

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

SONIK: ARTICLE 174 HAS TO BE TRANSLATED INTO CONCRETE ACTION

Bogusław Sonik who is a member of the EPP Group in the European Parliament as a member of the Polish delegation, is the President of the intergroup "Mountains, Islands, Sparsely Populated Regions: Group 174". Mr Sonik is also Vice-Chair of the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety Committee.

Enrico Mayrhofer:

What can regions with serious and permanent natural handicaps expect from the negotiations on the new budget programming period 2014-2020?

Bogusław Sonik:

We live in a very delicate time, indeed, the 2014-2020 budget is on the discussion table and the future of cohesion rests on these negotiations.

Territories with serious and permanent disadvantages, in particular islands, mountains and northernmost regions with low population density, fought to obtain an article (Art. 174) in the Lisbon Treaty which aims at reducing their handicaps. We now need to make this article happen and turn it into concrete action.

How can these territories be enhanced? I think a cross-cutting approach is needed and that this concern should be included in all the various European policies which have a territorial approach, those concerning the environment, energy, transport, etc. The idea of giving these territories direct funds has been abandoned, yet we can think of various programmes where they could be involved. Now, it is up to the European Commission to create these programmes, and the European Parliament to improve them or to make additional proposals. I am thinking mainly about the Parliamentary Committee for Regional Development, the Transport and Tourism Committee and the Environment Committee. And the aim of this intergroup that we have just created with around one hundred MEP is also precisely that: in ensuring coordination amongst ourselves, we seek to have our positions passed within the various Parliamentary Committees.

EM: *As Vice-Chair of the Environment Committee, do you already have ideas underway?*

BS: It is clear that a lot remains to be done in the field of energy. Mountainous areas are often an important source of renewable energy due to the large amounts of water they have. Yet we should not forget the islands and sparsely populated territories, which are rich in renewables, particularly in wind power or sometimes solar energy. In addition, it is with great attention that our Committee will follow the 2020 Strategy which has made sustainable growth one of its three priorities. Thus, the true challenge for us all will be to turn our permanent handicaps into sustainable growth policies.

EM: *Do you have any plans for own-initiative reports?*

BS: I am not against it, and I believe that we have to use all the legal instruments possible in order to improve comprehension of the specific characteristics and difficulties of these geographical areas with permanent constraints.

EM: *The vote on the budget will take place under the Polish presidency, what are your expectations vis-à-vis your country?*

BS: We are doing our utmost to prepare for this first Polish Presidency. Personally, I am already in contact with the Minister for Regional Development, in order to heighten his awareness of concerns related to natural handicaps. However, aside from the budget, the priorities of our Presidency will focus on major projects such as the European defense policy, neighbourhood policy, I am thinking mainly about Russia, Ukraine and Caucasus, but also on cohesion, which is indeed key policy area for our country and which cannot remain in the background in the Presidency's agenda.

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THE CPMR'S LOGBOOK

As the maritime days took place in Gijón, from 18 to 21 May 2010, the CPMR maintains the key role that regional authorities have in the implementation of the Integrated Maritime Policy (IMP), with a view to the next programming period, post 2013.

Several policy areas are at the heart of the discussions of the maritime regions present in Gijón for this annual celebration.

First of all, the sustainable development aspect: several initiatives are currently being proposed by the European Commission to ensure public management of maritime areas that can reconcile economic activities, employment and the protection of eco-systems. With regard to this, the CPMR calls for "Maritime Spatial Planning" to be based on the principles of good multi-level governance.

The macro-regional aspect is also fundamental for the CPMR as the only organisation divided into Geographical Commissions. The decision to launch a strategy for the Baltic Sea set a trend: further to the similar decision made by the Council in June 2009 for the Danube region, a large number of actors, in numerous other European areas, started lobbying for their own macro-regional strategy. The CPMR organised a workshop in Gijón, comparing the notions of sea basins and macro-regions. Over the next few years, the CPMR will clarify the way in which the maritime basins can find their place in these future large territorial blocs.

Another question on the table concerns training: the Blue Book on integrated maritime policy gave high priority to maritime employment issues. Unfortunately, the CPMR believes that the effective achievements of the EU 2008/2009 maritime action plan to date have fallen short of what might have been hoped for, even though the Commissioner for Maritime Affairs, Maria Damanaki, has made maritime jobs one of the priorities of her term of office. With regard to this, the maritime regions are proposing to launch a kind of "Maritime Erasmus" which will make maritime courses more attractive and will contribute to the consolidation of European maritime identity.

