

European Union



COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

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**A better way forward: responding to enlargement
A discussion paper**

by

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Colleagues,

Enlargement is not just a date of accession but a complex, ongoing process, involving different spheres of government in Member States and applicant countries. As negotiations enter their most crucial phase, the cities and regions of Europe have a vital role to play, especially given their ability to involve all citizens through the provision of education and information. As a forum for exchanging and promoting best practice between the cities and regions of Europe, the Committee of the Regions is the place to devise a flexible strategy for successful enlargement based on the different strengths of our communities.

The open debate on enlargement at the July plenary involves members of the CoR and representatives of associations of local and regional authorities from applicant countries. In the presence of **Commissioner Verheugen**, we have a good opportunity to take our thinking forward. This document is my personal contribution to this debate. It has been written with the aim of encouraging discussion and inciting reaction, pointing at questions and challenges for the CoR and applicant states. It is not meant for adoption but to open the way for concrete proposals and action in the coming months.

We have been involved in waves of enlargement before now as the European Community grew from 6 to 15. Yet we look set to experience the largest-ever, single enlargement bringing the number of Member States to 25+. This will include a large number of countries with a Gross Domestic Product significantly below the EU average and complicate the integration process. The Committee of the Regions has strongly supported enlargement and the entry of these new states. We now need to offer clear, practical suggestions for dealing with the administrative and political challenges of their integration. There is no place for warm rhetoric.

I have based this paper on three inter-related questions, on which I ask you to focus your intervention at the plenary:

1. How to prepare the Committee of the Regions for enlargement.
2. How to strengthen the decentralisation process and contribute to capacity-building within the applicant states.
3. How to consolidate economic and social cohesion.

We cannot provide answers to any one of these concerns without considering the others. But broadly, these questions inform the thinking behind the issues raised in this paper. They must in turn be considered in terms of our capacities:

1. to bring the experience and realities of cities and regions into the European policy-making process
2. to act as a multiplier, increasing the scope and success of European policies on the ground in the cities and regions of Europe.

I hope that the suggestions and action points made here will stimulate further proposals from colleagues from EU and applicant states alike.

Responding to enlargement opportunities for cohesion, innovation and capacity-building

Financial aspects of enlargement, specifically those concerning agricultural and regional policy are dominating the agenda of the final phase of accession negotiations. These raise sensitive questions for every sphere of government and public opinion, leading often to misunderstandings and even abuse by populists and extremists.

There can be no place for discrimination on any basis between present and future citizens of EU Member States.

There should be a fair and balanced approach to transition periods but these should only be used in the absence of other solutions and their duration restricted wherever possible.

The future Basic Treaty of the EU must recognise social and territorial cohesion as fundamental cornerstones of the European project.

The CoR believes that there should be major resources available to help the accession states develop their infrastructure, modernise their industries and build the social and training capacity of their communities. Yet, there are limits to the volume of funds that can be absorbed by any Member State in one go.

Based on previous experience of Member States, the Commission has suggested that these resources should be limited to a maximum of 4% of GDP. There are objections from candidate states, but the experience of CoR members may help them understand the reality of those absorption limits.

The Commission's Second Cohesion Report detailed the extent to which the entry of new Member States will widen economic and social disparities within the EU. This will make the debate on the future of the EU's regional and structural funds policy all the more important. On publication of the Second Cohesion Report CoR **President Jos Chabert** called for an expansion of the EU budget allocated to regional and cohesion policy. The arguments for this remain overwhelming. It is crucial that regional and structural funds address the economic, social and infrastructural needs of applicant states and continue to respond to major structural shortcomings in the economic and social situation of many cities and regions within the current fifteen Member States.

We should aim to improve the management of funds responding preferences of municipalities and regions for better-designed programmes for relatively small and medium sized projects, and produce more accurate definition of allocation criteria.

The political groups of the CoR should work together to create an effective, well-timed lobby capable of representing all the different interests of the cities and regions concerned by structural and regional funds.

The CoR should position itself as "the" forum for debate on this issue strengthening the voice of local and regional authorities across the EU and applicant states in the policy-making process.

The CoR has established joint committees with Poland, the Czech Republic and now Cyprus. Our main priority from now on must be to ensure the speediest integration of local and regional authority representatives from the new Member States into the work of the CoR.

We should ensure that all new Member States are able to have full observer status within the CoR as soon as accession treaties are signed and as full members as soon as negotiations will be ratified.

To facilitate this, the CoR will present its case to the European Parliament's Budget Committee for the necessary expansion of the CoR budget.

Enlargement offers opportunities to enrich our culture through greater diversity and strengthen the innovative potential of Europe. Cooperation schemes and investment opportunities in applicant countries offer unique chances for economic expansion, new skills and new markets. An active and well-targeted Structural Funds policy can only strengthen Europe's competitiveness in this regard. Improved and compatible infrastructures, services and business development schemes will facilitate progress towards the European social model and help it reach its potential. Research and education schemes can benefit from new links and broader inter-institutional networks, bolstering the development of a European knowledge-society as defined in the Lisbon strategy.

One of the most frequent suggestions emanating from discussions with colleagues from the accession states is the need for specialist advice. Many local and regional authorities say that they have an urgent need for more trained and qualified staff in a wide variety of areas: e.g. environmental regulation, waste management, urban planning, countering corruption, sound financial management, etc. There is little doubt that a concentrated programme of staff placements and short-term exchanges with counterparts in local and regional authorities within present EU Member States would be enormously beneficial and a number of such initiatives are already in place at local and national level

There should be an increase in the number and variety of exchange programmes. New programmes should be aimed at the "grass-roots" level involving the local and regional actors who will have key responsibilities for administering and implementing key aspects of the "acquis communautaire" and will need practical guidance in their areas of expertise on how to adapt their work practices.

Additional resources should be urgently found to ensure that these type of training and exchange programmes can be undertaken quickly over the next two years before accession.

The Union will get new borders through enlargement. This is a challenge for our cities and regions as well as for Member States.

In order to respond we need to build new, multilateral partnership programmes involving new partners in candidate states and their neighbours. It means re-launching the Barcelona process and facilitating more effective initiatives towards the countries of the former Soviet Union, enabling local authorities to exchange their experience and share best practices through networks of associations, civil society, business and research centres.

Making a success of enlargement requires connecting with all areas of European civil society. Many localities have extended their twinning relationships to central and eastern Europe and these

partnerships should be extended in number and scope. Schools have also begun to establish twinning links strengthening the capacity for exchanging culture and language skills between pupils and teachers.

Given the strategic importance of these networks for facilitating exchange at community level between citizens, the EU budget for twinning programmes should be strengthened.

A joint Commission and CoR-led audit and mapping exercise looking at existing twinning schemes of all varieties and pinpointing their potential for development in encouraging the exchange of best practice in all fields could be of significant use in facilitating exchange of skills and information necessary for effective cohesion.

The openness of our society, its capacity to look at diversities of culture, society, religion, depends largely on the capacity of local actors to be active part of the multilateral relations of enlarged Europe. It also depends on our capacity to make sure that they are recognised as a vital inter-dependent component in the governance of Europe. This is about having a vision for our politics on enlargement and about giving a role to the bottom-up dimension within the EU.

Albert Bore