

Brussels, 5 October 2004

**82nd EXTRAORDINARY MEETING OF THE BUREAU OF THE COMMITTEE OF THE
REGIONS**

- 21 OCTOBER 2004 -

ITEM 7

**COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS'
EXTERNAL RELATIONS STRATEGY**

Submitted by the Secretary-General

FOR DECISION

MEMO FOR MEMBERS OF THE BUREAU OF THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS
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Committee of the Regions' External Relations Strategy

1. Introduction

The accession of ten new Member States and the European Union's present intentions to intensify its external activities compel the CoR to reflect upon its external relations strategy.

To date, the CoR's priorities in external relations have concentrated primarily on enlargement. Nevertheless, the European Union's external relations are not restricted to applicant countries but also include its neighbours and third countries. The time has now come to re-assess the CoR's role in this process from the perspective of current EU trends and the European Union's new borders.

For this reason, the CoR must decide whether to extend its activities to new countries as a result of the EU's future strategy in this field, which is based partly on the neighbourhood policy and the Western Balkans stabilisation process, and partly on strengthening its ties with other regions worldwide.

However, three questions of principle must be analysed before the CoR can consider any new activities in the sphere of external relations. In particular:

1. How is the CoR to strengthen external relations with the local and regional authorities of applicant countries?
2. What external relations should it adopt with local and regional authorities in countries covered by the neighbourhood policy?
3. What external relations should it adopt with local and regional authorities in third countries?

Once it has answered these questions of principle, the CoR Bureau will be in a position to instruct the Commission for External Relations to prepare a plan of action for each area, which will be based on the decisions taken.

The purpose of this memo is to focus the Bureau's thoughts and to facilitate the decision-making process through recommendations.

2. **The European Union's importance in the international arena**

The European Union is currently in the process of intensifying its international engagement, as demonstrated by recent Communications from the Commission: *Building our common Future - Policy challenges and Budgetary means of the Enlarged Union 2007-2013* (COM(2004) 101 final) and the *Annual policy strategy for 2005* (COM(2004) 133 final).

In fact, the EU has gradually developed its sphere of engagement in a wide range of sectors, including the common trade policy; bilateral and multilateral cooperation, in particular with the United States of America, Japan, Canada, and more recently, with Russia, which the EU considers to be a key partner in its immediate neighbourhood; development cooperation, and humanitarian and financial assistance; and the external aspects of internal policy (energy, environment, transport, home affairs and justice).

Furthermore, the European Union has set up a number of instruments, which the Commission's Communication on *the financial perspectives* proposes to simplify in order to enhance the cohesion of the EU's external activities. Finally, it has established ties and cooperation arrangements with international organisations that will eventually enable the EU to influence global governance.

Thus, the European integration process has revealed new shared interests, which have drawn attention to the added value of collective action in terms of impact, in an area that is considered an essential aspect of national sovereignty.

This approach has been endorsed in the Constitutional Treaty, which strengthens the EU's external relations role, defines its principles and objectives, clarifies its remit, and ensures coordination and the complementarity of instruments.

As a body of the European Union, the CoR must assess the scope of its mission and its ability to contribute to the EU's international relations in order to establish whether its members' qualities and background, as well as its position within the European institutional framework, give it a specific role to play in EU external relations.

The CoR could, within the parameters of its resources and its institutional mission, work with other European institutions to contribute not only to EU relations with its neighbours but also with third countries. It could also play a role in implementing specific cooperation programmes.

The CoR can use its members' experience to help local and regional authorities in applicant countries to prepare for their involvement in their country's accession to the European Union. It could also use its members' experience to develop local and regional democracy, which is indispensable to political stability in neighbouring and third countries.

For these reasons, the CoR must remain open to dialogue and cooperation.

3. CoR relations with local and regional authorities outside the European Union

3.1 The CoR and applicant countries (Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia, Turkey)

In recent years, enlargement has been one of the CoR's priorities. In 1997, first contacts were established with local and regional authorities in applicant countries. In 1998, the CoR Bureau formalised the dialogue by setting up an ad hoc Bureau group called the CoR/CEEC – Cyprus Liaison Group.

Through the initiative of the CoR/CEEC – Cyprus Liaison Group, the CoR, with the support of national associations of local and regional authorities, held some fifteen conferences and seminars in applicant countries over the last four years. These events raised awareness of European realities amongst local and regional authorities, and encouraged them to prepare for accession.

The establishment of the CoR external relations commission in 2002 underscored the CoR's wish to play a greater role in the enlargement process of the EU. In particular, it delivered a number of opinions on the subject and facilitated the creation of four joint committees that brought the CoR together with the local and regional authorities of Poland, the Czech Republic, Cyprus, and Bulgaria. These committees met twice a year until the date of accession.

The next EU enlargement must also play a central role in the CoR's external relations priorities. Therefore, Romanian, Bulgarian, and Croatian accession, and Turkey's future prospects are to remain amongst the CoR's major concerns for some years to come.

