



# inforegio | news

1025-7039

## Regional policy on the Internet: launch of the new Inforegio site

From 1 March the Inforegio site will be hosted on the Europa server of the European institutions at the following address:

[http://europa.eu.int/comm/regional\\_policy/index\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu.int/comm/regional_policy/index_en.htm)

The new thematic site 'Regional policy – Inforegio' will be part and parcel of the extended family of official sites of the European Commission. The home page will be expanded and offer rapid access to the main contents and a new section will present the Union's regional assistance based on a thematic approach. The 'Information Sources' section contains relevant documentation, slides and a new link to a photo library with hundreds of pictures of projects part-financed by the ERDF. The debate on the future of regional policy will continue on this new site, which includes all the information needed for contributions to arrangements for regional assistance after 2006. Finally, the databases containing projects, programme summaries and the addresses of managing authorities are still accessible. Enjoy your visit!

## On 30 January, Michel Barnier, as agreed with Ms Diamantopoulou and Mr Fischler, presented the first Progress Report on economic and social cohesion, which both updates the information in the second cohesion report and provides a fresh basis for considering the future of regional policy in an enlarged Europe.

Presenting the Progress Report to the press, Mr Barnier noted that enlargement would heighten inequalities in the Union and that cohesion policy would be more important than ever. Disparities among the 15 Member States have not yet been eliminated (although they have been substantially reduced since 1988) and cohesion must remain a long-term objective. If Europe grows to embrace 27 countries, these will divide into three groups as regards level of economic development. The first will include most of the candidate countries, with a living standard of 41% of the future Community average. The second will comprise three candidate countries (Cyprus, Slovakia and the Czech Republic) and three existing Member States (Greece, Spain and Portugal) with a standard of living of 87% of that average. The last will consist of the other 12 Member States, with a figure well above the average.

Cohesion policy therefore remains a key issue in discussions on the future of the Union. It raises the sensitive question of solidarity, since the accession of poorer countries must not turn attention entirely away from the important structural problems that still exist in many regions in the present Member States. While an Objective 1 for the least-favoured regions still appears fully relevant in a Union of 25 or 27, Mr Barnier is of the view that consideration should be given to a cohesion policy for other regions of the Union.

Apart from its accounting aspects, the future regional policy should also look at its effectiveness in the light of the criticisms and proposals made following publication of the Second Cohesion Report. Outside of Objective 1, the Commission's designation of eligible areas appears to be giving way to a model of development aid which gives the Member States greater autonomy and concentrates on areas which meet precise criteria (urban areas, areas with natural handicaps and cross-border areas).

During 2002, the Commission will organise a number of seminars to identify measures with high Community added value, which should be favoured under a future regional policy. It also intends to include in its third cohesion report proposals on the adoption of the new Structural Funds regulations. The new generation of programmes could thus be implemented as soon as the new programming period starts in 2007.

For more information, see:  
[http://europa.eu.int/comm/regional\\_policy/index\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu.int/comm/regional_policy/index_en.htm)

# Draft budget for the candidate countries

On 31 January the European Commission proposed allocating under regional policy €25.567 billion to the first ten candidate countries (1) between 2004 and 2006. From 2004, the amounts committed should be gradually increased, so as to reach 2.5% of these countries' average GDP by 2006. As Mr Prodi and Mr Barnier explained at a press conference, this amount has been calculated on the basis of the real needs of the ten countries in question and their absorption capacity.

Mr Barnier remarked that, in view of the difficulties in using the capital allocated in the countries concerned, it would be preferable to channel one third of the amount through the Cohesion Fund. Thanks to the ISPA pre-accession programme, which operates in a very similar way to the Cohesion Fund, future members have already had some very

useful experience of this type of management. Furthermore, in the context of enlargement, the Cohesion Fund and the large infrastructure or environmental projects it is helping to implement could prove the best choice for the candidate countries that need to expand their development capacity. Decisions should be taken on their financing proposals in the coming months.

*For further information, see:*  
[http://europa.eu.int/comm/regional\\_policy/index\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu.int/comm/regional_policy/index_en.htm)

---

(1) Cyprus, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Slovenia.

## Structural Funds: pragmatism and rigour

The Commission has decided to allow the Member States extra time to complete certain programmes from the 1994-99 period. The last expenditure under these programmes should have been incurred by the beneficiaries before 31 December 2001, but the Commission has stated that it will be pragmatic and consider whether extensions of a few months can be granted in accordance with the statutory provisions and having regard to the following objective criteria:

- detailed justification by the Member State and a causal link between these justifications and the extension,
- a clearly identified error for which the Commission is solely responsible,
- force majeure, interpreted as a large-scale disaster, and similar cases having a substantial impact on the implementation of Structural Funds assistance.

The Structural Funds Regulations for the period 2000-06 deal with the question of time limits more strictly. Michel Barnier, Commissioner responsible for regional policy,

recently wrote to the Prime Ministers of the 15 Member States to ask that they implement regional development programmes rapidly in the new programming period, as failure to do so puts them at risk of losing the funds. Under the new Regulations, the Community funds committed each year must be used before the end of the second year following that of commitment. If at the end of that time, any funds committed are still available, the equivalent amount is cancelled and withdrawn from the programme in question. As the first deadlines approach (31 December 2002 for programmes adopted in 2000), Michel Barnier pointed out that, while the rule - adopted unanimously by the Council - might seem harsh, it is also a guarantee of sound management.

*For further information, see:*  
[http://europa.eu.int/comm/regional\\_policy/index\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu.int/comm/regional_policy/index_en.htm)



**European Commission**  
Directorate-General for Regional Policy

KN-AB-02-004-EN-C

Responsible editor: Thierry Daman, CEC, Regional Policy DG, Unit 01. Fax: +32 2 296 60 03. The texts of this publication do not bind the Commission.  
Electronic address of the Regional Policy DG on the Internet: <[http://europa.eu.int/comm/dgs/regional\\_policy/index\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu.int/comm/dgs/regional_policy/index_en.htm)>.

Commissioner Barnier: <[http://europa.eu.int/comm/commissioners/barnier/index\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu.int/comm/commissioners/barnier/index_en.htm)>

Orders for publications: <[regio-info@cec.eu.int](mailto:regio-info@cec.eu.int)> - This newsletter is published in all eleven official languages of the European Union.

Printed on recycled paper.

Text finalised on 06/02/2002.