



Regione Lombardia

Olympus Lecture "The European Territorial Agenda – the way ahead"

Euromontana in cooperation with the Regione Lombardia organised on the 25th October its annual Olympus lecture. This year the event took the form of reflections on the evolution, progress and expected impact of the Territorial Agenda concept through a high-level round table discussion bringing together the senior responsible representatives of the immediate past German Presidency of the European Union Dr Welf Selke, the representative of the current Portuguese Presidency Mrs Maria José Festas and the next Slovenian Presidency Director General Mrs Metka Cernelc.

The discussion started at 18.00 in Regione Lombardia premises in Brussels where also Euromontana's offices are located. It was chaired by Mr Ronald Hall, Director for Development and Coordination of Cohesion Policy and the Solidarity Fund at the Directorate-General of Regional Policy of the European Commission.

After the welcome made by Mr Frank Gaskell President of Euromontana and Mr Claude Scheiber head of Presidency delegation to EU of Regione Lombardia, Mr Hall made a brief introduction about the growing interest in the topic of the territorial cohesion as well as the implications that the Reform Treaty has been to the territorial cohesion. He explained that DG Regio, European Commission, had sent a questionnaire to member states seeking their views on the definition of territorial cohesion and although they are still waiting for 12 answers the responses they had received demonstrated a breadth of interpretation of the term.

During the session the difficulty of definition of the territorial cohesion frequently resurfaced.

Welf Selke, the representative of the immediate past German European presidency, started his speech explaining the role that large cities had in the process of developing the Territorial Agenda, but noted that the consultation result was very much emphasizing the key role of the rural areas in the process. Thus, the concept is seen more as a regional process rather than a city-scheme.

Since, from the outset it had been recognized that territorial cohesion involved an integrated dialogue between stakeholders, Welf Selke emphasized that it was therefore important for NGOs such as Euromontana to participate in this process.

The German representative concluded his introductory note questioning how best to integrate rural and mountain areas and explaining that there would be political acceptance only if integration in rural areas could be achieved.

Maria José Festas is the Portuguese senior adviser in the Cabinet of Vitor Campos, the current Portuguese Presidency Director General. She focused on the need for strengthening multilevel governance, territorial agreements and communication concerning territorial cohesion. She also explained the need for political commitment by the ministers implementing the Territorial Agenda in their countries as well as the necessity to collectively work to influence EU dossiers related to Territorial Agenda.

Festas discussed how much the recently concluded Lisbon Treaty agreement would influence the Territorial Agenda and talked briefly in similar terms about the potential implications of the Green Paper on adapting to climate change.

The Portuguese representative went on to explain the preparation of the Action Programme for the implementation of the Territorial Agenda, describing how the ministers had started to work together on 'priority dossiers'. She focused as well on the meeting of EU General Directors on Territorial Cohesion that happened on 15th October in Lisbon, where it was agreed that the first Action Programme for the implementation of Territorial Agenda should be adopted in the end of November in the Ministers informal meeting on Territorial Cohesion and Regional Policy, in Azores.

Maria José Festas concluded explaining how Member States and other participating States had been asked to propose concrete actions by 26 October and the importance of responses being received. So far 5 proposals had been received including one from the Swiss Government in respect of mountain areas and she suggested that Euromontana should consider contributing to that action.¹

Next the Slovenian Presidency Director General, Metka Cernelc, revealed the Slovenian intention to tackle the implementation of the Territorial Agenda including installing a monitoring system and stressing an integrated approach: strengthening the links between territorial cohesion and the urban approach, integrated approach as a tool for the Territorial Agenda, climate change, energy, transport...

Before the questions from the audience Ronald Hall noted two topics: the desirability of aiming for an intergovernmental process married to community policies (as had been achieved in respect of the Lisbon Agenda where European policies – including Structural Funds policy – integrated Lisbon objectives in their new programmes) and that the European Commission was trying to feed in a territorial dimension to sectoral policies.

Mr Hall was followed by Prof. Van De Poele, of Leuven University, who questioned the unbalanced economic development and the coordination of sectoral policies. How could a consensus be created between all sectoral policies? Should it happen at a national or European level? Would it have consequences for the internal administration?

In answer, Mrs Festas noted that territorial cohesion did not comprise only economic considerations; it had also a strong cultural, social or ecological component that should be taken into consideration. She considered that all sectoral policies should be submitted to a 'Territorial Impact Assessment test', just like an environmental impact assessment test in which the impact of those policies on Territorial Cohesion would be considered. Territorial Cohesion requires both a horizontal and vertical coordination. Dr Selke emphasised the role of integrating stakeholders at local level and the role of NGOs and businesses. Mrs.

¹ Euromontana Director's note – This is now being actively pursued.

Cernerlc defended the need for an integrated approach and Ronald Hall contended that this integrated approach had already been promoted since the first Cohesion Report in 1996.

In the concluding part of the debate the desirability of being able to distinguish between regional policy and territorial cohesion was discussed. Sylvain Lhermitte of APCA questioned the dilution of mountain policies that had arisen from the focusing of Regional Policy on the Lisbon Agenda. Mr Hall conceded that by definition concentration on the Lisbon Agenda, with its focus on research, innovation and growth opportunities had produced a strong tendency towards a development pole approach. This was not particularly helpful to mountain and similar fragile areas. But mountain areas also needed to innovate. Mountain areas are a definitely a challenge but they are not the only challenge. In fact, there were other areas that could also justify attention, hence the decision of the European Commission to go for a Green Paper on Territorial Cohesion instead of an exclusively Mountain Green Paper. For Euromontana, Frank Gaskell noted the necessity for any effective Territorial Cohesion policy to recognise the need both to distinguish itself from general Regional Policy and to focus on, and give priority to, some specific types of territory that could otherwise be expected to suffer most from unbalanced territorial development. Mr Hall concurred concluding that an effective and relevant territorial policy should reach the parts that other policies do not reach. That should be the central feature and ethos of a European Territorial Agenda.

Comment

This was a truly unique event: the first time that, within the European policy development process, senior officials of the triumvirate of past, present and future European presidencies have agreed to debate, outside their presidency structure, current policy development - and to do this under European Commission chairmanship.

The results were not disappointing. New light was shed on the progress being made towards a Territorial Agenda for the European Union and there was a genuine impression that this round table exercise had assisted in refining the issue in a significant way.

Certainly from Euromontana's perspective we were able to rehearse the compelling logic for any Territorial Agenda to recognise the predicament and potential of specific areas. By this we mean the need for the Agenda to have a focus on physical connectivity and accessibility, particularly for those regions facing geographical handicaps and to promote the integration of these areas. A policy intended to achieve territorially balanced development must acknowledge and address the opportunities and needs of such specific areas: it cannot by definition be expected to have universal territorial application. To pursue the more general approach favoured by some would not only encourage simple duplication of orthodox regional policy but also would risk neutralising the impact of a distinctive Territorial Agenda. Nor can the true objective of territorial cohesion be achieved by basing the Agenda on a simple elaboration of the polycentric philosophy of spatial planning. Urban centres might have the capacity to act as vectors of rural development in more densely populated parts of Europe with an even distribution of major settlements but to be effective in many other areas the focus of polycentric development will have to be on smaller towns and villages.

This 'equity' approach which we propose has often been characterised by critics as being an alternative to efficiency or growth and inconsistent with both. In

practice, over the medium to long term, the 'equity' approach would produce efficiency and growth by ensuring the use of the 'capital' of all regions and avoiding its wasteful dereliction.

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