Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on a 'Proposal for a European Parliament and Council Decision establishing a Community initiative for "The European City of Culture" event'

(98/C 180/12)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS,

having regard to the proposal for a decision of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing a Community initiative for 'The European City of Culture' event [1];

having regard to the decision taken by the Council on 5 December 1997, under Article 128 and the first paragraph of Article 198c of the Treaty establishing the European Community, to consult the Committee of the Regions on this matter;

having regard to the decision of its Bureau of 8 March 1996 to direct Commission 7 — Citizens Europe, Research, Culture, Youth and Consumers — to draw up the relevant opinion;

having regard to the draft Opinion (CdR 448/97 rev.) adopted by Commission 7 on 23 January 1998 (Rapporteur: Mr Efstathiadis),

adopted the following opinion at its 22nd plenary session on 12 and 13 March 1998 (meeting of 13 March).

1. Introduction

1.1. It is generally accepted that culture provides the best way of bridging differences between societies; it is the prerequisite for understanding and, therefore, for effective cooperation between nations.

1.2. Cooperation and mutual understanding at a cultural level based on respect for the identity of each nation and each ethnic group, will contribute to achieving economic convergence and social justice or indeed any policy where it is difficult to find common ground in Europe.

1.3. One European instrument in the sphere of culture is the event of the 'European city of culture'. The COR welcomes the proposal of the Commission to place this event in the Community framework and to set up a community initiative to provide support for it.

2. General remarks

2.1. Each city which has been designated 'European city of culture' was given the opportunity to show in its own way and to the best of its ability what it understands by promotion of cultural activity and diversity in a united Europe.

2.2. The experience gained from the first cycle of designated cities of culture from 1985 to 1999, enables us to make certain useful observations.

2.3. This event confirms the international nature of culture, which results in a strengthening of the cultural dimension as a critical and defining element of European identity.

2.4. Strengthening local cultural values and particularities underscores the cultural diversity of Europe, which is crucial to the development of social cohesion, the fight against racism and xenophobia, and the promotion of cooperation.

2.5. The COR suggests opening the initiative to the countries of the European Economic Area and to the accession countries and Switzerland.

3. Specific remarks

3.1. *The selection procedure*

3.1.1. The commission proposes, that an advisory Selection Panel be set up composed of seven independent members of whom two would be appointed by Parliament, two by the Council, two by the Commission and one by the Committee of the Regions. This panel would examine the applications and report to the Commission,

[1] COM(97) 549 final; OJ C 362, 28.11.1997, p. 12.

which would make the official proposal of the designation. The COR welcomes this composition of the Selection Panel, which would give an active role for a local/regional level representation.

3.2. *Criteria for the selection*

3.2.1. The need to maintain the status of the European cities of culture, together with the actual capacity they can demonstrate, as well as the essential requirements imposed on each application, must be given serious consideration when establishing the criteria that will ensure the uniqueness, substance and credibility of the event.

3.2.2. The year 2000 — for which the title has been given to all nine applicants — can be considered a one-off exception in celebration of the turn of the century. Normally the community programmes in the area of culture should provide the unsuccessful candidates opportunities to organize thematic cultural activities in a European context.

3.2.3. Emphasis must also be placed on the ability for cities that are not national capitals to take on the task of flying the flag of European culture, as Thessaloniki has successfully done, making it a benchmark for future events.

3.2.4. Given the importance of this event in promoting the concept of European cooperation in the intellectual sphere — where Europe can exhibit an enormous heritage, an enviable present and a promising future — culture provided by the European cities of culture is the means to achieve peaceful and creative communication, not just between the countries of Europe but also with the rest of the world.

Therefore the COR welcomes warmly the proposal of the Commission, that the applications of the candidates should present a European cultural project focusing on a specific European theme and based on cultural cooperation.

3.2.5. The Commission proposes that the application should specify in which manner the applicant city intends:

— to highlight artistic movements and styles shared by Europeans which the candidate city has inspired or to which it has made a significant contribution;

— to involve people active in the field of culture from other cities in the EU;

— to receive citizens and reach as wide an audience as possible by employing a multimedia and multilingual approach;

— to promote a dialogue between European cultures and cultures from other parts of the world.

The COR agrees with these principles but would suggest that the direct involvement of the citizens and the role and importance of minority cultures will be explicitly included in the criteria.

3.2.6. The Committee of the Regions would ask that, regardless of any decision to continue the Kaleidoscope programme in 1999 or to carry out pilot projects to prepare for the framework cultural programme, the city of Weimar should, as European city of culture in 1999, be awarded the usual EU support.

The COR would propose that, for future cities of culture, the aim should be to provide timely and punctual support.

4. **Conclusions**

4.1. The COR basically supports the initiative of the Commission to establish a Community initiative to provide support for an annual event 'The European City of Culture'.

4.2. The COR would emphasize the regional and local diversity of European culture and encourage the Commission in its intention to present in a near future a proposal for a single culture programme, into which also this initiative would be incorporated.

Brussels, 13 March 1998.

The Chairman

of the Committee of the Regions

Manfred DAMMEYER