



## Newsletter

1/2007



# The Adriatic and Ionian Chambers of Commerce Forum

## who are we

The Forum of the Adriatic and Ionian Chambers of Commerce is an association which has been operating since 2001 thanks to an initiative launched by the Ancona and Split Chambers of Commerce. The Forum group's 32 chambers in 7 countries are located on the Adriatic and Ionian Seas: Italy, Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, Albania e Greece.

During these years the Forum has contributed to turning the will of cooperation into facts in the Adriatic region, and has represented one of the most significant and successful initiatives in a process of openness and confrontation among people on the two sides of the Adriatic. A perfect example of this is the creation of the Adriatic Euroregion. The chamber bodies from the seven countries involved have made a great effort in analysing in depth the social and economic condition of their own territories, assessing the diversities and searching for possible solutions that could make an exchange mutually advantageous.

During the first Forum event, held in Split in 2001, the chambers' representatives formally expressed their intention to strengthen collaborative relationships previously unknown amongst countries geographically so near yet politically and culturally very far away. During this event they worked towards setting up of topic Workgroups so that problems and solu-



tions to them could be discussed together. Already from the event held in Ancona in 2002 the Forum managed to get the attention of chamber bodies in the area. The growing number of participants also improved the quality of the discussion, allowing in this way to focus on the discussions on topics of common interest. **Tourism**, above all, was discussed with the intent of raising awareness in terms of quality of the supply and promoting a joint development of the area via the creation of an Adriatic brand; **agriculture and fishing**, trying to favour a harmonic growth in terms of sustainability and preservation of the environment; transports, to support the economic growth in peripheral areas which in the future years could become one of the most dynamic poles of Europe and thus attract the EU's attention

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Adriatic and Ionian Chambers of Commerce Forum's activities and projects

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over possible corridors in the area; support to **women entrepreneurship**, and protection of the **environment**, which is considered one of the key topic towards an economic growth based on the needs of people in the Adriatic-Ionian basin.

Following the meeting in the premises of the Chambers founders of the association, in 2003 the Forum moved to **Igoumenitsa**, Greece, where guidelines to promote projects of shared interest were outlined. The constitution of a Tourism Coordination Centre and a Permanent Environmental Observatory were approved in 2004 in **Neum**, Bosnia-Herzegovina. Constitutional regulations of the International Court of the Adriatic for the use of alternative resolutions to disputes were presented during the same session.

The 2005 event in **Budva**, Montenegro, represented a moment for consolidating ongoing activities and outlining a training path for EU planning for chambers' officials aimed at promoting a way of planning which look at a broader timeframe.

In 2006 the Forum moved to **Durres**, Albania, where promotional and informative material was presented. In 2007 the Forum went back to **Ancona** to define new guidelines regarding the set-up of a network, now strongly influenced by EU programming.

The Forum has supported the choice made by the Nice European Council to allow full integration of the Western Balkans in the EU structures to be achieved over a period of progressive approaches to the administrative, legal and economic requirements as advised by the EU acquis.

The Balkans came out of the 90s after a long string of tragedies that have characterised the history of the 20th century. In that precise moment, talking about integration in the EU sounded very much like a dream that could never have come true. Instead, in less than a decade, this prospect is getting nearer and neared – it could be soon reality for Croatia. The Forum of Adriatic and Ionian Chambers of Commerce has made, without doubt, a great contribution to making this thing happen. It is the proof that those people and those countries that have lived apart for decades can now get together to begin a process of growth with beneficial effects, in terms of well being in the area, as never experienced before.

From its beginning, the Forum has had the main objective of fostering economic growth in the Adriatic and Ionian area as a whole, meant as a group of territories very different from each other but, at the same time, aware that a common policy could give more, quicker and better results. The promptness in spotting the need for a network as a key element of growth in the area, together with the traditional work done by the chambers as places of mediation among different operators of the economic, productive and commercial sectors, were both very important. The Chambers of Commerce are institutions that have been operating for years and therefore are able to provide a system of strong relations in the territory unlike many others.

The Interreg IIIA Adriatic Cross-border has represented for the Chambers associated to the Forum a constant reference in planning their activities. This correlation is especially evident if we consider that the directions outlined in the EU program regarding environmental, cultural and infrastructural protection and appreciation, economic integration of production systems and the strengthening of cooperation in terms of human resources, research and security all coincide with the Forum's objectives.

Some examples of direct interventions made to improve the economy of the area are: the Fishery Observatory for the Adriatic, the network of tourist ports in the Adriatic, the integrated tourist supply, the grouping



II Session - Ancona (Italy) 2002



III Session - Igoumenitsa (Greece) 2003



IV Session - Neum (Bosnia-Erzegovina) 2004





V Session - Budva (Montenegro) 2005



VI Session - Durres (Albania) 2006



VII Session - Ancona (Italy) 2007

of Adriatic SMEs and the work to reduce the gap between demand and supply of technological innovation to allow businesses to be more competitive. All these projects were carried out by using the Adriatic Interreg IIIA funds and with the support of the Marche Region.