With regard to energy, marine technology is in the same situation as wind power when it was at its early stages. For the CPMR, the EU could play a key role in this strategy by developing a long-term strategy and by ensuring better access to the European funds concerned. In addition, the Commission should guarantee the continuity of electricity grid towards or between peripheral maritime regions and ensure that electricity transmission and distribution charges do not penalise renewable energy produced in the peripheral areas and islands.

Regarding transport, the Commission is coming up against the implementation difficulties of Motorways of the Sea and potential distortion of competition. Following the difficult launch of the Marco Polo programme, the Commission is now trying to adapt it so that it stops giving priority to rail transport and encourages the modal shift toward maritime transport. However, for the peripheral regions, islands in particular, the real problem lies elsewhere: the accessibility deficit, relatively low traffic flows and the structural imbalance between incoming and outgoing flows, with the second being much lower than the first, all make the operation of regular shipping services really difficult.

The CPMR has also launched a number of initiatives to promote the regional approach and the role of the regions within European marine and maritime research strategy. The CPMR, which is a member of a group of experts in marine and maritime research infrastructure (set up by DG Research and Innovation in March 2010), is also carrying out work on maritime clusters and is starting work on the preparation of the maritime dimension of the 8th R&D Framework Programme.

Last but not least, climate change in coastal areas is particularly urgent and intense owing to a combination of natural phenomena created by land and marine environments. A major problem shared by all coastal territories is the need to have suitable and comprehensive information and data. The CPMR aims to implement transnational and interregional cooperation projects, and calls for the development of a table of data and indicators on coastal and maritime policy. This data could be created within the Commission, by a structure responsible for ensuring the consistency of indicators to give better guidelines for regulations of the future of cohesion instruments.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT ARE AT A CROSSROADS IN EUROPE. Why European Regions must be involved in the debate immediately!

According to the Eurobarometer, the vast majority of public opinion believes that the European Union must be involved in agricultural matters even though few of them can explain why.

This interest goes way beyond the discussions – at times too limited in scope – that take place in Brussels quarters. Citizens – in their capacity as consumers – are increasingly involved in matters such as food safety or the exceedingly variable prices that are paid to farmers, which sometimes have tragic consequences, as we witnessed in the dairy sector in the past and are witnessing currently for wheat.

What about European institutions?

The European Parliament is now involved in these discussions and not only as a consequence of the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty - which has granted it powers within the framework of co-decision - but also thanks to the determination of its Committee on "Agriculture and Rural Development" led by its flamboyant President Paolo De Castro.

Analyses, Scientific research, political debates and hearings with experts of world renown all lead to a simple message: *"The European Agricultural Model needs to be maintained"*. We know what this model implies because we enjoy its results every day: quality products and protection of the environment and of our landscape are now essential parts of our society.

There are still many outstanding issues that have always accompanied discussions on the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and divide Europe. Is a European agricultural policy necessary in a time in which world markets are being opened up and there is full trade integration? Is it still necessary to allocate half of the EU's budget to the CAP, especially in such difficult times for public finances? And on the basis of which arguments – especially vis-à-vis the European taxpayer – should agriculture be supported?

George Lyon – author of the draft report called *"Future of the Common Agricultural Policy after 2013"* - provides an answer to these questions. The Scottish MEP endeavours to define a new concept for the CAP in an attempt to give it new "legitimacy" and to identify in which framework the Commission ought to submit its proposals by the end of 2010. The key principle expressed in the text – which is still under discussion in the Committee – is that *"farmers should be recognised as main providers of Public Goods and that the market fails to reward them"* and *"only a strong and well-supported CAP can deliver such diverse positive externalities"*.

Parliament also discussed the *"quality of agricultural products"* and for the first time it recognised Regions as institutional players that should be involved in the recognition of quality certification systems for agricultural products. This is great news for Regions!

At Commission level, on the contrary, the situation is much more complex even though it is extremely constructive and encouraging that Commissioner Dacian Cioloș is constantly in touch with Parliament. It is too early, however, to say whether there has been a complete shift in stance on part of the Commission (especially after the recent incident with the *"disowned document"* on the future budget of the EU which was published at the end of last year and in which the CAP was heavily downsized...), but it is clear that things have changed compared to the previous Barroso Commission.

