



**CoR Seminar on
Cultural Diversity: Europe's Wealth
in
Graz – European Capital of Culture 2003**

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Regions**

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Mr Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I should like to begin by thanking the CoR for inviting me to take part in this seminar. As you will have discovered for yourselves over the past few days, the Committee was quite right to choose Graz as the venue for this event. Not only is the city Europe's sole capital of culture in 2003, it is also the capital of the Austrian Federal Region of Styria, a European region with ancient roots and rich traditions, that has a past – as well as a present – history of setting new and exciting cultural trends in literature, art and music.

Both in my capacity as President of the Assembly of European Regions, and as the Minister for Culture in the neighbouring Region of Lower Austria, my presence here today represents far more than a pleasant duty. The political changes and developments taking place in Europe, and in particular the forthcoming adoption of an EU Framework Constitution with considerable political implications for culture and education, provide compelling reasons for strengthening dialogue between the AER and the CdR. I hope this seminar will give new impetus to our joint efforts to promote cultural diversity.

I see the selection of European capitals of culture as the best and most vivid demonstration of the fact that regions and municipalities are the clearest expression of Europe's cultural diversity. For it is our regions and municipalities which create the basic conditions for culture and whose support is a sine qua non for ensuring that not only artistic freedom and the search for new forms of expression but also the careful preservation and interpretation

of the historical heritage, can unfold naturally, free from the constrictions of goals and targets.

Regions' and municipalities' comprehensive, diverse, broad and democratically legitimate patronage of the arts constitutes the essence of European cultural policy. It would therefore be both mistaken and misleading to equate European cultural policy with the measures taken and goals decided in Brussels by the EU institutions. The initiatives taken at European level can – and indeed should – merely relate to cultural life in our regions and municipalities.

This is why, since its creation, the AER has disagreed with those who believe that, in order to demonstrate the particular value which Europe ascribes to culture, the EU institutions should establish their own cultural policy and that, if the EU does not extend its competencies in the cultural domain, the process of European integration will lack an important element.

Our position is supported not only by financial and administrative concerns. As we all know, the budget for cultural policy in any major European city represents many times more than the funding that can be provided by the EU. We also know that not even the current agricultural budget would be anywhere near enough to ensure a fair spread of funds for culture across-the-board, let alone to benefit the smallest towns. It would be mistaken and unrealistic even to aim for such a policy in rudimentary form. Moreover, it would require the establishment of the kind of European administration which, from the point of view of budget allocation and supervision alone, would be unthinkable for most people.

Moreover, these are only some of the concerns which should warn us against considering something resembling a centralised European culture policy or continuously extending the current rudimentary policy.

In relation to the critical stance, which I myself, and the AER, have adopted on a central European cultural policy, another more important question concerns the anxiety about European "quality standards" and centrally established criteria and norms. There is a danger of the impression being given – as it already has with respect to the selection of events and activities eligible for European co-financing – that Brussels' support would go to "typical" or "ideal" expressions of European culture.

This would result in new emphases and restrictions being placed on the diversity of cultural activities and initiatives and artistic productions and products. Rather than letting

culture be determined by its own inner dynamic and selected on the basis of the criticism and self-criticism of those involved in its creation, new hierarchies of value would be established from above.

For the AER, this represents a step in the wrong direction for culture policy, and we are calling for the subsidiarity principle to be applied in this domain. In other words, culture policy at regional and local level should be based on the principle of self-determination for those involved in the creation of culture, without any policy input from the authorities. In the view of regional and local authorities this guarantees the best framework for the development of culture. As I have already stated, our vision is to have primarily disinterested, open patrons whose main objective is to promote the tremendous cultural diversity, vitality and creativity in the face of any form of restriction.

I do not mean to deny that the European Parliament and Commission are motivated by the best intentions in calling for broader powers and more European funding for culture, nor that they are also concerned to protect cultural diversity.

