



EU Bulletin No. 13 (21/02/05)

IN THIS ISSUE

FUNDING

- eGovernment
- Innovative Youth Projects
- Promoting Science

NEWS & POLICY

- Commission hardens position on regional aid
- Update on regional aid proposals
- Guidelines for Strl. Funds implementation
- Study calls for changes to Cohesion Policy
- Proposal on future EU Budget in March
- Rural Development Fund under threat
- Investment in regional airports
- New assoc. of European regional airports
- New Commission prioritises growth & jobs
- Modernising Europe's social model

EVENTS

- Training & Competitiveness; Europe in a Day; Benchmarking the Information Society; Regional Economic Development; European Neighbours Day; Information Society & Local Authorities.

PUBLICATIONS

- How regions can contribute to EU growth
- Twinning & transnational projects

NETWORKS

- European Regions Touring Nature

FUNDING

eGovernment

On February 10th the European Commission published a call for proposals under the eTEN programme. eTEN is the European Community Programme designed to help the deployment of e-services with a trans-European dimension. It supports a number of the e-government activities of relevance to local and regional authorities. Proposals under the current call must cover one of the following areas: e-government; e-health; e-inclusion; e-learning; trust and security; services supporting small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs). Total budget available: €45.3 million. Deadline for receipt of proposals is the 10th of May 2005. An information day on the call will be held in Brussels on March 2nd. Information days in the member states are also foreseen. *Further details at: http://europa.eu.int/information_society/activities/eten/calls/cfp20051/index_en.htm*

Promoting Science

The European Commission has published a call for the organisation of events to promote science and raise public awareness of its social benefits under the Sixth Framework Programme for Research and Development. Project proposals are invited under three categories: Science weeks in 2006 promoting the EU dimension; 'Best of' science events in 2006; and Science and society from 2007 onwards. Deadline: 24 May 2005. *Further details at: http://fp6.cordis.lu/fp6/call_details.cfm?CALL_ID=199. Call FP6-2005-Science-and-society-13, OJ C 34 of 9 February 2005.*

Innovative Youth Projects

The European Commission has published a call for proposals under the Youth programme for innovative cooperation, training and information projects in the field of non-formal education. Applications must follow one of five priority themes: 1. Cultural diversity and tolerance; 2. Less favoured regions; 3. Eastern Europe, Caucasus, South east Europe; 4. Innovation in youth work; and 5. Cooperation between local or regional authorities and youth NGOs. Projects must have a clear transnational dimension and must contribute to European cooperation in youth matters. Total budget: €2 million. Maximum funding per project is €100 000 per year (€300,000 in total). 10 to 15 high quality projects will be supported. Deadline for applications: 31 March 2005. *Further details at: http://europa.eu.int/comm/youth/call/index_en.html*

NEWS & POLICY

Commission Hardens Position on Regional Aid

EU Competition Commissioner, Ms. Neelie Kroes, has said she is planning to undertake a thorough reform of EU State aid rules and that she is not in favour of continuing to support poorer regions in rich countries. Speaking to the German press at the end of January, Ms Kroes indicated that her proposals on the future of EU regional aid, which are to be completed by the summer, would aim to halt all State aid in richer Member States (including Ireland) except where the focus is on horizontal areas such as risk

capital, research and innovation, SMEs and the environment. This would represent a significant shift from current policy, which allows State aid in rich countries if it is used for the development of regions with lower standards of living or with high unemployment. The Commissioner proposals could have serious implications for Ireland, and particularly its ability to attract foreign investment with State aid. Other Member States, notably France, Germany and the UK, have also expressed concern that concentrating State aid in poorer countries will result in re-location of businesses from richer countries. Given these concerns, it is believed that a compromise proposal, which would permit temporary eligibility of State aid in regions affected by an exceptional crisis, such as the withdrawal of a major employer, might be advanced. *Further details from the Irish Regions Office.*

Update on Regional Aid Proposals

The Commission circulated a second consultation paper on the reform of EU regional aid at the end of 2004, to which Member States are to respond by the 1st of March 2005. Regarding aid intensity, the Commission proposes sub-dividing regions covered by Article 87.3(a) into three groups: regions whose per capita GDP is equal to or less than 45% of the Community average: aid intensity would range from 40% to 60%; regions whose per capita GDP is between 45% and 60% of the Community average: aid intensity would range from 35% to 55%; regions whose per capita GDP is between 60% and 75% of the Community average: aid intensity would range from 30% to 50%. For regions eligible under article 87.3(c), which would include the BMW region, aid intensity would be between 15% and

