

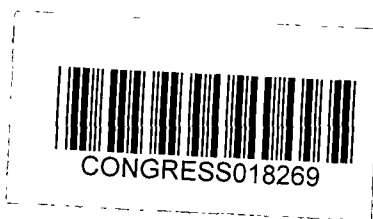


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Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe
Chamber of Regions

Congrès des pouvoirs locaux et régionaux de l'Europe
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REPORT

ON TOPICAL ISSUES

Regions in a changing Europe

(Rapporteur: Mr Claude HAEGI, Switzerland)

EXPLANATORY MEMORANDUM

I. Introduction

Regions are now more than ever present on the political scene and wish to take part in European construction and developing co-operation between the countries making up the new Europe, all of which share a certain conception of pluralist democracy, the need to protect human rights and the application of the rule of law.

Since 1989, Europe has experienced major transformations and changes of direction. The regions have their part to play in the great rapprochement between eastern and western Europe. Their responsibilities and their inter-regional relations can serve as the basis for their contribution to the democratisation of Europe as a whole, the creation of confidence measures and participation in a new and economically and politically stable greater Europe.

If the transformations in central and eastern Europe continue in a democratic and stable framework, it is likely that the process of regionalisation will also continue and that regions will have still more opportunity to make themselves heard at both national and European levels.

II. Europe and the regions in a world in search of a new balance

The globalisation of social and economic phenomena and the new world order will have repercussions on Europe's internal development and thus the future role and functions of Europe's regions.

The prospects for the development and reinforcement of regionalisation in Europe depend firstly on progress in co-operation in greater Europe and secondly on the integration of the European Union, that is the impetus towards integration within the 15 member states.

a. Regions in the European Union are using the recently established institutional structure of the Committee of Regions to claim their rightful place in the Union's decision making system.

Regional representatives intend to use this framework to contribute to the debate on the revision of the Maastricht Treaty at the Intergovernmental Conference scheduled for 1996.

A number of countries of central and eastern Europe have now achieved a form of pre-accession to the European Union, having already been granted associate status. A strategy is currently being drawn up for successive enlargements of the European Union to take in the six applicant countries and the three Baltic states. Under this strategy, there would be no mass accession but a step by step approach, one country at a time, to take account of economic strength and democratic stability.

This process already allows these countries' regions to benefit from various forms of financial assistance available under European Union programmes.

The Chamber of Regions can only welcome these measures and hopes that they will contribute not just to economic development but also to the establishment of democratic regional institutions.

b. Particular attention should be given to the prospects for increasing stability in the Mediterranean basin, particularly as a result of the recently established peace process in the eastern part of the region. In the medium term, greater co-operation could develop between all the Mediterranean regions, including those on the southern shore.

c. Turning to the regions' involvement in the Council of Europe's enlargement process, it should be noted that although discussions on the Russian Federation's accession are currently frozen, contacts with it and other countries of the former Soviet Union are continuing at the Assembly and Chamber of Regions levels.

These contacts particularly concern Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus.

d. Sadly, the war in Bosnia continues to ravage the central regions of former Yugoslavia.

Although relations existed - and continue to exist - between the regions concerned and the Congress, it has to be acknowledged that our regional structure is unable to make any contribution to a rapid end to the conflict. Regions are however called on to establish twinning arrangements and partnerships with their opposite numbers.

e. One recent positive development regarding inter-regional co-operation has been the dialogue and peace process recently initiated in Northern Ireland and it is to be hoped that the barriers which hindered transfrontier and inter-regional co-operation in the past will be rapidly removed.

f. Thus, Europe's regions currently find themselves caught up in the political search for a new balance, marked by the geographical extension of European co-operation, the inclusion of eastern European development in political and economic considerations and the stabilisation and development of national, regional and local democratic institutions, offering the prospect of a new period of security, co-operation and peace in Europe.

III. Tomorrow's Europe - the regional response

Since its inception, the Council of Europe has given municipalities and regions a key role, by providing their representatives with a forum in which they can help to build a new Europe.

With the establishment of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe, a new threshold has been crossed. Regions now have their own platform where they can discuss their problems and their vision of the future.

a. A Europe with a common cause

The Council of Europe has reacted to the new challenges by developing a flexible policy of gradual enlargement but also by creating new internal machinery to respond to current political needs.

