

**FOLLOW-UP PROVIDED BY THE COMMISSION TO THE
OPINIONS OF THE**

COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

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78th REPORT

N°	TITLE	REFERENCES
SG		
1.	Legal acts providing for the use of the regulatory procedure with scrutiny Rapporteur: François DECOSTER (FR/ALDE)	COM(2016) 799 final COR-2017-02776-00-01-PAC-TRA CIVEX-VI/026
DG ECFIN		
2.	Reflection Paper on the Deepening of the Economic and Monetary Union by 2025 Rapporteur: Christophe ROUILLON (FR/PES)	COM(2017) 291 COR-2017-03197-00-00-PAC-TRA ECON-VI/025 Own-initiative opinion
DG REGIO		
3.	The implementation of macro-regional strategies Rapporteur: Raffaele CATTANEO (IT/EPP)	COM(2016) 805 final COR-2017-02554-00-00-PAC-TRA COTER-VI/029 Own-initiative opinion
4.	Towards a European Agenda for Housing Rapporteur: Hicham IMANE (BE/PES)	COR-2017-01529-00-00-PAC-TRA COTER-VI/025 Own-initiative opinion
DG EMPL		
5.	Deinstitutionalisation in Care systems at local and regional level Rapporteur: Xamuel GONZALEZ WESTLING (SE/PES)	COR-2017-03412-00-00-PAC-TRA NAT-VI/024

DG ENV		
6.	The role of waste-to-energy in the circular economy Rapporteur: Kata TÚTTÖ (HU/PES)	COM(2017) 34 final COR-2017-01982-00-00-PAC-TRA ENVE-VI/023
DG JUST		
7.	EU Citizenship Report 2017 Rapporteur: Guillermo MARTÍNEZ SUÁREZ (ES/PES)	COM(2017) 30 final/2 COR-2017-01319-00-01-PAC-TRA CIVEX-VI/022 Own-initiative opinion
8.	Work-life balance for parents and carers Rapporteur: Nathalie SARRABEZOLLES (FR/PES)	COM(2017) 252 final COM(2017) 253 final COR-2017-03138-00-00-PAC-TRA SEDEC-VI/028
DG EAC		
9.	Modernising school and higher education Rapporteur-General: Csaba BORBOLY (RO/EPP)	COM(2017) 248 final COM(2017) 249 final COM(2017) 247 final COR-2017-03139-00-00-PAC-TRA SEDEC-VI/029 Own-initiative opinion
DG CNECT		
10.	Local and regional perspective on promoting public sector innovation via digital solutions Rapporteur: Frank CECCONI (FR/ALDE)	COR-2017-03529-00-00-PAC-TRA SEDEC-VI/030

DG MARE		
11.	Action Plan for a Maritime Strategy in the Atlantic area Delivering smart, sustainable and inclusive growth Rapporteur: Jerry LUNDY (IE/ALDE)	COM(2013) 279 final COR-2017-01995-00- 00-PAC-TRA NAT-VI/022
DG AGRI		
12.	Revitalisation of rural areas through Smart Villages Rapporteur: Enda STENSON (IE/EA)	COR-2017-03465-00- 00-PAC-TRA NAT-VI/025 Own-initiative opinion
DG COMP		
13.	The European Commission Report on Competition Policy 2016 Rapporteur: Michael MURPHY (IE/EPP)	COM(2017) 285 final COR-2017-01265-00- 00-PAC-TRA ECON-VI/023 Own-initiative opinion

<p>N°1 Legal acts providing for the use of the regulatory procedure with scrutiny COM(2016) 799 – CoR 2017/2776 – CIVEX-VI/026 126th Plenary Session – November-December 2017 Rapporteur – Mr François DECOSTER (FR/ALDE) SG – First Vice-President TIMMERMANS</p>	
<p>Points of the Committee of the Regions opinion considered essential</p>	<p>European Commission position</p>
<p>4. The Committee of the Regions overall supports the reform of the Comitology system introduced by the Treaty of Lisbon and the creation of the two systems of delegated and implementing acts.</p> <p>5. The Committee also supports the Commission proposal to amend the existing basic acts to replace references to the regulatory procedure with scrutiny with references to Articles 290 and 291 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union.</p>	<p>The Commission welcomes the support of the Committee of the Regions for the alignment proposal, in particular for the proposed indeterminate duration of empowerments.</p>
<p>14. In relation to the Common Understanding on delegated acts, the Committee of the Regions stresses the importance of involving local and regional authorities in this scrutiny.</p> <p>11. The Committee welcomes the clear commitment to systematically consulting Member States' experts when delegated acts are being prepared and drafted, but is not certain that this consultation is sufficiently defined, transparent and binding.</p> <p>15. The Committee calls for the European Committee of the Regions to receive all documents, including draft delegated acts,</p>	<p>The Commission welcomes the support of the Committee of the Regions for the Common Understanding. The Common Understanding now clearly spells out that the Commission will always consult Member State experts at all stages of the preparation of draft delegated acts. This is now also reflected in the Standard Clauses and thus becomes part of the provisions of the basic acts. Information on this consultation is available via the Commission Register on Expert Groups¹ and the Interinstitutional Register on Delegated acts². While the Commission understands that local and</p>

¹ <http://ec.europa.eu/transparency/regexpert/index.cfm>

² <https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/regdel>

at the same time as the Member States' experts and for its representatives to have systematic and facilitated access to the meetings of Commission expert groups preparing delegated acts.

regional authorities can play an important role in the implementation and application of delegated acts, the control rights foreseen in Article 290 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union are limited to the European Parliament and the Council. This does not mean in the Commission's view that there is no room for local and regional authorities to follow this work closely and make their views heard. The new Interinstitutional register for delegated acts provides information on the entire lifecycle of delegated acts and is publicly accessible. It also offers notification possibilities that will allow the Committee to follow the work on delegated acts. The Commission has also increased the possibility for stakeholders to provide feedback on draft delegated acts and now publishes draft delegated acts – with limited exceptions – before adoption on its website³ for a four-week feedback period. As to the participation in expert groups, the Common Understanding foresees for the European Parliament and the Council to send experts to meetings for expert groups – this reflects the respective control rights of these institutions. As to the Member State experts, it is up to the Member States to decide which experts are to participate.

