continuous and wide-ranging exchange of information, best practices and experience between stakeholders; also supports efforts to raise public awareness and ensure active cooperation at local and regional level; such cooperation should involve the ICT industry, public authorities, public and private service providers, and organisations repre-

senting end users, in order to achieve the maximum possible impact;

50. also feels that it is important to create an EU-wide regional network which could be used to give regions more and better opportunities to participate in collaborative projects.

51. emphasises that e-inclusion is a triple-win situation in that it benefits industry, users and society as a whole;

52. recommends that the Commission promote the formulation and application of indicators for comparative representation and evaluation of the regional distribution and use of ICT, to provide a continuous source of conclusions which would be useful and necessary for adopting measures to bring about socio-economic and technological convergence between the regions.

Brussels, 9 April 2008.

The President
of the Committee of the Regions
Luc VAN DEN BRANDE

Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on 'Green paper on urban transport'

(2008/C 172/04)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- calls for coordinated action to effectively tackle the problems of congestion and pollution affecting all European towns and cities. Such action should be underpinned by an integrated approach to the issues involved, with the EU playing a significant role, while at the same time leaving local and regional authorities with control over the practical solutions to be adopted;
- asks the EU to encourage local and regional authorities to develop long-term mobility plans based on a partnership between towns and cities and their respective conurbations, in order to find solutions adapted to local circumstances (parking at the entrances to cities, development of cleaner transport modes, optimised public transport etc.) These mobility plans could include Clear Zones (i.e. areas with low levels of congestion and pollution), thus also giving priority to investment to support them;
- recognising the quantum of investment funding needed, proposes that these mobility plans be underpinned by broad-based partnerships, also involving the private sector, and urges the EU, working in collaboration with the EIB, to develop innovative financial instruments to fund the requisite infrastructure and cleaner technology;
- calls for an EU-level reporting mechanism to be established in order to report back on progress. This process should be started with an EU-funded benchmark study looking at cities across the EU and their approaches to meeting these challenges.

Rapporteur: Councillor Sir Albert BORE, Member of Birmingham City Council, (UK/PES)

Reference document

Green Paper: Towards a New Culture for Urban Mobility

COM(2007) 551 final

Policy recommendations

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

Key Messages

1. welcomes the EU's commitment to continuing its efforts to raise the competitiveness of the European economy as well as to tackling sustainability and climate change. These key issues as formalised in the Lisbon Agenda, the Gothenburg Agreement and the Climate Change Action Plan are vital for the future of the Union. The CoR's political priorities recognise the vital importance of competitiveness for economic growth, particularly in urban centres and, as stated in the Lisbon objectives, together with its contribution to territorial cohesion;
2. notes that the division of powers between local, regional and national authorities varies across Member States. It is important that the measures laid down by the Commission in the forthcoming action plan do not presuppose certain organisational solutions;
3. underlines that these issues of growth and environment are being faced by cities on a daily basis. However, increasing environmental problems will hinder this growth. Cities and urban areas offer the potential for raising competitiveness and tackling climate change. In order to do this, cities and major urban areas must take measure to improve accessibility and solve the environmental issues. The opportunity of significantly decoupling growth from negative climate change impacts can first of all be realised in city regions, as it is above all in dense urban areas that alternative modes of travel become quickly viable;
4. calls for coordinated action in order to effectively tackle the significant problems of transportation derived congestion and environmental issues affecting cities to achieve decarbonisation of road transport by 2050. There have been individual cities where action has been successful. A more comprehensive strategy is needed respecting the subsidiarity and proportionality principles;
5. recognises the fundamental role that local and regional authorities play in the planning and implementation of urban transport policy and concurs with the Commission that rethinking urban mobility involves organising 'co-modality' between all public and private modes of transport with a view to a shift towards environmentally friendly modes of transport;
6. The EU should pursue an integrated policy targeted at the environment, spatial planning and mobility, to which the following EU-level actions are key:
 1. To improve air quality and reduce noise pollution the EU must pursue a more stringent policy for tackling at source the problems associated with traffic. Technological improvements and cleaner fuels will lead to cleaner, quieter and more economical vehicles.
 2. In the interests of traffic safety, the EU must encourage advances in vehicle technology.
 3. The EU must promote the development of the technologies needed to underpin regional and local pricing policies.
 4. The EU must promote links between urban areas by high-speed train and tram lines and networks.
 5. The EU should push for uniform road signs for environmental zones, while leaving towns with as much freedom as possible to introduce environmental zoning.
 6. The EU should promote the construction of non-motorised traffic routes, thus making it safe to walk, cycle or use other environmentally friendly forms of transport.
 7. asks the EU to encourage the regions and especially the cities to tackle the problems by developing comprehensive long-term mobility plans to deal with congestion and mitigate climate change by developing alternative methods of transport and providing choice to travellers, with a view to redressing the balance of modalities towards more sustainable modes. Within these plans, Clear Zones, i.e. newly designated areas with low levels of pollution and congestion (as distinct from the Green Zones which are areas with low levels of pollution only) should be encouraged through the award of Clear Zone status and investment to support these prioritised;
 8. recognises that accessing the quantum of investment funding needed to support such Clear Zones may prove challenging for some Member States. There is a role for the EU, working in close collaboration with the European Investment Bank, to develop innovative financial instruments capable of funding the necessary sustainable mobility infrastructure and investment into low carbon vehicles. This could be taken forward as an extension of the CIVITAS programme, or following the conclusion of CIVITAS in 2009, be incorporated within a successor EU funded programme;

9. calls for an EU-level mechanism to be established in order to report-back on progress in the field of urban transport and also on tried and tested procedures which can serve as an example for others. This process should be started with an EU-funded benchmark study looking at cities across the EU and their approaches to congestion reduction, environmental enhancements and the provision of more sustainable modes of transportation. The annual progress report on the Lisbon goals given at the annual Spring Councils should provide a timetable for reporting back;

10. recommends that the Commission issues guidelines in the form of common standards with regard to methodologies for calculating the full costs and benefits of transport modes (including externalities such as congestion, environmental damage, social inclusion, and effects on employment and the social viability of city centres) as the basis for promoting co-modality; and also the establishment of consumer friendly eco-standards for vehicles which reflect whole-life environmental costs;

11. urges the Commission to support and award networks of best practice (with which the CoR should be associated) in order to widen their take-up in areas such as multi-element packages which provide an alternative to car ownership and the active use thereof and through the expansion of initiatives such as Demonstration Cities showcasing innovative pricing mechanisms and the establishment of Clear Zones;

12. encourages the Commission to capitalise on the achievements of award schemes, where it is recognised that there is a need to fund the showcasing of the expertise gained, by using awards as a marketing tool for the city regions concerned and a target for other city regions to aspire to;

13. calls for the EU to use best-practice and model cities to illustrate, both within Europe and beyond, the efforts it is making to search for and implement innovative and complex solutions to our current problems and opportunities and calls for Mobility Plans to be developed by city regions over at least a 20-year horizon. The plans could cover funding needs, new technologies to be explored and piloted, infrastructure needs, innovative procurement to stimulate innovation etc. With the plan led approach to all EU cities through a significantly expanded Civitas or possibly through a new programme and with both the exemplar cities and demonstration cities, the EU could showcase within Europe and globally how it is seeking and implementing innovative and challenging solutions to our current problems and our current opportunities;

14. calls on the authorities at all levels of government and administration to encourage actions to facilitate joint procurement (public-public or public-private) to promote Clear Zones (where such joint procurement is not contrary to the wider public interest. Joint Procurement has the ability to create a market for manufacturers investing in new technologies and to

stimulate innovation. The EU could support this action by promoting best practice networks for green procurement and for stimulating innovation in the transport technology field, drawn from regions and localities actively involved in producing, researching and supporting developments in transportation technologies. These two actions would stimulate both demand and supply of new technologies for the benefit of cities;

15. stresses that the role of the private sector in the future provision of alternative transport modes and the decoupling of improved accessibility from increase in vehicle kilometrage needs to be more fully understood and therefore as part of the above mentioned EU-wide benchmarking study, an element should look at the role of private finance and companies in current innovative solutions and what incentives can be given to maximise their effective role;

16. points out that the Green Paper is timely as additional resources at all levels will be necessary to tackle the problems. The EU already spends significant resources on mobility and transport issues through TEN -T and also importantly for urban areas through the Convergence Regions under the structural funds. Cities are an important and integral component of transport networks since they are hubs where different modes come together and where journeys usually start and end. For this reason transport in cities must be given the same attention as transport networks. We must look to the longer term and long-term plans must also be met. Rather than waiting for problems to become acute, towns and regions should adopt a proactive approach. Therefore at all levels when resources are allocated, the aim should be not only to correct problems that have already arisen, but also to earmark extra resources for towns and regions that tackle potential problems at an early stage;

17. stresses the importance of encouraging urban mobility actions under the new Operational programmes for Convergence regions. Where this occurs the cities and regions in question will need to show that their EU funded actions are seeking to tackle the key issues;

Towards Free-Flowing Towns and Cities

Concerning Question 1 — on whether a 'labelling' scheme should be envisaged to recognise the efforts of pioneering cities to combat congestion and improve living conditions:

18. The EU could combine labelling along the lines of the EU-wide 'Blue Flag scheme', awarded on the basis of specific indicators, with the introduction of a 'Clear Zone Scheme' — an area with low levels of pollution and congestion. Projects could be funded in 'Demonstration Cities' covering a range of population sizes and historical legacies, possibly to link with the aspiration to extend CIVITAS to larger scale actions (See Question 21).

19. An annual report on the implementation of best practices could accompany the annual progress report on the urban goals submitted each year to the Spring Council.

Concerning Question 2 — on measures which could be taken to promote walking and cycling as real alternatives to the car:

20. The only way to promote walking and cycling as genuine alternatives to driving is to systematically create or expand comprehensive, high-quality and unobstructed networks of foot-paths and cycle paths, which local authorities would be responsible for to help ensure that much wider use is made of the bicycle as a transport mode within the EU than is currently the case. The best way for this to happen is to put the 'compact city' concept into practice. A functional approach to the planning of new settlements can help deep down the distances to be covered by pedestrians and cyclists. The development of urban Clear Zones encompassing stringent measures to tackle congestion and air pollution would significantly improve the environment for walking and cycling. There are many already existing examples of good practice with regard to promotional campaigns in schools and communities, and there is a role for the EU in supporting professional networks, showcasing exemplars and celebrating success. Europe should build on the success of the TAPESTRY⁽¹⁾ programme.

Concerning Question 3 — on what could be done to promote a modal shift towards sustainable transport modes in cities:

21. Achieving modal shift requires an integrated approach to improving journey experience for sustainable modes, making them more attractive whilst making unsustainable modes less attractive. Planning measures in the context of action plans to reduce air and noise pollution and transport (development) plans also requires an integrated approach. The forthcoming revision of the relevant EU directives should insert subsidiarity and take an integrated approach to planning into account, thus ensuring legal certainty for local authorities where it is practised. Particularly in the field of state aid and public contracts, failure to differentiate in applying Community law often has undesirable and unpredictable effects. Whether transport services are directly provided by a local authority or contracted out must in future still be decided at local and regional level.

Concerning Question 4 — on how the use of clean and energy efficient technologies in urban transport could be further increased:

22. The suggestions put forward in the Green Paper to continue to set increasingly more demanding targets through

(¹) TAPESTRY — Travel Awareness, Publicity and Education Supporting a Sustainable Transport Strategy in Europe. TAPESTRY was a three year research and demonstration project funded by the European Commission (DG Energy and Transport) under the 5th RTD Framework Programme.

progressively more restrictive emissions standards, encouraging the widespread establishment of Urban Green Zones with common standards, are supported. There may also be potential for European targets, perhaps linked to contribution rebates, tied to proportions of public sector procurement meeting an agreed 'eco-rating'. There is also the potential to encourage commitment to 'eco-standard' procurement by large private sector entities using the EU's various business networks.

Concerning Question 6 — on whether criteria or guidance should be set out for the definition of Green Zones and their restriction measures, how best to ensure compatibility with free circulation and on whether there is an issue of cross border enforcement of local rules governing green zones:

23. EU guidelines but not guidance on the definition of Green Zones would be a helpful contribution to clarity and consistency, especially to establish generally recognised categories of vehicles based upon energy consumption and emissions ratings. There may be a need for a Europe-wide website which brings data for cities within the EU together in a standard format and sign posts specific information for the urban area concerned. Standard marking of cars entering green zones to indicate pollution levels would be beneficial both to drivers and to those implementing green zones in urban areas, provided that the same identification features are used for all cars throughout Europe.

24. European-wide guidelines are needed on highway code matters concerning the environment and the more vulnerable road users. Member States should be encouraged to incorporate these guidelines in to their national highway codes, thus ensuring greater clarity and uniformity across the Union.

25. Many towns and regions are now introducing their own environmental zoning, using their own road signs. To avoid confusing international hauliers and tourists, the EU should develop uniform traffic signs. Local and regional authorities should have as much freedom as possible to introduce environmental zoning.

26. Cross border enforcement of local rules is already possible (Council Framework Decision 2005/214/JHA of 24 February 2005 on the application of the principle of mutual recognition to financial penalties).

27. The CoR is concerned that the European Commission — without awaiting the outcome of the consultation — in December submitted a completely revised proposal on the promotion of clean and energy efficient road transport vehicles, (COM(2007) 817 final).

Concerning question 5 — on how joint green procurement could be promoted:

28. Further benefits could be obtained from the STEER⁽²⁾ programme linking this to new European eco-standards based on the principles of life-time social costs outlined in the Green Paper. At the EU level, we could promote partnership working with suppliers, disseminating the concepts of life-time costings through supplier networks, and promoting common standards and acceptances, and the translation of pertinent academic research into innovative, commercially-viable products.

Concerning Question 7 — on how eco-driving could be further promoted:

29. The social and financial value of eco-driving could be promoted and included in driving lessons. What is at issue here is a change in driving behaviour and habits. These skills could be and incorporated into national driving tests by establishing standards of good practice and care. There could be a role for the EU in sharing best practice in campaign messages and use of the marketing mix, along the lines of the EU's successful TAPESTRY initiative. Another way of encouraging eco-driving is to promote in-car equipment to measure fuel consumption.

Towards Smarter Urban Transport

Concerning Question 8 — on whether better information services for travellers should be developed and promoted:

30. Better information services for travellers both prior to and during journeys can make significant contributions to sustainability. European cities already have many examples of good practice. There is a role at the EU level in encouraging the expansion and inter-compatibility of existing systems through the establishment of common systems and common symbols. There is a role in promoting exemplar systems. The Galileo satellite navigation system is of crucial importance in this respect.

31. Information services for collective transport users need to be developed and improved. Real-time information and information on disruptions posted on the internet or sent to mobile telephones and tailored to the individual traveller's needs will do much to make collective transport more attractive and more competitive vis-à-vis less sustainable transport modes. Galileo will play a key role in the development of new information services. It is important therefore that the EU take responsibility for ensuring that Galileo is expanded as quickly as possible.

⁽²⁾ STEER is the vertical action of the European Intelligent Energy Programme which focuses on alternative vehicles and fuels, policy measures for the efficient use of energy in transport and strengthening the knowledge of local energy agencies in the transport field.

32. Support should be given in the first instance to projects for setting up information services which reinforce the network effect of public transport — i.e. information systems that give comprehensive information on connections and the situation in the entire network of the integrated transport system of a conurbation and beyond (region, canton, state).

Concerning Question 9 — on whether further actions are needed to ensure standardisation of interfaces and interoperability of ITS applications in towns and cities, and on which applications should take priority when actions are taken:

33. Actions to date to ensure interoperability have been helpful in establishing technical standards, and there is an ongoing role for the EU in this area. More could be done in encouraging common approaches by groups of cities and between Member States, for example with systems for online monitoring and information to prevent serious traffic congestion.

34. As well as for systems informing transport users, common systems should be developed as far as possible at European level to provide, for example, BACT⁽³⁾ monitoring systems to provide statistics for transport and planning purposes.

Towards Accessible Urban Transport

Concerning Question 11 — on how the quality of collective transport in European towns and cities can be increased:

35. The EU should encourage the development of equipment and infrastructure to common standards, underpinning by research and development aimed at continuous improvement of service quality. Demand responsiveness could be encouraged by linking public funding to increased levels of customer satisfaction.

36. Measures to reflect direct and indirect costs will also help in this regard by balancing the factors in the mode choice decision.

Concerning Question 12 — on whether the development of dedicated lanes for collective transport should be encouraged:

37. We believe that dedicated lanes for collective transport in conjunction with ITS should be encouraged. There is a role for the EU in supporting projects to create dedicated bus and trolleybus lanes as well as tram lines, either uniquely for them or in a separate corridor shared with pedestrian and cycle paths and developing common signing and designations. Dedicated lanes may be a good way of securing a more unimpeded traffic flow for collective transport. Where this involves cutting the number of lanes open to cars, it can also lead to a reduction in car numbers and increased congestion for those cars that do remain on the road. It may sometimes be difficult to secure understanding for such measures and to implement them in practice.

⁽³⁾ BACT stands for Best Available Control Technology.

The EU and the national level can support local decision-makers in that regard through information and awareness-raising. Other options include the development of internet-based car-pooling services and of systems whereby car-pools of at least three people would be allowed to use the collective transport lanes at certain times of the day.

Concerning Question 13 — on whether there is a need to introduce a European charter on the rights and obligations for passengers using collective transport:

38. We would support an extension to the EU Charter on fundamental rights concerning the rights and obligations of passengers using collective transport to improve accessibility, particularly for the mobility impaired.

Concerning Question 14 — on what measures could be undertaken to better integrate passenger and freight transport in research and urban mobility planning:

39. Integration could be incentivised through funding criteria for research and demonstration projects, particularly relating to the adoption of energy efficient, environmentally friendly vehicles suited to the urban environment. The setting up of specific urban emission reduction criteria, linked to the labelling designations referred to in paragraph 18 (Question 1), could be considered.

Concerning Question 15 — on how better co-ordination between urban and interurban transport and land use planning can be achieved, and what type of organisational structure could be appropriate:

40. We support the use of voluntarily drawn up mobility plans integrating wider metropolitan conurbations. It is important that appropriate diversion measures are put in place to remove heavy goods traffic from town and city centres. There is no single optimal solution, but conurbations should develop local solutions geared to delivering outcomes prescribed and incentivised by the EU. These plans could form the basis of contractual Mobility Agreements between major stakeholder partners.

