



inforegio news

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Transport and communications: Interreg conference

A conference in Prague on 21 and 22 June, organised by Interact and ESPON, will look at the key role of transport, communications and accessibility as reflected in the Interreg III programmes and highlighted even more in the regional cooperation programmes for the period 2007–13.

http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/regional_policy/events_web/public_events_specific.cfm?event_id=203&status_flag=1

European funds and the environment

The World Wildlife Fund (WWF) recently published a handbook on EU funding for the next programming period. It analyses the financial options and proposed regulations and presents 18 examples of 'best practice' in sustainable development financed by the EU during the current period.

<http://www.panda.org/downloads/europe/eufundingforenvironmentweb.pdf>

Opinion of the Court of Auditors on proposals for the Structural Funds regulations

In an opinion published in the *Official Journal of the European Union* on 20 May, the Court of Auditors comments on the Commission's proposals for Structural Funds regulations for the period 2007–13.

http://europa.eu.int/eur-lex/lex/LexUriServ/site/en/oj/2005/c_121/c_12120050520en00140034.pdf

Report on the pre-accession instruments

The Commission has published the fourth report on implementation of the three pre-accession instruments — Phare, ISPA and Sapard — in 2003, the last year before the accession of eight of the beneficiary States. The report and its annexes contain facts and figures per instrument and country.

<http://europa.eu.int/comm/enlargement/pas/phare/publist.htm#reports>

Third progress report: the situation in the regions requires an ambitious cohesion policy

On 17 May, Danuta Hübner presented the 'Third progress report on cohesion' (1). It presents an update on the situation of the regions in the enlarged EU in terms of incomes, employment and productivity. Sixty-four regions, representing more than a quarter of the EU population, have a GDP per head that is less than 75 % of the Community average.

The enlarged Union shows considerable differences in wealth: in 2003, levels of GDP per head ranged from 41 % of the EU average in Latvia to 215 % in Luxembourg. Ireland is the second most prosperous country with a GDP that is 132 % of the EU average. In all the new Member States, the GDP per head is less than 90 % of the EU-25 average; in Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Romania it is less than half of this level.

In 2002, levels of GDP per head ranged from 189 % of the EU-25 average in the 10 most prosperous regions to 36 % in the 10 least prosperous ones. More than a quarter of the Union's population, in 64 regions, have a GDP per head below 75 % of the average. In the new Member States this applies to 90 % of the population, except in the regions of Prague, Bratislava and Budapest and in Cyprus and Slovenia. In the EU-15, this concerns just 13 % of the population, these low income regions being concentrated in southern Greece, Portugal, southern parts of Spain and Italy and the new *Länder* in Germany.

Employment rates and competitiveness.

National employment rates, that were an average of 62.9 % for the EU-25 in 2003, remain well short of the 70 % target set in the Lisbon strategy for 2010, with the exception of four Member States: Denmark, the Netherlands, Sweden and the United Kingdom. In Poland, the employment rate is just 51.2 %. For the EU as a whole, some 22 million extra jobs are needed to achieve this 70 % target. In the new Member States, the number of jobs would have to increase by one quarter (7 million) to reach this 70 %. The situation is more diverse at regional level. Just one quarter of the EU-25 population resides in regions where the 70 % employment rate target has been met, meaning that 200 of the 254 EU regions are below this target rate.

The differences between the Member States are even more marked when it comes to productivity. This is under 30 % of the EU-25 average in Poland

and the three Baltic States, but over 150 % in Luxembourg and Ireland. In all the EU-15 Member States, with the sole exception of Portugal, productivity exceeds that of all the new Member States.

Internal disparities. Regional disparities within the countries are more marked than at national level, but they are decreasing: the ratio between the GDP shares of, respectively, the most and least prosperous regions fell from 12 to 8.5 during the period 1995–2002. The greatest internal disparities were observed in Hungary, where 20 % of the inhabitants of the most prosperous regions represent 2.6 times the GDP share of the least prosperous. Since 1995 it is also in Hungary that this figure has increased most. Belgium, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and the United Kingdom also have high internal disparities. It is in Germany, Greece, the Netherlands, Finland and Sweden that these disparities are the lowest. Italy is the only country where regional disparities have fallen notably, although they have decreased slightly in Spain and Austria.

In addition to the figures, the progress report also provides information on the way the Member States and regions have benefited from the mid-term evaluation of the Structural Funds to adjust their development programmes.

