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(Resolutions, recommendations and opinions)

RESOLUTIONS

COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

152ND COR PLENARY SESSION, 30.11.2022-1.12.2022

Resolution of the European Committee of the Regions on the European Commission Work Programme and the CoR political priorities for 2023

(2023/C 79/01)

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS (CoR),

Having regard to:

- the European Commission Work Programme (ECWP) for 2023 ⁽¹⁾,
- the Protocol of Cooperation with the European Commission of February 2012,
- the CoR Resolution on the European Committee of the Regions' priorities for 2020-2025 ⁽²⁾,
- the CoR Resolution on the European Committee of the Regions' proposals in view of the European Commission Work Programme for 2023 ⁽³⁾,
- the CoR's *EU Annual Report on the State of Regions and Cities* ⁽⁴⁾;

1. Welcomes that the European Commission Work Programme is largely based on the proposals of the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE). As the implementation of some proposals would require Treaty amendments, the CoR shares the call of the European Parliament and of the President of the European Commission for establishing a Convention based on article 48 TEU. The CoR regrets, however, that the ECWP lacks reference and concrete proposals related to the CoFoE conclusions that foresee better recognition of the added value of regional and local authorities for European democracy;

2. Welcomes the renewed commitment of the Commission to use the Sustainable Development Goals as its overall guiding objective, especially by their integration into the European Semester and in the better regulation tools. The CoR invites the Commission to review the full potential of SDG localisation, including in the expected EU Voluntary Review, in order to achieve a sustainable recovery and complete the SDGs by 2030;

3. Stresses that the consequences of the ongoing climate emergency, the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia's war against Ukraine and the current record inflation rates triggered by increased food and energy prices as well as the structural migration and humanitarian crisis at the EU borders, with particular virulence in the Mediterranean and in the Atlantic,

⁽¹⁾ COM(2022) 548 final.

⁽²⁾ COR-2020-01392-00-00-RES-TRA.

⁽³⁾ COR-2022-02657-00-00-RES-TRA.

⁽⁴⁾ <https://cor.europa.eu/en/our-work/Pages/State-of-Regions-and-Cities-2022.aspx?origin=spotlight>

confirm the role of cohesion as a fundamental value of the European Union more than ever. Cohesion policy is the EU's most important investment policy and a key tool to support territorial cooperation and promote solidarity and integration. For this reason, the CoR will, in conjunction with its partners of the #CohesionAlliance⁽⁵⁾, focus in 2023, in particular within the review of the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), on further strengthening and enabling cohesion policy;

4. Commits to continuing its full support to Ukraine, its regions and municipalities, and to take up its responsibilities in Ukraine's reconstruction, notably through the European Alliance of Cities and Regions for the Reconstruction of Ukraine, which should be recognised as a partner in the Ukraine Reconstruction Platform. The CoR expresses concern that the concept of the platform, its financing modalities and its governance have not yet been presented. The CoR insists that the reconstruction process must ensure sustainable, green and digital approaches for integrated territorial development and goes hand in hand with promoting local democracy based on strong partnerships with local and regional authorities in the European Union, transparency and the fight against corruption. The CoR also considers that the EU's contribution to rebuilding Ukraine would require financial support going beyond the current Multiannual Financial Framework. Regions and cities hosting the highest number of refugees require additional financial support from the EU;

5. Commits itself to continue to support representatives of subnational governments from Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia through regular meetings in bilateral and multilateral settings, such as the European Alliance of Cities and Regions for the Reconstruction of Ukraine, as well as by facilitating peer-to-peer cooperation and promoting the organisation of holiday camps for children whose lives have been shaken by the war;

Bringing Europe closer to its people

6. Welcomes the setting up of European citizens' panels and the gradual introduction of place-based participatory mechanisms as a new feature of EU decision-making, including at local and regional level and with appropriate EU support in terms of financing and capacity building. Considers that this process will require a revision of the Inter-institutional agreement on Better Law-Making and needs to integrate a territorial dimension, building on the experience of local and regional authorities on participatory practices. The CoR also underlines the need for transparency and clear feedback to citizens on their proposals;