41. The CoR believes that, in order to relieve congestion on access routes to large cities, and working in cooperation with municipalities in surrounding areas and, where appropriate, metropolitan transport authorities, major interchanges should be constructed at the entrances to cities, with sufficient available parking (park and ride facilities) to allow those driving into the city to leave their cars and use public transport, without any significant time loss. We think it makes sense to support the creation of integrated transport systems, together with consortia of local authorities or similar bodies to manage them, that respect the natural boundaries of conurbations and movement of people.

42. Land use at all levels — municipal and higher levels of government — and mobility planning should go hand in hand so as to make initiatives in both areas as effective as possible from an environmental, energy and operational perspective as the two areas are closely interlinked.

Towards Safe and Secure Urban Transport

Concerning Question 16 — on what further actions should be undertaken to help cities and towns meet their road safety and personal security challenges in urban transport:

43. Pedestrians and cyclists are particularly vulnerable in urban areas, and ongoing improvements to road safety are imperative if these modes are to be encouraged. Further actions might include encouraging demonstration projects featuring innovative ways of affording pedestrians and cyclists priority over motorised transport, and encourage early adoption of safety enhancing technology. Local authorities should be encouraged to enter into voluntary joint ventures with private industry in order to solve these problems. Numerous examples of best practice solutions already exist.

Concerning Question 17 — on how operators and citizens can be better informed on the potential of advanced infrastructure management and vehicle technologies for safety:

44. We consider that well-promoted demonstration projects are the best mechanism for conveying the potential of these developments. We commend the work of the European Road Safety Observatory in publicising new developments in this area and draw attention to the existing examples of best practice in European regions.

Concerning Question 18 — on whether automatic radar devices adapted to the urban environment should be developed, and whether their use should be promoted:

45. The EU should promote development of new technology. A valid role for the EU may be to promote further trials across Europe to inform a greater understanding of the costs and benefits involved.

Creating a New Urban Mobility Culture

Concerning Question 20 — on whether all stakeholders should work together in developing a new mobility culture in Europe; and whether a European Observatory on Urban Mobility based on the model of the European Road Safety Observatory could be a useful initiative to support this co-operation:

46. We believe that this would be a useful model to follow, given Europe's success in reducing accident rates. The establishment of a European Observatory on Urban Mobility can only be supported if it offers true added value. We also believe that the model of cascading targets linked to funding has made a significant contribution to the progress made in accident reduction. A European Observatory on Urban Mobility could assist with the promotion of good practice, the award of Clear Zone status and an annual EU reporting mechanism linked to the Spring Councils.

Financial Resources

Concerning Question 21 — on how existing financial instruments such as the structural and cohesion funds could be better used in a coherent way to support integrated and sustainable transport:

47. There are already significant resources spent on mobility actions through various programmes, most notably through the TEN-T programme, in the Structural Funds under the Convergence Regions programmes and through Civitas. It is clear that in Convergence regions, where EU resources are being delivered in an urban context, they should be expected to fit in with the aims of this Green Paper. The actions financed under the Convergence programmes should seek to establish a balanced modality approach based on their respective pollution and climate impacts. These Convergence resources and those under the other programmes are not sufficient to stimulate the necessary radical change that is needed across Europe. In addition, these funds are not generally focused on the areas of real need, those large urban areas under pressure from growth where competitiveness is being hampered by environmental issues. The Green Paper illustrates the need for action. There is an EU role — in a significantly extended 'Civitas Plus Plus' approach or in a totally new programme, either of which should be focussed on stimulating the delivery of this radical change. These funds should support the development and financing of Clear Zones and the switch to a more balanced modality approach as stated in this opinion. It would also help draw in funds from the private sector and funds from national programmes.

Concerning Question 23 — on how targeted research activities could help more in integrating urban constraints and urban traffic development:

48. The key issues are systems to manage traffic and control activity, in conjunction with development of housing densities along strategic public transport corridors. In particular, urban development must dovetail with the development of the communication infrastructure network and other infrastructure

networks to avoid the need to integrate them later on. The main benefit will be achievement of the critical demand threshold for setting up and running public transport services.

Concerning Question 24 — on whether towns and cities should be encouraged to use urban charging; whether there is a need for a general framework and/or guidance for urban charging; whether revenues should be earmarked to improve collective urban transport and whether external costs should be internalised:

49. Urban charging could be a tool open to urban authorities. It would be helpful for the EU to encourage the development of best practice models, and learning from those schemes already established. A general framework and/or guidance could be of benefit. Standardisation would be desirable but difficult to achieve. Local and regional authorities must have effective instruments available to them if they are to solve congestion and environmental problems. Congestion charges can be a highly effective tool here. This is why local and regional authorities must be able to decide for themselves on the introduction of such charges and on how the revenue raised is used. In many Member States, however, they are unable to do so, since such matters are decided at national level. It would be helpful for the EU to encourage the development of best practice models, and learning from those schemes already established. In the CoR's view, the Commission can by explaining and raising awareness do a lot to facilitate the introduction of congestion charges by local and regional decision-makers.

Concerning Question 25 — on what added value, in the longer term, targeted European support for financing lean and energy efficient urban transport could bring:

50. Targeted support could result in improved performance against carbon reduction targets, new technology applications being rolled out faster and wider dissemination and uptake of best practice. In turn, this could reduce the economic cost of congestion to the EU and provide leadership in the global market for sustainable development technologies and methodologies, and in reconciling economic growth with sustainable urban transport.

51. Further added value could be generated by the EU by using Mobility Agreements to facilitate the establishment of strong stakeholder alliances capable of bearing the risk associated with the substantive levels of commercial borrowing needed to bring forward sustainable transport infrastructure on a large scale. Close working with the EIB will be needed to deliver this outcome.

Brussels, 9 April 2008.

The President
of the Committee of the Regions
Luc VAN DEN BRANDE

Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on 'The future common European asylum system'

(2008/C 172/05)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- underlines that local and regional authorities will be the first to implement European legislation on a common European asylum system and notes that a common asylum system which requires each Member State to take responsibility in a spirit of mutual support will facilitate the work of local and regional authorities;
- recommends that a consultation mechanism be set up, where necessary, at national level bringing together central, regional and local institutions with a view to achieving integrated, multilevel governance;
- recommends that a European regulation be drawn up governing the following aspects between Member States: mutual recognition of protection once granted; procedures for transfer and uniform status covering refugees and beneficiaries of secondary protection;
- considers that extending the provisions of Directive 2003/109/EC to those receiving a form of international protection is an essential step in averting the risk of discrimination, and constitutes an instrument for completing the Community process of harmonisation in the field of asylum;
- recommends providing common guidelines on how, with the broad involvement of local bodies, to help asylum seekers and refugees to gain access to social, health and housing services, and introducing programmes to involve them in the local community; laying down clear and specific standards for: recognising educational qualifications; vocational retraining; and skills certification; providing funding to support labour and/or management potentialities among refugees;
- considers that fostering successful integration of refugees requires that they feel they have a part to play in the neighbourhoods, towns, Member State and European Union in which they live. Involvement in local and regional political life, based on active and passive voting rights in local elections, represents a powerful and real value, going beyond the purely symbolic;
- recommends provision of funding and tendering procedures to develop national and local operators' skills. There should be a special emphasis on psychosocial wellbeing, and the identification and handling of vulnerable cases;

Rapporteur: Mr Antonio SANTARELLA (IT/UEN-AE), Mayor of Candela

Reference documents

Communication from the Commission: Green Paper on the future Common European Asylum System

COM(2007) 301 final

Proposal for a Council Directive amending Directive 2003/109/EC to extend its scope to beneficiaries of international protection

COM(2007) 298 final

Policy recommendations

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

The role of local and regional authorities

1. underlines that local and regional authorities will be the first to implement European legislation on a common European asylum system. Every day they receive mixed flows of migrants, among whom are asylum seekers, and must often provide medical and psychological help to people who have suffered physical and mental abuse, including torture. These services, not normally provided by local and regional authorities or their agencies, require special support if suitable skills and structures are to be implemented;

2. notes that a common asylum system which requires each Member State to take responsibility in a spirit of mutual support will facilitate the work of local and regional authorities. At the moment, local and regional authorities bear too much responsibility in certain Member States, partly because a common asylum system does not exist;

3. draws attention to the fact that, in the absence of reception and integration projects and stable employment, even recognised asylum seekers may fall victim to exploitation and crime, creating a possible source of problems in terms of security and social cohesion. The risk and likelihood of falling into a situation of exploitation or crime can be lessened if it is possible to take paid work during the asylum application period;

4. recommends that a system of networks of local authorities be set up in each Member State, to integrate refugees in an informed way, by means of local projects promoted by these authorities. In those Member States which have tried such service networks, working through local commissions, the processing of asylum requests has been accelerated and the living conditions of asylum seekers have been improved. This has facilitated their integration into local host communities, with significant benefits for security and quality of life;

5. recommends, therefore, that the various European, national, regional and local resources complement one another and provide real support for such service networks in all the Member States, in order to deal with the problems of integrating asylum seekers and refugees;

6. recommends that a consultation mechanism be set up, where necessary, at national level bringing together central,

regional and local institutions with a view to achieving integrated, multilevel governance;

7. recommends that participation in the network system should be voluntary, and advocates partnerships to share decision-making and responsibilities among the various institutional, public and private actors at local level, enabling reception and integration measures to be planned on the basis of existing local potential. These partnerships can help build up know-how and, consequently, increase the informed involvement of actors thus far unconnected with the asylum sector, or reluctant to assume responsibilities in this sector;

8. emphasises that such a system can prompt institutions, businesses, trade unions, third sector associations, training establishments, universities and, of course, local and regional authorities to find their place within the system. This would bring the issue to the attention of society as a whole, enabling each stakeholder to play their own role, which would naturally help to alleviate or remove any tensions;

Legislative instruments

Processing of asylum applications

9. considers that in applying the procedure for granting international protection, the Union faces two separate demands, which should not be managed in opposition to each other:

— effective protection for asylum seekers, and;

— control of external borders;

10. proposes that the procedures for identification, admission onto EU territory, and access to the asylum procedure should be harmonised at EU level;

11. calls for common procedures to be designed and tested for identifying migrants, which can be applied within clear time limits with specific and clear measures, in compliance with fundamental human rights and human dignity;

12. regarding the procedures for examining applications for international protection, holds it to be crucial that common instruments are identified that can guarantee uniform assessment in each of the Member States, enabling the provisions of European directives (2005/85/EC in particular) to be effectively put into practice;

13. also proposes regular opportunities for training, refresher courses and monitoring, as well as forums for bodies responsible for examining applications for international protection to meet and exchange and compare experiences;

14. recommends that a programme of training and refresher courses be prepared for border police forces and border guard units;

15. recommends the provision of, and support for, help and guidance centres for foreign citizens seeking international protection at border entry points (airports, sea ports, border posts) and arrival areas;

Reception conditions for asylum seekers

16. feels that, concerning the detention of asylum seekers, it is worth restating that they may not be held solely for the purposes of examining their cases. Any restrictions on the freedom of movement must not extend beyond the time required for identification procedures, and these should be further harmonised;

17. calls for the European Union to adopt a charter governing the status of applicants for international protection whose freedom of movement is curtailed;

18. believes that secondary movements within the European Union are chiefly determined by the economic situation of Member States and the approach taken to applicants for asylum;

19. therefore considers it necessary to carry out research compiling experiences in all the Member States over recent years, particularly concerning entry into employment, housing and society;

20. intends to supplement the present opinion with an appendix setting out best practices in these areas, that have been introduced in cooperation with European local and regional authorities;

21. with regard to the services provided by local and regional authorities, urges a shift away from the 'material assistance' concept towards that of 'integrated reception' (including personal assistance and guidance and steps towards socio-economic integration);

Granting of protection

22. recalls that the concept of international protection is still closely tied to the strict definition of refugee status, as enshrined in Article 1 of the Geneva Convention, whereas the international scene has been transformed since the 1950s, as has the profile of those seeking protection. Increasingly, they are not fleeing personal persecution but situations of widespread violence and armed conflict, and environmental and living conditions play an increasingly important part;

23. notes that, in the light of the above, the provisions of Directive No 2004/83/EC describing and harmonising the subsidiary protection to be granted to those who do not qualify for refugee status under the terms of the Geneva Convention are to be welcomed. This protection should be seen as complementary to refugee status, and not as an inferior or second-class form of it;

24. therefore appreciates the efforts made by the European Commission to define the position of beneficiaries of international protection, incorporating and expanding upon the provisions of the Geneva Convention;

25. emphasises that this reading of Community provisions enables two forms of international protection (refugee and subsidiary) to be outlined, broadening the types of beneficiary of the protection;

26. insists that both types of international protection granted by one Member State should be recognised in all the other EU Member States;

27. recommends that allowance be made for responsibility to be transferred between Member States when a beneficiary of international protection transfers their place of residence from one Member State to another, in this way guaranteeing freedom of movement (albeit directly controlled and monitored) within EU territory;

28. considers that the European Union must adopt instruments (legislative and operational) enabling it to intervene in cases where removal from EU territory is not possible;

Cross-cutting issues

Appropriate response to situations of vulnerability

29. considers that individuals should be deemed to be vulnerable on the basis of their specific circumstances and experiences; this does not apply to certain types of individual necessarily requiring specific reception and care measures (unaccompanied minors, women who are travelling with or following husbands or family, or are themselves refugees, people with physical or mental disabilities), whose particular situation has to be taken into account accordingly in procedures and decision-making practices (e.g. respect for the right to a private and family life or family reunification);

30. draws attention to the fact that — especially where victims of torture are concerned — support and rehabilitation measures may be inadequate when they:

- are not bolstered by specific actions aimed at ensuring reception, protection and socio-economic integration;
- are implemented by specific structures, in the absence of dialogue with national and local welfare bodies, or with other programmes and services also aimed at asylum seekers and refugees;

31. therefore recommends that a broad-ranging and structured debate, designed to outline common standards for identifying individual cases of vulnerability, form part of the process of building a common asylum system;

32. proposes that the instruments to be devised by the European Union to support the work of the various players involved in the asylum system (guidelines, manuals, training programmes, etc.) should include specific guidelines and indicators to help detect cases of vulnerability and facilitate their handling;

33. considers it essential, in order to identify and provide care for vulnerable individuals, to boost the capacities of local welfare services. To this end, it recommends that the European Union takes steps either by funding specific capacity-building programmes, or by promoting training and refresher courses to the Member States;

Integration

34. underlines that integration is a process whose primary objective is for refugees to attain a degree of autonomy. The integration process takes place through a number of parallel insertion levels (employment, housing, social) and following different thresholds (local knowledge, access to services, participation);

35. considers it essential, in recording the difficulties that may be experienced by second-generation migrants in different parts of Europe vis-à-vis integration policies, that refugees (in this particular case) should not always be seen as 'foreigners' or 'guests', and that, based on recognition of and respect for the values and the law of the host country, there should be no move to distance them from their cultures of origin;

36. considers that fostering successful integration of refugees requires that they feel they have a part to play in the neighbourhoods, towns, Member State and European Union in which they live. Involvement in local and regional political life, based on active and passive voting rights in local elections, represents a powerful and real value, going beyond the purely symbolic;

37. believes that developing this feeling of belonging starts at school, and that reception and integration programmes for refugee pupils and students can be developed as an integral part of all school and university systems in the Member States;

38. recommends:

- providing common guidelines on how, with the broad involvement of local bodies, to help asylum seekers and refugees to gain access to social, health and housing services, and introducing programmes to involve them in the local community,

- laying down clear and specific standards for: recognising educational qualifications; vocational retraining; and skills certification,

- providing funding to support labour and/or management potentialities among refugees, in part by fostering cooperation with pre-existing local businesses;

Implementation — accompanying measures

39. proposes that rules be laid down governing common procedures for identifying third country citizens applying for international protection;

40. proposes that structured training/refresher courses be designed for: border guards and police forces; NGOs; bodies responsible for examining applications for asylum; local health and welfare services; local administrations and directors of national institutions;

41. suggests that opportunities to meet and swap experiences be arranged, involving a full-scale European conference on asylum, regional conferences and a staff exchange programme — a kind of *Erasmus* for asylum officials;

42. calls for better coordination between the Member States on certain asylum questions;

43. recommends that a European regulation be drawn up governing the following aspects between Member States: mutual recognition of protection once granted; procedures for transfer and uniform status covering refugees and beneficiaries of secondary protection;

44. considers it essential to broaden and develop means of consulting the various stakeholders — ranging from national institutions to local administrations, from the police to NGOs — on the implementation of a common asylum system;

45. recommends provision of funding and tendering procedures to develop national and local operators' skills. There should be a special emphasis on psychosocial wellbeing, and the identification and handling of vulnerable cases;

Solidarity and burden-sharing

Financial solidarity

46. welcomes the Framework programme on solidarity and management of migration flows for the period 2007-2013 presented by the European Commission: this is a multiannual programme based on four pillars and the matching funds providing an integrated approach to the various issues arising from migration. It expresses particular satisfaction at the new version of the European Refugee Fund (ERF) for 2008-2013, and the European Return Fund for refugees who meet the requirements laid down by local authorities for asylum seekers and refugees;

47. believes that harmonisation of procedural standards for reception, integration and the involvement of local communities are the primary deterrent to secondary movement of applicants or beneficiaries of international protection within EU territory;

48. underlines that the main step to be made towards achieving such harmonisation is to build of an effective European asylum system. This would be the main instrument for bringing about a full sharing of responsibility and competences between all EU Member States;

49. recalls that attaining this objective is costly in terms of economic, human and time resources, but considers this to be necessary in order to devise an intervention model which can overcome the difficulties encountered across Europe in managing migration flows;

50. emphasises that it is essential, if the above-mentioned actions are to be carried out and if they are to have an impact in the individual Member States, the resources earmarked for European asylum policies should contain amounts to be managed at Community level and amounts to be channelled to the Member States;

51. therefore recommends that Member States where the number of requests for asylum are increasing or stable, together with Member States with external borders should receive allocations commensurate with the tasks to be performed. Implementing a common asylum system will require substantial economic resources and, especially for the first five years, it will be necessary to derogate from the rule that European funding should be complementary to national funding;

52. in this regard, calls for careful, well-organised programming of European financial resources, based on funding lines that can be put to effective use, especially for training, staff exchanges and the involvement of local partners in the European consultation process;

53. by the same token, recommends that sufficient resources be provided to assist the more recent Member States and those with less experience of handling migration, by means of additional funds to make up for possible structural shortcomings at national level. Against such a backdrop, there would be little point in considering resettlement programmes within the European Union;

Extending the scope of Directive 2003/109/EC to beneficiaries of international protection

54. warmly welcomes the Proposal for a Council Directive to amend the previous Directive 2003/109/EC to extend its scope to beneficiaries of international protection (refugees or beneficiaries of secondary protection);

55. considers that extending the provisions of Directive 2003/109/EC to those receiving a form of international protection is an essential step in averting the risk of discrimination, and constitutes an instrument for completing the Community process of harmonisation in the field of asylum;

56. believes it vital to ensure that beneficiaries of international protection can obtain long-term resident status in the same Member State that has granted protection, and are entitled to reside in a second Member State;

57. emphasises that granting a form of international protection should be seen as an essential element when assessing the consequences of possible removal of long-term resident status;

58. therefore welcomes the measures contained in the proposal for a directive upholding the principle of non-refoulement (the principle whereby individuals may not be forcibly repatriated to countries where their lives or freedom would be in danger) and ensuring its full implementation in practice, in keeping with Community and international law. Where more far-reaching limitations regarding expulsion and deportation are envisaged, these are to be rejected;

59. also in accordance with the principle of non-refoulement, considers it essential that the authorities of a second Member State must be made fully aware of the fact that a long-term resident — seeking to reside on its territory — has previously obtained international protection in the other Member State. This provision is a vital guarantee of continuity of protection in the event that the need for international protection persists;

60. considers that, when the national authorities responsible for granting or withdrawing international protection are not the same as those for granting or withdrawing long-term resident status, it is crucial that the 'protection background' must be fully taken into account;

61. expresses its satisfaction at the provisions ensuring the full application of the conditions for exercising the right of residence in a second Member State, also covering the beneficiaries of international protection with long-term resident status;

62. lastly, recommends that uniform rules at last be adopted at Community level regarding the granting of authorisation to refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection to reside in a second Member State (for employment or family reasons) and, above all, in order to allow the responsibility for the international protection granted to be transferred from one Member State to another.

