

DECLARATION OF VENICE: "EUROPE NEEDS ITS CITIZENS"

Strong Regions and Cities - the pillars of Europe

Venice, July 5, 2002

"The Union contributes to the preservation and to the development of these common values while respecting the diversity of the cultures and traditions of the peoples of Europe as well as the national identities of the Member States and the organisation of their public authorities at national, regional and local levels" (The Charter of fundamental rights of the European Union)

1. CITIZENS FIRST

1.1

Our objective is a strong Europe, which safeguards its heritage, meets its responsibilities for the future and finds acceptance among its citizens. We believe that the EU must focus its politics on the citizens of Europe, become more democratic, closer to the people, more transparent and of course, more efficient and accountable. Citizens must understand who is responsible for what and which are the competencies of the different governmental levels.

1.2

The regions, counties, cities and municipalities were always willing to support the integration progress, to meet the expectations of EU politics, and to fulfil the conditions and criteria to participate in the EU projects and programs. Now it is time for "citizens first". The EU has to make bigger efforts to meet first the expectations of the citizens and to respond to the challenges its citizens expect it to tackle and deal with.

2. STRONG REGIONS AND CITIES: THE PILLARS OF EUROPE

2.1

Citizens only will accept the European integration process if local and regional diversity and people's links with their roots and their cultural heritage are guaranteed. Regions, counties, cities and municipalities create identity and security in a 'globalised' world. The global society with its lack of transparency, the abundance and the arbitrary nature produce in many people a feeling of anxiety and insecurity. 'Europeanisation' and 'globalisation' are accepted only if the local homeland develops an identity both within a national and European context.

2.2

Regional and local authorities are a crucial part of Europe's political culture. Democracy starts right at the bottom in the villages and cities. Autonomy and local self-government must be seen as the basic prerequisites for a Europe that creates unity in diversity.

2.3

Regional and local authorities have increased political influence both in the federally organised Member States and in the more centralized ones. This decentralisation process has led to more power for regions and local authorities. In several member States, regions are even invested with legislative competences, have their own constitution, their own government and their own

parliament, without interference of national government or parliament.

2.4

The local and regional levels are partly or wholly responsible for the implementation and execution of European policies. Regions or municipalities implement 70% of European decisions, rules and regulations. This requires a full recognition of the levels of local and regional governments as legitimate partners in the Community's decision-making processes, especially when they are competent, according to their own constitutional situation.

3. SUBSIDIARITY AS PRINCIPLE FOR A CLEAR REPARTITION OF COMPETENCES

3.1

Above all, subsidiarity horizontal as well as vertical, must be the guiding principle for European activity and for a clear division of powers laid down in a European constitutional treaty. EU, Member States, Regional and Local representatives are equal partners and together, according to their own competencies and responsibilities, aim to build a Union, which is more effective and closer to the citizens.

EU's politics must prefer the tasks that can be dealt with only at European level. This does not exclude to transfer new tasks and competences at European level, but - if the reason justifying the transfer should disappear - some areas, currently handled at European level, could eventually be transferred back to the Member States.

3.2

Subsidiarity and closeness to citizens must not be used however as pretexts for reverting to nationalism or abandoning the process of European integration.

3.3

There should be a clear description of tasks, responsibilities, competences and instruments of the European Union and it should be made a clear distinction between exclusive, shared and complementary competences of the European Union. As regards the powers accruing to the EU, the hitherto largely unstructured forms of action provided for in the treaties (regulation, harmonisation, mutual recognition, supplementation, promotion, coordination, enforcement) should be definitively listed and defined in the treaty.

3.4

The European Union must basically have competence in the areas of foreign, security and defence policy, functioning and economically competitive single European market, joint representation abroad, the single currency, the Common Agricultural Policy, the structural policy and the economic and social cohesion and, where cross-border arrangements are in place, in the fields of justice, internal security, transport, infrastructure, the environment and health protection policies. The European Union should also have responsibility for cross-border arrangements safeguarding the basic freedoms enshrined in the Treaties, but without thereby acquiring regulatory powers throughout entire fields of activity. Conversely, everything relating to established civil and cultural traditions and to what is referred as "civil society" should remain the preserve of the Member States, i.e. matters such as Member States' internal administration (including local autonomy, family affairs and social security), the labour market, non-profit-making and charitable organisations and activities, education, culture, sport, among others.