40%. The Commission indicated that reform would take place in three stages. From 2005 to 2006, the Commission wants to make State aid policy more economically based, focusing on innovation, R&D, employment, training, and risk capital. It plans to simplify aid rules for SMEs and suggests lifting the *de minimis* threshold for EU approval from €100,000 to €150,000. EU regulators also want to see tighter scrutiny of national subsidies for public services. From 2007 to 2008, the Commission intends to examine environmental subsidies and aid to cinema and broadcasting. The third, and final stage will review and evaluate the reforms. *Further details at:* http://europa.eu.int/comm/competition/index_en.html

Commission Propose Guidelines for Structural Funds Implementation

At the end of January 2005 the European Commission's Directorate General for Regional Policy began bilateral consultations with the 25 Member States on the content of Strategic Guidelines for the implementation of EU Structural Funds in the period 2007-2013. These EU Guidelines will establish a framework for the preparation of a National Reference Framework (national strategic guidelines) on the use of Structural Funds at Member State level. As part of the consultations the Commission has put forward a number of themes in areas it sees as having potential to deliver growth and jobs. These themes vary from the development of networks for the transport of freight (in order to develop trade) to issues like progress on greenhouse gas emission, smart administration, better access to finance for SME's and speeding up innovation. However, the Commission has stressed that the

list of proposed themes is not exhaustive and that it will respond to other issues which might be proposed by the Member States. The bilateral consultations will last until April 2005. In May 2005 an informal meeting of EU regional policy ministers will then be convened to take stock of the consultations with a view to presenting the unofficial version of the Guidelines to the Council in June. *Further details from the Irish Regions Office.*

Study Calls for Changes to Cohesion Policy

A study carried out by the research group Notre Europe, at the request of the European Parliament's committee on regional development, has recommended 10 key changes to the Commissions proposals for the future Cohesion Policy. The proposed changes include: 1. Reinstate Community Initiative Programmes (Interreg IIIC) under the territorial cooperation objective, with €4.3 billion in funding; 2. Extend the same treatment to regions affected by the statistical effect as to those which are fully eligible under the new Convergence Objective (Obj. 1); 3. Maintain synergy between the objective of competitiveness in rural areas and the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD). 4. Restore the possibility of mobilising the private sector by setting up programmes in terms of overall expenditure, including private funding; 5. Extend the deadline for automatic decommitment to n+3; 6. Allocate budgets for cross-border cooperation by border and not by country; 7. Reinstate interim evaluations of programmes in converging regions; 8. Issue reports on national progress every two years; 9. Set up a genuine mid-term review after four years; 10. Increase conditionality on the results of structural

interventions instead of on macro-economic developments. The study will now feed into the Parliaments deliberations on the Commission's draft proposals. *Further details at: http://www.europarl.eu.int/meetdocs/2004_2009/organes/REGI/REGI_20050202_1500_audition.htm*

Proposal on Future EU Budget Expected in March

The Luxembourg Presidency is planning to table a first outline compromise for a possible deal on the 2007-13 financial perspectives proposal at the summit of EU leaders on the 22nd and 23rd of March 2005. In recent weeks there appears to have been a softening of views from both sides of the budget debate (those supporting the Commission's proposal for a budget of 1.14% of EU GNI and those supporting the proposal by the six net contributors to the EU budget to limit the budget to 1% of EU GNI). It has also emerged that Italian Prime Minister, Silvio Berlusconi sent a letter to the Presidents of the Council and the Commission on February 1 in which he suggested that if the overall budget is less than that proposed by the Commission, savings would have to be made in funding for the CAP, with the shortfall in payments to farmers being made up by national governments. In threatening to reopen negotiations on the CAP budget agreed in 2002 (which limits spending for 2007-2013 to 2006 levels plus an increase of 1% a year) Berlusconi appears to be trying to split the group of six net contributors by attacking France, the largest beneficiary of the CAP. So far, Italy is the only country to publicly call for a reopening of the 2002 CAP deal. *Further details from the Irish Regions Office.*