Brussels, 9 April 2008.

The President
of the Committee of the Regions
Luc VAN DEN BRANDE

Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on 'A European ports policy'

(2008/C 172/06)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- highlights the key importance of ports for economic and social development, and for competitiveness and prosperity in Europe, not only in the coastal regions;
- notes the tremendous diversity that is such a feature of European ports and is convinced that differing structures foster competition to identify the most efficient transport routes;
- stresses that it makes sense to manage ports at regional and local level and is thus pleased that the Commission has no intention of intervening to harmonise the different forms of port management in place in the EU;
- would stress that it is not only individual ports that are competing with one another, but entire transport chains;
- considers that the guidelines on State aid due to be introduced in 2008 are a suitable tool for clarifying the EC Treaty provisions as they relate to ports, with a view to ensuring that competition in the ports sector continues to be fair and efficient;
- notes the continued absence of a real internal market for maritime transport in Europe and welcomes any simplification in administrative procedures, the progress made in modernising customs formalities, and the Commission's initiative, announced for 2008, to establish a European Maritime Transport Space without Barriers;
- calls for the further development and promotion of the 'Clean Ship' and 'Clean Port' projects and feels that efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from ships — for instance, through access to shore power — should be concentrated at international level, so that European ports do not suffer any disadvantage in global competition;

Rapporteur: Mr HARLINGHAUSEN, Member of Hamburg Parliament's Committee for European Affairs, (DE-EPP)

Reference document

Communication from the Commission on a European Ports Policy

COM(2007) 616 final

I. Policy recommendations

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

Basic points

1. thanks the Commission for the communication on a future European ports policy, which is the fruit of an extensive reflection and consultation process carried out between May 2006 and June 2007 in which various aspects of the European ports policy were examined by all stakeholders in six dedicated workshops;

2. considers the Commission communication as a follow-on from an earlier document — the Communication to the European Parliament and the Council *Reinforcing quality service in sea ports: a key for European transport* and the Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on *market access to port services* (COM(2001) 35 final) — on which the Committee of the Regions issued an opinion on 20 September 2001 (CdR 161/2001 fin), and from the Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on *market access to port services* (COM(2004) 654 final), on which the Committee of the Regions issued an opinion on 13 April 2005 (CdR 485/2004 fin);

3. thinks that the communication is closely linked with other pertinent issues, particularly European marine policy and European transport policy, and would refer to its own-initiative opinion of 12 October 2005 on *EU maritime policy — a question of sustainable development for local and regional authorities* (CdR 84/2005 fin), its opinion of 13 February 2007 *Towards a future maritime policy for the European Union* (CdR 258/2006 fin), and its opinion of 14 February 2007 on the *Mid-term review of the European Commission's 2001 Transport White Paper* (CdR 119/2006 fin);

4. stresses that any future European ports policy must be designed and implemented in line with the subsidiarity and proportionality principles;

General comments on the communication

5. highlights the key importance of ports for economic and social development, and for competitiveness and prosperity in Europe, not only in the coastal regions. Ports, maritime transport and the attendant logistics are one of Europe's strongest growth areas. Ports handle 90 % of the EU's international trade. 40 % of intra-Community trade is also shipped via ports. More-

over, more than 200 million passengers travel by ship in the EU each year;

6. is convinced that any European ports policy must take due account both of these aspects and of increasing globalisation and the new context of an enlarged European Union. Other factors that are of key importance for sustainable and balanced growth and for the success of European regions are climate and environmental protection and public health;

7. notes the tremendous diversity that is such a feature of European ports and is convinced that differing structures foster competition to identify the most efficient transport routes;

8. is pleased, therefore, that, following the failure in the European Parliament of the two draft directives — which the Committee of the Regions had also criticised — on market access for port services, the communication and the further measures it announces mostly involve soft law, rather than new legislative proposals, as that is a better way to take account of the differing structures that are in place;

9. welcomes the fact that the Commission has taken the opportunity to broaden the communication's scope to go beyond the approach of the two draft directives, which were essentially limited to access to port services, and address a large number of issues;

10. welcomes the measures proposed to clarify Community rules in this area. The purpose of the measures must be to further improve effective competition and free market access. The Committee of the Regions notes in this connection that, in many parts of the Union, a high level of effective competition already exists between and within European ports;

11. would stress that it is not only individual ports that are competing with one another, but entire transport chains. This must be borne in mind in all provisions affecting the sub-area of ports, as these also impact on the entire logistics chain in hinterland traffic;

12. believes that EU measures liable to have an impact on transport flows, such as, for instance, trans-European transport network policy, or the guidelines on the application of Community environmental legislation to port development, should be underpinned by the need to maintain a stable environment for investment and a favourable social environment in ports, and to ensure sustainable port development, the uniform application of the provisions of the Treaty, and consultation with the national, regional and local authorities;

Port performance and hinterland connections

13. broadly agrees with the Commission analysis on improving port performance and welcomes the greater prominence given to increasing efficiency rather than expanding infrastructure; calls however, for strategies to promote intermodality and multimodality that take account of the specific features of the various regions, and stresses that the goal of a more rational distribution of traffic in Europe must be realised by the market within a global political framework;

14. would also point out, however, that the concept of 'port', that is connections between the open sea and the hinterland, should also include the seaward approaches to a port (e.g. use of ice-breaking and dredging to keep shipping lanes open);

Expanding capacity while respecting the environment

15. feels that any port development must be respectful of environmental concerns and the interests and needs of those living in port cities;

16. thus supports the Commission's intention to issue guidelines on the application and interpretation of environmental provisions as they relate to port development. This requires a new, broad-based consultation process involving not only the port sector, but also the regional and local authorities that play a crucial role in port development. Coordination and balance are needed between port development measures and action to protect the environment;

17. welcomes the planned action on waste and sediment management and endorses the Commission's intention of ensuring that the corresponding EU rules are applied in all Member States;

18. backs the Commission's plans to cut emissions in ports, but also stresses the key role of the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) in this connection, and calls for international agreements rather than any European attempt to go it alone that would weaken the EU's global competitiveness; feels, however, that the EU must act alone if the IMO does not come up with tangible solutions within a reasonable timeframe;

Modernisation

19. notes the continued absence of a real internal market for maritime transport in Europe and welcomes any simplification in administrative procedures, the progress made in modernising customs formalities, and the Commission's initiative, announced for 2008, to establish a European Maritime Transport Space without Barriers;

20. nonetheless has its misgivings about the practical problems involved in establishing barrier-free maritime transport, and recommends that a careful analysis be made of the existing situation before any new action is taken;

A level playing field — clarity for investors, operators and users

21. stresses that it makes sense to manage ports at regional and local level and is thus pleased that the Commission has no

intention of intervening to harmonise the different forms of port management in place in the EU;

22. considers that the guidelines on State aid due to be introduced in 2008 are a suitable tool for clarifying the EC Treaty provisions as they relate to ports, with a view to ensuring that competition in the ports sector continues to be fair and efficient;

23. in this connection also welcomes the extension of the transparency provisions of Directive 2006/111/EC to all ports irrespective of their size and annual turnover;

24. notes the points made in the communication that the relevant European Court of Justice case-law applies to the award of concessions and that a transparent selection procedure must be carried out when granting concessions that do not come under public procurement law. The Committee of the Regions still sees a need for clarification of the role of port authorities in this regard and their scope for giving adequate support to regional interests and port development;

25. is concerned that lack of flexibility in the administration of the proposed measures will result in legal uncertainty or a reduction in investment incentives for existing providers, thus potentially weakening Europe's competitive position;

26. trusts that ports will also still have scope to undertake necessary modernisation, expansion and conversion work as part of effective port development without the need for a selection procedure;

27. feels that further clarification is needed as to the rights of workers when an undertaking is subject to a transfer of ownership, particularly in cases where Directive 2001/23/EC mentioned in the communication does not apply;

28. notes that technical maritime services (such as pilotage, towage and mooring) are classed as services of general economic interest and are therefore subject to Articles 86, 87 and 88 of the Treaty establishing the European Community. Under these articles and the principle of subsidiarity, it is the Member States' responsibility to identify their SGEI in compliance with the conditions set out in the Decision of 28 November 2005. If a Member State decides that an undertaking is responsible for an SGEI, the undertaking may receive public service compensation if the income from providing the SGEI does not cover the costs incurred. Compensation may not exceed the costs actually incurred and a reasonable profit; recalls, in the same context, that the cost of essential technical-nautical services for safe navigation in port areas constitutes a very small percentage of total transport costs and therefore rejects the idea of encouraging price cuts for these services in order to make maritime transport more attractive;

29. believes that there is still a need for clarification with regard to pilotage and associated safety issues, which are the responsibility of local and regional authorities;

30. agrees with the Commission assessment of worker 'pools' and highlights their importance in recruiting and training port workers under current EU law, particularly in relation to freedom of establishment and the freedom to provide services;

31. welcomes the definition of the term 'port dues' and the fact that these are discussed solely in relation to the overall infrastructure, and asks for detailed clarification of the use of such dues in the planned State aid guidelines so as to avoid any anti-competitive cross subsidisation;

32. notes that port dues are already very transparent and thus sees no need for further rules in this area;

33. welcomes the Commission's intention to devote more attention to competition between European ports and third-country ports, and to provide support for the ports concerned, many of which are at a disadvantage not only because of their peripheral geographical location but also because of increased competition with third countries;

34. is concerned that the 100 % scanning of all shipping containers bound for the USA, required under the US Safe Port Act (2006) and in House Resolution No 1 (2007), is almost impossible for European ports to implement and is also extremely costly; it therefore calls on the Commission to negotiate feasible solutions with the US authorities;

Establishing a structured dialogue between ports and cities

35. supports the Commission's intention to improve the image of ports and to integrate them more effectively into cities. In many regions, ports play a key role that goes beyond purely economic and employment aspects. They often shape the urban landscape and make a significant contribution to urban or regional development;

36. therefore calls for an innovative approach which exploits the cultural, tourist and recreational potential of port cities, and proposes that research and regional cooperation projects be launched to identify potential future developments more effectively;

37. welcomes the Commission's planned measures to raise public visibility, but envisages difficulties in respect of the security measures currently in place both for general safety reasons and to combat terrorism and crime;

38. feels there is a need for further clarification as to the development and relevance of the planned multi-purpose access cards;

Work in ports

39. believes that any European ports policy must also take account of the employment dimension if it is to safeguard and create skilled jobs;

40. thus welcomes Commission plans to promote social dialogue at European level. This must be done in close cooperation with the social partners. Good and safe working conditions

and continual improvements in basic and further training for port workers, including, for instance, through the use of simulators as standard, are key factors in the further sound and sustainable development of ports and the regions in which they lie;

41. underscores the fact that Europe can only maintain its competitive position on the world stage if it demonstrates an exceptional capacity for innovation and offers a higher quality than other regions, and stresses the key importance of academic education and training and ongoing vocational training to achieve this objective;

42. is concerned that the number of work-related accidents in ports and on ships is still too high. The Committee of the Regions points out that local and regional authorities play an important role in monitoring and enforcing health and safety rules in ports.

II. Conclusions and recommendations

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

43. laments the delay in the building of infrastructure for the trans-European network (TEN) and calls on the Commission to better inform the Member States and the regions and cities about available funding possibilities and in this way help them to build up capacity and infrastructure for land access to ports (hinterland connections) and for the seaward approaches to ports (connections between ports and shipping lanes) and to develop logistic distribution networks;

44. believes that future rules for the granting of aid to motorways of the sea must formally involve the regions, and, in this connection, calls for a generally simplified procedure that better reflects the interests of the undertakings involved and thus fosters the more widespread use and acceptance of environmentally sound maritime transport;

45. proposes that, in future, greater use be made of land-use planning tools and integrated coastal zone management in land and sea access planning;

46. calls for the speedy publication of the State aid guidelines following consultation with the Member States, regions and stakeholders;

47. calls for economic incentives to be introduced to ensure appropriate port infrastructure and adequate sea transport to island and remote coastal regions, in order to promote the sustainable development of these areas and to minimise factors hampering business activity and equal access to major European markets;

48. stresses the need to combat air pollution and climate change and for ports and maritime transport to play a role on this front, for instance through the rapid switch to cleaner ship fuel and the speedy implementation of the IMO rules for the treatment of ships' ballast water;

49. calls for the further development and promotion of the 'Clean Ship' and 'Clean Port' projects and feels that efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from ships — for instance, through access to shore power — should be concentrated at international level, so that European ports do not suffer any disadvantage in global competition; complementary action should also be taken at European level to ensure an immediate improvement in the quality of life for people living in port communities;

50. believes that the public should be better informed than hitherto about the key importance of ports and seas for economic growth and job creation in Europe. This task should be left largely to the Member States, regions and ports;

51. looks forward with keen interest to the introduction, planned for 2008, of Commission measures to develop the EU's integrated maritime policy and to seeing how ports will be involved in this process;

52. acknowledges that, with due consideration for the subsidiarity and proportionality principles, a large number of measures are required at EU level to cover all aspects of ports policy. However, the Committee of the Regions fears that not all the measures can be achieved within the intended timeframe and for this reason would like to see a clear statement of the priority that is to be given to each initiative;

53. proposes that, when the Commission's proposed measures are adopted, consideration be given to the existence of small local and regional-scale ports, whose activities are not predominantly commercial and which play a vital role for the

communities in which they are located, and which have very limited financial and human resources when it comes to applying EU guidelines and legislation; proposes that, in some cases, new Community legislative instruments be checked for their impact on the capacities and volume of activity of these ports, so as not to undermine their viability;

54. thus recommends that the list of actions be revised to indicate the degree of priority to be attached to the individual objectives that the actions are supposed to achieve, the tier of government likely to be responsible under the subsidiarity principle, and the appropriate timeframe;

55. offers its help and support in working out proposals for setting the order of priorities for the measures concerned and for future ports policy, and would ask to be kept regularly informed of developments in this policy area;

56. recommends establishing a system under which all interest groups are able to be consulted regularly, thereby making it possible to factor their input into the ongoing development of the European ports policy, avoid potential conflicts and exchange best practice; it draws attention in this regard to the possibility of supporting and promoting local and regional bodies in a bid to secure a high level of acceptance for the policy;

57. asks the Commission to submit an interim assessment of the European ports policy by 31 December 2009 including a proposal for measures to eliminate bottlenecks between ports and the hinterland.

Brussels, 9 April 2008.

The President
of the Committee of the Regions
Luc VAN DEN BRANDE

Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on 'An integrated maritime policy for the European Union'

(2008/C 172/07)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- regrets that important aspects such as maritime education and training, the creation of European Funds for Coastal Areas and protection of the seabed have been overlooked;
- regrets the failure to address the use and protection of the seabed and believes this policy should also include general strategic rules on matters relating to dumping and laying and using pipelines and cables on the seabed;
- reiterates the call it made in its opinion on Towards a future maritime policy for the European Union for an appraisal to be made of the option of revising the EU financial system towards one single simplified system for all or most of the maritime issues within a European Coastal and Island Fund;
- requests the Commission to present a roadmap of major mid-term and long-term objectives to be achieved in the European maritime policy until 2015 and 2020;
- still misses the clear links between the Maritime Blue Paper and the Marine Strategy Directive and therefore asks the Commission to clarify these links and to deal with both subjects more closely;
- once again, calls for a European maritime platform including local and regional authorities and stakeholders as a means of pooling expertise and exchanging best practice.

Rapporteur: Dr Saima KALEV, Mayor of Jõgeva (EE/UEN-EA)

Reference(s)

Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions — An Integrated Maritime Policy for the European Union

COM(2007) 575 final.

Policy recommendations

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS:

1. welcomes and approves the Communication from the Commission on 'An Integrated Maritime Policy for the European Union'. The Committee is pleased that an attempt is now being made to achieve an integrated approach to this fundamental issue which covers all aspects of people's relationship with the oceans and seas. This will provide a coherent policy framework allowing for the optimal development of all sea-related activities in a sustainable manner;

2. acknowledges the involvement of numerous stakeholders in the consultation process, but is concerned that such key aspects like: maritime education and training, creation of European Funds; for Coastal Areas and protection of seabed have been overlooked;

3. shares the view that all matters relating to Europe's oceans and seas are interlinked, and that solutions must be developed in a coordinated way. In order to achieve the desired results it is important to provide information about the progress on all actions in a coordinated way (e.g. one website). Any compulsory action /regulation has to be based on scientific facts and evaluations that takes into consideration the local variation in ecosystems and regional differences in human use of marine resources;

4. is convinced that the EU maritime policy could become a very powerful policy in the long run, because more than 50 % of the EU-area is covered with water, including all its biological, physical and geological resources;

5. points out that an essential component of the marine environment, namely the issue of using and protecting the seabed — which falls within the competence of each Member State — is not addressed in the Communication on an integrated maritime policy. In the Committee's view, this policy should also include general strategic rules on matters relating to dumping and laying and using pipelines and cables on the seabed;

6. emphasises that the impact of maritime policy extends beyond national frontiers and requires efficient administration at a number of levels;

7. is in favour of an integrated, inter-sectoral approach, implementation of which requires cooperation and coordination of all sea-related policies at the different decision-making levels.

