

ASSEMBLY OF EUROPEAN REGIONS

Michèle Sabban elected AER president

By Nathalie Vandystadt in Tampere

After a particularly long vote, the Assembly of European Regions (AER) elected its new President, Michèle Sabban, vice-president of the Ile-de-France Region, for a two-year renewable term, on 13 November in Tampere (Finland).

This was the AER's first election of its president by members since its founding in 1985. Its president used to be chosen by the presidium or the board. "There was a real campaign with projects. It was hard, which is only normal. I am proud to belong to the AER today because it has

demonstrated its maturity and responsibility," commented Sabban, who has been serving as acting president of the assembly for six months after Riccardo Illy (Italy) decided to retire from politics.

Representing 260 regions from 33 European countries, the AER is today the biggest assembly in the EU. "I am keen to continue what Riccardo Illy began by placing the economic and social dimensions at the heart of our debates and to reach out to our regions," she added. Sabban's opponents in the election were Constantin Ostaficiuc (Romania) and Johanna Mikl-Leitner (Austria). Osta-

ficiuc (Timis, western Romania) was named vice-president along with Peter Straub (Baden-Wuerttemberg, southwest Germany).

Top priorities for the new president will be migration, integration (especially women), microcredits and relations with the Mediterranean countries. "Today, the regions are the echelon closest to citizens. Europe is still not well known. There is nothing to be gained from rejecting others; on the contrary, accepting others is essential," said Sabban, who comes from an immigrant family (she was born in Tunisia). ■

EU/US/CHINA

Beijing settles WTO info row

By Sébastien Falletti

Threatened by a condemnation at the World Trade Organisation, China reached a compromise with the EU, the US and Canada in its longstanding dispute over financial information providers, on 13 November in Geneva. Beijing will allow foreign financial news agencies, such as Thomson Reuters, Bloomberg or Dow Jones to provide information to their clients without passing through the control of the national agency Xinhua. The memorandum of understanding will set up a new regulatory framework, providing a level playing

field to all operators on the Chinese market by June 2009. "Today's agreement ensures that investors and market operators will be able to receive comprehensive and objective financial information," said EU Trade Commissioner Catherine Ashton. The key point of the agreement is that foreign press agencies are no longer required to supply their services through the only designated agency, which was China Economic Information Service (CEIS), an entity controlled by Xinhua. Moreover, a new independent regulator will be set up to replace Xinhua, which has until now been the only Chinese regulator.

The EU and the United States had regu-

larly raised this issue since 2006 before requesting WTO consultations with China, on 3 March 2008. The relevant WTO dispute settlement consultations were held on 22-23 April, followed by joint EU-US-China negotiations aiming at an amicable solution. This process was later joined by Canada, which had requested consultations with China on the same issue, on 20 June. The agreement was hailed by the European Commission as a positive signal just ahead of the EU-China summit, scheduled for 1 December in Lyon. "This shows what can be achieved when interested parties cooperate in search of solutions," commented Ashton. ■



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IMMIGRATION

European regions ready to better integrate migrants

By Nathalie Vandystadt in Tampere

Stuck between national competences and local realities, Europe's regions are committed to acting in several fields to improve the integration conditions for their migrants. Under the momentum of their new President, French Socialist Michèle Sabban (vice-president of the Ile-de-France Region), the 270 members of the Assembly of European Regions (AER) recognise, in a joint declaration adopted on 14 November in Tampere, "the challenge of integration," which requires "regional efforts to be made in the limits of national policies".

MULTICULTURALISM

After the adoption by the 27 member states of a non-binding 'toolbox' on integration two weeks ago in Vichy, following the wishes of the French EU Presidency, the regions' declaration symbolises a greater openness. In fact, faced with the promotion of "learning the national language from the country of origin," or awareness of the values of the national anthem by several member states, particularly France, the regions insist on education, employment, access to housing and health care services, gender equality, politics and civil society.

Several elements, of course, appear in both European declarations. But the regions' declaration gets credit for being

clear. The regions commit to integrating their immigrants through "effective promotion of language acquisition and multiculturalism from an early age while ensuring equal access to the education system". They will also exchange information on education. The central point nonetheless remains language, the regions insisting on "the ability to master the language(s) and to understand the education standards of the host region," specifying: "Linguistic skills among our citizens are crucial for the development of our societies".

The immigration ministers' toolbox, adopted against a backdrop of protests in the streets of Vichy, listed a series of very general instruments: "values of the European Union," facilitation of access to work according to national rules, development of "European modules" likely to serve as a basis for introduction and language courses (see *Europolitics* 3631).

According to the regions, integration through employment also takes place through the recognition of qualifications and knowledge acquired abroad, facilitating access to the job market, and the development of "targeted approaches" for certain migrant communities, such as small loans to stimulate the creation of start-ups.