7. Welcomes the ECWP's emphasis on the need for informed policymaking based on evidence, better regulation principles and strategic foresight. Following up on the CoFoE proposals, the CoR recalls the contribution of local and regional authorities and the CoR itself are making to strengthen the evidence base for EU legislation, including through subsidiarity monitoring, territorial impact assessments, rural proofing implementation review by the RegHub network and the Fit4Future platform;

8. Highlights the key role that local and regional authorities play in defending European values and in countering challenges to democracy such as disinformation and malign interferences. The CoR stands ready to contribute to the Defence of Democracy Package and to the updates of the anti-corruption legislative framework. The CoR also highlights the key role of local and regional authorities in upholding the rule of law and would expect the annual event for promoting the rule of law recommended by the CoFoE to build on a series of meetings held at regional and national level;

9. Strongly supports the Commission's efforts towards a Union of Equality, including by proposing a European Disability Card, to ensure the mutual recognition of disability status across all Member States and urges the Commission to implement a plan to ensure universal full digital accessibility in the EU. The CoR also welcomes the announced legal initiatives on combating violence against women and domestic violence, on pay transparency and on guaranteeing the implementation of the EU anti-racism action plan 2020-2025. The CoR also recalls the need to implement the LGBTIQ Equality Strategy 2020-2025;

⁽⁵⁾ <https://cor.europa.eu/en/engage/Pages/cohesion-alliance.aspx>

10. Undertakes to follow-up on the legacy of the European Year of Youth and to increase youth participation in democratic life from the local and regional perspective on the basis of the European Charter on Youth and Democracy and by continuing the CoR's Young Elected Politicians programme (YEP), while closely linking youth to the 2023 European Year of Skills. The CoR also welcomes the new Commission initiatives such as Youth Ideas Labs and HealthyLifestyle4All;

11. Eagerly awaits the Commission's legislative proposal on the review of the economic governance framework, which must be reset in the light of the climate emergency, the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's war against Ukraine, become more transparent and democratic and include a regional and local dimension in the European Semester. The CoR reiterates its call to differentiate between expenditures and investments, while reaching the aim of overall debt reduction, and expects new rules to be designed in order to support sustainable growth without undermining local and regional authorities' capacity to invest in public services and infrastructure;

Building resilient communities

12. Expects new key steps in 2023 for achieving the European Education Area as planned and expresses its support for updating the current EU learning mobility framework to enable learners to move more easily between education systems via an inclusive approach;

13. While welcoming the launching of the Culture Moves Europe permanent mobility scheme, the CoR regrets the lack of specific new initiatives in the field of culture and cultural heritage for 2023 and calls for the new EU Work Plan for Culture 2023-2026 to help mainstream these policies in other sectors;

14. Endorses the Commission's proposal to designate 2023 as the European Year of Skills (EYS) — with an active role of regions and cities — by promoting increased, more effective and inclusive training and up- and re-skilling for the green and digital transitions and the economic recovery. The Committee stresses the need to actively include cross-border and multilingual solutions in the education sector. The CoR will continue to actively support the Commission's relevant initiatives such as the Pact for Skills, and efforts to address the striking shortage of women in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) careers and education. Moreover, the CoR will support the Commission's special focus for greater labour market activation, with an emphasis on women and young people especially those not in education, employment or training (NEETs);

15. Eagerly anticipates the Commission's initiative for the digitalisation of social security systems and social safety nets in support of labour mobility, in connection with the ongoing work on ESSPASS;

16. Commits to contributing to the Commission Proposal for a Council Recommendation on developing social economy framework conditions;

17. Calls on the Commission to continue supporting the work of the European Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy, as well initiatives such as the New European Bauhaus and the EU mission on climate-neutral and smart cities as key instruments for implementing the European Green Deal in cities and regions across the EU and for helping local and regional authorities meet the adaptation targets, especially on islands, in other regions with geographical and demographic disadvantages and in the outermost regions;

18. Points out that the decarbonisation of the transport system and the shift towards more sustainable and environmentally-friendly modes of transport is an essential pillar of the European Green Deal. The CoR welcomes, therefore, the upcoming initiatives of the Commission to make transport more sustainable, in particular the Greening Freight Package. In this connection, the Committee calls for the continued cross-border expansion of freight transport and public transport to better connect border regions with each other and simplify cross-border tariffs and ticket bookings. Moreover, the CoR calls on the Commission to focus the revision of the Public Service Obligation guidelines on the implementation of the EU's Green Deal objectives. The CoR requests that the new guidelines, to be published in 2023, do not limit excessively the competence of local public transport authorities and do not introduce new legal concepts which risk creating legal uncertainty and inhibiting future investment in and development of public transport services;