A balance has to be struck here between competitiveness sustainability and environmental protection;

8. feels that local and regional authorities play an essential role in policy shaping and implementation and in the establishment of the requisite legal conditions, and also have a clear task to carry out in integrating the compartmentalised sector-orientated political measures and to inform the general public about the potential of the sea and how human activities affect the maritime environment;

9. notes that for the successful development and implementation of an integrated EU maritime policy, it is essential that local and regional authorities make an effective contribution and that they continue to be ready to show commitment in this field;

10. agrees with the Commission that the Committee of the Regions can bring added value to this process. The Committee wishes to help draw up a blueprint to support that local and regional authorities participate in this process and make an effective contribution;

11. is considering how it can lend its support to local and regional authorities to help them draw up their implementation strategies and implement the Commission's proposed strategy taking into account (a) the diverse characteristics of the Member States and the individual maritime regions, which have a need for closer cooperation, including the islands, archipelagos and outermost regions, and (b) the international dimension;

12. recommends taking into consideration the regions' varying capacities and the diverse views put forward in the consultation process;

13. agrees with the point made in the Communication that all changes instigated by the maritime policy will above all affect coastal regions and the estuaries and inland waterways linked to them;

14. continues to advocate efforts to build up the capacities of local and regional authorities in order to secure mandatory funding, and to this end, set up a European Fund for Coastal Areas and Islands; Reiterates the call it made in its opinion on Towards a future maritime policy for the European Union for an appraisal to be made of the option of revising the EU financial system towards one single simplified system for all or most of the maritime issues within a European Coastal and Island Fund; Funding must be used in a way that is positive for the marine environment and ecology;

15. stands by the view expressed in opinion CdR 84/2005 that it is of crucial importance to support innovation and entrepreneurial development, particularly in terms of developing new maritime technologies;
16. agrees that an integrated maritime policy will help to solve problems relating to globalisation and competitiveness, climate change, degradation of the marine environment, maritime safety, and energy security and sustainability;
17. also feels that this policy must be based on excellence in marine research, technology and innovation, the Lisbon agenda for jobs, and the Gothenburg agenda for sustainability;
18. agrees with the Commission's view on the question of added value raised by the Committee in its opinion CdR 258/2006, which pointed out that an integrated approach helps to prevent conflict, create synergies and ensure an exchange of objective information with the general public and neighbouring regions;
19. acknowledges the Commission's endeavours, through this Communication, to lay the foundations for the governance framework and cross-sectoral tools necessary for an EU Integrated Maritime Policy and to set out the main measures the Commission will be introducing in the course of its mandate; in this context, the Committee welcomes the fact that, in its Annual Policy Strategy for 2009 (COM(2008) 72), the European Commission confirms that maritime policy represents one of its political priorities; the Committee does, however, deplore the low level of funding foreseen in this field in 2009, involving the redeployment of EUR 6 million from the resources available under the fisheries policy.
20. is pleased that the Commission will be guided in these actions by the principles of subsidiarity and competitiveness, an ecosystem-friendly approach, and stakeholder participation;
21. for the above reason requests the Commission to present a roadmap of major mid-term and long-term objectives to be achieved in the European maritime policy until 2015 and 2020;
22. feels that a document on a subject of such major importance as EU maritime policy should plan for a significantly longer period, extending beyond the duration of the current mandate;
23. feels that it is extremely important to cooperate, consult with and support regional and sectoral working groups and organisations operating within an EU framework in the Atlantic, Arctic, Mediterranean, Black Sea, Baltic and North Sea regions; Requests the Commission to organise the implementation of the integrative maritime policy within the *above named areas*;
24. points out that competences relating to the integrated approach are clearly delimited, therefore the EU will need to use those competences laid down in the Treaty for actions in the relevant areas, such as environment, transport, fisheries, regional or industrial policy, in full respect of subsidiarity;
25. supports the Commission's call to Member States to draw up national integrated maritime policies, working closely with stakeholders, in particular the coastal regions and looks forward to guidelines of the Commission on this and on stakeholder consultation, which recognise the particular competences of regional and local authorities in relation to an integrated Maritime Policy;
26. feels that the decisions to propose a set of guidelines in 2008 for these national integrated maritime policies and to report annually on EU and Member States' actions in this regard from 2009 onwards are of key importance;
27. recommends additional supportive guidelines for local and regional authorities; requests the Commission to consider as basic principles within the guidelines for good governance on the national and the regional level: proposals for major maritime objectives, a methodology how these objectives could be achieved in an integrated approach, recommended deadlines for the objectives to be achieved;
28. takes the view that the coordination envisaged by the Commission will not guarantee integration, that guidelines could be interpreted in different ways and that consultation bodies do not yet have any structures for decision-making;
29. proposes to draw up a clear summary and list of best practices for regions;
30. recommends establishing a clear system to ensure that regions can continue contributing efficiently and effectively and that possible conflicts between regions can be resolved fairly;
31. emphasises that for this to happen an implementation regional strategies must be drawn up;
32. recommends that decision-making processes on maritime issues of based on dialogue with local and regional authorities should be speeded up. The CoR points out that both Member States and local and regional authorities must be directly involved in developing the implementation strategy. The strategy objectives must be jointly worked out with them, in line with the need for cross-sectoral integration in all activities. A similar approach could be followed for defining tasks and discussing funding issues;
33. supports the call for improved cooperation between Member States' Coastguards and the decision to take steps towards a more interoperable surveillance system to bring together existing ship monitoring and tracking systems used for maritime safety and security, protection of the marine environment, fisheries control, control of external borders and other law enforcement activities; the Commission is requested to launch a first pilot project on this in the Mediterranean, with a view to extending it Europe wide;

34. welcomes the Commission's decision to develop a roadmap in 2008 to facilitate the development of maritime spatial planning by Member States;

35. feels that there is a need for the Commission to take steps in 2008 towards a European Marine Observation and Data Network, and consider the need for the multi-dimensional mapping of Member States' waters, in order to improve access to high quality data; the Commission is requested to launch a first pilot project on this in the North Sea, with a view to extending it Europe wide;

Action Areas for an EU Integrated Maritime Policy

Maximising the Sustainable Use of the Oceans and Seas

36. agrees with the Commission that a European Maritime Transport Space without barriers and in cooperation with other players in the transport system is needed to improve the efficiency of maritime transport in Europe and ensure its long term competitiveness;

37. is in favour of preparing a comprehensive maritime transport strategy for 2008-2018,, which should consider promoting motorways of the sea and short sea shipping. This strategy, besides taking into consideration the network of major European ports connected to the Trans-European Transport Networks, should give special consideration to small and medium-sized ports, since they provide an efficient service for remote regions and islands, and also help to avoid congestion of major ports and roads;

38. requests the Commission and the Member States to encourage the cooperation among European ports to support:
a) the transport of as many goods as possible in the EU by ship as the most environmentally friendly option, including import, export and transit, b) the cost-efficiency and eco-efficiency of the sea trade of goods, in particular in the light of the expected further growth of goods movement;

39. acknowledges the replies received during the consultation process to the question put to stakeholders regarding options for incorporating the Thematic Strategy on the Protection and Conservation of the Marine Environment ⁽¹⁾ and the Proposal for a Marine Strategy Directive ⁽²⁾ in the future common maritime policy, especially given that these have been identified by the Commission as components of an integrated strategy;

40. emphasises that the above-mentioned strategies constitute the environmental foundations of the integrated maritime policy, given that they call for an eco-systems-based approach with equal emphasis on environmental, social and economic issues. These strategies also set deadlines for achieving targets, such as achieving good environmental status by 2020;

41. The proposal for the marine strategy directive states that regions, where the condition of the sea is critical, are required to prepare and implement actions faster in order to obtain a satisfactory environmental status. In such regions it is of the utmost importance that the European Commission coordinates the different sectors involved, programmes and strategies, and also provides sufficient financial support. In order to achieve a truly integrated maritime policy it is necessary to include land-based activities such as agriculture, sewage handling, transport and energy production. Such regions may function as pilot areas for a true and completely integrated maritime policy.

42. still misses the clear links between the Maritime Blue Paper and the Marine Strategy Directive and therefore asks the Commission to clarify these links, to deal with both subjects more closely and thereby avoid duplication of the proposed activities;

43. requests the Commission to come forward with a proposal on how to link the individual Natura 2000 off shore areas in the EU;

44. feels that Integrated Coastal Zone Management is based on a well thought out idea, and that a series of useful best practices could assist in framing maritime policy; in addition, proposes to investigate local and regional experience in the integrated use of coastal zones in particular existing Local Coastal Partnerships that made up by Local Authorities and relevant stakeholders to provide cost effective, bottom up ICZM and to explore means of reconciling integrated coastal zone management and maritime policy;

45. recommends developing close contacts with local and regional authorities implementing national water policy measures, in order to encourage cooperation on technical and management issues. Such cooperation is intended to achieve a good environmental status by 2015 for surface water at a distance of up to one kilometre from the coast ⁽³⁾;

46. would refer, for a detailed definition of its views on European ports policy, to its opinion number 237/2007 on the Communication from the Commission on a European Ports Policy COM(2007) 616;

47. backs the proposal for a new ports policy which takes account of the multiple roles of ports and the wider context of European logistics;

48. recommends using Structural Fund support to facilitate investment in regional port structures and other appropriate projects;

49. supports the proposal to reduce the levels of emissions from ships in ports, namely by removing tax disadvantages for shore side electricity and to develop and to support EU wide or world wide technical standards for the transfer of shore side electricity onto ships;

⁽¹⁾ COM(2005) 504 final.

⁽²⁾ COM(2005) 505 final.

⁽³⁾ Directive 2000/60/EC.

50. also feels that there is a need to issue guidelines on the application of the relevant Community environmental legislation to port development;
51. also emphasises to secure future sustainable energy supply and asks the Commission and the Member States to systematically support for maritime clean renewable energies, such as from wind, waves, tide and ocean stream, in particular prioritise and systematically support research and development, as well as with financial approaches, such as sufficient feed-in-tariffs. Moreover, administrative barriers hindering the development of maritime renewable energies should be removed;
52. believes that locally owned, non for profit trust ports shall be protected from disrepair as their social, recreational and touristic benefit for the surrounding communities exceed its original economic function;
53. welcomes the Commission's constructive position on encouraging the formation of multi-sectoral clusters and regional centres of maritime excellence, and promoting a European network of maritime clusters;
54. in this connection, asks for clarification of the structure and form of the bodies to be set up, together with an explanation of the policy contribution expected from each body, and of the roles envisaged for the Commission and the Committee of the Regions;
55. supports the decision to reassess, in close cooperation with social partners, the exclusions affecting maritime sectors in EU labour legislation;
56. takes the view that, when it comes to improving levels of safety for persons working in maritime occupations, a high degree of responsibility rests with the Member States by virtue of the need to ratify international documents, such as the ILO Consolidated Maritime Labour Convention of February 2006 and the ILO Work in Fishing Convention, adopted by the ILO in June 2007;
57. approves the decision to promote a 'Certificate of Maritime Excellence';
58. recommends taking steps to improve maritime training, so that professional training is internationally accepted and further training options available, thus ensuring the needed supply of skilled labour with the requisite qualifications;
59. is convinced that coastal regions are the first to suffer from climate change and therefore recommends priority actions such as: the reduction of the emissions from ships, the development and expansion of renewable maritime energies, the halt in the decline of marine biodiversity, coastal protection and consequently welcomes the Commission's decision to launch pilot actions to reduce the impact of and adapt to climate change in coastal zones;
60. asks the Commission for clarification on its assessment of the need for such actions in non coastal regions;
61. agrees that international efforts to reduce oil spills from ships are to be supported;
62. supports the decision to actively support international efforts to diminish greenhouse gas emissions from ships;
63. demands that the Directive on the taxation of energy is amended so as to include an obligation of Member States not to tax electricity supplied to ships in ports more than bunker oil, as the present system of the directive provides an incentive for air pollution, which in port cities comes up to 80 % from ships burning bunker oil.
64. welcomes the efforts of the Commission and the Member States to reduce SO₂ and NO_x levels and the emission of fine particles from ships in EU seas and in particular in ports. As this will not be sufficient in the long term, the Committee of the Regions calls for further reduction and therefore requests the Commission and the Member States to reduce the emission from ships to the same level as allowed by cars, at the latest by 2030;
65. calls for the integration of the emissions from ships into the EU Emissions Trade System;
66. welcomes the Commission's decision, taking due account of the ongoing work at international level, to make proposals for dismantling obsolete ships in an efficient, safe and environmentally-friendly manner;
67. supports firm action towards the elimination of discards and of destructive fishing practices such as high seas bottom trawling in sensitive habitats; It is particularly important to consider the interaction between countries in relation to over-fishing;
68. supports vigorous action to eliminate illegal, unregulated and unreported fishing in regions where such action through facts and research is established to be required;
69. recognises the need to promote and provide incentives for small-scale fishing which has a long tradition in European waters, is more selective and more environmentally friendly;
70. with regard to these two issues, asks the Commission for its views on how an integrated policy can be implemented more effectively than hitherto;
71. expresses its support for promoting the development of an environmentally safe aquaculture industry in Europe;

Building a knowledge and information base for the maritime policy

72. welcomes the Commission's plan to present a fundamental European Strategy for Marine and Maritime Research in 2008;

73. requests the Commission to consider the concept of a network of 'European Oceans research Institutes' within the new maritime research strategy;

74. also feels there is a need to launch joint cross-cutting calls under the 7th Research Framework Programme to promote an integrated approach and to improve understanding of cross cutting issues in maritime affairs, such as the impact of climate change, induced rising sea levels and changing weather patterns on the usability of ports and on shipping in general;

75. welcomes support for research to predict, mitigate and adapt to the effects of climate change on maritime activities, the marine environment, coastal zones and islands and requests the Commission to work towards a European Strategy for the adaptation to climate change impacts in coastal regions, which is based on a solid assessment of the rising costs of climate change adaptation at the coasts, and which helps to avoid that these become an impediment for economic growth at the coasts;

76. endorses the decision to support the creation of a European marine science partnership for a concerted dialogue between the scientific community, industry and policy makers;

77. would ask whether, and to what extent, the Commission supports this partnership, what form this support should take, how the partnership ties in with the consultation structure proposed by the Commission and how it would differ from that structure;

78. emphasises the importance of regional data and their evaluation from an inter-regional perspective;

79. feels that there is a need to compare statistics in order to promote sectoral competitiveness and reform activity (a point raised by Committee opinion CdR 258/2006, but which was overlooked in the 'Blue Paper');

80. asks for information on the scope for regions to influence pilot projects, calls for scientific and development projects, and projects based on good practice;

81. once again, calls for a European maritime platform including local and regional authorities and stakeholders as a means of pooling expertise and exchanging best practice; proposes to draw up an ongoing list of best practices for regions as soon as possible, possibly on the basis of already existing European lists of regional maritime best practice in particular examples on: defining general maritime objectives, good governance, sectoral policies and their integration, regional maritime action plans;

Delivering the highest quality of life in coastal regions

82. feels that it is essential to promote sustainable coastal and maritime tourism as part of the forthcoming tourism initiative;

83. asks the Commission to clarify how it considers that local and regional authorities and coastal regions can help to improve quality of life in coastal areas, and what synergies might be identified, for example with other EU policy areas;

84. is in favour of the Commission urgently preparing a database on all regional policy projects funded by the EU which fall within the scope of maritime policy, as a basis for spreading best practices; this database should also create transparency on Community funding available for maritime projects and coastal regions;

85. backs the proposal for a Community Disaster Prevention Strategy highlighting the risks to which coastal regions in particular are exposed; among other things, this would identify emergency ports which could be used by oil tankers in distress and ships with other hazardous cargoes. Maritime safety measures must also take into account the special aspects of maritime navigation in winter conditions;

86. appreciates the significance of the Commission's decision to promote development of the potential of outermost regions and islands. Solutions to the specific problems faced by remote coastal and island regions must be found through joint efforts encompassing maritime policy and action in other policy areas at EU level;

Promoting Europe's Leadership in International Maritime Affairs

87. welcomes the decision to promote cooperation under the Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policies, and the Northern Dimension;

88. welcomes the decision to propose a strategy for the external projection of the Union's Maritime Policy through a structured dialogue with major partners;

89. asks for an explanation of how systematic use can best be made in external relations of know-how which is of largely regional relevance (e.g. HELCOM, the Helsinki Commission on protection of the Baltic);

Raising the Visibility of Maritime Europe

90. agrees with the European Commission that work must begin on production of a European Atlas of the Seas;

91. supports the proposal to celebrate an annual European Maritime Day as of 2008 and to include the local and regional authorities, stakeholders and their expertise from the very beginning;

92. suggests giving substantial support to and stepping up publicity work on all sea-related issues, through educational systems, the media, the Internet and other information channels;

93. believes that Marine National Parks could be a way of both raising public awareness and protecting sensitive marine areas;

94. proposes that a comprehensive package of measures be drawn up to enhance the visibility of maritime Europe, in particular taking into account our maritime heritage.

Brussels, 9 April 2008.

The President
of the Committee of the Regions
Luc VAN DEN BRANDE

Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on ‘The white paper — Together for health: A strategic approach for the EU 2008-2013’

(2008/C 172/08)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- believes that a common approach to health matters should not result in any moves towards harmonisation or to any infringement of the subsidiarity principle;
- asks the Commission to make reducing inequalities in health a priority objective;
- notes that the strategy does not address the issue of pharmaceuticals and calls therefore for a closer examination of this issue;
- believes that cancer screening is an example of specific healthcare treatment and thus a matter for the national level; it should not therefore be included in the health strategy. However, cooperation and sharing of best practice amongst EU countries is welcomed;
- believes that local and regional authority input into the new EU-level structured cooperation mechanism could be achieved by having some seats on the new health-related committees filled by regional and local representatives, but demands that such a structured cooperation mechanism be discussed further and that it must be done in an open and transparent way;
- believes that the Commission should compile a digest of relevant health-related cooperation networks and organisations and that steps should be taken to bring together the stakeholders concerned to develop appropriate and effective types of cooperation.

