

The COR assumes that the individual proposals on the ongoing development of the Fifth Environmental Action Programme are part of the co-decision process involving the European Parliament and the Council under Article 130s(3) of the EC Treaty. When points of detail are clarified, account should therefore be taken of the powers of the Member States and the

regional and local authorities in accordance with the first paragraph of Article 3b and the second sentence of Article 4(1) of the EC Treaty. Instead of issuing constant streams of new, uncoordinated procedural rules, the European Commission should concentrate on setting minimum ecological standards.

Brussels, 18 September 1996.

*The Chairman
of the Committee of the Regions*

Pasqual MARAGALL i MIRA

Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on the 'Report from the Commission on the implementation of cross-border cooperation between the Community and countries of Central and Eastern Europe in 1994'

(97/C 34/04)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS,

Having regard to the Report from the Commission on the implementation of cross-border cooperation between the Community and countries of Central and Eastern Europe in 1994 (COM(95) 662 final);

Having regard to the decision taken by the European Commission on 15 March 1996, under the first paragraph of Article 198c of the Treaty establishing the European Community, to consult the Committee of the Regions on the matter;

Having regard to the decision of 8 March 1996 to direct Commission 1, Regional Development, Economic Development and Local and Regional Finances, to draw up the relevant Opinion;

Having regard to the Draft Opinion adopted by Commission 1 on 21 June 1996 (Rapporteur: Mr Ermisch) (CdR 207/96 rev.);

Having regard to the Decision of the European Parliament of 19 October 1993;

Bearing in mind the Commission Notice of 1 July 1994 laying down guidelines for operational programmes which Member States are invited to establish in the framework of a Community initiative concerning border developments, cross-border cooperation and selected energy networks⁽¹⁾;

Having regard to Commission Regulation (EC) No 1628/94 of 4 July 1994 concerning the implementation of a programme for cross-border cooperation between countries in Central and Eastern Europe and the Member States of the European Union in the framework of the Phare Programme;

Having regard to The Declaration of the European Conference on Cooperation in Spatial Planning in the New Central Europe of 6 and 7 May 1996 (Bindlach Declaration) in which the regions again acknowledge their responsibility for actively promoting East-West convergence,

⁽¹⁾ OJ No C 180, 1. 7. 1994, p. 60.

unanimously adopted the following Opinion at its 14th Plenary Session on 18 and 19 September 1996 (meeting of 19 September).

1. Introduction

1.1. Cross-border cooperation is an important facet of the European integration process. Border regions are not only bridges between the EU's Member States but are also bridges to its neighbours. As a result they exert a considerable influence on the neighbouring states.

1.2. Historical events have frequently conspired to sideline economic and infrastructural development in cross-border regions. Cross-border cooperation represents one attempt to remedy this situation.

1.3. If cross-border cooperation is to be successful, it must be a bottom-up process. Local inhabitants are alive to the opportunities which such cooperation offers their region and generally speaking they are more familiar than anyone else with their 'deficit'. Cross-border cooperation thus provides clear evidence of the significance of the subsidiarity principle.

1.4. There is a further dimension to cooperation across the EU's external frontier. The aim must be not only to build up cross-border infrastructural and administrative networking, but also to promote integration into the European Union of associated and other neighbouring states. Similarly, the need to reduce the gap in living standards can only be met through closer cooperation.

1.5. Since 1989, the European Union has been promoting internal cross-border cooperation through its Interreg scheme. This is designed to prepare frontier regions, which are frequently handicapped by their outlying location, for the single market; it is also seen as a contribution to regional cooperation and, consequently, to the application of the subsidiarity principle.

1.6. The Interreg I Community initiative which ran from 1989 to 1994, could obviously not take account of subsequent political developments: for instance, it did not cover the Länder, of the former GDR.

1.7. A dense network of cross-border links developed very quickly along the EU's external frontier — from the Baltic to the Mediterranean. Euro regions were established along the lines of those already created across internal frontiers.

1.8. Cooperation by towns and local authorities with comparable units in neighbouring states is also of great importance. The twin towns established on the German-Polish frontier in the aftermath of the war provide the best example of this. An impressive number of joint projects already exist along this border. The new Member States have also made significant progress in establishing cross-border links with third-country neighbours. In this connection, the COR would draw attention to the 'German-Polish Local Authority Committee' established by the German section of the Council of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe and the Association of Polish Towns.

1.9. The updating of the support machinery for cross-border cooperation also had to take account of political changes in Europe. Since, for legal reasons, it was not possible to establish a uniform support programme for cooperation across the EU's external frontier, two compatible instruments were provided.

1.10. The Interreg initiative was revived in respect of intra-EU border regions, including those in Germany's new Eastern Länder.

1.11. Support for cooperation between EU frontier regions and associated countries is provided under the Phare/Crossborder programme. Aid totalling ECU 1 039 million (1995: 150 million; 1996: 180 million) is available under this programme for cooperation across the Community's external frontier in the period from 1994 to 1999. The award criteria are the same as those of Interreg II. The relevant regional decision-making bodies must be automatically involved in the selection of suitable projects and measures.

2. Comments

2.1. The Committee welcomes the Commission report on the implementation of cross-border cooperation between the Community and countries of Central and Eastern Europe in 1994.