3.5

Any additional transfer of powers to the Community should remain the exception to the rule, and there must be special reasons to justify it. It should be made clear that stated objectives in treaties do not automatically give powers to the EU. The catalogue of EU competencies should not be undermined by soft-law and open method of cooperation.

3.6

As "Masters of the Treaties", the Member states should return sole responsibility for treaty amendments requiring ratification.

4. SOLIDARITY TOWARDS THE LESS FAVOURED REGIONS

4.1

European solidarity, which is currently reflected above all in the redistribution of finances through the Structural and Cohesion Funds, is an important and necessary element in the process of European unification. The system used up to now shows evident efficiency losses and creates an excessive bureaucratic burden, which an enlarged Union will no longer be able to bear. We propose that the Structural and Cohesion Funds be reformed in a way to create efficiency and safeguards, by focussing on the less favoured regions.

5. THE EPP GROUP IN THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

5.1

As the COR Members have a political elected mandate, the COR must take a political stance, press its views about EU politics concerning the local and regional levels and, at the same time, inform and talk to the citizens about the process of European integration.

5.2

This is why the EPP in the COR wants to strengthen the role of the political groups in the COR. Organizing the COR mainly along national lines is felt to be unbalanced and often too clumsy. The political group shall contribute more to COR political opinion - forming.

5.3

The EPP members in the COR are willing to fully contribute to further European integration policy and to take a pro-active part in areas where the EU has clear competencies and responsibilities.

5.4.

The EPP group in the COR proposes that all the presidents of regions and counties, as well as the mayors of the European Union and the candidate countries, bring the voice of their citizens to the European Convention on the future of Europe through the Committee of the Regions. In this way, the COR can strengthen the citizens' voice in Europe.

5.5

EPP members in the CoR representing regions and local authorities call the Member states, the European Commission, the Council, the European Parliament and the European convention on the future of Europe to take in consideration their requests by recognizing the respect towards the legislative and political powers of the member States' internal political units in their legislative, executive and judicial relations with the institutions of the Community.

6. STRENGTHENING THE POLITICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL ROLE OF THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS AND THE LOCAL AND REGIONAL AUTHORITIES IN EUROPE

6.1

The Committee of the Regions is the only EU body, which for the first time established a legally enshrined obligation to listen to the representatives of local and regional authorities in those areas where they are directly concerned or where they are responsible for implementing policy. In order to reinforce the COR's political role in the EU decision making process, its role must clearly go beyond its current purely consultative functions.

The EPP Group in the Committee of the Regions asks for:

- A) Shaping the COR's political role as a guardian of the principles of subsidiarity, proportionality and proximity. Every topic dealt by the COR should be examined thoroughly for its compatibility with these principles.
- B) A special role of the CoR in the monitoring process of the implementation of EU policies according to the subsidiarity principle so that the European level does not interfere in areas where the national, regional or local level is responsible.
- C) Amending Article 5 of the Treaty in order to take account of the sub-national level mentioning the principle of subsidiarity.
- D) Getting the right for the COR to bring an action before the European Court of Justice so as to preserve its prerogatives and in case of violation of the principle of subsidiarity.
- E) Increasing the COR participation in the European decision-making process, in which all political levels in the Member States, from local authorities up to regions with legislative or similar powers, have a role to play and shoulder their share of responsibility.
- F) The COR should participate in the co-decision Trilogue between Commission - Council - Parliament for the ten cases of its obligatory consultation.
- G) The COR should have a suspensive right of veto for:
 - i) Those legislative acts, which directly concern local and regional levels and where the legislative authorities have not sufficiently explained why they did not follow the opinion elaborated by the COR.
 - ii) All cases where local and regional authorities must bear the financial burden derived from EU legislative.

The EPP members in the COR call the Member states, the European Commission, the Council, the European Parliament and the European Convention on the future of Europe to strengthen the political and institutional role of the Committee of the Regions and the regions, counties, cities and municipalities in order to bring Europe closer to its citizens and to encourage further European integration.

This declaration must be sent to the Heads of governments from EPP parties and to the local and regional representatives of Member States and candidate countries. Citizens of regions, counties, municipalities and cities are invited to communicate their thoughts, opinions and contributions on the future development of the European Union. These contributions will be analysed and summarised in one report that will be introduced to the public and sent to the Members of the Convention on the future of Europe.