19. Supports the REPowerEU overarching objective and welcomes the recognition of the importance of local and regional authorities in the plan. The local and regional authorities' capacity to protect citizens must be supported by financial and technical assistance, including direct funds;

20. Welcomes the announcement of a comprehensive reform of the EU electricity market and the creation of the European Hydrogen Bank to better prepare the EU for a decarbonised future; in this regard, invites the Commission to develop a comprehensive legislative proposal on energy poverty to provide clear guidance to Member States for the development of measures that tackle the root causes of the problem;

21. Invites the Commission to step up its efforts to increase the digital resilience of subnational administrations, to protect critical EU infrastructure against physical and cyber attacks, notably in the context of the war in Ukraine;

22. Calls on the European Commission to engage with local and regional governments on the implementation of initiatives stemming from the Glasgow Climate Pact and UNFCCC COP27 conclusions and support multilevel collaboration and regionally and locally determined contributions (RLDCs). Efforts must be increased to promote locally led adaptation to climate change to meet the ambitious goals of the EU strategy on adaptation to climate change and to minimise the costs to households and businesses;

23. Stands ready to meet the challenge of delivering the post-2020 global biodiversity framework and calls on the Commission to secure the key role of regional and local governments in its implementation. The biodiversity targets should be mainstreamed into EU policy-making in order to ensure that the shared vision of 'living in harmony with nature' is achieved by 2050. Efforts to treat biodiversity loss as an urgent crisis and to seek synergies with measures to combat climate change, fossil fuels and pollution must be redoubled. Against this background, the CoR regrets that the ECWP does not contain any legally binding proposal to step up forest monitoring, reporting and data collection in the EU as announced in the EU's Forest Strategy;

24. Commits to continuing to cooperate on the Zero Pollution Stakeholder Platform, promoting a multi-level governance approach for the zero pollution action plan, including monitoring and, at a later stage, setting up a scoreboard of EU regions' green performance. The CoR calls for revising and strengthening REACH and CLP regulations. The CoR reiterates its call for an Ocean Law, in the same spirit as the Climate Law. The CoR welcomes the announcement of a new initiative for protecting, sustainably managing and restoring EU soils;

25. Emphasises that local and regional authorities are a crucial player in the transition to the circular economy, in waste policy and in the reduction of dependency on third parties and unused raw materials. The CoR regrets that the ECWP does not refer to the initiative on Sustainable Consumption of Goods — promoting repair and reuse;

26. Welcomes the SME relief and calls for involving local and regional authorities in the development of new — and improvement of existing — policy tools for assessing the impact of new legislation on SMEs;

27. Looks forward to the communication on 30 years of the single market and calls for the EU's global leadership role to be further used to firmly establish climate-neutral, circular, technical and democratic standards and norms beyond the EU;

28. Regrets that the Commission does not sufficiently address the distortions of competition resulting from EU and Member State support schemes in the wake of the pandemic and the energy crisis as well as from foreign companies receiving aid from their governments, to the detriment of local and regional economies;

29. Welcomes the Commission's ambition to continue delivering on the targets of the Digital Decade and strengthening EU resilience by foreseeing an EU critical raw materials act, which should complement the recent EU Chips Act and provide a basis for production of key products in the EU, including semiconductors;

30. Supports the strategic approach to legal migration and further measures aimed at attracting both low and high-skilled third-country nationals to the EU through uniform recognition of qualifications and facilitation of access to the labour markets;

31. Reiterates that cities and regions at the EU's external borders continue to be exposed first to migratory flows and need strong EU-level support; reminds the Commission not to lose sight of the recommendations in the CoR opinion on the New Pact on Migration and Asylum in the implementation of the Joint Roadmap on the Pact involving local and regional levels;

32. Stresses the need for enhancing Europe's external security, by providing more support for Member States to protect the EU's external border;

