



**EUROPEAN COMMISSION**

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## **The Outermost Regions, an integral part of an innovating European Union**

*Check Against Delivery*  
*Seul le texte prononcé fait foi*  
*Es gilt das gesprochene Wort*

2nd Outermost Regions Forum / Brussels  
**2 July 2012**

President, ministers, presidents of the Outermost Regions, friends

Since I became Commissioner for Regional Policy more than two years ago, I think I have been in contact with representatives for the Outermost Regions more regularly than any other single group of regions. One word that has entered my daily vocabulary is "RUP" (Régions Ultra-périphériques)!

I think some of you were apprehensive when I arrived. What would a man from the Alps know or care about the RUP?

Well, this man from the Alps does care. I have visited many of your regions and by next year I think I will have visited all of you. The more I have learned about you the more I have felt committed to making sure the European Union does the best for you.

We have not always agreed on what the best is. I regard myself as your friend, and in my view friendship means not always saying what people *want* to hear, but sometimes what they *need* to hear.

Your regions are treasures. Too few people in continental Europe appreciate their value, their contribution to the EU and their potential.

No friend can stand by and let that potential go unfulfilled. No friend can feel comfortable with a view of your regions that stresses only handicaps – and misses the great opportunities that can be yours.

When I say this I do not mean to minimise the challenges you face. You are remote from continental Europe, many of you are islands, some of you archipelagos, you are small and particularly exposed to climate change. Article 349 of the Treaty recognises these permanent difficulties as well as the fact that you are dependent on a rather limited range of sectors of production.

They say that wisdom is knowing that there are some things you can change and some you cannot – and the capacity to distinguish between them. We cannot change the remoteness of the Outermost Regions. But we can change their prospects for jobs and growth.

I am fully aware of the impact of the international crisis on your territories and the effect it has had particularly on unemployment among young people.

Europe 2020 is our strategy to promote jobs and growth throughout the EU. You should be part of every initiative coming through to maintain and build competitiveness in the EU.

That is why our new Communication shows the place of the RUP in a very wide range of initiatives related to Europe 2020 - under the responsibility of around two thirds of the Commissioners in the College.

This Communication says, clearly, you are on the radar screen for all the decision makers that matter to you in the Commission.

The whole Commission has agreed that you need to be taken into account not only in cohesion policy, agriculture, and fisheries, but also in other EU policies such as access to finance for Small- and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs), Research and Development, transport, and energy policy.

The aim is to invest in the modernisation and diversification of your economies. I want you to become more self-reliant, economically more robust, and better able to create sustainable jobs.

In an ideal world, our ambition should be that your economies become so successful that any concept of subsidy becomes irrelevant. That may seem an impossible dream. But, without questioning in any way your status under Article 349, we should aim high.

That means we need to help you capitalise on the unique assets you possess and overcome the obstacles that still exist to your integration in the single market and in your geographical neighbourhoods.

Many here gave us their advice on what action was needed – the outermost regions themselves, their Member States, the European Parliament, and of course the Solbes report. We have explored all these with all the services concerned, and you will find a positive reply in most cases, with a basis for future action.

There are too many undertakings in the Communication to mention in this speech.

Some are general: The Communication confirms that the Commission will ensure that the Outermost Region dimension is taken into account in impact assessments for future policies, and that their specificities are taken into account when concluding trade and fisheries agreements.

Some are of interest to individual RUPs: the promise of an exclusive access zone for the French RUPs, a re-examination of the coverage of POSEI, a particular wish of Guyane, and, the possibility of new or more efficient air and maritime routes with your immediate neighbourhoods as proposed by the Canarian presidency, and a readiness to re-examine, if the Council of Ministers so wishes, the 150 kilometre rule for Cross Border Co-operation – which could be of particular interest to the Azores, Madeira and La Reunion.

As Commissioner for Regional Policy I would like to highlight a few points under my own portfolio. In the next financial period there will be very substantial funds allocated from the Structural Funds in particular for innovation, SMEs and sustainable energy. The Communication covers all of these areas, which are crucial to the development of your economies.

I would like to dispel, once and for all, any misunderstanding about our focus on innovation. Innovation does not only mean technology. The successful seminar held in early June on Smart Specialisation hosted by the Azorean presidency found, for example, that the RUP tourist industry still has unexplored potential for eco, cultural and wellness tourism: that's a perfect example of an area of innovation that will be eligible under the new rules for thematic concentration in the Structural Funds.

And on sustainable energy, which is so important for your greater self-sufficiency, and where you will be expected to spend a minimum percentage of your structural funds, we will examine carefully with you what this should mean in the RUP in the light of your particular conditions.

The specific allocation will be maintained, and will continue to support you in meeting the overcosts associated with your particular situations. You will decide how to spend it, but I hope you will use it to support activities that help you open up new markets and develop your potential.

What will all this mean in practice? Overall I would say the real value of the Communication is in the new dynamic it sets up.

The Communication sets out a menu of what is available or what may be possible in future. But each of you is different and will need to make different choices from that menu.

That is why I am proposing that each region with its Member State reflect on its own specific capacity to modernise in traditional sectors and to diversify into a targeted selection of new ones. You need to identify your own unique selling proposition and then construct an Action plan to realise it, drawing on the instruments and funds available.

This will go wider than Cohesion Policy, but will also help you as we prepare for the Partnership Agreements to be negotiated later this year and early next.

In addition, we will be proposing Regional neighbourhood plans to guide efforts for the integration of the Outermost Regions in their neighbourhoods, in terms of territorial co-operation and other activities. We should begin discussions on these as soon as possible in the autumn.

And, following the Communication, the interservice group that already exists on RUP matters will become a task force to ensure follow-up to the undertakings that so many directorates-general of the European Commission have given. And, by the end of 2017 at the latest, the Commission has committed itself to review the state of implementation of each of the proposed measures and actions in the Communication

To conclude, I believe each Outermost Region can have an exciting future. Some of you – with new energy discoveries offshore – may find that geography and geology will create new fortunes and new challenges. Each of you has gifts in their geographical position and characteristics to explore.

Since I became Commissioner, I have pressed you hard on diversification and modernisation, and will continue to do so, because I believe this is the only path to the future you deserve.

And, whatever you think of this position today, I am convinced that ten, fifteen years down the line, you will recognise that that man from the Alps really was working in your best interests, as a true, and loyal friend.