2.2. The Committee also associates itself, in particular, with the general endorsement of the results of regional cooperation between EU Member States and associated countries under the Interreg II Community initiative and the Phare/Crossborder programme.

2.3. It believes that such cooperation can do much to bring these associated countries closer to the European Union.

2.4. The Committee notes with approval that, in order to take account of the special requirements of the Baltic States and Albania, maritime frontiers have for the first time, been brought within the scope of the programme. It believes that this will improve cooperation in the fields of economic development and environmental protection, and also boost existing cooperation — particularly in the Baltic region.

2.5. The Committee also welcomes the fact that, for the first time, the CEECs can participate directly in the ECOS/Overture Programme with specially earmarked assistance of MECU 2.

2.6. The Committee stresses the need to use cross-border cooperation, as a special instrument of regional policy, to reduce imbalances in regional economic structure and promote regional and local integration in frontier areas. This aim should be taken into account when selecting projects and measures. Regional — and therefore structural — policy should emerge gradually from spatial planning policy.

2.7. Although projects and measures which go beyond these objectives can undoubtedly have a boost on the economic development of associated countries, they should be put into effect under other assistance programmes. The overall national perspective cannot be the decisive criterion for cooperation under Interreg II or Phare/Crossborder Programme.

2.8. The Committee would stress the importance of the role of local and regional authorities in the monitoring committees. The Committee considers that successful cross-border cooperation cannot be imposed by central government; it should emanate from the regions, i.e. be a bottom-up process.

2.9. The Committee therefore endorses the efforts of all participants to decentralize decision-making on the allocation of resources.

2.10. The Committee welcomes the Commission's decision to bring the time schedules of Interreg II and Phare/Crossborder into line.

2.11. The Committee notes that Interreg II and Phare/Crossborder approval procedures differ, because of the different legal nature of the two instruments. The

Commission is therefore asked to develop, in conjunction with the competent regional authorities, arrangements which will reduce the resultant difficulties for the selection and subsequent management of suitable projects.

2.12. The Committee welcomes the Commission's proposal to develop the Interreg II initiative and Phare/Crossborder Programme into a kind of 'pre-accession structural fund'. Ensuring greater compatibility between the support instruments will strengthen the process of integration of the associated CEECs.

2.13. The Committee assumes that the resources made available under the Phare/Crossborder Programme will be adjusted to take account of the accession of new Member States. This is the only way of ensuring that the existing level of cooperation can be maintained and that current projects and measures can be continued.

2.14. The Committee stresses the particular importance of support for measures and projects focusing on youth, culture and university cooperation ('soft objectives') and the establishment of regional networks (Euroregions). Such measures produce a particular multiplier effect, since they promote contacts between citizens in regions where in the past political factors have precluded cooperation on the scale found across frontiers between EU states.

2.15. The Committee notes that cooperation across the EU's external border has helped to strengthen regional identity and thus to implement the subsidiarity principle. It also stresses the need for the large-scale involvement of decision-makers from the regions concerned in the award of projects. At the same time it accepts the need for participation by the relevant national authorities to ensure the compatibility of proposed projects and measures with national development objectives.

2.16. The Committee welcomes the proposed extension of the multiannual cross-border cooperation programmes to regions along CEEC/CEEC and CEEC/CIS frontiers. The Committee thinks that such cooperation is also necessary for the promotion of regional economic development. It will contribute towards integration of these countries, into the internal market.

2.17. The Committee recognizes the comparable and complementary status now assigned by Interreg II/Tacis to the promotion of cross-border projects along the Finno-Russian border.

2.18. The Committee notes that, for the first time, this will make it possible to provide targeted support for cross-border cooperation along the EU's entire Eastern border, from the Barents Sea to the Mediterranean.

3. Conclusions

3.1. The Committee is pleased to note that the European Parliament and the Commission of the European Communities have increased the funds available for cooperation across the EU's external border to ECU 180 million to take account of the greater need arising from the accession of the new Member States.

3.2. The Committee urges the Commission to present plans at an early stage for the continuation beyond 1999 of Interreg II and Phare/Crossborder. These plans should provide for greater dovetailing between the two instruments in terms of integration of the neighbouring associated CEECs into the European Union. However, the decision to implement Interreg II and Phare/Crossborder flexibility has proved its value, and this flexibility should be retained.

3.3. It is necessary to simplify the administrative procedures of projects and measures conducted in the context of EU/non-EU regional cooperation and supported under the Interreg II or Phare/Crossborder initiatives.

3.4. The Committee is convinced that support for measures and projects in the fields of culture, training and youth exchange (soft objectives) will produce a definite multiplier effect on cooperation across the EU's external border. Cross-border networks (Euroregions) can play an important part in the implementation of such measures and, as a result, help to increase public identification with the regions concerned.

3.5. The area currently fixed for Phare/Crossborder intervention should gradually be extended to cover cross-border measures in neighbouring regions in accordance with the Interreg II rules (see Guidelines II, 9). This would represent a further step towards integration into the EU.

Brussels, 19 September 1996.

The Chairman
of the Committee of the Regions
Pasqual MARAGALL i MIRA