AVOIDING GHETTOS

Regarding access to housing, the regions would be more divided. The French and

German regions are, according to our information, more reluctant on expenditure than the Scandinavians, for example. The members of the AER nonetheless commit to provide "suitable housing, avoiding the proliferation of immigrant ghettos which lead to social segregation".

Integration through access to health care takes place both through information given to migrants and financial support from the state. Regarding gender equality, it demands encouraging the participation of migrants in regional policies. Foreigners must also be able to take part in the regional democratic processes and civil society.

Regions therefore support migration in the EU. However, they conclude, the cost that this entails – at local and regional level – requires, for them, "recognition and adequate resources" from the national governments and the EU.

In an interview with *Europolitics*, Eric Alira, originally from Burkina Faso and presented as a "successful example of integration" as he became a councillor in the regional assembly of Lower Silesia (south-west of Poland) in 2003, says: "I have the impression, especially in the French case, the Assembly of European Regions could bring solutions to the problem of integration. In fact, there must be investment in co-funding and openness toward foreigners who come to live in the country". ■



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Michèle Sabban elected AER President

14/11/2008 00:00

Michèle Sabban, Vice-President of the Ile-de-France region has been elected President of the Assembly of European Regions (AER), the largest independent network of regional authorities in wider Europe.

14th November 2008.

Michèle Sabban, Vice-President of the Ile-de-France region (F), was elected yesterday President of the Assembly of European Regions (AER), the largest independent network of regional authorities in wider Europe.

A former AER vice-president (2006-2008), Ms. Sabban was elected from among three candidates to the two-year post during AER's annual General Assembly, which is taking place this week in Tampere (FIN) under the title "Migration and Integration: Regional solutions to a European challenge".

Sabban said after the election: "Our Assembly will have to pick up new challenges and our work program will have to respond to the major issues confronting regions today: climate change, demographic changes, migration and the common agricultural policy.

"We will bring together the voices of the regions on the European scene; we will establish strong relations of trust with the European institutions in 2009, and we will find a common platform to work with all the organisations representing local and regional authorities in Europe and across the world."

The General Assembly further elected two vice-presidents, Constantin Ostaficiuc (President of Timis, Romania) and Peter Straub (President of Baden-Württemberg Assembly), as well as a vice-president treasurer, Urs Wüthrich-Pelloli (Minister-Delegate for European Affairs, Basel Landschaft, Switzerland).

Seats were also allocated for AER's executive political Bureau, which consists of members selected by fellow-regions of the 33 countries represented within AER.

Michèle Sabban

Michèle Sabban has been President of the AER Observatory on Gender Issues since 2004 and an AER Vice-President since 2006. She took on the AER Presidency when Riccardo Illy withdrew from politics last Spring. She has been Vice-President of the regional Council of Ile-de-France (F) since 1998, in charge of personnel, general administration and government contracts. She is also Vice-President of International Socialist Women.

Born in June 1954 in Kef, Tunisia, she is a mother of three children and has a degree in Fine Arts. Active in many associations, notably in the protection of Human Rights, she has for a long time been committed to the acknowledgment of the place of women in the political arena.

The Assembly of European Regions (AER) is the largest independent network of regions in wider Europe. Bringing together more than 270 regions from 33 countries and 13 interregional organisations, AER is the political voice of its members and a forum for interregional co-operation.

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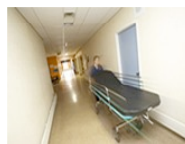
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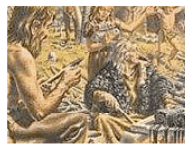
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Assembly of European Regions - General Assembly 2008

"From migration to integration"

Tampere, Finland, 12-15 November 2008

Speech by Ludmila Sfirloaga, President of the Chamber of Regions

Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe

Mr Chairman,

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear colleagues,

It is a great honour for me to address this assembly today, the Assembly of European Regions, a long-standing partner of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe. We are natural partners, because we share not only common values of democracy and human rights, and not only common interests of strengthening the role of regions in today's European political landscape, but also the common cause of advancing territorial democracy and improving the well-being of our communities.

Regional issues are clearly one area where our interests coincide directly. Ever since the regional dimension was added to the activities of the Conference of Local Authorities, the Congress' predecessor, making it Conference of Local and Regional Authorities in 1975, regionalisation has been high on our political agenda, reflecting the growing power and importance of regions in many Council of Europe member states and the strengthening of regional democracy on our continent. Today, many national parliaments in Europe have regional representation in the second chamber; a growing number of countries have regions with legislative power; still others are in the process of developing regional structures.

The work of the Congress in this area resulted in the European Charter of Regional Democracy, adopted at the plenary session in May 2008 after a long period of elaboration and consultations with a large number of national and international associations and organisations, including the Assembly of European Regions which I wish to thank for its support to this project.