Finally, the report looks ahead to the post-2006 period. In this respect, the level of disparities in the Union indicates the need to continue to pursue an active cohesion policy. The proposed reforms for cohesion policy and rural development, which place the emphasis on employment and growth, should help permit a better implementation of the Lisbon strategy. The report stresses that these measures will not only benefit from a financial incentive but also that the policy impetus will be raised at the local level. To find out more:

http://europa.eu.int/comm/regional_policy/sources/docoffic/official/reports/interim3_en.htm

(1) 'Towards a new partnership for growth, employment and cohesion — Third progress report on cohesion' (COM(2005) 192 final).

Strategic guidelines 2007–13: first exchange of opinions

The first exchange of opinions on the Community's strategic guidelines for cohesion (2007–13 period) — as set out in a working document presented by the Commission at an informal meeting of regional and cohesion policy ministers in Luxembourg on 20 May — produced broad support. On 21 May the ministers debated the territorial dimension of cohesion policy.

As foreseen by the proposal for Structural Funds and Cohesion Fund regulations, the Community's strategic guidelines for cohesion will be the first stage in preparing the post-2006 programmes. As Mrs Hübner pointed out, they will help Member States 'in increasing synergies between cohesion policy and the renewed Lisbon agenda for growth and jobs'. The Commissioner stressed that the debates have confirmed the refusal of a 'one size fits all approach to the next generation of programmes'; the strategies must therefore vary in order to take account of the different needs of different regions and their stages of development.

The guidelines must be finalised and then adopted by the Commission at the end of June. They will then be submitted to the Council for adoption once the financial perspectives and the legal regulations are adopted. They have three major strategic priorities:

- to improve the attractiveness of the regions and cities;
- to encourage innovation, entrepreneurship and the growth of the knowledge economy through R & D;
- to create more and better jobs by making workers and companies more flexible and through investment in human resources.

(¹) http://www.espon.lu/online/documentation/projects/cross_thematic/2723/sir-3.3.pdf.pdf

As to the 2007–13 financial perspectives, on which the European Council is expected to decide at its meeting on 16 and 17 June, Danuta Hübner argued that they should not represent any reduction compared with the Commission's proposals, which constitute 'the best compromise' between political ambitions and budgetary constraints.

Territorial dimension. The debates on this subject were based in particular on a report on the 'Territorial dimension of the Lisbon–Gothenburg strategy' (¹), published through the ESPON programme (European spatial planning observatory network). 'Research on this subject', stated Danuta Hübner, 'will be carried out in the framework of the fourth report on cohesion, and the Commission will look at how other instruments could be used, such as a possible White Paper, with a view to promoting territorial cohesion by means of increased integration of development and sectorial policy.'

To find out more:

<http://europa.eu.int/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=IP/05/584&type=HTML&aged=0&language=EN&guiLanguage=en>

<http://europa.eu.int/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=IP/05/587&type=HTML&aged=0&language=EN&guiLanguage=en>

European Summit of Regions and Cities: a plea for decentralised solidarity

Some 300 mayors and regional leaders from throughout the Union met on 19 and 20 May in Wrocław (Poland) on the occasion of the European Summit of Regions and Cities organised by the Committee of the Regions (CoR). It was the occasion to reaffirm their support for cohesion policy in the framework of the Lisbon objectives.

'Decentralisation enables Europe to realise its ambitions', stated CoR President Peter Straub in his introductory speech. 'We say "yes" to European solidarity and we say "yes" to the goal of making Europe the most competitive economy in the world ... This can only be achieved with us, the regions and the local authorities'. For her part, Commissioner Danuta Hübner stressed that Commission support for the process of decentralisation is fundamental but at the same time 'increased means must be granted to the regional and local authorities' as, if not, 'the words solidarity or cohesion will have no meaning'. 'We must be coherent' if we want to assure our partners 'that they can be fully involved in making Europe a place where economic and social cohesion is strong.'

Adopted at the end of the summit, the 'Wrocław declaration' reflects this thinking: 'It is essential that local and regional authorities have the necessary powers and administrative and budgetary resources to play their natural role of promoting and managing competitiveness, innovation and cohesion policies, for the benefit of regional and local development. In this respect, the tripartite contracts between European, national and regional levels are good instruments for ensuring better involvement and a better sharing of responsibilities by all the players concerned in implementing regional policy.'

To find out more: <http://www.cor.eu.int/en/>

Inforegio News online

Consult the Inforegio website for an overview of European regional policy. For the latest news, go to the 'Newsroom' section at: http://europa.eu.int/comm/regional_policy/newsroom/index_en.htm



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