It has established a programme of assistance for the countries of central and eastern Europe, DEMOSTHENES, an important part of which is set aside to promote the development of local and regional democratic institutions (LODE programme).

The Congress has already made a substantial contribution to the programme's success and hopes to be even more closely involved in its implementation in the future.

b. Europe and transfrontier co-operation

Since the Summit of Heads of State and Government in Vienna in October 1993, the Council of Europe has given a certain priority to measures to encourage transfrontier co-operation.

Such co-operation has two main strands: it covers all aspects of regional planning and environmental protection and it is also concerned with reducing the risk of conflict arising from the presence of minorities in the regions concerned.

The development of these two strands is of great importance for regional representatives and it is hoped that they will give rise to practical projects.

In addition, a report on the 6th European Conference of Border Regions was submitted to the most recent meeting of the Standing Committee. This led to the adoption of an important recommendation (Recommendation No 9, Resolution No 11).

I am pleased to note that the Council of Europe's work programme includes a special new section on transfrontier co-operation that will be directed by a steering committee, to which the Congress has been invited to appoint a member. The experience gained at local and regional level will therefore have an input into the new programme.

The Chamber of Regions is also involved in other areas of the intergovernmental work programme through its regional representatives on intergovernmental committees, particularly those responsible to the CDLR.

This offers them the opportunity to monitor progress on the proposed convention on inter-territorial co-operation and take part in the discussions of a group of experts on the draft protocol to the Outline Convention on Transfrontier Co-Operation.

They also monitor activities concerned with encouraging the subsidiarity principle, with which CDLR is concerned, and the various aspects of regional decentralisation.

c. The Chamber of Regions and regionalisation in Europe

Regarding the development of the Congress - and in particular the role of the Chamber of Regions - in the Council of Europe, the new machinery established by the Congress's Statute is working well during its experimental phase.

An initial assessment shows that the work undertaken during the first year of the new arrangements reflects a commitment to inter-regional co-operation and regions' determination to develop co-operation within the Council of Europe framework.

The drawing up of the Chamber of Regions' Rules of Procedure has therefore contributed to stabilising and strengthening the regions' operational institutions.

It is to be hoped that Regions can exploit this framework still further in the future to publicise their interests.

Attention should be drawn to one particular project of special importance to regions and the development of regionalisation in Europe: the drawing up of a European charter of regional self-government.

The aim is to give a legal definition to regional, as opposed to local authority and national government, responsibilities and to set out the benefits arising from genuine regional institutions.

Given the importance the European Charter of Local Self-Government has acquired as a reference text, it is to be hoped that a regional equivalent will also serve an important role in the future in encouraging regionalisation in Europe.

IV. The regions and the new east-west relationship

Regional representatives have established important contacts with the countries of central and eastern Europe. It has become clear that local and regional authorities have a significant part to play in responding to the expectations of these countries' local representatives regarding technical, administrative, legal and even financial assistance.

The inhabitants of these countries have been somewhat disappointed in their hopes for rapid progress towards economic and social prosperity comparable to that in western Europe.

We must respond to these expectations and emphasise the advantages of rapid democratic reforms, not just in the economic or national government spheres but also closer to home for the ordinary citizen, in local and regional authorities.

Regions must take up the challenge and contribute to assistance programmes and the transfer of knowledge and experience to help create regional institutions.

Moreover, technical assistance programmes at the national and European levels can be supplemented by partnerships between regions.

This is the background to the first east-west economic meeting of the regions of Europe, organised by the Chamber of Regions and scheduled for 1996 in Geneva, which will provide regional representatives with a forum for contacts and dialogue.

The Chamber of Regions also proposes to set up a data bank on inter-regional co-operation in general and specific east-west assistance and partnership projects in particular.

V. The regions in Mediterranean Europe

The importance of east-west co-operation should not stand in the way of north-south co-operation in general and more specifically the development of inter-regional links in southern Europe and the Mediterranean basin.

It is clear from the conclusions of the third Conference on Mediterranean Regions and the discussions of the working group preparing the fourth one (to be held in Cyprus in September) that fresh initiatives are required to encourage inter-regional co-operation in southern Europe - throughout the Mediterranean area and in south-east Europe, which includes the Danube basin and the shores of the Black Sea.