³ http://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say_en

<p>N°2 Reflection Paper on the Deepening of the Economic and Monetary Union by 2025 (own-initiative opinion) COM(2017) 291 final – CoR 2017/3197 – ECON-VI/025 126th Plenary Session – November-December 2017 Rapporteur – Mr Christophe ROUILLON (FR/PES) DG ECFIN – Commissioner MOSCOVICI, Vice President DOMBROVSKIS</p>	
<p>Points of the Committee of the Regions opinion considered essential</p>	<p>European Commission position</p>
<p>2. The future steps for the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) should be planned in several stages between now and 2025, identifying steps which can be taken immediately without changes to the Treaties and those which, beginning with the transposition of the Fiscal Compact into primary law, require Treaty amendment.</p>	<p>The Commission recalls that the signatories of the Treaty on Stability Convergence and Governance (TSCG) in the Economic and Monetary Union committed to incorporate the substance of the Treaty 'into the European Union legal framework'. The Commission supports this intention, but does not think that it requires amending the European Union primary law. In order to allow the Contracting Parties to implement their commitment, the Commission proposed on 6 December 2017 a draft directive⁴, which incorporates the Fiscal Compact, i.e. the Title III of the Treaty on Stability Convergence and Governance, into European Union law. The legal basis for that proposal is Article 126(14)§2 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union.</p>
<p>5. The Committee of the Regions regrets that, in contrast, issues relating to the Economic and Monetary Union have been relegated to the end of the reflection paper and that only options have been put forward, not specific proposals that the Commission has committed itself to. As a</p>	<p>The Reflection Paper on the Deepening of the Economic and Monetary Union builds on the Five Presidents' Report of June 2015 and on the White paper on the future of Europe of March 2017. The reflection paper's objective is to set out a vision. With the adoption of the</p>

⁴ COM(2017) 824 final.

<p>result, the reflection paper contains few new elements, in comparison with the Four Presidents' Report (December 2012) and the Five Presidents' Report (June 2015)⁵, as well as numerous European Parliament resolutions, including that of 16 February 2017 on a budgetary capacity for the euro.</p>	<p>package on the Economic and Monetary Union of 6 December 2017, the European Commission has taken another step in the ongoing process of building a more stable and prosperous Economic and Monetary Union. In this respect, four proposals⁶ have been put forward to strengthen its institutional framework. The Multiannual Financial Framework Communication on 2 May 2018⁷ announced the proposal for a new Reform Support Programme, including a Reform Delivery Tool and a Convergence Facility. The former will provide financial incentives for all Member States for key reforms identified in the European Semester; the latter will support non-euro area Member States seeking to adopt the single currency during the period of the Multiannual Financial Framework. In addition, the Communication announced a new European Investment Stabilisation Function to complement existing instruments at national and European level to absorb large asymmetric shocks. The detailed proposals will be presented by June 2018 with the other proposals for the next Multiannual Financial Framework.</p>
<p>7.1. The Committee of the Regions stresses that more attention needs to be paid to the role of local and regional authorities in fiscal matters and, in this regard, highlights that many local and regional authorities already have fiscal powers. Proposals at European Union</p>	<p>The Commission underlines that in the discussion on deepening the Economic and Monetary Union as well as the economic policy coordination under the European Semester, the regional and local level is always taken into account. Intensive dialogue on the</p>

⁵ <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/emu-report-2015/>

⁶ COM(2017) 822 final; COM(2017) 823 final; COM(2017) 824 final; COM(2017) 827 final.

⁷ COM(2018) 321 final.

<p>level should therefore respect those powers.</p>	<p>Economic and Monetary Union proposals by the Commission is encouraged at all levels of government and among all European Union citizens. The goal of social and economic convergence is not only to be achieved between Member States, but also within the Member States and between different European regions.</p>
<p>7. The Committee of the Regions supports a convergence strategy that would complement existing European policies to strengthen economic, social and territorial cohesion and build on the following proposals:</p> <p>7.2 turning part of the European Stability Mechanism (ESM) into an integrated non-monetary European instrument under the responsibility of the European institutions with a clearly defined mandate which would have borrowing and lending capacity of EUR 100 to EUR 200 billion, to allow for short- and medium-term interventions</p>	<p>The proposal on the establishment of the European Monetary Fund (EMF)⁸ builds on the current structure of the European Stability Mechanism and intends to anchor it within the European Union's legal framework. The endorsement by the Council of discretionary decisions adopted by the European Monetary Fund decision making bodies will therefore be necessary.</p> <p>In addition, the proposal contemplates that the European Monetary Fund will be able to provide the common backstop to the Single Resolution Fund, includes the possibility for faster decision-making in specific urgent situations, and foresees a more direct involvement of the European Monetary Fund as regards the management of financial assistance programmes.</p> <p>Finally, the lending capacity and the authorised capital stock of the European Monetary Fund will be fully preserved compared to the current situation in the European Stability Mechanism. In this regard, the initial lending capacity of the European Monetary Fund will not be less than EUR 500 000 million and the Board of</p>

⁸ COM(2017) 827 final.

	Governors will be able to amend it.
<p>7.3. establishing a convergence code supplemented by a system of incentives for structural reforms, the scope of which would be defined according to their European added value and could include for example fiscal convergence and measures to make the labour market more dynamic in the area of training, digitisation and consolidated social cohesion, taking into account in particular the challenges linked to demographic change. In this context, the Committee of the Regions draws the attention to the fact that technical assistance can already be supported through the Structural Reform Support Programme (SRSP).</p>	<p>The Commission stands ready to discuss and propose future links between Cohesion Policy and structural reforms in the form of conditionalities and incentives.</p> <p>The Commission refers to the fact that it proposed on 6 December 2017 as part of the Economic and Monetary Union package a) financial support to Member States for structural reforms through a reform delivery tool and technical reform support at the request of Member States; b) a dedicated convergence facility for Member States on their way to joining the euro. Both aspects – which are expected to have a positive effect on convergence among Member States – will be incorporated into an upcoming legislative proposal that is part of the broader package of Commission’s proposals on the next Multiannual Financial Framework.</p>
<p>8. The Committee of the Regions reiterates its call for any national, regional or local co-financing in relation to the European Structural and Investment Funds to be excluded from the accounting mechanism of the Stability and Growth Pact, as is already the case for contributions to the European Fund for Strategic Investments.</p>	<p>All expenditure items fall within the scope of the Stability and Growth Pact (SGP), since all spending should ultimately be financed.</p> <p>Under certain circumstances, the investment clause of the Stability and Growth Pact gives Member States a less stringent fiscal requirement in order to increase public investment, as outlined in the Commission Communication on <i>Making the best use of the flexibility within the existing rules of the Stability and Growth Pact</i>⁹. Furthermore, peaks in investment expenditure are smoothed over several years when assessing</p>

⁹ COM(2015) 12 final.

