

Final Declaration of the "Conference of the European Parliament and the Regional and Local Authorities of the European Union" (1-3 October 1996)

Caption: Final Declaration of the Conference of the European Parliament and the Regional and Local Authorities of the European Union of 1, 2 and 3 October 1996, organised by the European Parliament, on the initiative of its Regional Policy Committee, and the Committee of the Regions. The participants are in favour of the institutional consolidation of the Committee of the Regions and of an extension of its powers and responsibilities.

Source: European Parliament and Regional and Local Authorities of the European Union. [ON-LINE]. [s.l.]: European Parliament, [12.07.2002]. Disponible sur http://www.europarl.eu.int/conferences/19961001/regi/synthese/conf_en.htm.

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Final Declaration of the Conference of the European Parliament and the Regional and Local Authorities of the European Union of 1, 2 and 3 October 1996

The Members of the European Parliament and of the Committee of the Regions and the representatives of regional and local authorities participating in the Conference of the European Parliament and the Regional and Local Authorities of the European Union, 'For a Europe based on Democracy and Solidarity',

1. reaffirming their commitment to the establishment of a European Union which has become indispensable as a means of ensuring peace, democratic values, prosperity, employment and cultural diversity, in the light of the economic and social challenges which will confront Europe in the 21st Century,

2. whereas it is vital that the work of the Intergovernmental Conference should result in a thorough reform of the institutions and policies of the Union to enable it to meet these challenges,

3. whereas the process of revising the Treaty which is currently in progress is making little progress and is liable to meet with indifference on the part of citizens,

4. whereas the Heads of State and of Government have expressed the wish that this revision should bring Europe closer to its citizens,

5. whereas, in order for this to be achieved, all levels at which authority is exercised democratically must be involved and genuine political, economic and social solidarity among the peoples of Europe must be displayed,

6. wishing to make their views known to the Governments of the Member States meeting within the framework of the Intergovernmental Conference on the revision of the Treaty,

7. whereas the principle of economic and social cohesion means:

– ensuring in all regions of the Union equal opportunities for economic development,

– ensuring in all regions of the Union equal opportunities for access to cultural, environment-friendly and social infrastructure such as education, health, public services and basic infrastructure to provide an adequate and sustainable level of welfare and quality of life,

– the creation of employment in all regions as a priority,

– taking into account the balance of advantages and disadvantages of Union policies in the regions,

– strengthening the citizens of the Union in their rights to participate in democratic, economic and social life,

– taking account of territorial and political cohesion,

Adopted unopposed, with five abstentions, on 3 October 1996.

1. Are convinced that the necessary strengthening of the democratic legitimacy of the European Union will require greater participation and integration of the regions and of local authorities in the institutional structures and in the various policies of the Union; consider it essential, therefore, that the current revision of

the Treaty should result in the reforms called for in this Declaration;

2. Are likewise convinced that the true nature of European integration lies in a project of shared existence based on solidarity to which all authorities should make their specific contribution, and call for the principles of federalism, regionalism and local autonomy to be strengthened; call, at the same time, for states to respect fully the individual identity of each region and hence the organization of the internal reality of each state with this in view;

3. Consider that the European Parliament, as a direct expression of the peoples of the Union, is the key partner and natural ally of the citizens and the political institutions which are closest to them, namely the regional and local authorities; call, accordingly, for the revision of the Treaty to result in a strengthening of their legislative role; consider it necessary, in particular, that the codecision procedure should apply to the regulations governing the Structural Funds and the Cohesion Fund; stress, likewise, the role which should be played by the Committee of the Regions in the reform of the Structural Funds and the need for close collaboration with the European Parliament in that process;

4. Believe that it is necessary to redefine the principle of subsidiarity to make explicit provision for its application to regional and local authorities in accordance with the powers vested in them by the domestic law of the Member States, with a view to achieving greater efficiency in terms of both decision-making and the application of the various policies; stress the need for the criteria for the application of this principle to be more clearly and strictly defined in a protocol annexed to the Treaty;