Rapporteur: Mr Karsten UNO PETERSEN, Member of South Denmark Regional Council (DK/PES)

Reference document

White Paper — Together for Health: A Strategic Approach for the EU 2008-2013

COM(2007) 630 final

Political recommendations

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

1. welcomes the Commission white paper setting out a Community health policy strategy until 2013, subject to compliance both with Treaty Article 152, which stipulates that public health is basically a matter for national policy, and with the subsidiarity principle;

2. agrees that health is central in people's lives and needs to be supported by effective policies in all areas, including action taken in Member States and at EU and global level. The Commission should continue to give priority to public health as an area of EU competence in which major health gains can be achieved;

3. notes and applauds the growing interest in health matters at EU level, as was reaffirmed in the Reform Treaty agreed in Lisbon on 19 October 2007, which proposes reinforcing the political importance of health. However, the Committee of the Regions would point out that a common approach to health matters should not result in any moves towards harmonisation or to any infringement of the subsidiarity principle;

4. recognises the new requirements underlying the framing of a more strategic Community-level approach, including the ageing population, new health threats (pandemics, biological incidents, bioterrorism and climate change challenges) and new technologies, but underlines that care should be taken to ensure that the EU does not overstep the limited health-policy related powers assigned to it under Art. 152 of the EC Treaty;

5. supports the values and principles set out in the white paper, including solidarity, grassroots involvement in policy-making, the reduction of inequalities in health, the promotion of investment in this area, the integration of health concerns into all policies, and the strengthening of the EU's voice in global health;

6. backs the white paper's three overriding objectives — fostering good health in an ageing Europe, protecting citizens from health threats, and supporting dynamic health systems and new technologies — and endorses the proposals for specific action on them;

7. notes that openness vis-à-vis the role, interests and experiences of regional and local partners is a vital element in

ensuring that the values, principles and objectives of the white paper can also be translated into practice;

8. asks the Commission to make reducing inequalities in health a priority objective and to focus on the health-related discrepancies between different social groups; Priority should thereby be given to supporting Member States that are lagging behind in developing public health measures and improving people's state of health, so as to reduce the discrepancies and imbalances that exist on the health front within the EU;

9. welcomes a system of health indicators, provided there is no infringement of national responsibility for healthcare;

10. notes that the strategy does not address the issue of pharmaceuticals despite the far-reaching impact on patients and the public if the provisions in place in this area are considered solely as a facet of industrial policy and not in connection with health; calls therefore for a closer examination of the pharmaceuticals question, taking as its point of departure the fact that, in many EU countries, this area comes within the ambit of health and health insurance;

11. believes that cancer screening is a healthcare issue and thus a matter for the national level; it should not therefore be included in the health strategy;

Implementation of the strategy

12. also notes that local and regional authorities are directly affected by the EU's new health strategy since, in many Member States, it is they who are responsible for the health and/or healthcare sectors;

13. draws attention to the fact that regions and local health players are often responsible for the planning, management, operation and development of the health sector — and also frequently bear financial responsibility for this area too; they are close to grassroots concerns and thus have a profound understanding and knowledge of the health field;

14. is pleased that the white paper recognises local and regional authorities as key actors in delivering healthcare and thus expects that, given their responsibility in this area, they will be fully involved in implementing the strategy. The strategy will be most effective if it is backed up by regional and local input at as early a stage as possible, thereby also boosting scope for the regional or local level to take ownership of the strategy;

15. welcomes the scope afforded by the white paper for regional and local involvement in a new EU-level structured cooperation mechanism, and is pleased that the Commission is to work on a cross-sectoral basis and that it is to ensure consistency with other bodies that deal with health-related issues, but demands that such a structured cooperation mechanism be discussed further and that it must be open and transparent and by no means go beyond the coordination referred to in the second sentence of Article 152 (2) of the EC Treaty;

16. notes in that connection the importance of involving bodies and networks representing local and regional authorities on health matters at an early stage in the deliberations of future EU health initiatives;

17. backs the Commission proposal for a new EU-level structured cooperation mechanism to advise the Commission and to promote coordination between the Member States, provided that, as the Commission itself is proposing, this new mechanism secures adequate regional and local input and involvement at an early stage. This also applies to local and regional authority input and involvement in the planned new structure, under which Member States are to replace some existing committees;

18. makes the point that, in practical terms, local and regional authority input into the new EU-level structured cooperation mechanism could be achieved by having some seats on the new health-related committees filled not only by national-level members but by regional and local representatives as well, thereby yielding the broadest possible consultation on health issues and giving greater scope for generating a sense of ownership, at regional level, for EU health initiatives;

19. proposes that regional and local representatives be appointed from within the Committee of the Regions for a fixed period. The regional and local representatives on the new EU health-related committees could then report back to the Committee of the Regions;

20. agrees that value can be added to Member States' action through the Commission's proposal to foster cooperation with stakeholders at Community level and feels it is vital that Commission efforts to secure the continued development of partnerships with these players and to build on — or possibly set up new — health forums or networks should also bring in local and regional representatives much more fully than is the case today;

21. in that context, calls for cooperation first and foremost with the Committee of the Regions as the only advisory body under the Treaties representing local and regional authorities, but also with various networks and organisations that pool local and regional authority expertise in the health arena at EU level. It is important that, when selecting these networks, the Commission ensures that they have broad regional and local coverage, that they are equally accessible for all regional and local authorities to take part, and that no barriers, such as high membership fees, are erected to participation;

22. recommends that the Commission draw up a digest of relevant formal and informal health-related cooperation networks and organisations that meet the above criteria, and also that it bring together the stakeholders concerned to develop appropriate and effective types of cooperation;

23. drawing on the Commission's transparency initiative, recommends transparent working methods, i.e. the Commission should publicly announce the health stakeholders with whom it is working and the players that are to be involved at an early stage in the forums, committees and bodies it is proposing be set up;

24. would also ask the Member States to lay down procedures for the timely involvement of their own regions or local authorities in health-related issues at EU level;

Financial instruments

25. agrees that the actions in this strategy should be supported by existing financial instruments until the end of the current financial framework (2013), without additional budgetary consequences, not least in the light of the regions' and local partners' commitments;

26. is pleased that the Commission has drawn attention to the link between a healthy population and the Lisbon objectives for growth and jobs and, in that context, asks that, in future, cohesion policy and the common agricultural policy should focus more strongly on public health aspects;

Recommendations to the EU presidency

27. would ask the EU presidency to incorporate the substantive elements of points 7, 8, 15, 16, 19, 20 and 22-24 of this opinion into the Council conclusions on the EU health strategy, viz:

27.1 openness vis-à-vis the role of regional and local partners is a vital element in ensuring that the values, principles and objectives of the white paper can be translated into practice (point 7);

27.2 reducing inequalities in health must become a priority objective; the focus should be on the health-related discrepancies between different social groups and priority should be given to supporting Member States that are lagging behind in developing public health measures (point 8);

27.3 the Commission proposal for a new EU-level structured cooperation mechanism should secure adequate regional and local input and involvement at an early stage. This also applies to local and regional authority input and involvement in the planned new structure, but demands that such a structured cooperation mechanism be discussed further and that it must be open and transparent and by no means go beyond the coordination referred to in the second sentence of Article 152 (2) of the EC Treaty (point 15);

27.4 in practical terms, local and regional authority input into the new EU-level structured cooperation mechanism could be achieved by having some seats on the new health-related committees filled by regional and local representatives (point 16);

27.5 cooperation should focus first and foremost on the Committee of the Regions as the only advisory body under the Treaties representing local and regional authorities, but should also be conducted with a number of other networks and organisation that pool local and regional authority expertise in the health arena at EU level (point 19);

27.6 a digest should be compiled of relevant health-related cooperation networks and organisations and that steps should be taken to bring together the stakeholders concerned to

develop appropriate and effective types of cooperation (point 20);

27.7 the Member States should lay down procedures for the timely involvement of their own regions or local authorities in health-related issues at EU level (point 22);

27.8 the actions in this strategy should be supported by existing financial instruments until the end of the current financial framework (2013), without additional budgetary consequences, not least in the light of the regions' and local partners' commitments (point 23);

27.9 in future, cohesion policy and the common agricultural policy should focus more strongly on health aspects (point 24).

Brussels, 9 April 2008.

The President
of the Committee of the Regions
Luc VAN DEN BRANDE

Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on the '2007 enlargement strategy and main challenges 2007-2008 — Candidate countries'

(2008/C 172/09)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- emphasises that the European Union must maintain its 'open door' policy as regards enlargement, in order to stimulate democratic reform and economic development outside the current borders of the European Union;
- stresses that the fulfilment of the Copenhagen criteria and the requirements of the Stabilisation and Association Process conditions is a basic obligation for Member States, with the emphasis on the principle of own merit, which was also an essential factor in previous enlargements;
- stresses that it is vital not to interrupt Turkey's European journey; the EU must honour the commitments it made when it decided to open negotiations. However, it agrees with the Commission that the accession negotiations are an open-ended process, the outcome of which cannot be guaranteed beforehand;
- welcomes the good progress that Croatia has made towards meeting the Copenhagen political criteria, economic criteria and the *acquis communautaire*, and in implementing the Stabilisation and Association Agreement;
- considers that the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia has made considerable progress towards fulfilling the Copenhagen political criteria and economic criteria and highlights the progress made at the end of 2007; calls therefore on the Council to decide on opening negotiations with the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

Rapporteur: Mr Alin Adrian NICA (RO/ALDE), Mayor of Dudeștii Noi, Romania

Reference text

Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament: Enlargement Strategy and main challenges 2007-2008 — candidate countries

COM(2007) 663 final

Policy recommendations

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

General recommendations

1. reiterates its belief that the enlargement of the European Union is one of the most powerful means of exerting political influence, and is an important step towards peace and stability on the Continent and that it gives the citizens of candidate countries a further opportunity to achieve not only the well-being provided by the common economic area but also the EU common values, mainly freedom, democracy and solidarity;
2. emphasises that the European Union must maintain its 'open door' policy as regards enlargement, in order to stimulate democratic reform and economic development outside the current borders of the European Union;
3. stresses that the fulfilment of the Copenhagen criteria and the requirements of the Stabilisation and Association Process conditions is a basic obligation for Member States, with the emphasis on the principle of own merit, which was also an essential factor in previous enlargements;
4. highlights the fact that successful integration depends first and foremost on the way the candidate country prepares for accession, and on the soundness and careful implementation of reforms;
5. points out that monitoring the progress and adaptability of legislation is a guarantee for successful integration;
6. draws attention to the fact that local and regional authorities must play an active role in integration, as it is a structural democratic process that cannot only be implemented at central level and without the active participation of all tiers of government or full compliance with the principles of subsidiarity and proximity;
7. considers that it is important to consult associations of local and regional administrations when the central administration proposes legislative measures which fall within the purview of local and regional authorities;
8. highlights the fact that the sustainable development of a country relies largely on compliance with and application of the fundamental principle of decentralisation, with all that it implies: i.e. decentralisation in decision-making, administrative and financial terms;
9. points out that the war of the mid-1990s left deep scars in the collective consciousness of the Balkan peoples, and it is therefore essential for all the local, regional and national players

in the region to cooperate in order to resolve the problems that have been a source of conflict in the past;

10. emphasises the importance of supporting, through pre-accession policies and programmes, initiatives and efforts for cooperation (including 2008: the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue) and the exchange of experiences and best practices (including experience of the application of the principles of the European Charter of Local Self-Government) between local and regional authorities from the Member States and candidate countries; in this sense, it has a major role to play in promoting training seminars aiming at exchanging good practices and lessons learned by the EU regional and local authorities. In particular, this should take specific account of the experiences of the new EU Member States that joined in 2004 and 2007, especially since some of them are located on the border with the three new EU candidate countries;

Turkey

11. stresses that it is in everybody's interests to support Turkey throughout a lengthy, complex reform process. It is a basic principle of the accession process that the pace of the negotiations depends on the progress of these reforms which will also be furthered by external EU support based on funding programmes. Therefore, both Turkey and the European Union should show patience and perseverance in this process;

12. stresses that it is vital not to interrupt Turkey's European journey; the EU must honour the commitments it made when it decided to open negotiations. However, it agrees with the Commission that the accession negotiations are an open-ended process, the outcome of which cannot be guaranteed beforehand. Compliance with the conditions imposed by the EU must be the only criteria on which accession is decided. Moreover, it is very important that Turkey should make a commitment to good-neighbourly relations, in accordance with the requirements laid out in the negotiating framework. However, Turkey is expected to put an end to all economic exclusions or border closures, and to refrain from threats or military operations regarding its neighbours;

13. welcomes the fact that parliamentary elections were properly organised, and hopes that the new government will speed up the reforms needed to meet the accession criteria by making real progress in sensitive areas. At the same time, is concerned about the repeated interference by the Turkish armed forces in the political process and believes that more effort should be made to ensure full and effective political control of the army;

14. welcomes the recent measures to amend the constitution, and considers that the proposed amendments will, if adopted, encourage progress towards meeting the Copenhagen criteria, and reiterates the need to amend Article 301 of the Turkish penal code, which makes it a punishable offence to denigrate Turkishness and Turkey, in order to secure comprehensive freedom of expression;

15. emphasises that local and regional authorities — which implement much of European legislation — must play a central, decisive role in the internal democratisation and European integration processes, and recommends that the European Commission highlights the role of local and regional authorities in the negotiation process with the Turkish government;

16. recommends re-examining Turkish village law with a view to increasing the efficiency and strength of public administrations at the lowest level;

17. proposes that more models for the regional development of local and regional authorities in Turkey be looked into, following the example of the EU Member States, as such models could make it possible to draw up and implement regional policies and strategies, define priorities for local and regional development, and even apply programmes supported by the European pre-accession or structural funds;

18. stresses the need to set up a joint consultative committee comprising representatives of the Committee of the Regions and of Turkish local and regional authorities; consequently, urges the Turkish government to request that a joint consultative committee be set up and asks the European Commission to take account of the importance of setting up this committee in the context of negotiations with Turkey;

19. stresses that Turkey must continue to take real steps towards the financial decentralisation of local public authorities in order to make it possible to strengthen the financial autonomy of local and regional authorities, and reduce their dependence on the central exchequer;

20. points out that, as well as extending administrative powers for local or regional authorities, financial resources must be provided in order for them to exercise their new powers;

21. notes that a process of public sector reform is underway in Turkey in order to increase efficiency and improve the administrative capabilities of public institutions, with a view to effectively managing government and European funds;

22. points out that discrimination still exists in Turkey as regards women's access to public administration and justice services, even though the legal framework has been partially harmonised with European legislation in the field; also draws attention to gender discrimination as regards access to education, as many girls are not educated beyond primary school, for reasons of religious traditionalism;

23. highlights the discrimination to which ethnic minorities in Turkey — particularly Kurds — are subject;

24. highlights the problems encountered by non-Muslim faiths in Turkey, due to lack of legal recognition. These faiths encounter problems when it comes to charitable activities, the right to freedom of religion, the election of leaders and the training of the clergy. It also points out the repeated assaults and attacks on representatives and followers of non-Islamic faiths. The state must guarantee that there will be no more of these incidents and, to this end, use its resources to curb extremist factions, combating their subversive activities;

Croatia

25. welcomes the good progress that Croatia has made towards meeting the Copenhagen political criteria, economic criteria and the *acquis communautaire*, and in implementing the Stabilisation and Association Agreement; Croatia's example shows its neighbours in particular what advantages can be gained from being firmly anchored, politically and economically, to the structures and values of the European Union; welcomes the fact that a real breakthrough was achieved during the accession negotiations in 2007 and calls on the newly-formed Croatian government to redouble its efforts to fulfil the conditions for opening negotiations on the chapters that are still outstanding;

26. welcomes and encourages the measures taken by Croatia to decentralise local public administration and considers that, via these measures, more emphasis should be placed on subsidiarity so that decisions can be taken even more closely to the citizens;

27. considers that Croatia's continued engagement in regional initiatives, that has contributed towards further improvement of relations with its neighbours, has to be encouraged and strengthened; and highlights the importance of cross-border cooperation between local authorities in Croatia's border regions and those of neighbouring countries (Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, Slovenia and Montenegro);

28. welcomes Croatia's full cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal and calls for further progress in the conduct of war crimes trials, including the strengthening of witness protection programmes;

29. welcomes the fact that both prime ministers of Croatia and Slovenia have reached an informal agreement in principle, that the border dispute should be submitted for decision to a third arbitrator; calls upon the Croatian and Slovenian governments to make a good use of all opportunities for realisation of this Agreement; welcomes the decision of the Croatian Parliament, that Croatia will not implement the Ecological and Fisheries Protection Zone until a common friendly solution in the spirit of EU, will be achieved;

30. believes that progress has been made in improving the implementation of the Constitutional Law on national minorities, and that the position of the Roma minority in Croatia is improving; nevertheless considers that further progress must be made with regard to the social integration of ethnic minorities, particularly the Roma populations, and of refugees, by promoting access to public services and higher education;

31. highlights the importance of creating specific instruments to ensure good governance, focusing in particular on the fight against corruption. In this context, the extended remit of the Office for the Prevention of Corruption and Organised Crime (USKOK) and the increase in corruption cases being prosecuted in the Croatian courts is to be welcomed; calls upon the Croatian government to further increase its efforts under the national anti-corruption programme 2006-2008;

32. welcomes the progress achieved in the construction and reconstruction of housing units and infrastructure, as well as the housing programme for solving the issue of former tenancy rights holders, and calls for its continuation and acceleration;

33. welcomes the recent progress with regard to regional policy and the coordination of structural instruments, but stresses that measures are still needed to increase efficiency and improve the administrative capabilities of public institutions, in order to effectively manage European funds;

34. observes, nonetheless, that some progress has been made towards the reform of local public administrations, although uneven implementation of the legislative framework for public administration has led to its inefficiency;

The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia

35. considers that the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia has made considerable progress towards fulfilling the Copenhagen political criteria and economic criteria and highlights the progress made at the end of 2007; calls therefore on the Council to decide on opening negotiations with the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia;

36. welcomes the compliance with a number of the provisions of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement;

37. notes that the implementation of the Ohrid framework agreement has triggered radical changes within the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia society, with the full recognition of its multi-ethnic and multicultural nature, this being a key aspect of the political criteria for accession to the EU; again emphasises

that the Badinter principle must be fully obeyed, and that all parties must respect each other and work together within the democratic institutions which the country has struggled to create. Regrets, however, that integration of ethnic minorities remains limited;

38. recommends that the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia learn from Europe's experience in the field of public administration and education, which takes ethnic and linguistic diversity into account; calls for the conclusion of agreements to secure the harmonious, equitable coexistence of the two ethnic majority communities and various minorities; in this context, calls for the effective application of the constitutional provisions aimed at guaranteeing fair representation of ethnic minorities in public administration;

39. regrets the fact that corruption is still rife and continues to be a very serious problem, and therefore recommends that the authorities take steps to eradicate this blight;

40. appreciates the efforts made to decentralise local public administration and the concern shown for administrative efficiency by consolidating various municipalities for economic and development reasons; also stresses the need to speed up the process of financial decentralisation in order to strengthen the authority of local and regional administrations;

41. regrets the fact that no progress has been made on the issue of the country's name. Welcomes the resumption of negotiations assisted by the UN's special envoy Matthew Nimetz, and calls on the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia to step up its efforts to help resolve the issue in line with UN Security Council Resolutions 817/93 and 845/93, thus promoting the establishment of good-neighbourly relations and the development of regional cooperation;

42. applauds the efforts made to increase administrative transparency by guaranteeing citizens' access to public information, but points out that the public institutions involved are not prepared or are unwilling to facilitate access to information;

43. welcomes the decision by its Bureau on 4 March 2008 to set up a joint CoR-the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia consultative committee following the formal request submitted by the government of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia; calls for all necessary administrative steps to be taken in order to enable the consultative committee's first meeting to be held in the first semester 2008.