<p>The Committee of the Regions reiterates its call for an indicator relating to the investment rate to be included in the macroeconomic scoreboard.</p>	<p>compliance with the Stability and Growth Pact in order to avoid that such peaks penalise Member States.</p> <p>The Commission draws attention to the fact that the Macroeconomic Imbalances Procedure (MIP) Scoreboard already includes investment (gross fixed capital formation as percentage of gross domestic product (GDP)) in its auxiliary indicators; residential construction and gross domestic expenditure on research and development are also included among the auxiliary indicators of the Macroeconomic Imbalances Procedure Scoreboard.</p>
<p>9. The Committee of the Regions calls for genuine democratic involvement of the European Parliament and consultation of the Committee of the Regions and the social partners prior to adopting country-specific recommendations under the European Semester, particularly to ensure that they are in line with the principle of subsidiarity and have not been put forward on the basis of potential macroeconomic imbalances derived from national figures alone without considering if they are appropriate at regional and/or local level.</p> <p>19. The Committee of the Regions regrets that the involvement of local and regional authorities in the governance of the European Semester is still very unsatisfactory.</p>	<p>The Commission recalls that it has made important steps in recent years to increase national ownership and democratic accountability at national and European level. The dialogue with the European Parliament, national parliaments and social partners at Union and national level has been enhanced. This process will be continued. The Commission also encourages Member States to involve national parliaments and social partners closely in their own Semester. In particular, Member States are invited to explain how regional and local authorities are involved in the preparation of the National Reform Programmes, as the success of implementation also relies on various levels of government.</p>
<p>10. The Committee of the Regions rejects the idea of creating new parliamentary bodies, bearing in mind that the European Parliament is already the parliament of</p>	<p>The Commission agrees with the Committee of the Regions that deepening the Economic and Monetary Union must go hand in hand with an</p>

<p>the euro area, as according to the Treaties the euro is the common currency of the European Union.</p>	<p>increase in democratic accountability. The Commission also agrees that the European Parliament is also the parliament of the euro area.</p>
<p>13. Economic and Monetary Union must be accompanied by a genuine social pillar in order to raise employment and upwardly harmonised social standards to the status of macro-economic priorities.</p>	<p>The European Pillar of Social Rights is intended as a compass for convergence towards well-functioning and fair labour markets and welfare systems primarily in the euro area, but is open to all Member States wishing to join. This intention was confirmed with its Proclamation by all Heads of State and Government, the European Parliament and the European Commission at the Gothenburg Summit of 17 November 2017.</p>
<p>14. The Committee of the Regions suggests adding a fifth principle addressing contribution to sustainable development and to the implementation of the objectives of the Paris Climate Conference to the four guiding principles proposed by the Commission on deepening the Economic and Monetary Union.</p>	<p>Implementing the Paris Agreement should underpin European Union policy development, including strengthening the Economic and Monetary Union, and many of its elements are already reflected in the first and second guiding principles. Accelerating the transition to a low carbon and climate resilient Europe is central to promoting sustainable growth and jobs, increasing long term financial stability and risk reduction as well as developing the environment for sustainable finance.</p>
<p>15. The Committee of the Regions calls for cohesion policy post-2020 to have sufficient resources, equivalent at least to one third of the future European Union budget.</p>	<p>In the Multiannual Financial Framework Communication of 2 May 2018¹⁰ the Commission is proposing to modernise and strengthen Cohesion Policy. Working together with other programmes, the funds will continue to offer essential support to the development of Europe's Member States and regions. In some Member</p>

¹⁰ COM(2018) 321 final.

	<p>States, the European Structural and Investment Funds have in recent years accounted for more than half of total public investment, contributing strongly to the economic and social catching-up of regions and countries across Europe. This has been complemented by the European Fund for Strategic Investments, which has supported private investment across Europe. Cohesion Policy will play an even more important role in the future by supporting the ongoing economic reform process in the Member States. The Commission proposes to strengthen the link between the Union budget and the European Semester of economic policy coordination. Further convergence across Member-States should be better addressed by European Union public finances through the following avenues: 1) promoting and supporting structural reforms in the Member States, 2) supporting euro area Member States to respond better to rapidly changing economic circumstances and stabilising their economy in the event of large asymmetric shocks, and 3) severing the link between sovereign debt and the situation of the banks.</p>
<p>16. The Committee of the Regions suggests that the new own resources could build on a European Union corporate income tax by means of the Common Consolidated Corporate Tax Base and other tax resources.</p>	<p>The Commission concurs that a reform of the revenue side and in particular the introduction of new tax-based own resources could be a constructive element of the next Multiannual Financial Framework. Building on recommendations from the High-Level Group on the Future Financing of the European Union, the Commission proposes to modernise and simplify the current overall financing – 'Own Resources' – system and diversify the</p>

	<p>budget's sources of revenue. The Commission proposes¹¹ to simplify the current Value Added Tax (VAT) based Own Resource and to introduce a basket of new Own Resources that is linked to political priorities. The proposed basket of new Own Resources includes: 20% of the revenues from the Emissions Trading System; a 3% call rate applied to the new Common Consolidated Corporate Tax Base (to be phased in once the necessary legislation has been adopted); a national contribution calculated on the amount of non-recycled plastic packaging waste in each Member State.</p>
<p>17. The Committee of the Regions is opposed to euro fiscal capacity being made a euro area budget heading in the European Union budget while the own resources ceiling remains fixed at 1.23% of the European Union gross national income (GNI).</p>	<p>With a view to deepening Economic and Monetary Union, the Commission proposes for the period 2018-2020 – within the ceilings of the current Multi-annual Financial Framework – to strengthen the activities of the Structural Reform Support Service in order to support reforms in all Member States and to put in place a dedicated work stream for Member States on their way to joining the euro. The Commission also proposed to amend the Common Provisions Regulation (CPR) governing the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) in order to extend the possibilities to use part of their performance reserve in support of agreed reforms. The European Parliament and the Council are invited to adopt these two latter proposals in 2018.</p> <p>For the post-2020 Multi-annual</p>

¹¹ COM(2018) 326 final.

