

THE CONGRESS OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL AUTHORITIES

Recommendation 225 (2007)¹ Challenges and opportunities for peripheral and sparsely populated regions

1. Equity of access to infrastructures, services and economic development is one of the foundations for sustainable development and for democracy. However, peripheral regions, sparsely populated areas and some mountainous zones and islands often face an accumulation of disadvantages due to problems relating to their remoteness, relative small size in the case of islands, their distance from economic and social centres, higher infrastructure costs, and, in some cases, harsh climatic conditions.

2. In addition to the geographical handicaps, the impact of globalisation on peripheral regions and sparsely populated areas is uneven, with the demographic transformations that face all European states affecting them disproportionately.

3. Furthermore, climate change is already impacting on many peripheral regions; in particular many islands and coastal zones are threatened by rising sea levels and mountain areas are facing harsher conditions and the effects of melting snowcaps.

4. Peripheral regions are important to the sustainable development of the European continent. Many are depositories of vital energy or mineral resources and are host to a rich, varied but often fragile biodiversity. Some regions are home to native, traditional peoples and cultures which are an integral and precious part of our shared European heritage and civilisation.

5. Territorial disparities are a threat to Europe's territorial cohesion. Regions able to exploit their natural resources are finding new markets. Other regions are becoming more isolated as their local economic networks weaken further due to the impact of easier importation of goods from outside the region.

6. The geopolitical changes since the fall of the Berlin Wall have modified the borders of Europe, and regions which used to be on the edge of Europe are now in the centre. The redefined boundaries of Europe offer enhanced opportunities for transfrontier and transcontinental partnerships and networks.

7. Globalisation and the information society revolution have transformed notions of space, distance and travel and this has led to changes in the very concept of periphery: places which used to be remote or isolated are now suitable locations for teleworking; islands which used to be isolated have become tourist destinations; and hitherto inhospitable

regions are now coveted for their mineral and energy resources.

8. The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe welcomes the fact that in its reply to Recommendation 175 (2005) on outermost regions: a challenge to the balanced and sustainable development of European territory, the Committee of Ministers invited the Congress to examine its Recommendation No. R (87) 10 to member states having sovereignty over large maritime islands, on the development of islands or archipelagos as extreme examples of peripheral regions, with a view to assessing whether this recommendation should be updated, and if so, to indicate the changes which, in its opinion, should be included in any updated recommendation. This recommendation forms part of the Council of Europe *acquis*.

9. Wishing to develop a coherent strategy for integrated, regionally balanced development of the entire European continent and noting that the extent of the territory covered by the Council of Europe member states has grown considerably, the Congress invites the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe to:

a. draw up a new recommendation on peripheral, sparsely populated, island and mountain regions in the light of the issues raised in this text and in the light of the fundamental changes that have taken place since Committee of Ministers Recommendation No. R (87) 10 was adopted;

b. support the Congress in its elaboration of a legal instrument on regional democracy;

c. develop a common strategy with the European Union on ways to strengthen regional identities, territorial diversity and the sustainable development of regions and cities through new forms of innovative and co-operative partnerships at all levels of governance and, in this context, to consider the development of tools for benchmarking for use in spatial planning policies for all member states;

d. prioritise networks and co-operation activities between peripheral regions on the edge of the European continent and their neighbouring regions;

e. address the urgent problems facing those islands and coastal regions which are on the front line of illegal immigration and trafficking of human beings and illicit substances; the regions concerned should be provided with adequate support and resources to alleviate this problem whilst ensuring due respect for human rights;

f. promote mechanisms for exchange of experiences and good practice and the development of monitoring and early-warning systems in areas particularly vulnerable to climate change and extreme weather conditions;

g. encourage the elaboration and implementation of mitigation and adaptation strategies to ensure that citizens, resources and property are protected from the threats of climate change.

10. Furthermore, the Congress recommends to the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe to invite the member states of the Council of Europe to:

a. support integrated and decentralised policies for the development of peripheral, sparsely populated, island and mountain regions drawn up at the most appropriate territorial level – local, regional, national, even transfrontier, in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity as defined in the European Charter of Local Self-Government (ETS No. 122) and the work of the Congress on regional democracy;

b. promote polycentric spatial development models through innovative policies, strategies and implementation mechanisms which encourage the growth of overlapping networks at different territorial levels, thereby overcoming historic barriers, physical distance from centres and poor communication networks;

c. ensure that spatial planning and development policies for peripheral and sparsely populated regions are conceived and implemented in such a way as to be sustainable, effective and prioritising the interests of the populations directly concerned;

d. encourage partnerships between different territorial levels to facilitate the development of integrated infrastructures in the regions, including transportation and broadband networks, as well as decentralised education and improved local economic growth;

e. provide the means necessary to comply with public service obligations and the development of infrastructures in line with Recommendation Rec(2007)4 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on local and regional public services;

f. make use of euroregions, or similar European networks, to encourage better inter-regional co-operation, the exchange of good practice and the development of transfrontier economic, social and cultural projects;

g. ensure that the management and exploitation of energy and mineral resources in peripheral and sparsely populated regions is undertaken in a manner that is sustainable with regards to both the resource and the environment;

h. explore the opportunities that peripheral and sparsely populated regions offer to provide suitable locations to develop renewable energy sources including biomass, hydro energy, geothermal and solar power;

i. foster the preservation and maintenance of the language, culture, identity and traditions of minority peoples living in peripheral, sparsely populated, island and mountainous 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)7REC, draft recommendation presented by I. Linge (Sweden, R, EPP/CD), rapporteur).