Public Consultation of the European Commission

on Creative Online Content in the Single Market

Contribution of the Assembly of European Regions

(Veszprem, 21st September 2006)

I. About the Assembly of European Regions (AER)

For the past 20 years, the AER has been a key proponent of regional democracy, good governance and subsidiarity. Created in 1985, the Assembly of European Regions (AER) is the political voice of the regions and the key partner for the European and international institutions on every issue of regional competence.

The AER promotes cultural diversity, subsidiarity and regional democracy and enables the regions to form the essential link between the European Union and the citizens. It supports the cultural diversity of the regions and translates this diversity into its strength. Through its 255 member regions from 30 European countries and 13 interregional organisations, the AER represents the interests of the European regions on the European level.

Riccardo Illy, President of Friuli-Venezia Giulia, is the AER President. The AER headquarters are in Strasbourg.

II. AER Answers to the Questions of the European Commission Consultation on "Intercultural Dialogue"

Below, the AER and its member regions outline their position on specific questions of the Commission Consultation that are of particular significance to European regions:

Question 6 - How far is cultural diversity self-sustaining online? Or should cultural diversity specifically be further fostered online? How can more people be enabled to share and circulate their own creative works? Is enough done to respect and enhance linguistic diversity?

The AER sees online communication as an important means to sustain the cultural diversity worldwide, because it allows members of the same cultural background to communicate regularly with each other. In this way, the European citizens can remain rooted in their cultural identity even if they would not remain in their home regions. In addition, one should also not forget the positive impact of increased contact with other cultures and languages through Internet communication.

However, cultural diversity is also endangered by the cultural and linguistic hegemony of American and Western European cultures that characterise and dominate online content today. Other cultures and languages – especially those not forming the national standard of a

country and those not using latin letters – are today still in danger to be pushed to the background by others.

Language plays a crucial role for the cultural diversity of Europe – by supporting linguistic diversity online also the standing of cultural diversity is supported. Therefore, the AER would support any measures to enable lesser-used languages of Europe to be used in creative works online. This might be done in form of financial incentives to provide additional language versions of websites, which are of particular interest of lesser-used languages and regional cultures, for instance news services.

Finally, creative works from regional cultures and in lesser-used languages should also be more effectively supported to be able to be shared by interested citizens all over Europe. These creative works could be supported by funding for translation into major European languages or the creation of distribution channels easily accessible to all European citizens.

Question 32 - What could be the role of national governments / regional entities to foster new business models in the online environment (broadband deployment, inclusion, etc.)?

The AER and its member regions are fully aware of the significance of the new online technologies and instruments for the economic development of Europe's regions. The regional entities can potentially play a crucial role in fostering new business models, but need before that own expertise and competencies to be able to implement them.

Therefore, the exchange of best practice between regions and adequate training in the regions is an important means to explore the needs and potentials of European regions in making best use of the new online technologies for the regional economy.

Obviously, a first step would be to ensure that individual regions are equipped with an adequate and modern infrastructure to enable its citizens and businesses to make best use of the possibilities that online communications pose. Therefore, regions will have to look at efficient and cost-effective ways to create an Internet infrastructure.

Furthermore, the infrastructure needs to be supplemented by human resources able to make the best use of the infrastructure. It would be the role of the regions to identify the groups – social, occupational or individual - in most need of support for their inclusion into online communication. These groups could be supported best by the regional authorities with the help of the national and European level.

Question 33 - What actions (policy, support measures, research projects) could be taken at EU level to address the specific issues you raised? Do you have concrete proposals in this respect?

One of the major challenges for online communications is to make it generally available to European citizens. Those, who are not able to use online communications will be left behind by the frontrunners of the technological developments. Therefore, the AER is in support of actions that would lead to a stronger inclusion into the use of online content for these which are currently left behind – among them regions lacking adequate infrastructure, social groups without adequate education or lesser-used languages and cultures. On the European level, there need to be support measures targeted specifically for regional development in online accessibility.

In addition, there is also the need to enable European regions to receive adequate training and access to best practice in order to be able to implement policies in their home regions

that make best use of the opportunities of online communications. This should be done on a European level also in order to reach an elevated European standard of Internet communication that would contribute to the competitiveness of the European Internal Market as a whole as well as to notion of European citizenship.

* * *