	<p>Financial Framework, the Commission proposes to include 1) a reform delivery tool to support Member States' reform commitments, 2) further technical support for specific actions at the request of the Member States, 3) a dedicated convergence facility for Member States on their way to joining the euro, and 4) a stabilisation function for euro area Member States and open to all in the event of large, asymmetric shocks. For the latter, the European Union budget would guarantee back-to-back loans to Member States affected of up to EUR 30 billion complemented with a grant component to subsidise the interest payments financed through external assigned revenues based on a share of monetary income. With this financing the crowding out of resources for other European Union policies such as the European Structural and Investment Fund would be avoided. These new instruments will be part of the broader package of proposals on the next Multiannual Financial Framework.</p>
<p>19. The Committee of the Regions reiterates its opposition to any form of macro-economic conditionality when it comes to the European Structural and Investment Fund.</p>	<p>The Commission considers that the linkages between European Structural and Investment Fund and the economic governance of the Union provide assurance that the effectiveness of expenditure under the European Structural and Investment Fund is underpinned by sound economic policies. The provisions linking the European Structural and Investment Fund to sound economic governance have proved to be a good incentive for compliance with the economic surveillance procedures by the Member States.</p>

<p>N°3 The implementation of macro-regional strategies COM(2016) 805 final – CoR 2017/2554 – COTER-VI/029 126th Plenary Session – November-December 2017 Rapporteur – Mr Raffaele CATTANEO (IT/EPP) DG REGIO – Commissioner CREȚU</p>	
<p>Points of the Committee of the Regions opinion considered essential</p>	<p>European Commission position</p>
	<p>The Commission welcomes the opinion of the Committee of the Regions and shares most of its comments and concerns. However, certain points deserve some replies or clarifications that the Commission is happy to provide on the points below.</p>
<p>15. The Committee of the Regions notes that the objectives of macro-regional strategies must be included into the overall European Union's strategy after 2020 in a concerted way and thus create a consistent framework for all programmes, which would lead to the strategic planning of all policies with an impact on regional development to take macro-regional strategies into account. This applies to policies in all forms and at all levels, including policies under shared management, and also to policies directly managed by the Commission and to national regional policies;</p>	<p>The Commission agrees that, as a general principle, the objectives of macro-regional strategies (MRS) should be in line and coherent with the European Union policy objectives, and likewise national and regional objectives with those for macro-regional strategies, so that policy planners and designers benefit from a consistent policy framework for all programmes.</p>
<p>17. The Committee of the Regions considers that in order to ensure access to financial resources in the post-2020 programming period all European Union policies (including cohesion policy) should provide specific implementation rules for projects contributing to a macro-regional strategy that would facilitate access to financing and reduce</p>	<p>Considering simplification is among the main priorities for the next programming period, the Commission believes that guaranteeing a consistent framework in the negotiation phase of programmes after 2020 will facilitate the funding of macro-regional strategy projects, in particular if specific calls or incentives supporting them are fully</p>

<p>administrative requirements. The implementation of European Union programmes must be simplified as a matter of urgency;</p>	<p>integrated in the implementation process.</p>
<p>21. The Committee of the Regions calls on the Commission in cooperation with the Interact programme, the thematic and national coordinators of the macro-regional strategies as well as stakeholders of the existing and future macro-regional strategies to support this process by organising and funding specific workshops tasked with drafting such strategy documents. The Committee of the Regions calls on the Commission in cooperation with the Interact programme to foster the exchange of experience between the four macro-regional strategies, both with regards to the thematic priorities of the strategies and general aspects of their implementation. Preparation of new macro-regional strategies should be equally methodologically supported;</p>	<p>The Commission considers that drafting strategy documents must be the responsibility of countries and regions involved in a macro-regional strategy, and that those partners should organise their cooperation and governance mechanisms accordingly. It would increase ownership of the strategies, and would help them clarify what their main joint objectives are and how they can support them in the next programming period.</p> <p>For its part, the Commission is favourable to facilitate the exchange of experience between the four strategies, and has already started to do it in 2017 with the support of Interact programme, in co-organising and participating in thematic meetings (two with transport coordinators of all strategies and programmes managing authorities, one on climate change and risk prevention). Similar meetings are planned in 2018 on environment, digital issues, capacity and governance, etc.</p>
<p>22. The Committee of the Regions notes that the Commission should assume an increased/more pro-active role in the coordination and stimulating cooperation of the macro-regional strategies. Besides the Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy, other Directorates-General of the Commission should be involved more actively in the support of the implementation of the Macroregional Strategies' strategic objectives. macro-</p>	<p>The Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy already assumes a strategic coordination role, including with the participation of available national experts of countries involved in the macro-regional strategies.</p> <p>Other Directorates-General are increasingly involved at different levels and meetings. This is in particular the case of Directorates-General for Environment, for Climate Action, for</p>

<p>regional strategies should be better connected with all European Union policies and instruments in order to ensure an increased contribution to the overall European Union objectives;</p>	<p>Mobility and Transport, for Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection, for Energy, for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries, for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations etc.</p>
<p>26. The Committee of the Regions notes that cohesion policy works through national allocations, thus focusing primarily on national priorities. In practice, this means that even if one country/region decides to support projects under a macro-regional strategy, there is no guarantee that the other country/region will do the necessary to also support its implementation. Unfortunately, in such cases the effectiveness of the project is reduced and the added value of the macro-regional strategy is weakened. Member States should reflect macro-regional strategies in the programming process of cohesion policy;</p>	<p>The Commission agrees that, as said in point 17, if a consistent policy framework is set up, it will be easier for Member-States to reflect macro-regional strategies in the programming process of cohesion policy.</p> <p>It is worth noting a good practice developed in the European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region, where European Structural and Investment Funds programmes managing authorities have set up a network on a voluntary basis to discuss and coordinate actions and projects in the field of innovation. This practice should be extended to other priorities and to other macroregions, upstream the programming process in the next period.</p>
<p>28. The Committee of the Regions reiterates the request in its recent opinion on People-to-people and small-scale projects in cross-border cooperation programmes that access to cohesion policy funding be made easier for small projects. Experience shows that some small-scale, transnational projects are compatible with the objectives of macro-regional strategies. However, most European Union funding programmes are not designed to support small projects: many local communities and civil society organisations cannot participate as they do not have the necessary financial and administrative capacity. In view of this, it is recommended that easily accessible and</p>	<p>The Commission takes note of this point but considers it has a very tenuous link with the macro-regional strategies issue.</p>

