The current debate on the future of Europe cannot disregard the fundamental value of the process of European integration in order to put into practice the principles of peace, democracy and freedom. Today, in order to build together a new Europe that is stronger, more united, and faithful to its fundamental ideals, it is necessary to promote effectively strong and sustainable economic and social development in all European regions. In this respect, a strong cohesion policy is essential, and the cooperation between the French and Italian regions carried out within the framework of the Alps-Mediterranean Euroregion is a good practical example of the value of this European territorial cohesion policy. Precisely the territories of this Euroregion, in a contemporary battlefield crossed by rigid borders of nations in conflict, currently constitute an area of peace and prosperity, which was also built openly thanks to the precious contribution of the cohesion policy.

The Alps-Méditerranée Euroregion is a coherent and original space that brings together, across the Franco-Italian border, the Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes, Liguria, Piedmont, South Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur and Aosta Valley regions. With its 20 million inhabitants, this alliance of regions occupies an essential place both in the Alpine region where it contributes largely to the implementation of the European Union Strategy for the Alpine region (SUERA - Stratégie de l'Union européenne pour la région alpine) but also open to the Mediterranean region.

Over the centuries, despite the evolution of borders, exchanges between these five regions have never stopped and today this territory is one of the most active, productive and innovative in Europe. With a total GDP of more than 580 billion euros (almost 30,000 euros per capita), the relative prosperity of the Euroregion relies in particular on an industrial base that remains powerful (1.5 million companies representing 126 billion exports) and with a high level of innovation (2.2% of GDP in R&D expenditure on average, a service sector covered at 40% by the high-tech sector), in a particularly competitive tourism and cultural sector (130 million overnight stays per year) and positioning at the crossroads of several European transport corridors, the Mediterranean corridor and the North Sea and Mediterranean corridor.

Beyond the mountains and the sea, this border area is also structured around major cities such as Genoa, Lyon, Marseille and Turin. This diverse territory presents structural challenges due to its mountainous geography but benefits from a cultural and natural heritage which presents considerable development potential (in particular tourism, sport and hydrotherapy, renewable energies, agriculture). These challenges can only be overcome and this potential can only be developed through integrated action by the partner regions and
better coordination of certain policies. In a context where the phenomenon of metropolisation tends to concentrate economic activities and wealth in large urban areas, the Regions are indeed the only level of governance to promote a territorial balance and to try to mitigate disparities in development between the different territories at the subregional level.

For this, the Euroregion Alps-Mediterranean regions have worked together to implement territorial development projects. This was particularly the case during the 2007-2013 period around the themes of local, seasonal and sustainable tourism (STRATTOUR), renewable energies, energy management and the reduction of greenhouse gases (RENERFOR), the coordination of innovation policies (INNOVATION) but also with the new projects that were launched between 2014-2020, particularly in the health field. For example, the MisMI2 project (Integrated Health Model for Inclusive Mountain) aims at setting up an experimental teleconsultation network and the deployment of remote surveillance at home for the inhabitants of mountain areas affected by depopulation. The adaptation of medical services to these regional specificities is therefore a major challenge for the Euroregional territory, and this project has a special status as a laboratory to test the organisation of a new system of social services and regionalised health. Thus, through these projects that are close to citizens' concerns, the Regional Authorities respond to their needs and demonstrate the importance of the European Union's involvement in their daily lives.

On the basis of these practical experiences and in a context in which the European Union is going through serious difficulties, the Regions of the Alps-Mediterranean Euroregion find it essential to propose a more ambitious and simpler cohesion policy after 2020 based on the following guidelines:

- For a cohesion policy that covers all European regions, building in particular on the potential of the more developed regions

EU regional policy is both an indispensable tool for territorial cohesion at European level and an investment policy essential for maintaining the continent's competitiveness on a global scale. In the Alps-Mediterranean Euroregion, for example, the ERDF has invested almost one billion euros in research and innovation over the period 2007-2013, offering a major contribution to the economic transformation and competitiveness of regional industry. The form of intervention (grant or financial engineering) must remain flexible so that the regions can define the most effective support depending on the sector and the type of projects targeted.

This policy is also the only European policy that brings Europe closer to citizens by taking into account the needs of the territory, local involvement, multi-level governance involving regional and local authorities. This Europe of proximity is necessary throughout Europe, to strengthen the sense of belonging to the European project in the regions.
To utilise the potential of the most developed regions of the European Union, cohesion policy must reduce funding gaps between less developed and more developed regions, and move towards more comparable co-financing rules. It must also ensure a credible minimum funding level to allow the regions to work with their regional partnership and to promote of new dynamics and ambitious projects in their region. A reform of the system of distribution of funds into three categories could be envisaged, in order to better take into account the real situation of each territory. Even if the system of the three categories of region were maintained, an approximation of rules and legal frameworks would be indispensable between the three types of regions. It would be advisable to enrich the basis of the indicators used for the distribution of cohesion policy envelopes, in order to supplement the regional GDP per capita with other indicators that better reflect the challenges faced by the European regions (unemployment, youth unemployment, number of dependents, circular economy, air quality, vulnerability to climate change, etc.).