5. Consider that, in view of the heterogeneity of the elected regional and local authorities of the Member States, the principle of subsidiarity implies that the various tiers of government — local, regional, national and European — possess equal dignity;

6. Consider that the Community should, in its actions, take account of the impact of its instruments and policies on urban and rural communities and should ensure that such actions constitute an integrated approach to the needs of such communities;

7. Call for the principle of local autonomy as defined in the Council of Europe's Charter of Local Self-Government to be incorporated in the Treaty as a general principle of Community law derived from the shared constitutional traditions of the Member States; recall that this principle entails both respect for all the powers proper to local authorities and the granting of the means necessary for their exercise; call on the Member States of the Union which have not yet done so to sign and ratify the Council of Europe's Charter of Local Self-Government;

8. Demand recognition of the principle of regional autonomy by analogy with its equivalent at local level as referred to in the Charter of Local Self-Government;

9. Call for the principle of adequate means, currently contained in Article F(3), to be incorporated and implemented under the Community pillar of the Treaty;

10. Call on the Commission and Member States to ensure a better horizontal and vertical coordination of EU policies to maximize the benefits and limit disadvantages to regions and local authorities and specifically ensure better coordination and coherence for urban, rural and peripheral areas;

11. Call for the principle of partnership, which has been tried and tested in the implementation of the Community's structural policies and which constitutes a practical expression of the subsidiarity principle, to be more fully applied and strengthened by incorporating it in the EC Treaty and extending it to other policies, particularly those for which regional and local authorities are responsible; recommend furthermore that the Member States extend this principle to the two sides of industry;

12. Call on those Member States whose constitutions recognize regional authorities with legislative powers to facilitate the effective application of Article 146 of the Treaty by instituting suitable national mechanisms

for enabling members of regional governments to effectively take part in meetings of the Council of Ministers;

13. Consider that the Committee of the Regions has an essential role to play vis-à-vis the regional and local authorities it represents, by the 'bottom-up' and 'top-down' dissemination of information, by providing a link between the European institutions and regional and local representatives at all levels and by ensuring thereby that all tiers of government enjoy equal opportunities vis-à-vis the Union; recall that the Committee of the Regions also has an important consultative role in the Community decision-making process;

14. Consider it necessary to consolidate the Committee of the Regions by, in particular:

a) recognizing its organizational and budgetary autonomy;

b) requiring that its members should have an electoral mandate or be politically accountable to a democratically elected assembly;

c) extending its role to include consultation by the European Parliament;

d) expanding the number of matters on which the Committee of the Regions must be consulted;

e) granting it the right to draw up its own rules of procedure;

f) making it incompatible to be simultaneously a member of the Committee of the Regions and a Member of the European Parliament;

g) empowering it to bring proceedings before the Court of Justice in defence of its own interests;

15. Consider, moreover, that, in the case of states with a regional or federal structure, there must be guarantees that the constitutionally recognized regions are represented on the Committee of the Regions, without prejudice to the adequate representation of the various levels of local and regional government, in accordance with the principle of equal dignity of all tiers of government;

16. Consider that the principle of economic and social cohesion constitutes the practical expression of solidarity among the peoples of Europe; believe that it is essential, in view of the major challenges which will confront the European Union in the near future — particularly monetary union and future enlargements, to consolidate economic and social cohesion, which is already among the Community's aims, activities and policies and is a prime objective of the European Union;

17. Support the introduction of monetary union but warn of the need to foresee the impact on disparities of staggered adoption of the single currency and, therefore, to deal with the problems arising from an asymmetrical monetary system by introducing a solidarity mechanism designed to stabilize the financial markets and by further development of the Cohesion Fund;

18. Are convinced that the new enlargement will have beneficial consequences from the political point of view for the whole of Europe and that it will also be a source of economic benefits, although these will not be distributed evenly among the various areas of the Union; consider that enlargement must not compromise the solidarity which currently exists and recall that enlargement will increase disparities of regional development in the Union;