This new geopolitical context also opens up the prospect of new co-operative links between eastern Europe and the eastern part of the Mediterranean basin.

This co-operation should also be concerned with developing local democratic institutions in this region, based on the European Charter of Local Self-Government, and encouraging regionalisation.

VI. The regions and long-term issues

a. Unemployment

Like national governments, regions face a major social and economic problem in unemployment.

It is a difficult scourge to conquer and regions need to use all the skills and the political and administrative powers at their disposal to develop initiatives to reduce joblessness and stimulate regional economic recovery and job creation, particularly among tradesmen and small and medium-sized enterprises.

Clearly, regions are unable by themselves to resolve a problem of European, and even transatlantic, dimensions but within their restricted geographical sphere they can certainly take steps to induct young people into the economic process.

b. The environment

Regions must also face up to the costs and challenges arising from policies to protect the environment, particularly the problem of reducing, treating and eliminating waste.

Moreover, in the fields of public works and regional planning, it will be more necessary than in the past for regional authorities to assess the environmental impact of major projects, to ensure their citizens a quality of life that enables them to identify with the region and feel responsible for its future development.

Exchanges of views between local and regional authorities are particularly important for the representatives of regions that house nuclear power stations or nuclear waste deposits, an area in which a European-wide safety policy will be required.

c. Rural decline

In predominantly rural regions, policies are required to combat rural decline, depopulation and the abandonment of entire villages.

In the past, regional representatives have focused particularly on protecting and developing mountain regions. The Chamber of Regions' agenda includes an important draft Charter on this subject, to be considered at its second session.

d. The campaign for tolerance

The Congress's programme also includes a contribution to the Council of Europe's Campaign against racism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism and intolerance.

Regions must also become involved in this area and use their inter-regional contacts to spread the message of solidarity, tolerance, confidence and co-operation.

The Chamber of Regions fully supports the statements and initiatives emanating from the Council of Europe and hopes that relevant international legal instruments will rapidly come into force, particularly the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages.

Regional representatives could also put more pressure on their governments to sign and ratify these texts.

e. Participation

Citizen participation in political life is an essential feature of a democratic society.

The Congress has an important contribution to make to the debate on how to reinforce citizen participation at the local and regional levels. Of particular importance is an exchange of ideas on ways of improving women's participation in the political process.

This could also be one of the topics considered by the new European network of training institutions for territorial authorities.

f. Regional cultural policy

Regions' cultural policies are an important way of instilling in citizens a regional identity based on tolerance and respect for others.

VII. Regions' external relations: a factor for stability and greater European co-operation

In response to the growing needs of a changing Europe, inter-regional co-operation continues to develop.

The widening and strengthening of relations between regions contributes to the process of European co-operation and will help to establish networks based on solidarity, stability and peace.

The Chamber of Regions' future activities could include a number of strands:

- as a first priority, the Chamber should take all possible steps to encourage regionalisation in the member countries, particularly those of central and eastern Europe. Discussions are already underway in several of these countries aimed at assessing the advantages and problems arising from the establishment of a regional administrative tier and the tracing of regional boundaries.

As a response to such discussions, the Chamber of Regions might consider preparing national reports setting out the current situation and putting forward guidelines to assist progress.

- Relations between regions and both local authorities and national governments, whether in western Europe or the Council of Europe's new member states, are a continuing subject of discussion and sometimes conflict.

The Chamber could undertake investigations in this area with a view to identifying ways of reducing conflict between the different tiers of government.

- Other topics for future consideration could include ways of managing regional administrative departments, transferring public services to the private sector, the effects of integration on regional authorities' budgets and the regional application of the conclusions of the Rio conference, in order to create the necessary conditions for sustainable development.

- One final proposal is for the establishment of regional youth parliaments, so that young people can be more closely associated, in a responsible fashion, with the development of the regions in which they will spend their future lives.

VIII. Towards a European summit of the regions

- Finally, it is proposed that the Chamber of Regions' experience to date should form the basis for an initial conference of European regional heads of government or executive to enable regional political leaders to meet and exchange ideas on their political institutions and activities and discuss the prospects for regionalisation in greater Europe, with a view to developing machinery and working methods for extending inter-regional co-operation in Europe.