Brussels, 9 April 2008.

The President
of the Committee of the Regions
Luc VAN DEN BRANDE

Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on 'Addressing the challenge of water scarcity and droughts in the European Union'

(2008/C 172/10)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- echoes the concern of regions and local authorities about the problems observed around the Mediterranean and in central and western Europe due to droughts and phenomena such as abnormally dry years, empty reservoirs, difficulties with groundwater tables, problems with brackish water in coastal water tables, reductions in groundwater levels, changes in the hydrological regime owing to inadequate planning, changes in the normal rainfall patterns and water pressures resulting from natural causes or human action, leading to the consequences already observed by the Commission in its preparatory work;
- advocates a coherent water planning policy in Member States and the regions, in which Community funds invested in infrastructure have the aim of conserving water, preserving uplands and wetlands, regenerating forested areas, water-saving and efficiency and reallocating water between uses, and of alleviating situations caused by severe drought or water scarcity, by providing additional means of water supply;
- welcomes the Commission's Communication on the 'Health check' of the Common Agricultural Policy, as regards the inclusion of water management as a new challenge for the Common Agricultural Policy; agrees with the Commission that the possibility of closer integration of water management issues in rural and upland development programmes should be considered. The CoR calls for the value of arable land and upland areas, rich in water and forests, to be studied as a means of generating atmospheric humidity and attracting rain and of halting desertification caused by climate change.

Rapporteur: Francisco CAMPS ORTIZ, President of the Generalitat of Valencia (ES/EPP)

Reference document:

Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council — Addressing the challenge of water scarcity and droughts in the European Union

COM(2007) 414 final

Policy recommendations

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS,

1. welcomes the Communication from the Commission on water scarcity and droughts in Europe, considering it to be fully in line with Directive 2000/60/EC (Water Framework Directive), which must form the general basis for any water policy in the EU;

2. endorses the Commission's description of the difference between 'drought' and water scarcity, which is defined as follows: 'while "drought" means a temporary decrease in water availability due for instance to rainfall deficiency, "water scarcity" means that water demand exceeds the water resources exploitable under sustainable conditions';

3. emphasises that water scarcity and drought are phenomena which occur in certain regions of the EU and should be managed in accordance with local and regional conditions;

4. urges the Member States and Europe's regions and municipalities to strive to conserve and save water, to cut down the wastage of water and to expand water reuse: these are absolute priorities, above and beyond other alternatives, in order to combat water scarcity and droughts; also calls for structural measures to provide sustainable solutions for water scarcity and drought problems;

5. stresses that to combat water scarcity and droughts, absolute priority must be given to creating an economy that uses water efficiently and sustainably and that saves it. Saving water also means saving energy. Like energy, water is necessary for all human activities, economic and social;

6. highlights the role that local and regional authorities can play in implementing the Water Framework Directive, planning land and water use, developing the various economic sectors, protecting the environment and ensuring supply to citizens of sufficient good quality water;

7. points out that the regions have much to say about the different measures proposed by the Commission, particularly when it comes to guaranteeing all citizens' access to decent water, protecting both surface and ground water, planning water usage rationally, preventing and remedying scarcities in the short, medium and long term, setting the end-price of water,

allocating and reallocating water between uses, saving, reusing water and applying the water hierarchy in all economic spheres, ensuring the flexibility and mobility of water flow between internal or external water management systems, developing infrastructure for water and for land reclamation; drafting drought plans, improving knowledge and information, mobilising economic sectors, and raising the awareness and guaranteeing the involvement of the public;

8. points out that when it comes to water, the subsidiarity principle and multi-level governance are particularly relevant, because it is the responsibility of the European Union, States, regions and local authorities to take action in response to droughts and water scarcities, through steadfast, mutually supportive cooperation between regions;

9. points out that, although climatic conditions and the severity of water shortages and droughts vary in different parts of the European Union, the solutions adopted must coincide in their compliance with the ecological principles of the European water policy. Therefore, preference should be given to local and regional solutions in accordance with the subsidiarity principle;

10. calls for solidarity in all of the Member States affected, the application of the subsidiarity principle and a leading role for the regions and municipalities in order to solve a problem affecting this vital resource and its protection;

11. points out that the Member States and regional and local authorities should focus on the objectives of the existing Water Framework Directive. The Commission is therefore urged to press for application of the Water Framework Directive;

With regard to the effects of droughts and water scarcity

12. echoes the concern of regions and local authorities about the problems observed around the Mediterranean and in central and western Europe due to droughts and phenomena such as abnormally dry years, empty reservoirs, difficulties with groundwater tables, problems with brackish water in coastal water tables, reductions in groundwater levels, changes in the hydrological regime owing to inadequate planning, changes in the normal rainfall patterns and water pressures resulting from natural causes or human action, leading to the consequences already observed by the Commission in its preparatory work;

13. endorses the Commission's commitment to continue to address the challenge of water scarcity and drought at international level, in particular through the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change;

14. points out that the Synthesis Report forming part of the Fourth Assessment Report of the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), presented in Valencia on 27 November 2007, predicts with 'high confidence' that many semi-arid areas in the Mediterranean Basin 'will suffer a decrease in water resources due to climate change';

15. points out that it is the regions and municipalities which, because of their close proximity to the end-users, are the first to have to deal with drought and water scarcity-related problems, often with insufficient resources. Moreover, it is they who know which measures are appropriate for the area in question and who, in cooperation with other regions and municipalities, can implement these measures, with support from national and European bodies;

With regard to planning and rational use of water

The price of water

16. notes that water and sewage pricing is a particularly sensitive and important issue for administrations, as they have to reconcile appropriate incentives to use resources efficiently with the financial impact of prices on users, given the physical, climatic and geographical differences, discrepancies between infrastructures and the different ways that public services are organised in each area;

17. highlights that the cost recovery and consumer pays principles mentioned in the Water Framework Directive do not preclude consideration of the social, environmental and economic effects of cost recovery and the geographical and climatic conditions of the region(s) affected; the application of these principles is the responsibility of the authorities that are closest to the citizens;

18. recommends also considering the 'polluter pays' principle when determining the price of water, as the second pillar of an integrated management system for this resource. This principle would commit all users to better use of the resource, and would make it possible to redistribute revenues according to the different needs and efforts realised;

19. recognises the need to mainstream mechanisms for measuring water consumption so as to promote water saving and its efficient and rational use;

20. asks the Commission to bear in mind the opinions, concerns and experiences of regional and local authorities in its studies on water pricing, especially for issues such as the consequences of strict pricing leaving this resource available only to the service and consumer sectors; the legal framework surrounding supply, treatment and purification; the social and economic impact of water pricing, and the calculation of the environmental costs of the resource;

Water planning

21. considers that land-use planning geared towards preservation and sustainability, which is a competence of local and regional authorities, is a key factor in the proper management of water, and stresses the importance of strict application of the Strategic Environmental Assessment Directive and the identification of European river basins facing water stress or structural scarcity;

22. proposes that the European Union support the regions in showing cooperation and solidarity with regard to water;

23. highlights that, in order to make efficient use of water, it should be possible for this resource to be reallocated between different uses, depending on the circumstances. It is the role of the Member States and the regions to develop the necessary infrastructures and the legislative and governance mechanisms enabling this, in line with social, economic and environmental sustainability;

24. welcomes the Commission's Communication on the 'Health check' of the Common Agricultural Policy, as regards the inclusion of water management as a new challenge for the Common Agricultural Policy; agrees with the Commission that the possibility of closer integration of water management issues in rural and upland development programmes should be considered. The CoR calls for the value of arable land and upland areas, rich in water and forests, to be studied as a means of generating atmospheric humidity and attracting rain and of halting desertification caused by climate change;

25. considers that water planning is the best tool for assessing the water available for sustainable regional development;

26. calls for the inclusion of measures to protect upland areas, wetlands and green areas in order to overcome the consequences of droughts and flooding linked to climate change, bearing in mind that this will require environmental, sustainability and water-saving concerns to be taken into account in water use;

27. understands, in the context of the Water Framework Directive, that water demand management and water use planning are based essentially on river basin districts, in cooperation with the regional authorities concerned; considers, however, that this basic principle must not result in problems transcending the borders of a region or district being considered insurmountable;

28. advocates a coherent water planning policy in Member States and the regions, in which Community funds invested in infrastructure have the aim of conserving water, preserving uplands and wetlands, regenerating forested areas, water-saving and efficiency and reallocating water between uses, and of alleviating situations caused by severe drought or water scarcity, by providing additional means of water supply (transfers, reservoirs and desalination), in line with point 37 and subsequent points below;

29. takes account of the specific water planning requirements on islands and in areas in analogous situations where, due to the limited availability of water, basic supply can be provided by desalinating seawater; in these cases, recommends efficient water use as the most important measure, followed by optimising energy efficiency and using energy from renewable sources, and guaranteeing access to water through storage systems that allow for adequate reserves, together with the promotion and rehabilitation of traditional rainwater collection and storage infrastructures;

30. integrated water management systems should take account of the strategic role of groundwater resources as reserves to be included in drought management and emergency supply plans;

31. calls for cross-border cooperation to manage shared water basins and intergovernmental cooperation in the exchange of best practices and policy coordination: southern Europe is used to water scarcities, and these are now worsening in northern Europe as a result of climate change, as more frequent flooding and water scarcity problems mean new challenges must be faced;

With regard to drought risk management plans

32. considers that the implementation of specific drought plans is an effective way to move from crisis management to drought risk management, and believes that the Water Framework Directive is flexible enough to develop specific water management plans for the river basins concerned;

33. believes that the way ahead, as stated in previous opinions, lies in the exchange of information and the drafting of a specific protocol for droughts or, at national level, the drafting of specific management plans; acknowledges the key role of local and regional authorities in defining adaptation strategies, taking an integrated approach, and encourages them to act in partnership with the other stakeholders, including users. Against a background of climate change, it will be necessary for plans and instruments to be flexible and for knowledge and experiences to be shared. It is important to emphasise that no local or regional authorities can manage these things independently. Support in the form of resources, expertise and data is crucial to success. This can be provided through examples of good practice from other local and regional authorities, but the Member States and the EU should be prepared to help make such support available;

34. calls for further consideration of the guidelines set out in the opinions on natural disasters and climate change, particularly with regard to the role of regions as 'enforcement officers' for the relevant adaptation policies, and in response to challenges such as migratory flows, adjustments to legislation, changes in user attitudes and strengthening of cooperation between regions grouped, for instance, according to river basins; in particular, emphasises that Europe's map of droughts, water

scarcities and related disasters will change as the climate changes;

35. proposes, together with the allocation of Community funds to investment in water infrastructures, that a specific European programme be set up for water. This programme would gather funding from the existing instruments in the Community budget. It would aim to visibly and coherently support actions for access to the latest technology, implementation of good practices, communication measures and improved governance, helping to create a 'water-saving culture';

With regard to the use of Community funds

36. stresses that the European Solidarity Fund should be applied to situations of catastrophic drought, and that catastrophic droughts should be incorporated into the working plans of the Community Civil Protection Mechanism, including specific protocols and in coordination with the drought observatory, by means of an early warning system;

With regard to the consideration of additional water supply infrastructures

37. considers that additional water supply infrastructures (transfers, reservoirs and desalination plants) are means to prevent situations of severe drought, although they are not a substitute for the responsible use of water resources;

38. recommends that additional water supply measures should be adopted once all the preventive measures are in place, in line with the water hierarchy system and subject to coherent planning. Use of different infrastructures should ensure balanced and sustainable environmental, social and economic development;

39. recommends that the competent authorities consider the reuse of purified waste water via adequate regulation and distribution infrastructures as a means of managing demand; underlines the need to take all necessary measures to ensure that water from waste treatment plants is not used for drinking water but restricted to certain uses which are acceptable from the environmental and health angles;

40. considers that national, regional and local hydrological planning as set out under the terms of the Water Framework Directive should include the assessment of structural deficits and resources which can still be sustainably used by these areas, taking the future potential of planning areas and environmental restrictions into account;

41. is in favour of transfers of surplus resources and other inter-system exchanges of water in each Member State as a means of showing solidarity with regard to water, provided that these measures have a positive impact on the environment, and guarantee the quality of water bodies and the recovery of water tables and water flows;

42. considers that, against a background of climate change, energy efficiency and sustainability must be decisive factors when choosing between options for the external supply of water flows to planning areas (transfer or desalination). Desalination is an energy-intensive process and therefore has a high environmental impact, and should only be considered as an option in circumstances where the benefits outweigh that impact;

43. believes that decisions regarding the feasibility and characteristics of external supply must take into account the environmental effects, energy efficiency and costs of the additional infrastructure needed to incorporate water flows into planning areas;

44. concludes that informing the public and complying with environmental and economic conditions will promote social consensus with regard to the construction of additional water supply infrastructure (pipelines, desalination plants). Water in river basins receiving an additional water supply should be used in a particularly consistent and responsible manner;

45. will pay close attention to studies by the European Commission on additional water supply infrastructure, particularly with regard to transfers, reservoirs and desalination;

With regard to water-efficient technologies and practices

46. supports the promotion of research to bring economic activity, decision-making procedures and water efficiency into line with the challenges raised by water scarcity and drought. In this context, appropriate solutions could include creating incentives for sanitation manufacturers to make more economical and water-efficient products, penalising unjustified wastage, imposing penalties for illegal drilling and drawing of water, setting up levies and/or tax concessions, providing incentives for water efficiency in all fields, promoting the use of clean technologies in industry, establishing clear, stable ground rules for transferring rights for water usage between users and for working out the relevant compensation, and developing voluntary agreements;

With regard to the water-saving culture in Europe

47. urges regional and local authorities to set up public communication, awareness and information campaigns highlighting the value of water, and to include the importance of water-friendly behaviour in educational and training programmes. Particular focus should go to informing and raising awareness among tourists and other people who travel from one region to another;

48. considers that public involvement in the implementation of the Water Framework Directive and the definition of water policy should provide an opportunity to raise public awareness and to inform and encourage people to use this resource responsibly; this applies particularly to the drafting of drought plans. The Committee therefore urges the authorities to promote this involvement;

49. proposes the development of market mechanisms, reinforcing the criteria for water saving within the product lifecycle and taking into account quality and certification systems such as EMAS in production processes, eco-design and a 'water-friendly' label for products, so that citizens and public and private contractors can learn their water footprint and change their consumption;

50. considers that the eco-efficiency of infrastructure and equipment must be promoted through the corresponding quality and certification systems. Local and regional authorities can promote water saving and recycling in buildings and urban infrastructures. Through investments and legislation in addition to the Energy Performance of Buildings Directive, the regions could encourage the recovery of rainwater and water from building cooling systems, and could make use of secondary networks in cities and buildings in order to use non-drinking water for cleaning, irrigation and sanitation purposes. Tourist facilities, including golf courses and farms must in particular be required to reuse and recycle the water that they utilise;

51. highlights the essential role of the regions and local bodies in establishing partnerships with civil society and economic players, through voluntary agreements, incentives and taxes, with a view to saving water and improving efficiency;

52. points out that water is one of the areas where most money and efforts are being invested in decentralised cooperation with third countries, and it is the cooperation networks set up by the regions and municipalities that are most flexible, tightly-knit and close to citizens; calls for collaboration and the exchange of information and experience between cooperating regions in order to achieve, with the contribution of the European Union and its Member States, the UN's Millennium Goals;

53. advocates the exchange of best practices and debate between the regions on the subject of water, so that they can learn about successful water management experiences;

With regard to the European information system

54. considers that the Water Information System for Europe (WISE) and the management of indicators are reliable means by which to find out the scale, impact and evolution of droughts in Europe;

55. highlights the role of the authorities in compiling data, fostering basic research and information monitoring, encouraging the development of common methodologies and, if necessary, compatible, comparable indicator systems, exchanging knowledge and experience and prioritising the empowerment and coordination of administrations in order to obtain full data on their areas; therefore, supports the creation of a European Drought and Desertification Observatory to monitor water scarcity and forecast droughts in the context of climate change;

With regard to research and technological development

56. agrees that it is necessary to disseminate and facilitate the use and exploitation of the results of research on water scarcity and droughts, and that technological research and development

activities within the EU's 7th Framework Programme should be enhanced and encouraged;

57. highlights the importance of the regions as a driving force behind technological innovation in the field of water, given that water efficiency will be an increasingly important factor for competitiveness; therefore, proposes for strategic reasons that inter-regional cooperation, information exchange and strategic partnerships with technological platforms be stepped up;

58. lastly, concludes that against the backdrop of climate change, the proposals made in response to the challenge of water scarcity and drought could bear fruit in the short term.

Brussels, 10 April 2008.

The President
of the Committee of the Regions
Luc VAN DEN BRANDE

Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on the ‘Third legislative package on European electricity and gas markets’

(2008/C 172/11)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- stresses that all discussions on the liberalisation of energy should centre around the consumer;
- is therefore in favour of additional measures in the area of transmission unbundling;
- is pleased that the legislative package proposes to complete the internal market in energy through additional legislative measures intended to guarantee non-discriminatory access to transmission networks for new entrants and thus promote competition, to establish better coordination between regulators and TSOs, to promote investment in electricity generation and networks, and to increase market transparency;
- calls on the Commission to take appropriate measures to prevent market concentration and to encourage the diversity of private and public operators; Member States who so wish must be able to decide not to apply the rules on legal unbundling of supply system operators to integrated electricity companies serving less than 100 000 connected customers or serving small isolated networks;
- calls for encouragement of local and regional energy generation derived from renewable energy sources, which are suited to local environmental conditions while cutting energy transmission costs and emissions throughout the EU. Region-specific energy plans must therefore be encouraged; they should be properly coordinated and integrated at both national and Community level.

