

European Grouping of Territorial Co-operation

Debate in the European Parliament

Plenary session

30 January 2008

Brussels

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Introductory remarks

Mr President, I would like to start by saying that the deadline of one year for the adoption of national rules was, in fact, very ambitious. If we look into other regulations establishing legal bodies, it can be seen that the deadlines foreseen are usually between three and four years. So this is something which we also have to take into account.

In order to accelerate the whole procedure, the Directorate General for Regional Policy has prepared a questionnaire covering the elements of the regulations which have to be taken into account in the national rules. This questionnaire was sent in March 2007 to all Member States via the networks of the members of the Committee for the Coordination of the

Funds (COCOF). The questionnaire was also subject to discussions with Member States during the COCOF meetings twice last year: once in April and then in the middle of July.

So where are we today with the adoption? We have six Member States that have adopted appropriate national rules: Hungary, the UK, Bulgaria, Portugal, Romania and Spain. In another four Member States, the finalisation of the process of adoption of national rules should take place very soon: France, Luxembourg, Germany and Belgium. Of the remaining 17 Member States, 15 have already launched either the parliamentary or the government adoption procedure. We have, however, two Member States – Denmark and Estonia – where we do not have any information on the process. They are expected to respect the deadline of mid-February as fixed in the Director General's letter, which was sent to all the Member States, in which we request information on the communication on the adoption of the procedures of the rules by the deadline of 14 February. In the same letter, in which we gave this deadline of mid-February to those Member States that still have to inform us whether they have adopted or what the calendar of the adoption is, we also inform the Member States of the preparation process for the interinstitutional EGTC seminar, which, together with Parliament and the Committee of the Regions, will be held on 19 June in Brussels under the Slovene Presidency. We have also encouraged them to participate in the EGTC expert group which was set up by the Committee of the Regions.

On the possible infringement procedure, let me say firstly that this is a very specific regulation: it is not a directive. This is a regulation of direct applicability in all 27 Member States, which requires some additional

action from the Member States and not merely the adoption of the implementing rules. After 14 February, when we have received the responses of individual Member States – especially those whose agenda for adopting the necessary regulations we do not yet know – on which any decision of the Commission to start infringement procedures will depend, we will consider our position again and see where the infringement procedure will start. In any case, we will, of course, also be carefully monitoring the application of the regulations when they are in place.

But let me say – and I think this is a very important part of this whole process – that, in the mean time, the first EGTC was established last Monday between France and Belgium, although the national rules have not yet been adopted, because this regulation is directly applicable and regional and local authorities have the right to set up the groupings. National rules need to identify the ex ante check procedure, including the designation of a competent authority that would receive the request of the regional or local authority to participate in an EGTC. We have today around 30 examples of programmes of projects across Europe where the option for EGTC is already envisaged. There are also regions that have already signed the letter of intention. A great deal of preparatory work is going on, so we expect that the process will gather momentum once the finalisation of the national implementing rules is completed.

Closing remarks

Mr President, I thank Members very much for their comments and also for all their support for this tool, and for their commitment.

Let me just remind everyone that no Member State has refused to implement this tool and this is, I think, very important. It is absolutely clear that all of them have to implement. We have, as I was trying to say in my introductory remarks, tried to move towards completion and accelerate the whole process through very different instruments. Certainly, today we can still give encouragement directly through your active presence in your Member States and regions, which we have doing for the last year. During all my visits, all my meetings, all the conferences – not only on territorial cooperation but also on the core of the policy – we have been encouraging, we have been talking and giving instructions. We have worked a lot with regions to help them prepare for implementing this new tool for cooperation.

But I think today we are in the process. I think the awareness among the Member States has greatly increased. I hope that, with the recent impetus from the Director General's actions, we will have most of the national adjustments for the implementing regulations in place by June.

We have to remember, however, that any programme can transfer its management to the EGTC at any time of its existence, so no potential damage to the policy arises from the fact that the Member States have not yet implemented the requisite adjustments. Also, any project can use

this tool for the implementation of the project and, as we know, we can have new projects until the end of 2013. So there is no threat here either. This is not a consolation, but I would like you also to see that the fact that we have not yet completed all the implementing procedures does not cause damage in this sense.

What we see today is the great interest of other directorates general in the Commission that are eager to use this instrument within the seventh Framework Programme, but also within the CIT programme and in other policies as well.

It is important in your meetings at regional and local level to remind the regions that, even if there are not yet implementing rules in place, the recent example of France and Belgium clearly shows that the EGTC can be established and a Member State can implement and designate an ad hoc authority to play the role of the authority to which the regional and local bodies would direct themselves for information about the establishment of the EGTC.

Concerning the handbook on EGTC, INTERACT is working on the handbook. In March there will be a conference in Brussels, and everybody interested will be invited to this seminar on the preparation of the handbook.

Concerning the Madrid Convention, we should remember that it has taken 20 years so far to ratify this convention and, if I remember correctly, not all of our Member States have ratified the Convention yet.

This regulation was renegotiated less than two years ago, and we are now in the first year of its implementation.

That, I think, would be the reaction to what you have been saying. I would like to assure you that we are strongly committed, because we see the value added and we work with the regions. This is why so many of them are also so well prepared. We see all the value added of this instrument that you have mentioned.

However, of course we have to remember that it does not guarantee the money. It is not a project, it is a tool that we want to use for the cooperation. But, of course, the EGTC can receive Community funding according to the normal rules, under the European cohesion policy. This is also important to bear in mind.

Again, thank you for your interest. We are absolutely committed to completing this process as quickly as possible.