The political initiatives taken every day by the European Parliament bear ample witness to this. Take, for example, the report on cultural diversity by my Austrian colleague from Burgenland, **Christa Prets**, the initiative for the promotion of regional and minority languages by the South Tyrol MEP, **Mr Ebner**, the revised Directive on Television without Frontiers or the discussion on the status of the culture industry.

Nevertheless, I do not wish to conceal my concerns about the draft adopted by the Convention for the EU Framework Convention. The AER-Bureau shares my concerns and expressed them unanimously two weeks ago in calls for amendments to Articles III-181 on culture and III-217 on the common commercial policy.

We regret the introduction of qualified majority voting for measures in support of culture. Until now, unanimous voting has applied in this area. This has ensured that the measures adopted – as well as the related funding allocations – have been supported by all the parties and no Member State has been obliged to go along with measures that run counter to its own conception of cultural policy.

I understand the efforts to simplify the decision-making process and the dissatisfaction caused when measures are vetoed. However, I would also say that the introduction of qualified majority voting into EU cultural policy represents a threat to the preservation of cultural diversity. Cultural diversity is not compatible with the imposition of majority rule. The Member States can undertake common cultural policy initiatives without imposing

majority decisions. They are free to commit their own resources. The commitment of common EU funds for cultural policy measures, despite minority opposition, would represent both direct and indirect interference in Member States' and regions' freedom to determine their own policy in the cultural domain.

Regions have day-to-day experience of putting the principle of European integration into practice in the cultural field, on a voluntary basis and with no European funding. When initiatives are felt to be appropriate, support and funding naturally follow. For instance, a few days ago at the end of three years of work, the Languedoc-Roussillon region, with support from the AER, published an extensive and detailed catalogue on Writers-in-Residence in Europe, a work which promotes cross border cooperation. Similarly, a few days ago, a comprehensive guide, catalogue and study on the "Danube cultural routes" was published under the auspices of the Working Community of the Danube Regions, a body in which my own region has taken on responsibility for cultural policy. These are just two examples of successful cooperation-based cultural policy initiatives in Europe.

It is vital that we develop more initiatives of our own and that we do not become accustomed to waiting for Brussels to act. This also means that we must be ready to commit our own funds for the common good.

The AER is also critical of a further area of the Framework Constitution, namely the changes to the common commercial policy under Article III-217. In practice, decisions as to which aspects of culture and education are to be considered as economic matters and therefore included in competition negotiations, will now be decided by qualified majority. Specifically, this concerns international agreements such as GATS, the General Agreement on Trade in Services and Annexes. A decision on whether an initiative comes under the domain of cultural policy, or economic and market policy, will now have to be taken in every case. The proviso to the Article, stipulating that unanimity is only required if there is a threat to cultural diversity, leaves many questions open, including the rules on who would decide and how the decision would be taken.

This will ultimately mean that decisions as to what constitutes culture, and merits protection, and what can be left to the market, will have to be taken by the courts. The freedom of the Member States and regions to decide on subsidies will be considerably reduced. Article 217 strikes a severe blow against national cultural autonomy.

The protection requirement that applies to culture does not extend to education, which will become a commercial commodity under Article III-217. The AER has already pointed to the implications of this in its Brixen/Bressanone Declaration of 2002.



In the face of the huge objections, the Commission has refrained from making new offers to open up culture and education to competition during the current GATS negotiations.

The AER finds it incomprehensible that the European Parliament and Commission have fought so strongly in the Framework Constitution for ending the veto in the fields of cultural and education policy.

For the AER, the provisions agreed in Nice – in other words, the maintenance of the unanimity requirement for culture, education, social policy and health in the EU's common commercial policy – represent the best guarantee against further commercialisation of culture and education and their reduction to the status of commodities and merely profit-oriented services.

I hope that we will find fellow supporters for our cause within the Committee of the Regions, even if many are now inclined to see the current version of the EU Constitution as final.

I wish you every success with the seminar.

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