33. Recalls the recommendations contained in its opinion on Revised Schengen Area Governance and stresses that internal border controls should only be tolerated as a measure of last resort and only after having considered any possible alternative measures; supports the accession of Bulgaria, Croatia and Romania to the Schengen area, based on merits;

34. Regrets the lack of reference to the Recovery and Resilience Facility in the Commission Work Programme, despite the fact that the RRF is the key EU instrument for a sustainable post-COVID recovery in the EU;

35. Regrets that, concerning EU civil protection, the Commission does not propose a clear plan for long-term commitment or actions other than doubling the firefighting capacities ahead of the 2023 forest fire season. Local and regional authorities should be sufficiently consulted and involved in procurement, maintenance, coordination and deployment of these capacities;

36. Calls for more EU-level initiatives, including a more structured mechanism of support for disaster prevention and preparedness actions to strengthen the overall resilience of the EU regions and cities. In this context, the CoR reiterates its availability to contribute to the elaboration of a European Vulnerability Scoreboard at regional and local level;

37. Calls on the Commission to ensure that the European Rural Agenda is implemented in the current and future funding periods across all policies and has ambitious targets to strengthen the innovative dynamics of rural territories and their resilience, organise smart inter-territorial cooperation and stimulate citizen action in local development strategies; the 'smart' concept needs to be seen as an integrated, holistic tool, interconnecting the concepts of Smart Villages, Smart Cities and Smart Regions;

38. Regrets that the Commission does not explicitly mention the demographic challenge facing many EU regions among the generational challenges it refers to in its 2023 Work Programme, as this is one of the major challenges that the EU must consider in all its policies so that disparities can truly be reduced between regions, which is a key objective of the EU's cohesion policy;

39. Encourages the Commission to use world heritage as a tool for enhancing the economic and social sustainability of rural areas in Europe;

40. Stresses the importance of seizing the opportunity of the upcoming Framework Law for a Sustainable EU Food System for a profound and structural food system overhaul that opposes speculation on international markets and protects farmers' revenues. Public stocks, as main market regulation tools, should be used in order to both stabilise markets and build up strategic stocks to prevent food crises;

41. Calls on the European Commission to maximise the opportunities offered by food public procurement by proposing local and regional authorities a set of possible criteria for sustainable food procurement to promote healthy and sustainable diets in schools and public institutions, thus supporting a systemic change of our food systems. The CoR also stresses the importance of systemic action to reduce food waste and calls upon the Commission to provide guidelines and ensure monitoring on the basis of the work carried out by the EU Platform for Food Losses and Food Waste;

42. Calls for new European legislation on seeds to enable the use and marketing of farmer-saved seeds;

43. Proposes that the EU implement the recommendations made by the European Parliament on farmland concentration in the EU and Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure adopted by the FAO;

44. Stands ready to contribute to the forthcoming initiative on mental health and points out that the CoR has identified mental health as the key health challenge in the post-COVID era and presented a sample of local and regional approaches in its State of the Cities and Regions report 2022;

45. Reiterates its support to fight against cancer and expects the draft recommendations on smoke-free environments and on vaccine-preventable cancers to increase the level of protection of Europeans; sets to work at local and regional level to raise awareness and share best prevention and screening strategies;

46. Stresses that one of the key requests of European citizens, listed in the final CoFoE report, is to have a digital EU 'health passport'. The CoR expects the EU legislators to swiftly find an agreement on the European Health Data Space (EHDS), taking into account recommendations from the CoR opinion on EHDS and considering that the European Health Union will not be complete without a robust framework for health data transfers;

Cohesion, our fundamental value

47. Reiterates its strong support for efficient, flexible and sustainable implementation of the current cohesion programmes that would help to secure strong cohesion policy in the future. The CoR stresses that the 'do no harm to cohesion' principle put forward in the 8th Cohesion Report underlines that cohesion is an overall value of the EU. The CoR deplores in this respect that the 2023 Work Programme of the Commission does not contain either a reference to the asymmetric territorial impact of the current crises or a reference to the need to examine the potential territorial impact of EU policies, which falls behind the commitment already made in the 2022 Work Programme to strengthen territorial impact assessments and rural proofing. The CoR also recalls the European Parliament's plea to involve the European Committee of the Regions in the design of the 'do no harm to cohesion' principle and confirms its readiness to cooperate with the European Commission in this regard. The CoR strongly reiterates its call to the Commission to guarantee that impact assessments include an evaluation of the potential territorially differentiated impacts of each legislative initiative;