Under the circumstances, the CoR should waste no time in creating opportunities for structured dialogue with the local and regional authorities of applicant countries. Priority should be given to the local and regional authorities of Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia, where accession negotiations with the EU are already under way. Cooperation with Turkey should run parallel to developments in this country's progress towards accession.

Strengthening ties with the local and regional authorities of applicant countries could mean setting up joint committees with Romania and Croatia as of next year. It could also involve meetings and other contacts with the local and regional authorities of these two countries and Turkey.

The object of cooperation is to introduce them to the different tools involved in the EU decision-making process, the workings of EU common policies and their consequences for regional and local authorities. Cooperation will also make it possible to provide information regarding the CoR's role within the European institutional framework. The CoR can also complement the Council of Europe's efforts to clarify the realities of local democracy in Europe.

3.2 CoR relations with the local and regional authorities of neighbouring countries

a. Relations with local and regional authorities in the Western Balkan States

The CoR could examine the possibility of establishing contacts with the towns and regions of the Western Balkans with a view to actively lending its support to strengthening local and regional democracy and decentralisation.

b. Neighbourhood policy (relations with Russia, Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus, States covered by the Euro-Mediterranean partnership, and possibly Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia)¹

Upon the initiative of the European Commission; in 2004 the European Union launched a new strategy targeting neighbouring States that did not, with the exception of the Western Balkans, aspire to accession. The strategy aims to create a second zone of prosperity and stability on the EU's outer borders.

There are two aspects to the new policy. The first concerns states on the EU's eastern borders, and the second concerns states on its southern Mediterranean borders, i.e. Maghreb, Mashrek and Israel.

In one of its recent opinions (CdR 175/2003, RELEX-013, final WHEREAS), the CoR pointed out that EU relations with these countries, especially following enlargement, would be of considerable importance not only for the security and stability of these countries but for Europe as a whole.

As a consequence, the CoR could, whilst remaining within the confines of its institutional remit, initiate cooperation with the local and regional authorities of willing neighbouring countries and so work alongside other European institutions to achieve security and political and economic stability on Europe's borders.

The CoR could lend its support and its members' experience to cooperation projects on behalf of local and regional authorities in countries that benefit from EU financial assistance.

CoR dialogue with local and regional authorities in neighbouring States could serve to strengthen the EU's neighbourhood policy as well as develop local democracy, decentralisation and the modernisation of local administrations.

c. Relations with the local and regional authorities of EFTA member States (Norway, Switzerland, Iceland and Liechtenstein)

The neighbourhood policy, as outlined above, should not prevent the CoR from developing relations with local and regional authorities in EFTA (European Free Trade Association) Member States.

¹ The inclusion of the three Southern Caucasian States in the neighbourhood policy was put forward in a Communication from the Commission in May 2004.

3.3 CoR relations with the local and regional authorities of third countries

The European Union has succeeded in developing its international role over the years in order to become a true global partner, defending its fundamental values. It believes that it has the duty and the capacity to actively contribute to sustainable development, security and stability in the rest of the world.

In this context, and in view of its specific role, the CoR could join other European institutions in supporting the development of decentralisation and decentralised cooperation in interested countries, thereby bringing substantial added value to international cooperation amongst states.

Nevertheless, opening a dialogue with local and regional authorities in other parts of the world implies extremely vast geopolitical reach and therefore requires prioritisation and a case-by case approach involving other European institutions such as the European Commission, the European Parliament, and the Council of Europe.

The activities of the CoR and its members in this sphere may be used to complement European Commission and Community funded cooperation projects.

Relations between the CoR and the rest of the world should not be considered a future priority. Nevertheless, the CoR could, on a case-by case basis, look into the possibility of contributing to the reinforcement of local and regional democracy and decentralisation within the parameters of its inter-institutional role and its limited resources.

Furthermore, the European Commission is ready to involve the Committee of the Regions in a number of its projects, where the experience and know-how of the CoR and its members could add value to the proposed activities.

4. Recommendations

4.1 Relations between the CoR and the local and regional authorities of applicant countries (Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia and Turkey)

- Strengthen and develop relations between the CoR and the local and regional authorities of applicant countries, prioritising Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia. The development of relations with Turkish local and regional authorities should run parallel to Turkey's progress towards accession.
- Set up joint committees with Romania and Croatia as of 2005.
- Instruct the RELEX Commission to draw up a strategy and present concrete proposals for a structured dialogue with regional and local authorities in applicant countries whilst respecting the priorities outlined above.

4.2 Relations between the CoR and the local and regional authorities of neighbouring countries

Instruct the RELEX Commission to identify the CoR's priorities for the development of relations with the local and regional authorities of neighbouring countries and to present its recommendations to the Bureau.

4.3 Relations between the CoR and the local and regional authorities of third countries

Instruct the RELEX Commission to develop criteria that would facilitate a case-by-case decision-making process for establishing relations with local and regional authorities in other parts of the world, whilst bearing in mind the parameters of the CoR's inter-institutional role and its limited resources.

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PROPOSAL

Bureau members are asked to take a decision on the proposals set out in this document.