Rural Development Fund under Threat

Speaking in the European Parliament at the end of January, Agriculture Commissioner Marian Fischer Boel warned that if the group of Member States pushing for the EU budget to be capped at 1% of GNI got their way, then rural development would pay the price. In her speech, the Commissioner strongly defended the EU's new Rural Development Policy, which she said was crucial to ensuring the competitiveness of the agri-food sector and would make a concrete contribution to the Lisbon goals. She said that linking rural development to Lisbon would also ensure that "this ambitious agenda for the EU does not become an agenda for urban areas alone". The proposed rural development budget for the period 2007-2013 amounts to almost €100 billion. However, despite the fact that the CAP budget for agricultural supports is already agreed until 2013 (Agenda 2000) the rural development budget is still negotiable and could come under pressure. Mrs. Fischer Boel said that rural development was a top priority and that an agreement must be reached during the Luxembourg Presidency. The Luxembourg government has said it wants a political agreement on rural development at the EU's Farm Council in April. *Further details from the Irish Regions Office.*

Consultation on Investment in Regional Airports

At the beginning of February the European Commission opened a public consultation on a new set of draft guidelines on the financing of infrastructure at regional airports and State aid for the start-up of new routes departing from regional airports. Following from the decision of the Commission in the Charleroi (Ryanair)

case, the new rules propose authorisation of start-up aid for new routes opened at regional airports, subject to strict conditions of transparency and with time limits. The draft guidelines propose restricting start-up aid to between 30% and 50% of the additional costs over a period not exceeding 5 years. The proposed guidelines also include measures to guard against all forms of discrimination to the exclusive benefit of any one company and seek to clarify methods for the financing of airport infrastructure. The guidelines propose that the construction or financing by public authorities of airport infrastructure which they themselves own does not, in principle, raise any question of State aid. On the other hand, the Commission will take steps to ensure that no advantages accrue to any particular airport manager as a result of the infrastructure funding, and that access to the infrastructure will not favour one or more airlines. The Member States and the public are now being consulted on the draft guidelines and the Commission expects to adopt the definitive guidelines later this year. *Further details at:*

http://europa.eu.int/comm/transport/air/rules/state_aid_consultation_en.htm

New Association of European Regional Airports

To coincide with the Commission's consultation on investment in regional airports, on February 2nd a new European Forum of Regional Airports (FARE), was established. Representing 26 regional airports across the EU, FARE aims to promote cooperation between regional airports and their local public authorities. Its general assembly held at Stansted airport near London on February 2nd saw the designation of FARE's president, Pier Giorgio Ballini, chairman and

managing director of Pisa airport. Four vice-presidents were also elected, including the president of the Eindhoven airport, the general director of Limoges airport, the director of Charleroi airport and the vice-president of Alghero airport. *Further details from the Irish Regions Office.*

New Commission Prioritises Growth & Jobs

On January 26th the President of the European Commission, Mr. Jose Manuel Barroso presented the new Commission's strategic objectives for 2005-2009 and the Commission's annual work programme for 2005. The emphasis of both documents is very much on reviving the Lisbon agenda and on boosting economic growth and job creation. The Commission suggests that the Lisbon Agenda has underperformed due to too many objectives, too many conflicting priorities and poor delivery. It proposes that efforts must now be concentrated on a limited number of essential core tasks. The Commission's Strategic Objectives 2005-2009 are listed under four main headings: prosperity, solidarity, security and Europe as a world partner. The strategy includes a concrete action programme, which includes actions at Member State and EU level. It identifies responsibilities and proposes that governments should appoint a "Mr or Mrs Lisbon" to take charge of implementation. The Annual Work Programme reflects the four main themes set out in the Strategic Objectives. In terms of Prosperity, priorities include a new generation of research programmes and a new programme to boost competitiveness and entrepreneurship. Under Solidarity one of the main priorities is the refocusing and reworking of cohesion policy to ensure that resources are

directed to regions in greatest need and to sectors which offer the best potential to promote competitiveness at regional level. *Further details at:*

http://europa.eu.int/comm/off/work_programme/index_en.htm

Modernising Europe's social model

The Commission recently launched its new Social Agenda for modernising Europe's social model under the revamped Lisbon Strategy. The new agenda focuses on providing jobs and equal opportunities and aims to ensure that the benefits of the EU's growth and jobs drive reach everyone in society. By modernising labour markets and social protection systems, the EU will attempt to assist citizens to seize the opportunities created by international competition, technological advances and changing population patterns while also protecting the most vulnerable in society. The Agenda calls for partnerships between public authorities at local, regional and national level, employer and worker representatives and NGOs. *Further details at:*

http://europa.eu.int/comm/employment_social/social_policy_agenda/social_pol_ag_en.html