<p>manageable funding instruments be developed, including pre-financing models and project preparation for smaller projects;</p>	
<p>32. The Committee of the Regions argues that the Three No's should be replaced by Three Yes's, to improve the use of existing legislation, institutions and funding. A practical approach should be adopted whereby the necessary measures are taken to improve the functioning of macro-regional strategies rather than focusing on confusing principles such as the Three No's. The Committee of the Regions says yes to better synergies with funding instruments, yes to better embedding of existing structures in macro-regional strategies and yes to better implementation of existing rules;</p>	<p>The Commission takes note of the positive interpretation of the Committee of the Regions of the "three No's rule", which would indeed help create a dynamic for stimulating further opportunities for cooperation between Member States and Regions concerned.</p>
<p>41. The Committee of the Regions underlines that in order to improve governance, macro-regional strategies require the support of the Commission, which should actively support national and thematic coordination and should work to strengthen the link between European Union policies and the implementation of macro-regional strategies, paying particular attention to the regional and local perspective. The Commission should organise frequent and regular meetings and seminars, which will give implementers and key stakeholders a better overview of European Union objectives and enable exchange of best practice between existing macro-regional strategies;</p>	<p>The Commission refers back to the responses to points 21 and 22 above.</p>
<p>42. The Committee of the Regions considers that the Commission should significantly improve its internal coordination across different Directorates-</p>	<p>The Commission takes note of the recommendations of the Committee of the Regions and welcomes any advice to improve its internal coordination. It</p>

<p>General and address existing overlaps at the level of European Union policies. The next Commission report on the implementation of European Union macro-regional strategies should put even more focus on good practices that could be transferred between strategies;</p> <p>43. The Committee of the Regions believes that future Commission reports should also provide hard data on the financial contributions to macro-regional strategies, including the number of projects supported. Finally, the Commission should also do more as regards proposals to harmonise the terminology used to describe roles and processes in macro-regional strategies;</p>	<p>also takes note of the request of the Committee of the Regions as regards the content of the next Commission report on the implementation of European Union macro-regional strategies.</p> <p>As regards the terminology used in macro-regional strategies, the Commission has always encouraged stakeholders of all macro-regional strategies to resist the temptation to stand out from the others in this respect. But in each macroregion, partners have made their own choice. However, and by way of example, the Commission and Interact now use the generic term of "thematic coordinators" to name priority area coordinators, policy area coordinators, thematic steering group leaders and action group leaders; or "national coordinators groups" to name "executive Board" or "governing Board".</p> <p>Moreover, Interact has developed a Glossary which helps interpreting different terminology across macro-regional strategies¹².</p>
<p>46. The Committee of the Regions underlines that territorial cooperation is somewhat risky and not easy to predict in detail. Monitoring and evaluation should therefore focus on outcomes and cooperation processes rather than figures. Failures and errors can and will happen and should not immediately lead to financial corrections or the end of measures, as this would prevent innovative but risky projects.</p>	<p>The Commission takes note of this point but does not see the link with macro-regional strategies which are not affected by financial corrections as they do not have their own funds.</p>

¹² http://www.interact-eu.net/library?field_fields_of_expertise_tid=33#470-glossary-macro-regional-strategies

<p>N°4 Towards a European Agenda for Housing (own-initiative opinion) CoR 2017/1529 – COTER-VI/025 126th Plenary Session – November-December 2017 Rapporteur – Mr Hicham IMANE (BE/PES) DG REGIO – Commissioner CREȚU</p>	
<p>Points of the Committee of the Regions opinion considered essential</p>	<p>European Commission position</p>
<p>31. The Committee of the Regions calls for housing investment to be eligible under the post-2020 cohesion policy, in order to better respond to the diversity of local needs.</p>	<p>The Commission takes note of the proposal. Under the current cohesion policy period housing investment is possible when contributing to the investment priorities set under the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) Regulation¹³.</p> <p>Concerning future cohesion policy, the Commission is currently in the reflection process to prepare its proposal under the post-2020 Multiannual Financial Framework for the European Union.</p>
<p>13. Following on from the European Union Urban Agenda's Partnership for Housing, the Committee of the Regions calls for the implementation of a European Agenda for Housing that can: ensure better coordination between European Union policies and the policies of the Member States, their regions and local authorities; achieve better coordination of European Union policies and intervention mechanisms to support these housing policies; and compare how European cities provide affordable housing;</p>	<p>The Commission supports and facilitates the work of all the Urban Agenda Partnerships. When Partnership actions are addressed to the European Union level, the Commission will consider, where appropriate, the actions proposed when drafting relevant proposals and reviewing European Union legislation, instruments and initiatives.</p> <p>Already during the current programming period, the scope of support of the five European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) is coordinated in order to maximise complementarities and avoid double</p>

¹³ Regulation (EU) No 1301/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 December 2013 on the European Regional Development Fund and on specific provisions concerning the Investment for growth and jobs goal and repealing Regulation (EC) No 1080/2006, OJ L 347, 20.12.2013.