The will to retain the CAP is emerging with increasing determination, though with deep modifications compared to the past especially with a view to adapting it to the Europe 2020 Strategy. It is interesting that M. Cioloș urged not only farmers, but also all public stakeholders – such as environmental associations, consumer interest and animal welfare groups – to actively participate. The debate needs to be as wide as possible so that society in its entirety can benefit from this new CAP. The new Common Policy will need to focus on nutrition, territorial management and environmental protection. That is the reason why a public consultation on the future of the CAP was launched and is due to be completed at the beginning of June.

What about European Regions?

There are many reasons why European Regions are entitled to play their role in agriculture as was also indicated during the works of the Committee of the Regions on the CAP after 2013.

Regions need to be actively involved because the CAP is clearly a "territorial" policy both from an economic and environmental point of view.

The implementation of rural development policies - which has been consolidating itself during the last 20 years - is based on full participation of the Regions. Planning, on the contrary, has been taking place at European level and has been closely tied to the Union's financial perspectives in order to establish a homogeneous and well-defined policy. Since its inception, rural development (5B schemes for rural areas of the first Delors I package) was the result of an ambitious political intuition of the Commission that formed an alliance with the Regions and obtained considerable success at local level.

Within the framework of the simplification exercise (supported also by Commissioner Ciolos) there are certain points on a number of CAP instruments that remain rather vague. Effective Regional planning (both of pillar I and II actions) can guarantee the synergies which in turn can widen the scope for development in rural areas.

Regions possess a wealth of know-how and resources that must be taken into account in the current discussions on the future implementation of relevant instruments. The starting point is the definition of a new concept of rural development - an idea that currently does not seem to be taken sufficiently into consideration - and new ideas should come by the Regions themselves.

Practical experience on the ground and the awareness of the importance at local level of the Common Agricultural Policy must motivate all European Regions to actively participate in this consultation since it is a unique chance to determine future decisions. In this framework I think that both single Regions and their associations - such as the CPMR or Regional thematic Networks on Agriculture (AREPO, AREFLH etc.) should be as pro-active as possible.

We must reject any kind of drastic reduction of the CAP or a possible renationalisation that would certainly not benefit Regions or the European project. It is especially in the interest of Regions to answer Mr. Ciolos' call and to support him in this decisive moment.

It is not only about defining the future of the CAP and the CAP of the future but also about giving a new and more complete meaning to the 27-member-state Europe we all believe in!

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EVENTS

17-20 May 2010, European Parliament Plenary Session, Strasbourg (FR)
<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/activities/plenary/home.do?language=EN>

18-21 May 2010, European Maritime Days, Gijon (ES)
<http://www.crpm.org/index.php?act=6,1,2,188>

20-21 May 2010, 30th General Assembly of the CPMR Islands Commission, Azores (PT)
<http://www.crpm.org/index.php?act=6,1,2,183>

25 May 2010, CPMR Seminar on Territorial Cooperation in the European Union and at its borders, Valencia (ES)
<http://www.crpm.org/index.php?act=6,1,2,175>

26 May 2010, Fostering bio diversity and sustainable water, PURPLE The Hague-Scheveningen, (NL)
http://www.crpm.org/pub/agenda2/192_purple-conference-26may2010.pdf

26-28 May 2010, General Assembly of the CPMR Baltic Sea Commission, Rostock-Warnemünde (DE)
<http://www.balticseacommission.info/>

9-10 June 2010, Plenary Session of Committee of the Regions

<http://www.cor.europa.eu/pages/EventTemplate.aspx?view=folder&id=87402c77-d94a-4381-95b0-5ee5b3ec2d2d&sm=87402c77-d94a-4381-95b0-5ee5b3ec2d2d>

11 June 2010, Meeting of the CPMR Political Bureau, Troms (Norway)

<http://www.crpm.org/index.php?act=6,1,2,191>

17-18 June 2010, General Assembly of the CPMR Atlantic Arc Commission, Bretagne (FR)

<http://www.crpm.org/index.php?act=6,1,2,187>

1 July 2010, Europe and its neighbourhood: towards macro-regions? CPMR Seminar: Brussels (BE)

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