Rapporteur: Michel LEBRUN, Member of the Walloon Parliament (BE/EPP)

Reference documents

Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council amending Directive 2003/54/EC concerning common rules for the internal market in electricity

COM(2007) 528 final — 2007/0195 (COD)

Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council amending Directive 2003/55/EC concerning common rules for the internal market in natural gas

COM(2007) 529 final — 2007/0196 (COD)

Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing an Agency for the Cooperation of Energy Regulators

COM(2007) 530 final — 2007/0197 (COD)

Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council amending Regulation (EC) No 1228/2003 on conditions for access to the network for cross-border exchanges in electricity

COM(2007) 531 final — 2007/0198 (COD)

Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council amending Regulation (EC) No 1775/2005 on conditions for access to the natural gas transmission networks

COM(2007) 532 final — 2007/0199 (COD)

Policy recommendations

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS,

General recommendations

1. points out that local and regional authorities make an important contribution to the success of European initiatives and play an important role in European energy policy,
2. emphasises that energy is essential for citizens and business competitiveness. Local and regional authorities, as organisations close to citizens, want consumers to have uninterrupted access to electricity and gas, at a competitive price and with a good level of service,
3. stresses that all discussions on the liberalisation of energy should centre around the consumer,
4. notes that the liberalisation of energy has not yet yielded the anticipated results in many Member States and that there is no real single market for electricity and gas in the EU,
5. agrees with the European Commission's analysis of the malfunctioning observed in the electricity and gas markets: strong market concentration, high degree of vertical integration of energy companies, fragmentation of the markets, lack of transparency as regards price formation inter alia, and lack of coordination between transmission system operators (TSOs),
6. is pleased that the legislative package proposes to complete the internal market in energy through additional legislative measures intended to guarantee non-discriminatory access to transmission networks for new entrants and thus promote competition, to establish better coordination between regulators

and TSOs, to promote investment in electricity generation and networks, and to increase market transparency,

7. is pleased that the development of regional markets has been included in the legislative package, believing that this is a crucial step towards a single market in electricity and gas within the EU,

8. is pleased that the European Commission has identified competitiveness, security of supply and sustainability as the objectives of European energy policy and is pursuing them; however, it emphasises that these three objectives are not necessarily compatible, thus necessitating a careful balance between them,

9. recognises that the primary aim of the third legislative package is to improve the functioning of the European electricity and gas markets, but would also hope that the package will work towards other Community policy objectives, such as improving energy efficiency and reducing the impact of climate change. Therefore renewable sources of energy should be made the recommended option,

10. draws attention to a previous opinion in which the CoR advocated internalising environmental costs in the consumer price (CdR 216/2005). Such an initiative would require the implementation of targeted legislation at EU level, whereas the legislative package has no such intention; therefore urges the Commission to propose such a system. When creating this system, however, care must be taken to ensure that it does not lead to a disproportionate rise in energy prices, taking into account the repercussions on the EU's competitiveness and the achievement of the Lisbon Strategy,

11. believes that regardless of the Commission's largely positive impact analysis of the third legislative package on energy, it is imperative to remain attentive to the social, economic and environmental repercussions of the proposed measures, in particular at regional and local level.

Internal market in electricity and gas

Regarding competition

12. points out that the liberalisation of the electricity and gas markets was supposed to put an end to the monopolies of energy companies in Member States and to promote competition. Competition is in fact only possible if, on the supply side, several producers and several suppliers are genuinely competing against each other,

13. notes that at the current time, national energy generation markets are dominated by a de facto monopoly or an oligopoly. As regards natural gas, the number of potential generators is not only limited, but moreover, generators from outside the European Union are not subject to EU rules, despite providing the bulk of the supply,

14. calls on the Commission to take appropriate measures to prevent market concentration and to encourage the diversity of private and public operators. Local and regional energy companies have a key role to play in this respect, and therefore Member States who so wish must be able to decide not to apply the rules on legal unbundling of supply system operators to integrated electricity companies serving less than 100 000 connected customers or serving small isolated networks,

15. insists that new market participants be able to invest in new electricity generation and gas import capacity so as to develop a level playing field conducive to a competitive market,

16. draws attention to the fact that a competitive market also enables local and regional generators of electricity derived from renewable sources to have equal access to consumers.

Regarding unbundling requirements

17. notes that legal and functional transmission unbundling, effective since 1 January 2004, is insufficient to ensure that the market functions properly, since it does not suppress the conflict of interest that stems from vertical integration,

18. agrees that a vertically integrated company tends to consider networks as strategic assets serving the commercial interest of the integrated entity, rather than the overall interest of network customers, and in particular to underinvest in new networks, fearing that these investments might help its competitors to prosper on its national market,

19. is therefore in favour of additional measures in the area of transmission unbundling,

20. notes that the ownership unbundling advocated by the Commission is not unanimously welcomed by Member States despite the fact that this is a way of guaranteeing equal access to the networks for all suppliers and of neutrality in transmission network investment policy,

21. judges therefore that Member States who so wish must have the choice of opting for the approach based on an 'independent system operator' (ISO), while noting that this option can have undesirable consequences for shareholders (loss of control, privatisation, etc.). Member States should therefore also be offered a further option, namely 'effective and efficient unbundling', based, on the one hand, on real independence for transmission system operators and, on the other hand, on clear provisions governing network investments,

22. calls for legal and functional supply unbundling, which has only been mandatory since 1 July 2007, to be applied in both the letter and the spirit of the law. In order to discourage market concentration as far as possible, there must also be a strategy to support small and medium-sized energy companies; the Committee is therefore pleased that the current waiver for small supply system operators (serving less than 100 000 customers) is being maintained,

23. believes that local and regional authorities should be encouraged to become active shareholders in transmission and supply system operators, real hubs in the energy market.

Regarding energy regulators

24. emphasises the need for independent, but competent and efficient regulatory bodies, in a market with monopoly and/or dominant operators,

25. is pleased to see the role of national regulators harmonised and reinforced. Regulators must not focus exclusively on regulated activities, but must also ensure the proper general functioning of the market through ex-ante discretionary powers,

26. notes that regulators often take an overly short-term view, determined to cut the tariffs for the electricity and gas networks at any cost and losing sight of long-term objectives: optimal development of the network and improvement of (or at least maintaining) network and service quality. Regulators must therefore be persuaded to adopt an integrated approach to their task, which should not consist solely in regulating prices,

27. stresses the need for regulators to try and create incentives for the necessary investment in the networks to be carried out, including those necessary for renewable energy,

28. calls for methodologies for benchmarking of tariffs and of transmission and supply network-access costs, established by the regulators, to incorporate not only quantitative aspects (costs) but also qualitative aspects (e.g. network quality reliability criteria) so as to maintain the current level of network quality.

Regarding investment to guarantee security of energy supply

29. notes that not only is the security of energy supply at risk owing to inadequate investment in new electric power plants, but also that it is of fundamental importance for security of supply that new transport and distribution networks are developed, existing networks are expanded and improved, and that the networks are linked up with each other; besides large-scale investment, this means major design and procedural difficulties will have to be overcome,

30. emphasises the importance of a stable and attractive environment for investors,

31. highlights that diversification of energy sources will be important in future to guarantee the security of energy supply,

32. calls for encouragement of local and regional energy generation derived from renewable energy sources, which are suited to local environmental conditions while cutting energy transmission costs and emissions throughout the EU. Region-specific energy plans must therefore be encouraged; they should be properly coordinated and integrated at both national and Community level,

33. calls on the Commission to take all necessary measures to encourage generators and network operators to invest in the construction of power generation plants and network infrastructure to allow access, on a fair basis, to local renewable generation,

34. nevertheless draws the Commission's attention to the fact that, generally speaking, the networks are not currently designed to accommodate a large share of renewable energy, which means that investment and additional funds will be needed to adapt the networks to the development of renewable energy. The question of energy storage will also have to be addressed, which will require further not inconsiderable costs,

35. stresses that policies for the rational use of energy and for energy efficiency are the best way to ease the current tension between energy supply and demand.

Regarding consumer protection

36. points out that public service obligations must run alongside competition and must remain at the heart of the market-opening process,

37. recommends that the freedom of choice of energy consumers should be accompanied by firm guarantees regarding the rights of energy consumers. In this respect, the provisions of the

future European Charter on the Rights of Energy Consumers should have legal force,

38. welcomes the setting-up of a 'retail market' forum, along the lines of the Florence and Madrid fora,

39. calls on the Commission to step up its surveillance of retail markets so as to assess the effects of liberalisation on households, with a view to increasing consumer confidence in the energy market and limiting the risks of market manipulation,

40. stresses the importance of increased transparency in electricity and gas billing with a view to encouraging consumers to modify their behaviour by energy saving and greater energy efficiency,

41. insists on the implementation of neutral IT systems which are independent of suppliers and enable the 'switch' to be managed automatically,

42. calls on the Commission to make the roll-out of smart meters subject to two conditions: it must be financially reasonable and proportionate to the potential energy savings for the various types of customers,

43. recommends that in future protection of vulnerable consumers be stepped up so as to combat the phenomenon of energy poverty.

Agency for the Cooperation of Energy Regulators

44. acknowledges that as regards cross-border issues there is a 'regulatory gap' and inter-connections in some market segments need to be improved,

45. nevertheless, supports the notion of reinforcing the ERGEG rather than replacing it with a new agency. Indeed, rather than establishing a new structure, with the resulting expenses and bureaucratic burden, it would be possible to continue on the current basis with a stronger ERGEG which would have the power to deal with cross-border problems and which would also be made responsible for the other tasks which would be entrusted to the proposed agency. If this does not sufficiently increase competition, the establishment of a separate agency would then be justified.

Cross-border exchanges

46. is pleased that the third legislative package reinforces cooperation between the TSOs by establishing a European TSO network. This serves to encourage cross-border exchanges of electricity and gas, one of the prerequisites for a fully functional internal market. High TSO capacity is a basic technical requirement for both security of supply and effective competition in a common energy market. At present, this is particularly true of the eastern Member States, who are endeavouring as a matter of principle to end their energy dependency on their eastern neighbours,

47. believes that a gradual move towards regional transmission system operators is imperative,

48. points out that the European Commission's proposals regarding the European electricity and gas TSO network confer a quasi-regulatory status on the TSOs, whereas the agency appears to be limited to the role of consultative body. Some rules, such as those on transparency or exchanges, fall rather more within the remit of the regulatory authorities,

49. welcomes the obligation imposed on the European electricity TSO network to publish, every two years, a ten-year plan for investment in the networks for the whole of the EU,

50. is keen for new market entrants, in particular local and regional electricity companies, to have the same level of market information as longstanding stakeholders.

Gas transmission networks

51. believes that the limited availability of gas storage capacity, often controlled by longstanding operators, has a serious impact on competition in the gas sector and, indirectly, the electricity sector as regards generation. It therefore welcomes the proposals intended to improve access to storage facilities and to LNG facilities,

52. supports the implementation of an 'entry/exit' regime where capacity is allocated to an area or region rather than to a specific gas pipeline, thus promoting competition.

Brussels, 10 April 2008.

The President
of the Committee of the Regions
Luc VAN DEN BRANDE

**Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on 'Enlargement strategy and main challenges 2007-2008
Pre-candidate countries'**

(2008/C 172/12)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- believes that a clearer message to pre-candidate countries about the way they will accede to EU is needed. Individual accession might inspire and motivate countries to make the overall process faster. A country's success in implementing required EU benchmarks should be a determining factor in its pace towards accession;
- notices that further capacity building of local authorities and local government associations in pre-candidate countries is needed as, presently local and regional authorities are not adequately involved in EU accession processes;
- welcomes the initialling of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) with EU and urges Bosnia and Herzegovina authorities to work together towards implementing obligations undertaken by the Agreement;
- welcomes initiation of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) with EU and calls on Serbia to continue working towards fulfilling its obligations towards the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia as they remain a condition for further EU integration;
- welcomes the signing of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement with the EU and encourages the government of Montenegro to continue working on its obligations under the Agreement along the lines of the draft action plan for implementation.

Rapporteur: Councillor Martin HEATLEY (UK/EPP), Member of Warwickshire County Council

Reference document

Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament: Enlargement Strategy and Main Challenges 2007-2008

COM(2007) 663 final

Policy recommendations

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

A General recommendations

General progress and timetable

1. believes that a clearer message to pre-candidate countries about the way they will accede to EU is needed. Individual accession might inspire and motivate countries to make the overall process faster. A country's success in implementing required EU benchmarks should be a determining factor in its pace towards accession;

2. believes that a fine balance must be found between maintaining enthusiasm and stability in the potential candidate country, and a cautious and proper preparation for the accession process;

3. believes that whereas enlargement is important for the EU as well as for the candidate and pre-candidate countries, in terms of economic growth opportunities, the securing of vital transport and energy routes, and other strategic considerations, without forgetting the EU common values, such as freedom, democracy and solidarity; in particular, the prospect of accession is vital to securing peace and stability in the Western Balkans. Nevertheless, is concerned with 'enlargement fatigue' shown in some EU member states and believes that greater public awareness should be promoted on the opportunities and challenges of further enlargement;

4. welcomes the marked improvement in the general economic growth, overall macroeconomic stability and raised standard of living in pre-candidate countries, however believes that more effort should be made in strengthening the rule of law and modernisation of social structures. These macroeconomic improvements should be aimed at increasing the quality of life of the citizens of these countries. Specifically, calls for the enforcement of the rule of law — notably through judicial reform — and the fight against corruption and organised crime, including people trafficking, should be top priorities in all pre-candidate countries;

5. calls on all pre-candidate countries to maintain and continually improve good neighbourly relations as they form an essential part of the process of moving towards the European Union. Also points to the need for the Western Balkan countries

to step up their efforts to find mutually acceptable solutions to pending issues with neighbouring states;

Communications

6. stresses that good communication is essential for the continuing success of the enlargement strategy. It is necessary to provide better information on the benefits and challenges of the current enlargement process, as well as to ensure an understanding and acceptance that the process is gradual and carefully managed. All spheres of governments of pre-candidate countries should be supported in their efforts to better inform their public about European values and the benefits of getting closer to EU membership as well as about conditions of EU membership. In this context, the publication of Commission's communications on enlargement should be assured in the languages used in the pre-candidate countries, including minority languages;

7. recommends that the new EU financial instrument, the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA), should be used to improve awareness about EU integration and foster trans-border cooperation, strengthen capacities of representative associations of local and regional government in the Western Balkans, and include them in accession processes;

8. recommends improving 'vertical' communication between central government offices in charge of EU integration in respective countries and local and regional authorities as well as local government associations;

Capacity-building and cross-border cooperation

9. believes that supporting measures that connect people at the local and regional level and encourage cooperation between EU and pre-candidate countries are valuable instruments of cultural and political understanding, which can overcome doubts about integration capacity. Recalls the important role played by twinning and cooperation between twin towns following the historic events of the 1990s;

10. calls for increased measures to promote inter-regional and inter-municipal cooperation between EU Member States and pre-candidate countries, in addition to existing cross-border mechanisms, encouraging, for instance, the inclusion of pre-candidate countries into EGTCs ⁽¹⁾;

⁽¹⁾ EGTC — European Grouping for Territorial Cooperation.

11. stresses that administrative capacity building, not least at local and regional level, is essential for successful fulfilment of the Copenhagen criteria. Local and regional authorities in the countries concerned are not informed enough and generally still lack capacity to absorb EU financial support. In this sense, the CoR has a major role to play in promoting training seminars in order to exchange good practices and lessons learned by EU regional and local authorities;

12. welcomes the agreement on visa facilitation signed between EU and the pre-candidate countries as it is important step in facilitating people-to-people contacts, not only between peoples of Western Balkans countries, but also between peoples of EU and pre-candidate countries as well;

13. notices that further capacity building of local authorities and local government associations in pre-candidate countries is needed as, presently local and regional authorities are not adequately involved in EU accession processes;

14. welcomes projects that connect local authorities of EU member countries and pre-candidate countries such as the 'Exchange Project' in Serbia that included one-third of municipalities and exposed them to European practice in project management as well as assisting with establishing links between EU and Serbian local authorities;

15. encourages capacity building of central, local and regional authorities in pre-candidate countries to align their environmental policies with EU recommendations;

16. democracy in the pre-candidate countries is young and fragile. Determined and sustained efforts are needed to develop and consolidate the institutions and rules of representative democracy. This is particularly true at the local and regional levels, given their crucial importance for a stable and open democratic society and for good governance;

Civil society and public life

17. believes that the civil sector is a very important element in building a democratic society. Further development and capacity building of this sector is needed in order to facilitate their significant role in increasing transparency and promoting democracy. The civil sector can play important role in informing public on EU and facilitating citizens' inclusion in accession processes;

18. calls for further improvement of women's, children's and old people's rights. Further steps should be taken to improve equal opportunities, ensure better employment and encourage more active involvement of women in political life. Protection

of women, children and old people against all forms of violence including human traffic needs strengthening;

19. encourages further improvement in the status of people with disabilities. Particularly important element is improvement of employment opportunities for people with disabilities as it is an essential step towards their full integration into society;

20. encourages further improvement of minority rights and creation of conditions necessary for minorities' cultural self-realisation and development. However, strong action is also needed to improve attitudes towards ethnic groups and promote tolerance and reconciliation;

B Country specific remarks

Albania

21. achievements in better administration are to be welcomed, notably developments related to the improvement of civil registry, ID cards and the introduction of biometric passports; expresses hope this will contribute to an improvement in the electoral process as the most recent local elections failed to be in line with international commitments and standards;

22. welcomes the government's more strategic approach to the fight against corruption. However, corruption is still very widespread and constitutes a serious problem in Albania. Moreover, despite some improvements, the judiciary system remains weak and there is a major need for further reforms, especially in the areas of independence, transparency and efficiency. That is why it is particularly important that the planned anti-corruption strategy for 2007-2013 be implemented and applied vigorously in line with the Council of Europe/GRECO recommendations;

23. notes the very positive climate in inter-religious relations as they represent valuable example in the region, but urges more improvement in the areas of human rights and freedom of expression;

24. calls on Albanian authorities to continue working towards improvement of in the status of minorities in line with European best practices and the Council of Europe's Framework convention for Protection of National Minorities. Strongly recommends to include representatives of minorities in the Albanian parliament and ensure that teaching of minority languages is extended to include all members of ethnic minorities throughout the country;

