

Priorities of the CoR presidency 2004-2006

The Committee of the Regions – a strong institution serving an enlarged EU

In the next two years, the EU will be called upon to take decisions which are of crucial importance to its future.

On 1 May 2004 ten new states will join the EU, which will mean that the reunification of Europe will have been largely concluded. In the same year, the accession negotiations with Bulgaria and Romania are to be concluded and a decision has to be taken on whether to start accession negotiations with Turkey.

The enlarged EU will require a common constitutional framework, based on the draft Constitution presented by the European Convention. Such a Constitution would strengthen the EU internally, thereby enabling it effectively to shape the future of the continent of Europe, whilst taking account of the principle of subsidiarity.

Enlargement will also present the Union with new challenges, particularly with regard to solidarity arrangements in the EU. The future financial allocations for the EU in the period 2007-2013 will be of decisive importance in this context since they will define the framework for sectoral policies, in particular for regional and structural aid, which is, in the view of the CoR, a matter of particular importance.

In the political discussion process addressing the key issues in the EU, the voices of elected local and regional representatives must gain a hearing in the other institutions through the intermediary of a strong Committee of the Regions. The bigger the EU becomes, the more its foundations need to be underpinned by local and regional authorities, which provide the link with the citizens of the EU. Only in this way will people be able to feel themselves involved in the European venture.

Our aim must therefore be to strengthen the role of the CoR as a political body.

The CoR has achieved much since it was established ten years ago. It has been able substantially to improve its position with each successive IGC. It has been able to extend its right to be consulted, detach itself from the EESC, achieve administrative and budgetary independence, introduce the stipulation that CoR members have to have a political mandate, together with many other achievements.

The draft Constitution drawn up by the European Convention brings with it further substantial progress. In particular, the CoR is to be entitled to bring actions before the European Court of Justice in the event of infringements of the subsidiarity principle. This would clearly strengthen the role of the CoR as the "conscience of the EU in matters relating to subsidiarity and as the champion of local

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and regional interests". For this reason it is especially important that the IGC is able to permanently secure the achievements which have been made in the European Convention.

The CoR will continue to pursue its goals of achieving institutional status within the EU and strengthening its role as the political body representing local and regional authorities – over and above the Committee's purely advisory role – in order to give the local and regional dimension the status to which local and regional authorities are entitled by virtue of their closeness to the people.

In order to gain more influence, the CoR should focus its work more on issues which enhance its position as the champion of local and regional interests. It should also, as far as possible, speak with one voice.

The CoR should set itself as a guideline the goal of facilitating a balance between the various interests involved, be it between local and regional interests, north and south, east and west, or between the political groups and the national delegations. Every member of the CoR must be able to play a part in the Committee's work.

Priorities

- Enlargement
- The European Constitution
- Inter-institutional cooperation and cooperation with local and regional associations
- Information and communication policy
- Structural policy and cohesion policy: the political priority of the CoR
- Administrative reform

EU enlargement

With effect from 1 May 2004, the CoR will have 95 members, and the same number of alternates, from the ten new member states. This will also mean that the CoR's proceedings will be conducted in nine new languages. The main objective in the next two years must be to bring about the successful integration of the new members into the Committee. Steps must be taken to enable them to have their concerns and their interests effectively addressed in the work of the CoR.

Further objectives will be to familiarise people in the new member states with the political role played by the CoR in the EU decision-making process; and to give support to the development of decentralised structures in these states. With these aims in view, more CoR meetings, seminars and conferences are to be held in the new member states. These efforts should culminate in the organisation of a summit of representatives of municipalities and regions to be held in one of the new member states in 2005.

European Constitution

The draft Constitution drawn up by the European Convention represents a practical compromise which will render the EU more democratic, enhance its ability to take action and bring about substantial progress for local and regional authorities and the CoR.

Particular attention should be drawn to the plan to give the CoR the right to bring actions before the European Court of Justice in the event of infringements of the subsidiarity principle. This would confirm the CoR's role as the guardian of the subsidiarity principle in the EU.

The CoR therefore has a stake in the successful conclusion of the work of the IGC and in seeing the European Convention's proposals for strengthening the regional and local dimension incorporated into the Constitution.

The IGC should also, in particular, establish a legal basis for cross-border and inter-regional cooperation within the framework of the cohesion policy.

Inter-institutional cooperation and cooperation with local and regional associations

Inter-institutional cooperation needs to be further developed. The effective cooperation with the Commission, based on the Cooperation Agreement of 20 September 2001, should be further intensified, particularly at the pre-legislative stage and in respect of the CoR's new tasks with regard to monitoring the application of the subsidiarity principle.

The CoR's relations with the European Parliament should also be stepped up. The aim is to win back confidence and expand relations between the two bodies at both political and administrative levels. We should therefore seek to conclude an agreement with the European Parliament establishing an institutional basis for CoR-EP relations.

The CoR also needs to expand its contacts with the Council. We should seek to closely interlink our work with that of the Council of Ministers, using as intermediaries the regional representatives participating in the work of the Council.

Cooperation with local and regional associations should be further developed; this cooperation proved its worth in the European Convention and in connection with the reform of the European cohesion policy.

This goal will be furthered by the fact that the Commission has attributed to the CoR the role of a contact body in the framework of the planned dialogue with associations and local and regional authorities.

Information and communication policy

The CoR is the body which provides a channel of expression for the views of local and regional authorities on EU matters. The CoR supplements the role of the European Parliament, which also represents Europe's citizens. If the CoR is to be able to fulfil this role, people need to be better informed about the Committee and its work.

If the CoR is to have a greater impact, it needs to step up its relations with the press, particularly on issues of burning interest. There is also a vital need to make the work of the CoR better known by organising- both in Brussels and at local level in the Member States - conferences, forums, seminars and other events dealing with regional and local issues.

The refurbished Belliard Building, which is to be the new headquarters of the CoR from June 2004, clearly offers many new opportunities for achieving the abovementioned objectives. It should provide a "home" for regional and local authorities, a forum for representing their interests and a magnet for visitors' groups.

Structural policy and cohesion policy - the political priority of the CoR

The Committee of the Regions is about to take up new political tasks in several fields in which it can bring to bear the specific expertise of its local and regional representatives. A key issue in this context is the future of regional policy after 2006; regional policy must continue to be a cornerstone of integration, particularly in the enlarged EU.

Mention should also be made of a number of other important issues, namely: the Lisbon strategy for achieving enhanced growth and employment, the creation of an area of freedom, security and justice; and the reorganisation of cooperation with the EU's neighbours, not only to the east, but also, and especially, in the Mediterranean Basin.

Administrative reform

The CoR will only be able to operate successfully as an EU institution if it is able to rely on the support of an efficient administration. In this field, too, the CoR has to rise to the challenges. A large number of the new CoR members will have to be looked after and introduced to the work of the CoR. The CoR has tackled difficulties in the past and has already set in train initial reforms which need to be implemented and completed without delay.

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