	funding, including for the operations in favour of social housing.
<p>20. The Committee of the Regions welcomes the Commission's initiative to link the European Pillar of Social Rights to the European Semester, which in the area of housing policy will according to the Commission translate into a closer monitoring of the reform of social housing, the accessibility and affordability of housing, as well as the effectiveness of housing allowances.</p> <p>The Committee of the Regions expects thereby an amendment of certain flawed assumptions on housing in the European Semester insofar as:</p> <p>i) the European Union competence of some country analyses and country-specific recommendations in the field of housing was debatable in terms of subsidiarity (for example questioning of rent controls, etc.) and</p> <p>ii) recommendations on housing were made only from the perspective of possible macro-economic imbalances based on national figures and proposed therefore one-size-fits-all policies that did not take into account local and regional peculiarities;</p>	<p>The recent financial crisis underscored the need to strengthen macroeconomic surveillance and broaden its scope, in addition to fiscal surveillance. The macroeconomic imbalance procedure, as foreseen in Regulation 1176/2011¹⁴, encompasses monitoring of internal imbalances, including those that arise from housing markets. The macroeconomic imbalance procedure assesses the housing market from a macroeconomic perspective and where relevant involving its cross-border relevance, the Commission takes into account the specific circumstances at hand where warranted.</p> <p>The Commission takes into account institutional features of housing and mortgage markets that shape house prices through the impact on demand and supply conditions. Therefore, various policy areas, including taxation, lending practices and regulation, land availability and housing supply, and rental markets can be covered.</p> <p>Homelessness and housing exclusion are addressed at European Union level through several European Union policies and initiatives among which:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The Europe 2020 Strategy¹⁵, through its European Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion flagship identified homelessness as one of the most severe forms of poverty and

¹⁴ Regulation (EU) No 1176/2011 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 November 2011 on the prevention and correction of macroeconomic imbalances, *OJ L 306, 23.11.2011*.

¹⁵ COM(2010) 2020 final.

	<p>deprivation.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The European Pillar of Social Rights has identified housing and assistance for the homeless as one of its 20 key principles¹⁶. - The Social Investment Package¹⁷ and its accompanying Commission Staff Working Document on homelessness¹⁸ argue for urgent concerted action to take preventative measures that can reduce the risk and magnitude of homelessness. <p>The European Semester process will be the main tool used for the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights. Country Reports, which are the prime analytical basis for recommendations and policy advice, will play a central role in bringing this about. It is therefore important to ensure that they reflect well the social dimension as described in the European Pillar of Social Rights.</p> <p>The 2017 the Country Specific Recommendations package contains several references to housing. More specifically, for a number of countries the recitals accompanying the Country Specific Recommendations¹⁹ include concrete issues focussing on restoring the healthy functioning of the housing market to avoid:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - macroeconomic imbalances (Ireland, Cyprus, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Sweden),
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¹⁶ SWD(2017) 201 final.

¹⁷ COM(2013) 83 final.

¹⁸ SWD(2013) 42 final.

¹⁹ See Annex II.

- housing supply shortage (Ireland, Luxembourg, Sweden, United Kingdom),

- access to affordable housing (Czech Republic, Ireland).

In the course of the 2018 European Semester process, beside the above mentioned countries, other Member States are likely to be targeted with regard to housing related issues.

Efforts have been made by the Commission in the last years to put more emphasis on homelessness and housing exclusion in the Country Reports, notably in the sections devoted to social policy, by stressing issues like housing supply shortage, dysfunctional housing markets, macroeconomic imbalances, insufficient social housing, lack of access to affordable housing and housing cost overburden.

The Country Reports contain recitals that are not only made from a macro-economic imbalances perspective, but also from a social inclusion (access to quality and affordable housing) and fight against poverty (fighting homelessness) perspectives.

The Commission is committed to supporting policies and strategies that ensure citizen's access to quality and affordable housing and social housing, and provides Member States policy support.

In addition, relevant Commission support includes cohesion policy investment in the areas of energy efficiency in housing, housing as part of urban regeneration, social housing as well as integrated urban strategies

	which can include a housing component.
21. The Committee of the Regions calls for the future European Agenda for Housing to also pay attention to the needs and demands of rural areas with respect to housing;	<p>European Union cohesion policy investments are available for the development of all types of regions, including rural areas.</p> <p>For example, the Commission supports interventions stimulating the socio-economic sustainability of rural areas, among other through the renewal of villages and the restoration, upgrading and rehabilitation of public (municipal or regional) buildings that can be used by the respective authorities for social housing purposes.</p>
22. The Committee of the Regions calls therefore for a proper democratic involvement of the European Parliament and consultations with the Committee of the Regions representing European local and regional authorities as well as with the social partners prior to adopting European Semester country specific recommendations in the area of housing policy and for particular attention given to the respect of the subsidiarity principle in this field;	<p>European and national parliaments, social partners and local governments are key stakeholders in the reform process. The timely and meaningful involvement of them in the design, sequencing and implementation of reforms can enhance ownership, impact and implementation.</p>
24. Given the results of recent research suggesting that there are significant regional differences in house price developments, the Committee of the Regions suggests that the macro-economic imbalances scoreboard uses regional and not just national data on year-on-year changes in house prices as trigger point that would warrant close monitoring. The Committee also asks the Commission to enquire whether it could be possible to encourage a differentiated macro-prudential policy at the regional level with different loan-to-value (LTV)	<p>The main deliverables of the European Semester build on a broad range of input. They are developed in close collaboration with the public authorities and the social partners, and take into account discussions with the European Parliament, the Council, the Committee of the Regions and national parliaments.</p> <p>The Commission will continue the dialogue established with the Member States in the framework of the European Semester, with a view to</p>

<p>or debt-to-income (DTI) limits for mortgages, in particular in metropolitan areas and in the rest of the country;</p>	<p>reaching a common understanding of the most urgent challenges in the next country reports and identifying priority areas for action in the next cycle of specific recommendations by country.</p> <p>The Commission also invites Member States to ensure that national social partners, local governments and national parliaments participate fully in the reform process.</p>
<p>29. The Committee of the Regions welcomes the fact that the Commission's report on the European Union Urban Agenda echoes its call for a review of Decision 2012/21/EU²⁰ with the aim of broadening access to social housing beyond "disadvantaged citizens or socially less advantaged groups". Such an extension would be in line with giving the Member States more discretion in planning, delivering, financing and organising the construction of social housing and would confirm their autonomy to decide how to use housing policy as a tool to create social mix, avoid ghettoisation and create sustainable communities. This would allow the right to adequate and affordable accommodation to be given more priority, because the inability of the housing market to meet accommodation needs in certain regions affects not just people who have no access to housing at all, but also the occupants of housing that is hazardous to health, inadequate or overcrowded, as well as people who are paying most of their income on rent or their monthly</p>	<p>The Commission's report on the Urban Agenda²¹ further to the first results from the European Union Urban Agenda states the following (page 8):</p> <p>"The first Partnerships' draft actions for better regulation focus on possible improvement of policy processes and legislation. They go beyond changing legislation and include new non-legislative proposals. These actions could be examined by the European Commission in the frame of the Regulatory Fitness and Performance Platform (REFIT)."</p> <p>The Commission's objective in the European Union State aid rules on Services of General Economic Interest (the 2012 SGEI package) is to set out clear, balanced and proportionate State aid rules that avoid serious competition distortions in the internal market, whilst taking account of the great importance for society of the Services of General Economic Interest, including social housing and of the large variety of these services across</p>