48. Welcomes the Commission's intention to propose a timely review of the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF). This review should encompass an overarching debate on the structure and equipment of the next MFF, continuing the focus on simplification, thematic focus of the instruments and potentially the delivery system for the European Structural and Investments Funds (ESIF);

49. Calls on the European Commission to carry out an analysis about models of participation and shared management in negotiating, programming and implementing European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) in order to map the different models across the EU and optimise the participation of regional and local authorities in every step of ESIF roll-out;

50. Regrets that the ECWP does not propose any new initiative aiming at addressing the blockage in the Council of the European Cross-Border Mechanism regulation. The Committee emphasises the importance of further developing and simplifying cross-border cooperation and taking it into account in legislative initiatives in order to improve cohesion. The CoR welcomes, however, the announcement of a legislative initiative on a statute for European cross-border associations to enable them to fully benefit from the single market without barriers to cooperation;

51. Requests that the Commission follow up on the joint CoR and European Parliament recommendation to create an Islands' Pact and a European Union Agenda for Islands, with the participation of the principal stakeholders, namely national, regional and local authorities, economic and social operators, civil society, academia and non-governmental organisations, along the lines of the Urban Pact and the future Rural Pact; and reminds the European Commission of the necessity to carry out a study on the diverse situations of island territories of the European Union;

52. Stresses the importance of following up on the updated strategy for the outermost regions, for their benefit and for the benefit of the EU as a whole;

53. Continues to directly contribute to the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) at the local and regional level and the evaluation of the EPSR Action Plan on the ground. In this regard, it reiterates the need for 'beyond GDP' complementary indicators to measure economic, social and environmental progress facilitating the transition to a sustainable wellbeing economy as well as for effective monitoring and data collection mechanisms for social and employment policies, as there are still significant gaps between regions;

54. Considers that complementary to the green taxonomy as a contribution to the implementation of the Green Deal, the Commission should urgently make a proposal to establish a social taxonomy. Without a social taxonomy, investors and businesses lack clear guidance as to what can be understood as 'social investment'. This makes it difficult to finance socially motivated activities in healthcare, social housing, social services and more;

55. Reiterates its call for a European Housing Strategy aimed at boosting affordable, sustainable, social and emergency housing. This strategy should be included in the European Semester and encompass quantitative national public investment targets;

56. Calls upon the Commission to confirm its clear commitment to a Just and Sustainable Transition Fund 2.0 beyond 2027. Stresses that there are currently no specific funding opportunities for automotive regions, despite the fact that they also face major challenges in the transition process. Reiterates its call to put forward an EU programme, with a thematic and territorial scope that includes automotive regions;

57. Welcomes the Commission's commitment to give new impetus to the accession process of the candidate countries in the Western Balkans, along with Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. The CoR will embed local and regional authorities of the two new candidate countries, Ukraine and Moldova, into its enlargement work and strives to set up bilateral structures with them. The CoR reiterates its readiness for the establishment, in 2023, of a Joint Consultative Committee with Albania. The CoR will continue to support dialogue and practical cooperation with Türkiye. The CoR will present its view on the future of the Eastern Partnership from a local and regional perspective in the beginning of 2023, as requested by the Czech Presidency of the Council of the EU;

58. Commits to building stronger ties, on the local and regional level, with the EU's Southern Neighbours and third countries, notably through exchanges and cooperation opportunities in the forum *Cities and regions for international partnerships* to be co-organised with the European Commission in 2023;

59. Reiterates its call on the Commission to follow up on the CoR's request to give the relationship between the United Kingdom (UK) and the EU more territorial depth. The CoR will contribute to facilitating and developing territorial cooperation with the devolved nations and UK local and regional authorities, including beyond the institutional framework of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement;

60. Instructs its president to forward this resolution to the European Commission, the European Parliament, the Czech, Swedish and Spanish Presidencies of the Council of the EU and the President of the European Council.

Brussels, 1 December 2022.

*The President
of the European Committee of the Regions*
Vasco ALVES CORDEIRO
