

Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on the Proposal for a Decision of the European Parliament and of the Council concerning the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue (2008)

(2006/C 206/08)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS,

Having regard to the European Commission's proposal for a *European Year of Intercultural Dialogue (2008)* (COM(2005) 467 final);

Having regard to the European Commission's decision of 16 November 2005 to consult it in accordance with Article 128 of the Treaty establishing the European Community;

Having regard to the decision of its Bureau of 12 April 2005 to instruct its Commission for Culture and Education to draw up an opinion on this subject;

Having regard to Article 151 of the EC Treaty which states that 'The Community shall take cultural aspects into account in its action under other provisions of this Treaty, in particular in order to respect and to promote the diversity of cultures';

Having regard to Article 22 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the Union which states that 'The Union shall respect cultural, religious and linguistic diversity';

Having regard to the Unesco Convention of 20 October 2005 on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions;

Having regard to the Opinion of the Commission for Culture, Education and Research, adopted on 1 March 2006 (CdR 44/2006 rev. 1) (rapporteur: Mr András Mátiš, Mayor of Szirák (HU/UEN-EA));

adopted the following opinion at its 64th plenary session, held on 26 and 27 April 2006 (meeting of 27 April):

1. Introduction

extensive exchanges with the rest of the world through trade, education, leisure and globalisation in general, is increasing interactions between citizens in Europe;

The Committee of the Regions

1.1 **stresses** that Europe's strength lies in its diversity. Respect for cultural linguistic, ethnic and religious diversity is one of the basic principles underlying the process of European integration, which is not about levelling out differences or creating uniform identities but fostering greater cooperation and understanding among the peoples of Europe;

1.2 **notes** the scale of migration in the European Union today. Public administrations must provide immigrants with all available means to become a source of intercultural exchange and to integrate fully into our societies;

1.3 **recognises** that the combined effect of the successive enlargements of the Union, the increased mobility resulting from the single market, old and new migratory flows, more

1.4 **welcomes** the European Commission's initiative on the Year of Intercultural Dialogue and agrees with the key objective of the Year, which is as follows: to raise the awareness of European citizens and all persons living in the European Union of common cultural values in Europe and of the importance of developing active European citizenship which is open to the world, respectful of all manners of diversity and based on common values in the European Union. A European Year devoted to intercultural dialogue constitutes a unique awareness-raising tool for involving citizens, insofar as intercultural refers to a dialogue which embraces all elements and groups within society;

1.5 **endorses** the idea of closely involving the candidate countries with the project among other initiatives to promote intercultural dialogue, and supports the focus on ensuring that the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue and the initiatives to promote intercultural dialogue implemented in cooperation with the EFTA countries, Western Balkan countries and the partner countries involved in the European Neighbourhood Policy complement each other;

1.6 **stresses** that local and regional authorities:

- have important competences in promoting cultural activities and intercultural dialogue and they bear a major responsibility for shaping and supporting our rich variety of cultures and for integrating into society the different communities that exist within it;
- have a key role in disseminating and applying best practice and exchange of experiences in this field, in particular through their coordination of multi-dimensional local and regional networks in the cultural sector, involving all relevant actors.

2. Importance of intercultural dialogue

The Committee of the Regions

2.1 **reiterates** that the basic principle underlying the process of European integration is respect for and the promotion of cultural diversity. Cultural diversity is a source of richness that needs to be preserved, whilst its virtues need to be extolled as one of the main characteristics of Europe's identity. Intercultural dialogue is, in this respect, a key instrument in promoting understanding of cultural diversity;

2.2 **stresses** that intercultural dialogue can promote greater understanding, in particular in relation to cultural traditions, religious practice and history. It can also guard against the risks of both cultural indifference and levelling down as well as the growth of racist and xenophobic attitudes, which encourage anti-social behaviour. The CoR reiterates that intercultural cooperation needs to be stepped up so as to ensure that cultural differences are an instrument for strengthening and uniting people in a multilingual, multicultural Europe;

2.3 **emphasises** that intercultural dialogue helps to curb extremist tendencies in certain social groups;

2.4 **emphasises** that it would particularly support more effective integration of immigrants;

2.5 **stresses** that intercultural dialogue can help to instil the basic values of private, social and civic life, such as solidarity, tolerance, democracy and understanding for cultural diversity. Intercultural dialogue can foster the ability to communicate between different cultural groups and to take part in civic society. Such dialogue is vital since racism, xenophobia and friction are on the increase. The right to be different does not justify different rights before the law;

2.6 **points** out that intercultural dialogue can assist in alleviating the social exclusion, isolation and marginalisation of disadvantaged social groups, in particular immigrants. Culture and participation in cultural activities can provide them with new possibilities for strengthening their identity, their self-esteem and achieving a new status in society;

2.7 **calls** for continuous support to facilitate intercultural dialogue and relevant activities at local government level in order to support various existing initiatives and to strengthen cultural exchange between citizens through multiple measures involving culture, sports, youth, etc.;

2.8 **calls** for increased emphasis on the mainstreaming of culture in all policy areas, particularly in education and in social and employment policy and sport.

