

THE CONGRESS OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL AUTHORITIES

Resolution 245 (2007)¹ Challenges and opportunities for peripheral and sparsely populated regions

1. The challenges and opportunities facing many peripheral, sparsely populated, island and mountain regions due to their geographical, physical and demographic characteristics need to be addressed at all levels of governance.

2. The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe is aware that regionalism generally acts as a catalyst for modernisation and innovative planning and that local and regional authorities play a key role in developing the necessary regional and transfrontier co-operation structures and networks which will reduce regional disparities and enable such areas to fully participate in democratic, economic and social life.

3. It underlines the fact that instruments and networks exist for structuring co-operation and partnerships between regions, including the European Outline Convention on Transfrontier Co-operation between Territorial Communities or Authorities (ETS No. 106, 1980); the European Charter of Local Self-Government (ETS No. 122, 1985); the Guiding Principles for Sustainable Spatial Development of the European Continent (2002) and the recent Recommendation CMRec(2007)⁴ of the Committee of Ministers to member states on local and regional public services. The Congress is also preparing a legal instrument on regional democracy in Europe.

4. The Congress welcomes new forms of polycentric development and overlapping networks which offer opportunities for innovative, integrated and effective co-operation between regions and across national boundaries.

5. It particularly supports the principle of subsidiarity which promotes strong local and regional authorities able to optimise the capacity of peripheral or sparsely populated areas to implement the policies necessary for their sustainable development.

6. The Congress is aware that many peripheral and sparsely populated regions are facing particular challenges including:

a. the destabilising effects of globalisation on those regions whose economies are small and without a sufficient local market for their goods;

b. the greater impact of climate change on certain regions including small islands and coastal zones at risk from rising sea levels, mountain areas affected by melting snow caps, and frozen peripheral regions with retreating permafrost;

c. the impact of a combination of demographic trends – the Europe-wide phenomena of population ageing and regional depopulation – means that the remaining population is ageing even more rapidly than in other parts of Europe;

d. the reduced capacity to provide public services and others of general interest, as efficiency thresholds are not reached and the costs of infrastructure are relatively high.

7. However, the Congress notes that certain peripheral, sparsely populated, island and mountain regions are host to extensive mineral deposits and other natural resources which offer opportunities for economic development and for the development of non-carbon-based energy resources.

8. In addition, many such regions are places of outstanding beauty and biodiversity and may also be home to minority cultures whose language, culture and lifestyle is increasingly under threat, even though they are a unique, precious and often vulnerable part of European, and indeed world, heritage.

9. Consequently, the Congress calls on local and regional authorities of Council of Europe member states to:

a. make full use of existing instruments which provide frameworks for the development of subsidiarity, decentralisation, polycentralism, transfrontier co-operation and euroregions in order to ensure that public services and others of general interest are maintained in remote or less densely populated regions and that they are provided as close to citizens as possible;

b. work with the Congress and the Committee of Regions of the European Union on ways to strengthen regional identities, territorial diversity and the sustainable development of regions and cities through new forms of partnership and networks based on innovation and exchange of experiences;

c. encourage partnerships between public-private actors to ensure the development of integrated infrastructures in peripheral and sparsely populated regions and, in particular, to:

i. reconsider regional transportation options and prioritise public transport infrastructures in the light of opportunities offered by transfrontier and transregional spatial development;

ii. ensure that the necessary broadband and mobile telephone infrastructures are put in place to reach remote and peripheral areas with a view to ensuring equitable provision throughout Europe;

iii. encourage widespread use of the new information technologies to improve communication and quality of life at all levels, in particular e-governance, e-health, e-learning and the promotion of teleworking;

d. re-orient regional policies towards the development of renewable energy sources, including biomass, hydro energy, geothermal and solar power and promote awareness among citizens of the need to transfer to these new energy sources;

e. develop mitigation and adaptation strategies for climate change, particularly in those regions already affected by rising sea levels, melting ice caps and retreating permafrost;

f. explore options for sustainable and balanced mining of the rich mineral deposits which exist in some peripheral and sparsely populated regions whilst ensuring the protection of their unique identity, landscape, biodiversity and cultural heritage;

g. create local sustainable employment in peripheral and sparsely populated regions through the development of projects in the sectors of sustainable tourism, new energy sources, new technologies, and decentralised public services;

h. ensure that the necessary measures are put in place to preserve the indigenous peoples, ancestral lifestyles and languages which are still to be found in peripheral parts of the European continent and which are today threatened with extinction;

i. take into account the need to stem depopulation in peripheral and sparsely populated regions when making policy decisions and seek innovative solutions to depopulation, for example through the introduction of integration policies for immigrants prepared to move to remote regions.

1. Debated and approved by the Chamber of Regions on 31 May 2007 and adopted by the Congress on 1 June 2007, 3rd sitting (see Document CPR(14)7RES, draft resolution presented by I. Linge (Sweden, R, EPP/CD), rapporteur).