Apart from being the first legal text laying down the tenets of regional democracy, the Charter reaffirms respect for national sovereignty and territorial integrity as one of its main principles, and offers a variety of flexible existing models for regional autonomy, which, we are convinced, can only strengthen national territorial development and could also be used in settling territorial questions. These regional models, reflecting different European viewpoints, represent an alternative to any uniform system of regionalisation. However, the new Charter of Regional Democracy will serve first and foremost to preserve and enhance regional identity and development in the political, economic, social and cultural spheres.

The Charter has now been submitted to the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers. We express our gratitude to our partners which have already adopted declarations of support for this text, and count on your support in convincing national governments of the expediency of such a legal instrument.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The theme of this Assembly is "From migration to integration". For our Congress, issues relating to migration and its management are of great importance, because local and regional authorities are directly affected, in the most concrete way, by migration flows. Indeed, territorial communities are the first to cope, in practical terms, with the influx of migrants, having to provide them and their families with shelter and food and then seeing to their employment and integration into local society. As leaders and "managers" of their communities, local and regional authorities have a key role to play in facilitating this

integration and interaction of migrants with the rest of the community.

This is a particular focus of the Congress' approach, which I would describe as "integration through participation and equal treatment", and which necessarily includes the important economic factor – integration through employment. We strongly believe that migrants should be regarded as an asset, and helping them as an investment which will yield benefits with the migrants' contribution to local economy. Whether a citizen or not, the migrant is de facto part of the fiber of the community, user of public services and as such an economic participant in its life.

The importance of migrants' contribution to the economic progress in Europe today was also recognised by the Council of Europe Ministers responsible for migration issues, at their Conference in Kyiv in September this year, where the Congress participated and contributed our views. It is essential that national governments are at the same wavelength with us, also in regarding the protection of migrants' rights, the enforcement of the principle of equal treatment and non-discrimination as key guarantees of social cohesion within our communities.

Local and regional authorities, with the support of national governments, should implement measures conducive to the full involvement of migrants in the life of communities – measures including teaching the local language, promoting intercultural dialogue, providing professional training to equalise or upgrade the migrants' qualifications, especially for professions lacking on a particular market. Local and regional authorities, which are often the largest employer in the region, should also introduce measures facilitating migrants' employment – by, for example, reviewing their own restrictive recruitment requirements – and encouraging migrant entrepreneurship, giving them the possibility of starting their own small and medium-sized enterprises.

It is clear that education, including professional education, and employment – the two issues which I have just mentioned – are closely interlinked and are both important factors for integration which is not, however, limited to these two factors alone. Participation in political life and civil society, non-discrimination and equal access to social rights and public services – housing and health care in particular – are all part of a holistic package supported by the Congress in its approach to migration management.

I am pleased to see that this approach is also shared by the Assembly of European Regions, as reflected in the draft Final Declaration of this Conference. This confirms once again that the Congress and your Assembly not only share common goals but also agree on ways of achieving them, making our cooperation useful and mutually advantageous – the cooperation which, I am sure, we will be pursuing and strengthening in the years to come. Thank you.

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Luc Van den Brande addresses the subject of immigration and integration



In the run-up to the Committee of the Regions' November plenary session (26-27 November) highlighting EU policies on immigration and integration, President Luc Van den Brande is addressing the Assembly of European Regions' (www.aer.eu) annual conference in Tampere, Finland (13-15 November), on the subject "From Migration to integration: regional solutions to a European challenge".

"Today we need to ensure that immigrants play a full part in European society and we can do that only by integrating them in the economic, social, cultural and political life. Integration is a two-way process. This means motivating immigrants and giving them tools to actively participate in the public life of our societies, starting from the local level. They have to comply with such fundamental European values as equal opportunities, human rights, human dignity, tolerance, respect for diversity, measures to combat discrimination, and promotion of increased participation in the community." said Van den Brande.

During its upcoming Plenary Session, the CoR will welcome Mrs Fadela Amara, French State Secretary for Urban Policies and representative of the French EU presidency to discuss the role of intercultural dialogue in the making of a common European identity and will adopt two related opinions. Mr Milan Belica (SK/ EPP), President of the

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autonomous region of Nitra, Slovakia, will present his opinion on "Integration policy and intercultural dialogue: the role of local and regional authorities". The opinion of Mr Werner Jostmeier, (DE/EPP) Chairman of the European Affairs Committee of the North Rhine-Westphalia Landtag, Germany, deals with the "Development of a future common Immigration Policy". (The Belica opinion is available [here](#) and the Jostmeier [here](#))

At its Plenary Session the CoR will organise a forum on intercultural dialogue bringing together from all over Europe best practises on intercultural and inter-faith dialogue. For more information, please click [here](#).





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