²⁰ 2012/21/EU: Commission Decision of 20 December 2011 on the application of Article 106(2) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union to State aid in the form of public service compensation granted to certain undertakings entrusted with the operation of services of general economic interest, OJ L 7, 11.1.2012.

²¹ COM(2017) 657 final.

<p>mortgage payments. The Committee believes, therefore, that there would be added value to be gained from establishing criteria for defining decent affordable housing at European level.</p>	<p>different sectors.</p> <p>In the Commission case practice over the last years, the Commission has sought to apply the 2012 Services of General Economic Interest package with common sense, with an eye to solutions which are workable in practice for aid-granting authorities and for aid beneficiaries.</p> <p>Due to the importance of the Services of General Economic Interest a predictable and stable legal framework in this area is an objective in itself.</p>
<p>31. The Committee of the Regions calls for housing investment to be eligible under the post-2020 cohesion policy, in order to better respond to the diversity of local needs (energy, urban planning, migrants, exclusion, etc.) while continuing existing measures in the areas of renovation for energy efficiency, access to housing for marginalised communities and urban regeneration, as part of a cross-cutting approach to housing investment, to be co-funded under cohesion policy. Social action in those urban areas and in housing where it is needed should be a horizontal tool of public housing policies;</p>	<p>The Commission agrees with the importance of considering local needs while carefully assessing the added value of European Union intervention and respecting subsidiarity.</p> <p>The Commission takes note of the proposals, however, it is not in a position to comment on post-2020 cohesion policy at this stage, whilst preparations for the new Multiannual Financial Framework are underway.</p>
<p>32. The Committee of the Regions considers that the European Fund for Strategic Investment (EFSI) could contribute to fill the market failure gap in the field of social housing in the case of high risk profile projects that would not have the chance to get financing under the European Investment Bank (EIB) traditional lending. However, in the field of social housing the new financial instruments such as the European Fund for Strategic Investment must meet the</p>	<p>18 social infrastructure projects with financing of more than EUR 1.2 billion have been approved to date under the European Fund for Strategic Investment Infrastructure and Innovation Window, which should mobilise over EUR 6 billion in investments. Out of these, 6 concern social/affordable housing. The Commission is determined to support the uptake of such investments, including through targeted technical</p>

<p>specific long-term needs in terms of affordable housing and energy efficiency.</p> <p>The 4% uptake of the overall European Fund for Strategic Investment budget on social infrastructures by June 2017 illustrates that difficulty which may be exacerbated by the insufficient use of the investment clause foreseen in the Stability and Growth Pact and by the choice of inserting investments in social housing in the European System of National and Regional Accounts 2010 (ESA) accountancy category of public administration when calculating the public deficit. The Committee urges therefore that an evaluation be made of the Juncker Plan and the European Investment Bank loans in terms of the investment generated in the field of housing and expects the newly established High-Level Taskforce on Social Infrastructure to play a significant role in this regard;</p>	<p>assistance from the European Investment Advisory Hub and the set-up of Investment Platforms.</p> <p>The report of the High-Level Task Force (HLTF) estimates the minimum gap in social infrastructure investment at EUR 100-150 billion per annum. Meeting this demand requires significant and multi-level coordinated efforts.</p>
<p>A European Agenda for Housing under the Pact of Amsterdam</p> <p>36. The Committee of the Regions welcomes the initial conclusions of the Urban Agenda for the European Union's Partnership for Housing, which also represent practical contributions to the Regulatory Fitness and Performance Programme, and urges the Member States and the Commission to back up these results by preparing specific proposals such as a revision of the Services of General Economic Interest decision.</p>	<p>Ref. to point 13.</p> <p>The Commission facilitates the European Union Urban Agenda process in line with the Pact of Amsterdam and considers, where appropriate, the actions proposed by the Partnerships when drafting relevant proposals and reviewing European Union legislation, instruments and initiatives.</p>

<p>N°5 Deinstitutionalisation in care systems at local and regional level CoR 2017/3412 – NAT-VI/024 126th Plenary Session – November-December 2017 Rapporteur – Mr Xamuel GONZALEZ WESTLING (SE/PES) DG EMPL – Commissioner THYSSEN</p>	
<p>Points of the Committee of the Regions opinion considered essential</p>	<p>European Commission position</p>
<p>6. The Committee of the Regions welcomes the initiative of former Commissioner Vladimir Špidla who, with the assistance of an expert group, developed the Common European Guidelines on the Transition from Institutional to Community-based Care. The Committee would recommend using the definition of "institution" provided in these guidelines, namely: "any residential care where residents are isolated from the broader community and/or compelled to live together; residents do not have sufficient control over their lives and over decisions which affect them; and the requirements of the organisation itself tend to take precedence over the residents' individualised needs".... The Committee of the Regions notes that the guidelines can offer valuable support in the transition from institutional care to a more community-based system of care, and would recommend that they be used by all Member States;</p>	<p>The Commission cooperates with the expert group for organising meetings related in particular to the use of the European Structural and Investment Funds, in particular the European Social Fund, in the de-institutionalisation process (DI). During these meetings information about the national situations and examples of good practices are being exchanged. The group also organises, together with Commission officials, national seminars in the Member States. The guidelines are used in the de-institutionalisation process. The definition of institution included therein is in line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and the General comment on independent living of the United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.</p>
<p>8. The Committee of the Regions considers that developing a more community-based system of care should be a high priority for all European Union Member States, and that de-institutionalisation should be carried</p>	<p>The need to reform health systems by reinforcing primary care and community care has been highlighted by the Commission in many policy documents in the recent years (2014 Communication on Health systems²²;</p>

²² COM(2014) 215 final.