3. The role of local and regional authorities in supporting intercultural dialogue

The Committee of the Regions

3.1 **calls** for the promotion of the lesser-used languages and regional languages in Europe including the languages of some of the smaller Member States;

3.2 **stresses** that local and regional authorities, through their proximity to citizens, are strategically well placed to respond to the specific needs and demands of the different cultural groups within the EU and to effectively mobilise local and regional communities in promoting greater intercultural dialogue;

3.3 **calls** for local and regional authorities to be to the fore in the implementation of the Year, in particular to carry out information campaigns at local and regional level. Because of their closeness to and representation of local communities, they are in a unique position to ensure the widest access possible to actions, reaching in particular 'disadvantaged' groups and thereby ensuring maximum benefit from the opportunities available;

3.4 **stresses** that, in view of the greater complexity involved, programmes and legislation to combat cultural and social exclusion could be more of a priority at local and regional levels, rather than action at the level of international diplomacy;

3.5 **underlines** that in order to promote intercultural dialogue effectively, there is a need for cooperation at regional and local level involving the relevant actors, especially the social partners, education and training establishments, NGOs, youth, sports, cultural and religious organisations at grassroots level;

3.6 **stresses** the increasing importance of intercultural dialogue at international level;

3.7 would here **highlight** the importance of the UNESCO Convention of 20 October 2005 on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions, which for the first time achieved consensus on a series of guidelines and concepts regarding cultural diversity, inter alia in the context of trade policy resolutions, and created the basis for a new global pillar of governance in the culture sector;

3.8 **pays tribute to** the activities of the Anna Lindh Euro-Mediterranean Foundation for the Dialogue between Cultures and expresses the hope that local and regional authorities will be included in the work of this foundation;

3.9 **underlines** the important contributions that existing programmes for cooperation between regions and/or municipalities and for town twinning have provided in enriching cultural cooperation between towns and cities;

3.10 **underlines** that local and regional authorities can help to promote intercultural dialogue developed in coordination with other policy sectors such as education, training, enterprise and employment strategies;

3.11 **stresses that**, in conjunction with all of these measures promoting cultural exchange, the European Union is founded on cultural elements that are common to all Europeans, which come from their own traditions and which, when taken together, form what could be called 'European culture'.

4. Specific proposals

The Committee of the Regions

4.1 **calls** for the events of the Year to be organised in such a way that the initiatives trialled during the Year can be used as a basis for an in-depth analysis to develop a communication and exchange tool for local and regional authorities;

4.2 **calls** for the Year to intensify interaction and open discussion between all citizens in the EU so as to promote

the values and the idea of European integration. It further points out that it is insufficient to merely highlight a few success stories; what is needed is a coherent blueprint for the medium-term application of successful exchange models;

4.3 **calls** on the European Commission to take the experience acquired through the Year into account in long-term action programmes which include intercultural dialogue, such as Culture 2007;

4.4 to this end, **calls** on the Member State to incorporate cultural dialogue and programmes into the legislative work of national and regional parliaments, particularly in relation to State education, the propagation of culture and citizens' initiatives;

4.5 **calls** on the European Commission to spell out what is actually involved in the actions at Community level (Actions A and B), and to provide detailed information about the instruments which can be used;

4.6 **notes** that in the breakdown of resources contained in the Annex to the draft proposal a large proportion of the proposed budget for the Year has been allocated to supporting emblematic action on a Community scale (8 actions envisaged – Action B). The CoR calls for more focus to be given to small-scale actions, in particular at local and regional level, which have lasting repercussions and multiplier effects in communities and which can provide an important added value to EU cultural actions. Due to a lack of funding, many innovative small-scale actions cannot be implemented. We would therefore recommend that the European Year emphasise small-scale local initiatives, and request that the requisite support be provided;

4.7 **advocates** supporting the work of the European Migration Network as an existing platform that allows a EU-wide debate on migration issues and the marginalisation of groups of migrants in order to combat cultural misunderstandings and inform policymakers and the public accordingly;

4.8 **calls** for the positive appreciation of local community social networks as visible mediators, motivators and catalysts for dialogue between individual cultures;

4.9 **stresses** that involvement of local and regional authorities in the implementation of the European Year seems the most effective way of ensuring that it reaches European citizens. Incorporating the local and regional dimension into a European Year is fundamental to its success;

4.10 **calls** on the European Commission to involve local and regional authorities in the implementation of the Year, in particular to carry out information campaigns at local and regional level;

4.11 **requests** that programmes pursuing a multidisciplinary approach, combining various art forms as one - perhaps on the basis of a unifying idea - be given special support;

4.12 **calls on** the European Commission to devise a short message or central idea for the 2008 European Year conveying the meaning of the slogan 'Unity in Diversity' to all European

citizens. It also **requests** special support for projects which focus on identifying shared European cultural traditions and/or future-oriented strategies in this area;

4.13 requests that the measures for intercultural integration implemented by the different Community institutions as part of the Year of Intercultural Dialogue be evaluated, in order to show how the cultural assistance they have provided has benefited the social integration of immigrants, helping these become an asset for Europe rather than a problem.

5. Recommendations of the Committee of the Regions

Recommendation 1

Article 5

Text proposed by the Commission	CoR Amendment
<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Article 5</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Cooperation by the Member States</p> <p>Each Member State shall appoint a national coordination body, or an equivalent administrative body, responsible for organising that State's participation in the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue. Each Member State shall ensure that this body involves in an appropriate manner the various parties in intercultural dialogue at national level. This body shall ensure the coordination, at national level, of actions relating to the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Article 5</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Cooperation by the Member States</p> <p><i>Each Member State shall appoint a national coordination body, or an equivalent administrative body, responsible for organising that State's participation in the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue. Each Member State shall ensure that this body involves in an appropriate manner the various parties in intercultural dialogue at national level, <u>including local and regional authorities</u>. This body shall ensure the coordination, at national level, of actions relating to the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue.</i></p>

Brussels, 27 April 2006

The President
of the Committee of the Regions
Michel DELEBARRE