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Twinning in Europe : Beyond exchange

Cities and twinned towns of the wider Europe assembled for their Congress organised from the 22nd to 24th May 2002, at the initiative of the Council of European Municipalities and Regions, at the invitation of the City of Antwerp, and with the support of the European Commission.

At the beginning of the 21st century, taking into consideration the events all over the world which shock and call into question what we hold dear to ourselves, the elected representatives and officials of European local and regional authorities have underlined the role of the twinning movement in the construction of more peaceful, understanding and unified societies for their inhabitants.

To this end, the elected representatives and twinning coordinators gathered in Antwerp expressed their wish to give twinning a new boost so that closer links can enable the citizens of Europe:

- To live together, in harmony, solidarity and mutual understanding,
- To make "the art of twinning" an instrument of bringing together the people of Europe called to live together within an enlarged Union,
- To make twinning a tool of co-operation favourable to a Europe that is concerned by the well-being of its inhabitants,
- To benefit from and develop the richness and assets of the "learning cities".

Having debated these four broad themes, the representatives from the European local and regional authorities gathered in Antwerp analysed the twinning movement in order to consider the role that twinning can play in the future of Europe.

1. Living together infers the respect a mutual understanding, core values of our society which from now on are identified in the Charter of Fundamental Rights. If twinning is to make its contribution to this, it has to be particularly involved in:

The fight against racism, xenophobia, prejudice and all forms of extremism and ignorance;
Construction, at ground level, of a Europe that is culturally rich and respectful of its diversity;
The definition of a European social model of reference that answers the expectations of Europeans;

The preparation of enlargement of the European Union;

The promotion of citizenship and local democracy on our continent;

The inclusion of weak and less privileged populations in exchanges between twinned towns;

A stronger mobilisation and contribution of the young and their initiation to mobility.

2. "The art of twinning", one of CEMR's core values ever since the end of the Second World War, remains an ideal way of bringing European citizens closer together. Conscious of the importance of people to people exchanges, the elected representatives and officers in charge of twinning of European local and regional authorities called on their European colleagues to: Recognize the role of community input and create and support voluntary structured local bodies - committees / twinning association - specifically in charge of promoting, leading and strengthening relations between two local authorities;

Formulate exchange projects and co-operation that favours personal enhancement of those involved and benefit the general local interest;

Create effective promotional strategies to improve the image of twinning;

Increase participation in the networks of towns that currently exist in Europe;

Give priority to exchange projects with the aim of increasing intercultural communication and strengthening the training of those responsible at local level in this domain.

3. Economic co-operation and sustainable development now constitute many aspects of a relationship between twinned towns. This allows the towns to exchange experience and know-how, and to increase, as key players of sustainable development, the means available to them to improve the well-being of their inhabitants. On the basis of their work, local elected representatives and twinning officers ask the representatives of European twinned towns to: Encourage, among key local players, co-operation within the powers of local authorities, in those fields;

Attain the human, operational financial and cultural means to fulfil the requirements of quality and performance of the actions implemented within the framework of twinning;

To use twinning and transnational partnerships to support local employment, and local sustainable development;

Involved the inhabitants of the twinned towns in the activities of co-operation in these fields and promote those activities as widely as possible;

Use twinings as to propose models of safeguarding peace in countries -European and beyond, faced with conflicts and civil wars.

4. "The learning city" constitutes an accurate model in Europe where the citizens of all ages can aspire to education, training, apprenticeship, and the benefit of knowledge throughout their life. This concept contributes to the strengthening of values which have always formed the basis for the European model of society. In this perspective, the elected representatives and twinning officers gathered in Antwerp seek to:

Make the educational institutions aware of the benefit of twinning, and encourage them to take part in twinning schemes with the appropriate means so that relations between the cities take on an educational dimension for the awareness of European citizenship;
Establish at local level, the decompartmentalised practices between educational institutions in

order to establish a European and intercultural appreciation in the field of youth and adult education, apprenticeship and training;

Introduce within the activities of twinning new teaching methods in order to more effectively meet the needs of exchange participants with regards to training, education, apprenticeship and personal culture;

Use twinning as a means of mutual learning, including within the framework of the contribution of Europe to the development and the optimisation of resources between the North and South;

Make twinning a framework for the promotion and the education of democracy and citizenship, these being the universal values and ways of life that, if learnt and implemented on a local level, find all their force on the European level through the encounters organised between the inhabitants of twinned towns.

5. The Cities and Twinned Towns of the wider Europe wished to emphasize to the Commission and the Parliament the importance of the support that the European Institutions give to the twinning movement, both politically and financially, and affirmed their vigilance regarding the evolution of the Community Aid to Twinning budget.

They expressed appreciation to the Parliament for its continuing support, which will continue to be vital for the future, where a growing number of twinings include partners in candidate countries. While expressing deep concern at proposals - contrary to the perspectives of enlargement - aiming to reduce the twinning budget for 2003, they also expressed appreciation for the commitment of all those in the Commission who work to support the twinning movement. They called on the institutions to ensure stable, sufficient, multi-year financial support for twinning.

The delegates also invite the institutions to take all the necessary initiatives to ensure that the support of the European Union is enlarged to include twinning actions between cities and towns of the Union and those in Albania, Bosnia Herzegovina, Croatia, FYROM, and from the Republic of Serbia - Montenegro.

6. The Antwerp Congress takes place at a crucial moment in European Construction. The Union must reform itself with the drawing up of, in the framework of the Convention on the Future of Europe, a draft constitution. The Union must prepare itself for enlargement to include the candidate countries. The Union is faced with increasing responsibilities on the international level.

The delegates from European twinned towns and cities wish to recall their commitment to a politically strengthened Union - in conformity with the constitution of CEMR-, transparent and close to its citizens.

They also wish to confirm their strong belief that the twinning movement makes an essential contribution to this process, as its main aim is to bring citizens together around the shared values of our continent.