25. acknowledges Albania's effort in maintaining and developing further good neighbourly relations with Member States and other pre-candidate countries;

26. considers that a further upgrade of administrative capacity is needed in order to implement the SAA successfully. Local authorities' administrations and Albanian Association of Municipalities need further capacity building to be able to absorb IPA funds;

Bosnia and Herzegovina

27. welcomes the initialling of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) with EU and urges Bosnia and Herzegovina authorities to work together towards implementing obligations undertaken by the Agreement;

28. welcomes the declaration on reforms of police forces in Bosnia and Herzegovina and calls upon all signatories to work towards reforming the police according to EU principles. Police reform remains necessary for the signature of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA);

29. welcomes determination of local government structures in Bosnia and Herzegovina to adopt European best practice in improvement of service delivery and welcomes readiness of the local government associations of both entities to work together in improving the quality of local services to the citizens;

30. welcomes continuing reforms of local government and notes that legislation of both entities regarding local self-government is compatible with the European Charter for Local Self-Government;

31. considers that a further upgrade of administrative capacity is needed in order to implement the SAA successfully. Local authorities' administrations and local government associations in both entities need further capacity building to be able to absorb and to fully benefit from IPA funds;

32. welcomes progress that has been made in return of refugees and internally displaced persons and encourages relevant organisations and agencies to continue working on improving conditions for sustainable return;

33. welcomes improvement in cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia which seems as being on generally satisfactory level, but full cooperation shall be required for the signature of Stabilisation and Association Agreement;

Serbia

34. calls on Serbia to continue moving closer towards EU and to endeavour to live peacefully with its neighbours;

35. welcomes initiation of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) with EU and calls on Serbia to continue working towards fulfilling its obligations towards the Interna-

tional Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia as they remain a condition for further EU integration;

36. acknowledges the progress that has been made in the field of public administration reform which is in line with European standards and notes good administrative capacity that Serbia has shown in the context of negotiations on the SAA;

37. welcomes the initiative launched by the Ministry of Justice to do in-depth analysis of the judiciary system as implementation of the legal framework provided by the new constitution is still pending. Further effort is needed to ensure the independence, accountability and efficiency of the judicial system;

38. welcomes further implementation of the national strategy against corruption, but notes that corruption is still widespread and constitutes a serious problem in Serbia;

39. welcomes the improvement in the respect for, and protection of, minority rights and encourages the government to focus its efforts in improving the rights of ethnic groups, particularly in the area of education, social protection, health care, housing and employment;

40. urges the Serbian Parliament to ratify European Charter on Local Self-Government;

41. considers that a further upgrade of administrative capacity is needed in order to implement the SAA successfully. Local authorities' administrations and Standing Conference of Towns and Municipalities need further capacity building to be able to absorb and fully benefit from IPA funds;

Kosovo (under UN SC Resolution 1244)

42. Kosovo's declaration of independence of 17 February is now a fact; it welcomes the decision to launch ESDP mission on the rule of law and stability, EULEX Kosovo. Maintaining the rule of law and stability is in the interest of everyone. Ethnic groups must coexist peacefully;

43. welcomes the introduction of the Strategy and the Action Plan on Public Administration Reform 2006-2011 as the public administration is weak and inefficient and reforms are still at early stages;

44. believes that whilst certain progress has been made at the local government level, its administrative capacities remain weak;

45. welcomes the establishment of the Kosovo Anti-corruption Agency but believes there is a lack of clear political will to fight corruption, which remains a major problem. Further capacity building of the Agency's staff is needed as well as continuing work on development of the legislative framework and implementing measures;

46. regrets that little progress was achieved in the area of civil and political rights and liberties and urges Kosovan authorities to undertake further investigations on over 2 000 missing persons as an important step towards reconciliation;

47. welcomes the fact that elections in Kosovo in November 2007 took place in a peaceful manner; calls of Kosovan and Serbian authorities to continue working towards peaceful settlement of the actual political situation and it strongly believes that there can be no place for violence in Kosovo and that multi-ethnic Kosovo can only be built through co-operation of all its communities;

Montenegro

48. welcomes the signing of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement with the EU and encourages the government of Montenegro to continue working on its obligations under the Agreement along the lines of the draft action plan for implementation;

49. welcomes the adoption of the new Constitution;

50. acknowledges the good record of post-independence Montenegro in establishing good bilateral relations with enlarge-

ment countries and neighbouring Member States as well as good progress in joining regional initiatives and the Council of Europe;

51. welcomes measures introduced by the government to combat organised crime and corruption but notices that these issues are still seen as a serious concern and urges the government to continue with improvement of anti-corruption measures and increased efforts in combating money laundering. Particular emphasis should be on continuation of reforms to the judiciary system;

52. notices continuing reform of public administration and recommends further capacity building, particularly in areas of transparency, accountability, public procurement as well as in managing of public assets and licensing procedures;

53. considers that a further upgrade of administrative capacity is needed in order to implement the SAA successfully. Local authorities' administrations and Montenegrin local government association need further capacity building to be able to absorb and fully benefit from IPA funds.

Brussels, 10 April 2008.

The President
of the Committee of the Regions
Luc VAN DEN BRANDE

Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on 'Full involvement of young people in society'

(2008/C 172/13)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- regrets that although, in the communication, the Commission sets out the need for cooperation between policy makers and interest groups at European, national, regional and local level in the development of the youth strategy, it has failed to describe in detail the role that regional and local authorities would play.
- emphasises that youth policy is largely implemented at regional and local level. Local and regional strategies contribute substantially to ensuring that young people take up high-quality measures aimed at better education and training, better social and professional integration, and active citizenship.
- agrees with the Commission that national and regional education and training systems must teach basic skills geared to the labour market. It should not be overlooked, however, that solid, basic education which helps shape personalities is important too for an individual's participation in social life.
- considers, in contrast to the Commission, that the priority with children of pre-school age is not so much to develop key abilities, as to develop their overall personalities.
- deems the dual training system used in a number of countries, which combines training at work and school and is geared to integrating as many young people as possible in the labour market, to be an exemplary training method, and regrets that vocational training in many Member States is considered unattractive and difficult to accept.

Rapporteur: Gebhard HALDER (AT/EPP); President of the Vorarlberg *Landtag*

Reference document

Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions — Promoting young people's full participation in education, employment and society

COM(2007) 498 final

Policy recommendations

OF THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

General comments on the Commission Communication

1. notes that young people provide society with its potential for development. The future of the European Union, its Member States and its regional and local authorities depends more and more on whether we succeed in creating a child and youth-friendly society.

2. emphasises that young people are also crucial for developing the economic strength of the European regions and municipalities and their ability to survive global competition. Moreover, involving EU citizens in society is an important cornerstone for social cohesion and the peaceful and democratic development of Europe, and one which must already be set during youth.

3. draws attention to the Committee of the Regions' opinion on the demographic future of Europe ⁽¹⁾. Too few children are being born to maintain current population levels. This is leading to far-reaching changes in the size and age structure of the European population. It therefore highlights the need for a policy which is adapted to the different generations and is sustainable.

4. recognises therefore that the Youth Pact adopted by the European Council in Spring 2005 ⁽²⁾, the Commission Communication on European policies concerning youth ⁽³⁾, and the present Communication deal with a subject of the utmost importance.

5. supports the cross-cutting approach proposed by the Commission. It is important to take the concerns of young people into account consistently in all policy areas, in order to achieve greater focus on young people's special needs.

6. points out that responsibility for the introduction of suitable measures in the areas dealt with in the Communication — education and training, youth and employment —, lies with the Member States and the regional and local level of government. The European level plays a supplementary coordinating and supporting role.

⁽¹⁾ Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on the demographic future of Europe, CoR 341/2006 rev. 3.

⁽²⁾ Appendix 1 to the Conclusions of the Presidency of the European Council, Brussels 22 and 23 March 2005 (7619/05).

⁽³⁾ Communication from the Commission to the Council on European policies concerning youth 'Addressing the concerns of young people in Europe — implementing the European Youth Pact and promoting active citizenship', COM(2005) 206 final.

7. against this background, calls on the Commission to check whether the proposed measures conform to the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality which have been consolidated with the EU Reform Treaty.

8. notes that the Commission has not presented an impact assessment in connection with the communication, and regrets that it has not examined the additional administrative and financial burden that its implementation would create at regional and local level.

Importance for the regional and local level

9. regrets that although, in the communication, the Commission sets out the need for cooperation between policy makers and interest groups at European, national, regional and local level in the development of the youth strategy, it has failed to describe in detail the role that regional and local authorities would play.

10. emphasises that youth policy is largely implemented at regional and local level. Local and regional strategies contribute substantially to ensuring that young people take up high-quality measures aimed at better education and training, better social and professional integration, and active citizenship. The regional and local level is best placed to focus on the specific needs of young people, and, therefore, more targeted action can be taken here.

11. calls on the Commission to respect national, regional and local diversity in the areas of education, youth and employment. In drawing up and implementing the coordinating, supporting and supplementary measures, it must not only involve the national but also regional and local authorities.

Better and more education for all young people

12. stresses that European education and training systems are key factors in developing the long-term competitive potential of the EU, and therefore welcomes the substance of the work programme entitled 'Education and Training 2010' ⁽⁴⁾. At the same time though, it points out that the responsibility of Member States, and regional and local authorities, for determining the content and form of education systems, must be respected, as must the diversity of cultures and languages.

⁽⁴⁾ Detailed work programme on the follow-up of the objectives of education and training systems in Europe, OJ C 142/01 of 14.6.2002.

13. agrees with the Commission that national and regional education and training systems must teach basic skills geared to the labour market. It should not be overlooked, however, that solid, basic education which helps shape personalities is important too for an individual's participation in social life.

14. considers, in contrast to the Commission, that the priority with children of pre-school age is not so much to develop key abilities, as to develop their overall personalities. Nonetheless, by offering very young children inter alia technology or science-related possibilities for play, their potential and interest in these areas can be awakened in a playful manner. This can be a major factor influencing subsequent career choices.

15. highlights the importance of promoting language learning as part of early childhood education. This is particularly important for migrant children. It is also the basis for acquiring further languages later.

16. deems the dual training system used in a number of countries, which combines training at work and school and is geared to integrating as many young people as possible in the labour market, to be an exemplary training method, and regrets that vocational training in many Member States is considered unattractive and difficult to accept. However, this system, along with post-secondary and university education in general, is facing higher and higher qualification requirements for a large number of jobs. The attractiveness of this education system needs to be boosted, in particular by improving the possibilities for university access which the dual education system can offer.

17. therefore believes that education levels need to be raised overall. Highly qualified and motivated teaching staff and trainers who not only have technical knowledge and teaching abilities, but also social integrational skills⁽⁵⁾, are a crucial prerequisite for this. In addition, curricula must reflect the requirements of the labour market.

18. welcomes the fact that the Commission has called on the Member States to implement the European Qualifications Framework, and requests that national and regional diversity in education be taken into account here. Thus, for example, solutions need to be found for the inclusion of training modules geared to working life.

19. highlights the importance of the EU programmes for life-long learning and 'Youth in Action'; These programmes which focus on cross-border mobility and the formal and informal learning associated with this, are a valuable complement to national, regional and local education policies.

20. calls on the Commission to look into the situation faced by disadvantaged young people in greater detail in the Communication and the measures put forward by it (for example in the EU programmes). Training schemes, such as vocational training

⁽⁵⁾ See also Commission Communication 'Improving the Quality of Teacher Education', COM(2007) 392 and the Conclusions of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States on improving the quality of teacher education, OJ C 300/6 of 12.12.2007.

with a strong integrational element, can be useful in giving these young people the opportunity to develop their individual potential and establish themselves in the labour market. They offer disadvantaged young people the possibility to complete training over a longer period of time or obtain partial qualifications. Here intensive social support and mentoring for young people is important, and this can only be provided at regional and local level. These schemes can also help reduce the number of school drop-outs, which is still very high.

Youth and Employment: a challenge for Europe

21. notes that the transition from school to working life is becoming increasingly difficult for young people to master.

22. already now many European regions are confronted with a paradoxical situation where they face, in some cases, very high youth unemployment⁽⁶⁾ and at the same time must deal with shortages of labour — especially highly skilled workers — which are set to grow.

23. highlights that the professional and social integration of young people in disadvantaged city and rural areas is particularly difficult, and, in this context, emphasises the importance of European, national, regional and local policies to support convergence and improve regional competitiveness, not least also as a way of creating the conditions required for qualified young people to stay in these regions.

24. agrees with the Commission that particular attention must be paid to youth employment in the national reform programmes for growth and employment, and calls for reform programmes to be optimally dovetailed with the measures in the 'Education and training 2010' work programme.

25. requests that the EU Lisbon peer review process, in which Member State governments are engaged, be extended to allow local and regional authorities and other stakeholders to benefit from peer exchanges across the EU, which would enable them to explore local and regional initiatives targeted at young people not in employment, education and training.

26. considers the steady growth in precarious working conditions with low job security as a fundamental problem, especially for young employees, who are often unable to achieve stable and adequate working/income conditions over many years, and are thus unable to lead independent lives.

27. therefore calls on the EU Institutions, the Member States and regional and local authorities to ensure a sound balance between the interests of the employers and employees, in other words, between flexibility and security, is struck in any implementation of flexicurity. The social integration of young people must not be made more difficult.

⁽⁶⁾ According to reports, youth unemployment currently stands at 17.4 %.

28. believes that the Commission does not adequately address the employment of disadvantaged young people. Besides preventative measures which concern above all labour market-oriented education for young people, intensive, tailor-made support measures — including those of a social kind — are needed to integrate young people, especially disadvantaged ones, in the labour market. It is crucial here to include all young people without exception, and to integrate them in the employment process within the shortest time possible, as has also been called for in the European Employment Strategy. This may also require 'safety nets' for disadvantaged young people seeking work, and the introduction of publically financed qualification and employment programmes targeted at young people ⁽⁷⁾.

29. points out that the EU structural funds, especially the European Social Fund (ESF), make it possible to fund these kinds of projects, and supports the call made by the Commission in the Communication for the ESF to place greater focus on youth employment wherever regional circumstances — high youth unemployment — so require.

30. considers improving young people's employability, as well as their willingness to enter employment, as an essential task for national, regional and local authorities. Efforts in the provision of personal career guidance and information, amongst other things, should be stepped up to raise young people's awareness about career paths that offer good prospects. This might also help secure gender balance in certain career groups.

31. supports the quality framework for work experience by the Commission which is to provide general guidance, since trainees — who are increasingly employed across borders — are in some cases improperly used as 'cheap labour'. Quality work experience, however, provides young people with a useful opportunity to gain initial experience in the work place, which can often play a substantial and decisive role in subsequent career choices and education. Young people in training must be encouraged to gain work experience, and the range of work available for this expanded.

32. points out that not just basic training, but also further vocational training is becoming more important. The technical knowledge and skills required at work are changing rapidly. The challenge therefore is to improve the attractiveness and openness of further education and expand the range of further education measures on offer. It is important to give young people who do not have adequate basic training the opportunity to catch up on their knowledge and close skill gaps (second chance) ⁽⁸⁾.

⁽⁷⁾ In some cases, easily accessible 'work experience' should be made available to young people who have lost touch with public and educational institutions. The partial and temporary payment of labour costs can also act as an incentive for companies to take on first time entrants to the labour market. Studies show that this can have a positive macro-economic impact, especially if one also considers the socio-political impact that a larger number of long-term unemployed would otherwise have.

⁽⁸⁾ These education measures, which are also funded by the ESF, are an essential precondition for entry into the labour market. Examples include literacy courses or courses for completing compulsory education.

Using everyone's potential to the full

33. notes that children and young people from poor families are particularly disadvantaged in many respects, and in some cases are also excluded from education and employment opportunities, as well as health services. In addition, poverty is often 'inherited': poverty and social exclusion in adult life are the consequences of a disadvantaged childhood and youth.

34. stresses, therefore, that fighting poverty and social exclusion must be a priority. This is primarily a national, regional and local responsibility and requires close coordination between economic, employment, education and social policy, as well as a cross-cutting approach to youth policy issues.

35. believes that reducing the risk of poverty faced by families with children must be the starting point. Special attention needs to be paid to socio-economic factors such as segregation and parents in long-term unemployment and of low education levels, in order to avoid permanent poverty traps.

36. points out that it is often local and regional authorities that are responsible for looking after and educating orphans and children from problem families, and that they put in place the conditions that enable such children to live independent lives.

37. points out that mastery of the language of the country of residence is a precondition for rapid integration, better results at school and greater opportunities in the labour market, and is thus also a major factor in fighting poverty.

Active young citizens

38. emphasises that involving young people — allowing them to contribute and share in social life — strengthens children and teenagers, gives them self-confidence and promotes democracy and active citizenship.

39. points to the special importance of participation processes at local and regional level. Participation is at its most vibrant and stable in places where young people help shape their environment and where they directly experience the effects of such participation.

40. notes that it is very important to introduce children and young people to local and regional self-government mechanisms by familiarising them with the positions, functions and responsibilities of local elected representatives and their capacity to improve local people's living and working conditions.

41. would welcome an exchange of experience at European level to boost local and regional participation initiatives, and calls on national and EU authorities, as well as regional and local ones, to develop youth policy by adopting a cross-sectoral approach and working in close cooperation with young people.

42. considers the proposal by the European Commission to present a regular youth report to be a positive step. The report will help analyse young people's living conditions and set out their concerns; it will thus create a basis for cross-sectoral youth policies at the national regional, local and EU level. Care should be taken to ensure that no new reporting duties are created for the Member States, regions, and municipalities. The existing numerous reporting obligations, which also offer insight into young people's living conditions, already contain much of the information needed.

43. stresses that voluntary activities are an important opportunity for young people to become actively involved in society and at the same time gain initial work experience, helping them to make future career choices.

44. points out that voluntary work also allows knowledge and skills to be acquired that could be useful in later working

life. Recognising the qualifications acquired through such informal learning is necessary for boosting the attractiveness of these activities.

45. welcomes, therefore, the 'Youth pass' introduced by the Commission as part of the EU-programme 'Youth in Action', which serves as an individual certificate on the quality of the work carried out by young people in the programme, and supports the Commission's plan to include informally acquired qualifications to the Community Framework for the transparency of qualifications and competences (Europass) ⁽⁹⁾.

46. calls for greater attention to be paid to disadvantaged young people at all levels to ensure that they are given more opportunities to become involved in social and voluntary activities.

Brussels, 10 April 2008.

The President
of the Committee of the Regions
Luc VAN DEN BRANDE

⁽⁹⁾ Cf. Decision No 2241/2004/EC.