

InTerView



Michel DELEBARRE



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1st Vice-President of the Committee of the Regions**

What is the Committee of the Regions' role within the EU institutions?

MD: Since its inception in 1994, the Committee of the Regions (CoR) has provided an assembly where its 344 members, all of whom are regional and local elected representatives, represent regional and local authorities before the EU institutions and ensure that their voice is heard in the shaping of Community policies and legislation. Under the Treaties, the Commission and Council are obliged to consult the CoR on any new proposal affecting the regional or local level. With the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty, the CoR has become something more than a mere consultative body as it now has the right to bring proceedings before the EU Court of Justice to defend its prerogatives or in cases of infringement of the subsidiarity principle.

Aside from the text of the Treaties, the CoR also acts as a powerful sounding board and advocate for the regions in Brussels.

Local and regional authorities are playing a growing role in the governance of sport, notably in France. Is this a trend you've noticed elsewhere in Europe? Does the CoR address any sport-related issues?

MD: It's true that responsibility for sporting issues is becoming much less centralised. In Germany, Austria, Belgium, Italy or Spain, the regions have significant powers over sports organisation and management. In other countries, however, the public authorities have much less say in this field. This is broadly speaking the case in the UK although at the same time it includes very marked regional prerogatives (for instance in football and rugby) that are envied by other regions of Europe which have much stronger powers and funding but feel less satisfied in terms of identity.

As for the CoR, it certainly does do work on sport, and in 2007 provided active input for the White Paper on sport. However, I believe that European sporting networks as such are still too thin on the ground in Brussels, and tend to operate from the perspective of national lobbyists.

The European Olympic Committee has recently set up an office in Brussels, but it's really only a little annex to the Rome office. Other than that, sport-related initiatives are often organised by the regions' offices in Brussels, or by economic players from the sport sector for specific topics. But it all remains a bit too ad hoc: what we need is a concerted approach.

From now on, the EU will have a direct competence as regards sporting issues. What, in the view of the CoR, should be the priorities for these future policies?

MD: Until now, EU action regarding sport has been essentially passive and the result of other policies such as competition, the single market, or justice and home affairs. The entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty could open the way to the introduction of a real European dimension for sport, as it stipulates that the EU will have competence to support, coordinate or supplement Member States' activities in this field. However, we should not look at this issue solely in terms of competences.

Sport is also a force for economic and social development, and for the sustainable development of our regions. Sport has every justification to be included in the projects which the EU co-finances under the Structural Funds or through specific measures related to the societal and economic aspects of sport, such as health, social inclusion, the voluntary sector and education. It's worth pointing out that according to the most recent VOCASPORT study available (2004), the sports sector provides 800 000 jobs in the EU. In France, physical and sporting activities generate annual expenditure of over EUR 31 billion per year (around 1.8% of GDP). Aside from the figures, I believe that the EU has every interest in developing the symbolic aspect of European sport.



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One day the idea of seeing the 27 EU Member States all competing under the star-spangled flag of Europe will take hold. The EU would then outclass the rest of the world. The results of the Beijing Olympics bear me out: the EU won 280 medals, while the United States and China together amassed just 210.

One thing is certain: this host of challenges for European sport warrant more resources on the part of the Commission, starting with human resources, as sport is currently only dealt with by a tiny unit within the Education and Culture Directorate-General.



You are Mayor of Dunkirk and President of the Dunkirk Urban Community (CUD) Grand Littoral, recognised for their dynamism on sport-related issues. What are the main planks of these policies?

The CUD has been supporting sport for more than 20 years now, first by building facilities and later by supporting high-level sport and taking part in major sporting events such as the Tour de France cycle and yacht races. As part of its sustainable development project, the CUD has confirmed its support for high-level sport. Dunkirk, in contrast, has preferred to focus on community sporting activities

that are more "accessible" when it comes to public funding, such as handball, basketball, swimming or ice hockey. Performance contracts and goal-oriented agreements are negotiated each year with clubs, event organisers and elite sportspeople.

We want to develop a positive image of our town, bring new vitality to the region and build social links. I should add that for a medium-sized town, Dunkirk is very well equipped with public sports facilities. Our three main challenges are subdivided into 12 tactical objectives and hundreds of activities based on the three pillars of sustainable development: social, environmental and economic. For this we are signed up to French sport's Agenda 21 programme for sustainable development.

Our major regional project at present is to be considered as a base for preparation for the 2012 London Olympics. We firmly believe that preparation for the biggest sporting events is increasingly done on a polycentric basis involving exchange of good practice, networking and wider geographical zoning.

Over a hundred teams from all over the world, representing more than 25 different sports, are already coming to acclimatise and train in our sports centres. I believe that sport brings a town or a region two key benefits. The first is in terms of image:

sportspeople and teams are excellent ambassadors, and European competitions reinforce this aspect. The second is the aspiration that sporting achievements kindle in young people: giving them a taste for taking part in sports is also extremely beneficial for health, friendships and team spirit.

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