19. Consider that the solidarity measures needed, firstly, to facilitate the proper integration of future Member States into the policies of the Union and, secondly, to continue combating existing regional disparities,

require a qualitative and quantitative reform of the EU budget to be undertaken with a view to endowing the Structural Funds with the appropriations needed under the 1999 review of the Financial Perspective;

20. Believe that the integration of the new Member States into the Union should be accompanied by the establishment of a specific, gradual and provisional structural instrument designed to deal with their serious structural difficulties, which would receive a level of budgetary funding corresponding to the absorption capacity of their economies over and above the funds currently available for cohesion;

21. Recall the requirement of Article 130b of the Treaty that all Community policies must contribute to the achievement of cohesion and call for the inclusion in the Treaty of a regional planning mechanism which would improve the coordination of the possible impact of the various policies on regional cohesion whilst respecting the principle of subsidiarity;

22. Believe that, when the Structural Funds are next reformed, they should be consolidated as instruments of economic development, with the following priorities:

- a) a greater concentration of existing resources to enhance their effectiveness,
- b) simplification, reduced bureaucracy and greater flexibility of procedures,
- c) compliance with the additionality principle,
- d) increased opportunities for monitoring and imposing sanctions,
- e) more direct partnership with regional, local and social partners, particularly in the context of programming,
- f) a greater share of responsibility to devolve upon the beneficiaries;

23. Call for all necessary measures to be taken to ensure that the objective of creating jobs plays a larger part in Structural Fund and Cohesion Fund operations; urge the Council and Commission to recognize the essential role of regional and local authorities in combating unemployment by according them a central role in employment policies and, particularly, regional and local employment pacts, while ensuring that this does not result in a transfer of uncompensated financial burdens to regional and local authorities;

24. Reject, in order to preserve the additional character of the Structural Funds and preserve the benefits of multiannual programming, any linkage of regional policies, by means of a conditionality clause, to the nominal convergence process leading to membership of the single currency;

25. Recall that the appropriations of the Structural Funds constitute, within the framework of the Financial Perspective, not only a ceiling but also an expenditure objective; call on the Member States to respect the aims of the Community's regional policy determined by the Heads of State and of Government at Edinburgh and to take the necessary steps to carry out in full the structural programmes essential for development and employment, despite the budgetary constraints imposed by monetary union;

26. Believe it necessary to fulfil the intention, stated in the protocol on cohesion annexed to the Treaty on European Union, of taking greater account of the contributive capacity of individual Member States in the system of own resources, and of examining means of correcting, for the less prosperous Member States, regressive elements existing in the present own resources system;

27. Consider it a matter of urgency for a legal framework to be incorporated in the Treaty facilitating and

encouraging crossborder interregional cooperation both within the Union and at its external borders in line with the Council of Europe Convention on this matter;

28. Stress the need to include in the Treaty a provision recognizing and regulating a specific, permanent status for the outermost regions of the Union, and call for special attention to be devoted to the problems of islands;

29. Recommend that 1998 be declared 'European Year of Local Democracy and Town Twinning' with the aim of increasing public awareness of the importance of local democracy and town twinning and drawing attention to the role which should be played by local authorities in a citizens' Europe;

30. Call on the Council, Commission and Member States to promote a broad debate at all levels of political representation to involve citizens in the reform of the Treaty; wish full and transparent information to be provided concerning the progress of the work of the IGC; consider it very important for the future of a democratic Europe that the right of citizens to information about the policies and acts of the European Union should be laid down in the future Treaty;

31. Attach great importance to the initiative announced by Commissioner Oreja on 2 October 1996, during the Conference, to inform regional and local authorities about and increase their awareness of the Intergovernmental Conference; undertake therefore, in particular, to do everything in their power to ensure that the European Parliament and the Committee of the Regions cooperate actively with the European Commission in this connection; support, furthermore, the proposal for a summit meeting of European regional and urban authorities before the end of the IGC;

32. Instruct their President to forward this Declaration to the President-in-Office of the Council with the request that it be forwarded to the Intergovernmental Conference.