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TORN BETWEEN PROGRESS AT EUROPEAN LEVEL AND WITHDRAWAL INTO NATIONAL SELF-INTERESTS: THE SCHIZOPHRENIC APPROACH TO INVOLVING REGIONS IN EU POLICIES

The European Parliament has given its approval to the new **Structural Funds for the 2007-2013 period**. MEPs accepted a total of 307.9 billion euros, i.e. 35.7% of the EU's total budget, which will start being used as of 1st January 2007.

The Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions of Europe (CPMR) welcomes the Parliament's vote and above all the fact that the amount earmarked for interregional cooperation has been increased in comparison with the Council's proposal. However it does remain critical of the regions' still too limited role in European governance. In the follow-up to a *benchmarking* seminar organised at the Committee of the Regions on 31st May last on arrangements for implementing this policy in 12 Member States, the CPMR has published a **policy position addressed to the Commission and Member States**, which contains concrete proposals for involving regions more deeply in EU regional policy.

After the inclusion in 1997 of a protocol on the clarification of competences in the Treaty of Amsterdam and the launch by Romano Prodi, President of the European Commission, of the White Paper on governance of the Union in 2001, the CPMR notes an overall lack of significant progress, or in some cases even a step backward, with regard to the **regions' role in preparing, managing and delivering new policies for 2007-2013**, especially regional and rural development policies which constitute two clearly essential EU budget items.

Many of the proposals in the White Paper were taken up by the Commission, one of them the concept of **tripartite contracts** which would involve the European, national, regional or even local levels in every stage of the programming process. These advances could be perfectly acceptable without a change in the Treaty as far as the introduction of regional policy at national level was concerned. Yet Member States continuously undermined the proposals as negotiations advanced on financial perspectives. In other words, regional policy could not be financially maintained unless the most recalcitrant States obtained a guarantee that they would be able to spend the scheduled European funding in any way they wished. The CPMR is keen to point out that it is still not too late to change direction and avoid certain latent forms of re-nationalisation. At a time when regions and European SMEs and SMIs are being asked to innovate as part of the Lisbon strategy, it is crucial that this innovation is also taken into account in the way these policies are governed and led.

"The European Commission," states Philippe Cichowlaz, CPMR Director in charge of regional policy, "has continued to play fair, within the limits of its competence. It has begun to implement the initial basis of a real territorial dialogue, which is gradually taking shape. This opening has now gone beyond DG Regio alone and has extended to other Directorates General, including those most linked to the economic sector such as DG Competition, DG Enterprise, or DG Research. Thus, while the Commission is opening up the process of involving regions in general agreement with the Council," stresses Philippe Cichowlaz, "some Member States are continuing to close off the flow of these processes. The result of this is that the regions are sometimes more involved in issues arising from certain EU



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policies than they are at national level. This is why it is legitimate to liken it to a form of schizophrenia, especially with regard to regional policy. We might notably recall that during discussions on the future of regional policy, no Member State really questioned the actual relevance of the regional approach but they were rather much more concerned about the extent of solidarity."

The most surprising fact is that there is no automatic correlation between national institutional frameworks and the level of involvement of the regions in implementing future programming. This image once more highlights the fragile nature of the role of the regions. In the great majority of national experiences examined, under no circumstances do the regions fully participate in all the stages essential to achieving EU objectives.

Mrs. Danuta Hübner, Commissioner for regional policy, is of the same opinion. Speaking in conclusion at the seminar organised by the CPMR on 31st May, she recalled that the failure of the Lisbon process over the last few years could undoubtedly be explained, in part, by the weakness of the regional dimension in the principles of partnership and the territorial application of the Structural Funds. *"Although meetings such as this seminar,"* stated the Polish Commissioner, *"merely serve to prove the level of involvement of the Regions and the hope of short-term success for their claims, the ambition of the Regions should not be restricted to the promotion of a multilevel partnership and the principle of territorial cohesion. In the future it is to be hoped that the Regions will take a firmer stance on the involvement of regional and local levels in the drafting of European policies at the very highest level."*

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