Managing the presence at the same time of many EU countries and countries that had started their process of EU integration has not always been easy. The starting levels were and are still very heterogeneous as heterogeneous are the reasons that have lead different chambers of commerce to increasingly spend more human and financial resources on this cross-border project. Nevertheless, in many cases these differences were the real trigger to growing relations among different countries; all have grabbed the possibility of creating a stable partnership that could be very advantageous and very useful in widening the horizons of those subjects represented by the chambers.

After 6 years since its opening, the AIC Forum has achieved some important goals such as the **domiciliation in Brussels in the Union-chambers premises, the patrociny of the European Parliament** for the 2007 event held in Ancona and the acknowledgment of its own legal status. The Forum has been able to group 32 chambers from 7 different countries and carry out a long string of projects in sectors like agriculture, tourism and port infrastructures in the Adriatic. Above all, the Forum has been able to enable a better planning activity and to understand future common needs on which to base ambitious projects.

These projects will be bound to the directions given by the EU institutions for the four countries that are members of the AIC Forum but not yet members of the EU: Croatia is the official candidate whilst Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Montenegro are potential ones. Given this situation, there is a necessity for a progressive but strong growth of local institutions and for a gradual compliance with the standards required by the EU *acquis* in the legal, administrative and economic sectors. It is a long and complex process given also the little visibility in the public eye, a visibility that is relegated to institutional fields apparently so far from the citizens.

This process would be even more difficult for countries that have already gone through it – such as Croatia, Slovenia and Greece – which could not share their experience with the others. Integration in the EU does not happen suddenly but it is built day by day by improving the capacity building of the subjects in the territories and by acquiring familiarity with EU decision making procedures.

In this picture of openness and confrontation, the fact that the Forum has participated in the ASCAME assembly, the Association of the Mediterranean Chambers of Commerce aimed at promoting economic growth and the exchange of cooperation in the area in accordance with the EU principles, is very important.

The effort shown by the Forum in overcoming obstacles and barriers among countries located in the Adriatic and Ionian basin resulted also in services regarding mediation, arbitration and expert determination being provided by the **International Court for the Adriatic and Ionian Sea**. The procedures contained in the Regulation approved by all countries members are applied by the Court which provides legal and commercial assistance to all economic subjects in the region and contributes to promote economic relations – i.e. a more competitive economy in the area. To this end, it is important to mention the orchestrated action that has helped to create a network among Chambers of Commerce members aimed at supporting enterprises via specialist training courses. We have



managed to grant funding for the promotional phase of the Court's services – a fundamental activity to make the Court a reference point in the process of connection in the area - by applying the Italian Law 84/2001 ("Indications for the Italian participation to processes of stabilization, reconstruction and growth in the Balkans"), which regulates different forms of participation in the process of stabilization, reconstruction and growth in Balkan countries.

Equally important is the initiative regarding women's entrepreneurship. This topic has had a central role in the Forum's discussions since 2003, thanks also to the setting up of topic Workgroup.

However, since 2006 this topic has gained greater space and an independent event regarding this issue was launched. Dubrovnik witnessed the birth of the **I Congress of Adriatic and Ionian Women's Entrepreneurship**: it represented the first special occasion to promote knowledge and exchange amongst women-run enterprises in the area, a very important moment for Europe as a whole.

After periods of war, in all the countries of the area, women have shown to be able to work with great determination by exploiting their knowledge and their entrepreneurial skills. Nonetheless, the space given to them is still limited.

Two representatives of the banking world took part in the Congress of Adriatic and Ionian Women's Enterprises held in May 2007. This was the



The Forum's mini-plenary session at the European Parliament - september 2007

first step towards analysing and overcoming the major obstacles that women find themselves having to face up to when they look for start-up investments.

The topic of equal opportunities will be a way to test EU candidate members, as stated by the "European Charter for equal opportunities for men and women in terms of community living". This Charter invites European local and regional bodies to take a stance over principles of equal opportunities and binds them to find an action plan to make these promises real.

The Forum Association is very sensitive to this topic and in the future

intends to keep on working on the promotion of equality of all kinds, trying to create an institutional network of women's association and enterprises. It will also try to create a virtual shop-window which will allow quick and useful exchange of information to lay the basis for new entrepreneurial activities.

In conclusion, the experience of the Forum of the Adriatic and Ionian Chambers of Commerce shows that a network built on strong and solid relations can become an operative way to realise good projects, with **tangible benefits for the territories**. The centrality of the Western Balkans in the 2007-2013 program, with the related expectations of its people, will also represent a way for the Forum to become a main player in terms of cross-border cooperation.

## HOW TO JOIN THE ASSOCIATION



**JOINED BY THE SEA**  
Adriatic and Ionian Chambers Forum

Bodies and Organizations can join the Association as fixed in art. 2, par.3 of the **Charter**, by forwarding the **Application Form** through post, fax or e-mail, accompanied by the relevant decision of the competent body.

## CONTACTS

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