EVENTS

7 March 2005, Syracuse (Italy)

"Training and Competitiveness at Local and Regional Level" is the title of a conference being organised by the Regional Province of Syracuse in association with the Committee of

the Regions. The conference will be divided into three sessions: Session I will look at lifelong learning as a tool to promote regional competitiveness; Session II will consider strategies and support to develop human capital and promote competitiveness of regions and cities; and Session III will focus on best practices to promote innovation and entrepreneurship through training at local and regional level. *Further details from the Irish Regions Office or from Activ@ Soc. Coop. Tel: +39.0931 66533*

March - November 2005, Brussels

The European Training Institute is organising a series of one-day seminars intended for associations, NGOs, companies, local and regional authority officials, students, and others wishing to get acquainted with the EU Institutions and their working system. The seminars will include a practical presentation on the EU Institutions, a visit to the Parliament and the "toolbox of a lobbyist" (identifying key players, the best sources of information, legislative monitoring, writing position papers, etc.). Sessions in English will be run on the March 16th, May 19th, September 15th and November 17th. Registration fee: €495. *Further details at:* <http://www.eis-training-centre.be/index.asp?linkid=http://www.eis-training-centre.be/welcome.htm>.

17 March 2005, Brussels

The Committee of the Regions is sponsoring and hosting the first conference on the Interreg IIC project, Understand. The Understand project aims to benchmark the development of the Information Society in ten participating

regions. The conference is aimed at disseminating the first results of the project and its general approach. Partners will present the methodology handbook and the benchmarking data and compare broadband infrastructure, e-government, e-business and ICT usage by citizens in partner regions. Regional ICT policy managers will also discuss the implications for policy-making. *Further details at:* <http://www.understand-eu.net>

21-22 March 2005, Madeira (Portugal)

The EU's Regional Development Agencies Association (EURADA) is organising the First World Forum on Regional Economic Development. The Forum will attempt to increase awareness of competitiveness (particularly at regional and local level), the production and utilisation of knowledge, entrepreneurship and the power of networks. It will provide participants with a unique opportunity to exchange ideas and experiences relating to competitiveness and to gather information on experiments being conducted in other parts of the world. *Further details at:* <http://www.eurada.org/>

31 May 2005, Europe

The third "European Neighbours' Day" will take place again in May. This initiative, launched in 1999 by the French association "Immeubles en fête", brings together, on the last Tuesday of May, the inhabitants of a particular building or area to share a meal. The event is generally organised jointly by local authorities, local trade associations and residents associations. Over 3.5 million people took part in the 2004 event. *Further details at:* <http://www.european-neighbours-day.com/>

9-11 November 2005, Bilbao (Spain)

This year's United Nations World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) will focus on the role of Local Authorities in promoting an information society for all. This "2nd World Summit of Cities and Local Authorities on the Information Society" will include thematic workshops addressing issues such as health and social inclusion, infrastructure and networks; sustainable development, e-administration and democracy and public-private cooperation. Participation is free. *Further details at:* <http://www.it4all-bilbao.org/context>

PUBLICATIONS

How Regions can Contribution to EU Growth

The Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions of Europe (CPMR) has just published a book which aims to provide food for thought on how regions can contribute to European growth. Entitled, "Objective 2009: A giant leap for Europe, one small step for the regions", the book is available in 5 languages, including English and can be ordered from: CRPM, Tel. +33 (0)2 99 35 40 50, Fax: +33 (0)2 99 35 09 19, E-mail: secretariat@crpm.org

Twinning and Transnational Projects

The handbook, "Take your partner", produced by the Local Government International Bureau (LGIB), gives practical advice for local authorities and twinning associations on setting up and managing a formal town twinning link or

a project based around an international partnership. *It can be downloaded for free at:* <http://www.lgib.co.uk/pubs/publication.html?pubId=35>

NETWORKS

European Regions Touring Nature Network

With support from the EU's Innovative Actions Programme (Article 10, ERDF), the European Regions Touring Nature Network has created a sustainable development quality label called "Village +". New member regions are now being invited to join this Network of rural territories, which will eventually comprise about 400 partner regions. The Network, is modelled on a successful network of 400 nature areas in the US and Canada (<http://www.nps.gov>). All areas, even though they might not be officially recognised as a nature reserve or park, can apply for membership of the network. *Further details at:* <http://www.a-e-r.org> (Access path: *Current activities/Committee C/Environmental protection/Sustainable quality tourism: promotion of a Label for the Regions*).

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