- For a territorial and integrated cohesion policy, which continues to cover the European Social Fund, and which operates on the basis of decentralised management

Cohesion policy finds its strength in its cross-disciplinary approach, which allows it to combine economic, social and environmental action to respond to regional challenges. It is therefore very important that the European social fund can stay in the field of cohesion policy, and that it undergoes decentralised management, closer to the needs of the regional employment market and the skills needs of the regional strategic sectors. This allows the regions to plan the assistance of funds by maximising their complementarities in the service of a coherent regional strategy.

Moreover, the regions of the Alps-Mediterranean Euroregion consider that this territorial investment policy helps Europe to modernise its economy, but that it cannot become "an instrument for achieving structural reforms". Such a development could lead to a renationalisation of this policy, with management by the Ministries of Economy and Finance, and would result in it losing its capacity to respond to territorial challenges, and to lead the European regions in a shared European agenda (Europe 2020 strategy).

- For a bottom-up approach giving more choice to the regional authorities on priorities for the programme, while concentrating resources on these priorities, in order to obtain critical mass

For the current programming period (2014-2020), the funds have been directed towards priorities for growth and employment: research and innovation, SMEs, information and
communication (ICT) and the low-carbon economy. The Euroregion is in favour of thematic concentration, but proposes that regions have greater room for manoeuvre to choose these priorities, in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity, in particular to adapt them to the new challenges of social and territorial cohesion (integration of young people, mobility, creativity through the use of digital technology, for example).

Thematic concentration allows the various Euroregional Operational Programmes to become involved in similar areas. Their connection with the regional cooperation programmes (cross-border and transnational in particular) is important to allow a good leverage effect in favour of functional areas such as the Alpine Macroregion. Tangible results, productive and visible investments are indeed necessary in order for citizens to have a strong sense of Europe. Moreover, in order to make cross-border cooperation more visible and concrete for citizens, it would be interesting for future programmes to identify 2 to 3 flagship projects to be implemented over the period, for example to improve the connectivity of the area.

- **Strengthening territorial cooperation and macro-regional strategies in the future cohesion policy**

Strengthening the tools and resources allocated to territorial cooperation is essential for the Alps-Mediterranean Euroregion. The possibility of jointly using funds from different regional operational programmes, even outside the regional territory\(^3\), should be greatly simplified. The European regulatory framework should facilitate the possibility for regional authorities to work more closely on the programming of their European Structural and Investment Funds. This simplification could encourage joint investments at the level of functional regions such as the Alpine Macroregion. Better inclusion of macro-regional strategies in post-2020 European policies would help to reinforce these macroregions and help them to progress faster in terms of the various European policies concerned, in order to have a tangible impact on the region. It would be interesting if specific calls for proposals (additional funds) could cover macro-regional areas, thus strengthening their cooperation on priority areas for Europe.

In the particular case of cross-border co-operation, the experience in the Alps-Mediterranean Euroregion shows that it is necessary to avoid excessively restricting the eligibility of projects to strictly cross-border areas insofar as this limitation harms the strength, the diversity of stakeholders, and the effectiveness of projects. These projects must be able to make use of all the available regional resources, in particular academic or research and innovation resources, in order to face the cross-border challenges identified.
For a real application of the principle of proportionality and simplification of the implementation of the cohesion policy, in particular as regards State aid and performance

Simplification commenced in 2014-2020 needs to be strengthened by merging the different regulations specific to each fund into one single regulation promoting effective harmonisation of the rules and procedures for the implementation of the funds and facilitating synergies and joint actions between the different Funds (Cohesion Fund, ERDF, ESF, EMFF, EAFRD).

The necessary simplification of the management and control rules must also be based on a new trust contract between the European Union and the regions. This contract, which is based on the principles of subsidiarity, proportionality and differentiation, should lead to greater autonomy for managing authorities, in particular those which have all the administrative guarantees at regional or national level to justify good use of funds (including fraud prevention), especially when the volume of European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) is relatively low compared to GDP.

In this context, the controls must be proportionate to the financial stakes, and to the administrative capacity acquired and demonstrated by the managing and monitoring authorities in the previous programming periods. In these territories, managing authorities should be able to use their own administrative rules for the management of funds in compliance with regional and/or national laws. European control should focus on the achievement of selected results and the proper implementation of cohesion policy. Also, it is important to better distinguish simple errors from cases of fraud.

Finally, like the exemptions granted to the sectoral European programmes (Horizon 2020, COSME, etc.) for State aid, the Regions of the Alps-Mediterranean Euroregion propose that the validation by the European Commission of the operational programme as an "ex ante acceptance" of the conformity of the aid provided for in the operational programme with EU state aid rules.

To better take into account sub-regional disparities and areas with natural handicaps such as mountain areas

Article 174 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU defines the economic, social and territorial cohesion policy as aiming to reduce the gap between the various regions and the backwardness of the less favoured regions. The mountain regions, even more so if they are cross-border, suffer from particular structural problems which it is necessary to take into account, in the same way as the depopulated areas of the far north of Europe. These particularities should be taken into account when allocating funds to ensure a minimum amount for mountain regions to help them meet their challenges. Also, differential treatment, for example in the application of EU state aid legislation, could be envisaged to take into
account the additional costs to mountain areas in terms of public investment (freezing, landslide, seismic activity, snow cover, low population density) compared to other European Union territories.