<p>out in a way that upholds the rights of the target group and guarantees the best possible outcome for those affected;</p>	<p>2016 Joint Report of the Economic Policy Committee and the Commission on Health Care and Long-Term Care Systems and Fiscal Sustainability²³; Annual Growth Survey²⁴ every year, State of health in the European Union Companion Report²⁵).</p> <p>The need to reinforce primary care, move further into deinstitutionalisation and develop community care as part of health systems reforms has been highlighted through Country Specific Recommendations to some countries as part of the European Semester process.</p> <p>The European Union also supports development of community-based services via the European Structural and Investment Funds, in particular the European Social Fund. For the years 2014-2020 the European Union has allocated approximately EUR 45 billion for social inclusion.</p>
<p>9. The Committee of the Regions considers it important to point to the risk that in the transition towards more community-based, open forms of care, states may build new institutions to replace the ones being closed down.</p>	<p>See above on health systems reforms.</p> <p>Investments in long-stay residential institutions, such as homes for people with disabilities, mental health problems and children deprived of parental care, are excluded across all thematic areas of the Cohesion Policy. This is in line with the anti-discrimination principle of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, as well as with the legal obligations of the Cohesion Policy</p>

²³ https://ec.europa.eu/info/publications/economy-finance/joint-report-health-care-and-long-term-care-systems-fiscal-sustainability-0_en

²⁴ COM(2017) 690 final.

²⁵ SWD(2017) 400.

	<p>regulations,²⁶ in particular the requirement of the United Nations Convention on Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCPRD), i.e. Article 19 Living independently and being included in the community²⁷ and the General comment No. 5 (2017) on living independently and being included in the community²⁸.</p>
<p>10. Stigmatised groups are often treated with hostility, fear and as if they were of less worth and a burden. A large number of studies have shown that people with mental health problems suffer from stigmatisation.... Deinstitutionalisation is more than closing down large institutions and creating alternative forms of care. It also means combating prejudice, questioning stereotypes and changing mindsets, so that instead of being viewed primarily as objects and the passive recipients of care and treatment, people with disabilities gain recognition as equal members of society entitled to the full range of human rights. The Committee of the Regions considers that at the same time as introducing deinstitutionalisation, the Member States must combat stigmatisation and prevent discrimination. This means, in line with the United Nations Convention (Articles 4-6), that</p>	<p>Fighting stigma and discrimination is part of the Commission's actions on mental health. The European Pact for Mental Health supported a conference on the topic including conclusions that are still relevant today. It is a guiding principle in the European Framework for Action on Mental Health and Well-being and is addressed under the activities carried out by the European Union Compass for Action on Mental Health and Well-being. Examples of good practice are published in brochures "Good practices in Mental Health & Well-being" in 2016²⁹ and 2017³⁰. A key measure for better inclusion is establishing quality community based and comprehensive mental health services which replace institutional models. Progress in this approach is one of the topics discussed in the current round of the European</p>

²⁶ The ESF Regulation (1304/2013) – Article 8, Recital 19 (<http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32013R1304>); the ERDF Regulation (1301/2013) – Article 5(9)(a), Recital 16 (<http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32013R1301>); the thematic ex-ante conditionality 9.1 on active inclusion required that national strategic policy framework for poverty reduction, aiming at active inclusion, "depending on the identified needs, includes measures to support the shift to community-based services" (ANNEX XI of the Common Provisions Regulations. <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32013R1303>).

²⁷ <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/CRPD/Pages/ConventionRightsPersonsWithDisabilities.aspx>

²⁸ http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CRPD/C/GC/5&Lang=en

²⁹ https://ec.europa.eu/health/sites/health/files/mental_health/docs/ev_20161006_co05_en.pdf

³⁰ https://ec.europa.eu/health/sites/health/files/mental_health/docs/2017_mh_work_schools_en.pdf

<p>states need to take positive and preventive action to combat all forms of discrimination and safeguard the human rights of all. It observes that numerous good examples of national campaigns to combat stigmatisation serve as a source of inspiration, both from other European Union Member States and from further afield;</p>	<p>Union Compass, where a dedicated scientific paper on community-based mental health services will be published together with an activity report about developments in European Union Member States and discussed during the Compass Forum – the annual conference on mental health – in February 2018 together with relevant stakeholders. Another measure to overcome discrimination is ensuring parity of esteem. The Commission applies this principle by integrating mental health in its new approach to address non-communicable diseases to reach the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 3.4 - reducing non-communicable diseases and promoting mental health. A newly established Steering Group on Health Promotion, Disease Prevention and Management of Non-Communicable diseases advises on the selection of best practices for scaling-up and piloting in Member States.</p> <p>The Commission is also financially supporting Mental Health Europe (operational grant allocated via the Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme) that is carrying out anti-stigma actions at European Union and national levels and intends to continue them also in future. Other European Union-level non-government organisations on disability are also implementing anti-stigma activities.</p>
<p>11. Services (including personal assistance) must be made available and accessible to all to guarantee that users are included in the community and can</p>	<p>The European Union Regulation laying down common provisions of the European Structural and Investment Funds³¹ calls for taking into account</p>

³¹ Regulation (EU) No 1303/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 December 2013 laying down common provisions on the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund, the

<p>live as independent a life as possible;</p>	<p>accessibility for persons with disabilities throughout the preparation and implementation of programmes (Article 7).</p> <p>In December 2015 the Commission adopted a proposal for a European Accessibility Act³² with the aim of improving the functioning of the internal market for accessible products and services by removing barriers created by divergent legislation. The Directive aims at setting a coherent framework in the European Union combining the demand with the supply side by harmonising the accessibility requirements when public authorities buy accessible products and services and when economic operators develop products and services. The legal basis is Article 114 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union.</p> <p>The Commission's proposal aims at ensuring accessibility of products and services for people with disabilities in key areas such as transport and some elements of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), mainly e-commerce, electronic communications, access to audio-visual media services and e-books. It is both a step towards a more equal society and a market opportunity. Improving accessibility is a precondition for participation and inclusion and enhances opportunities for independent living.</p>
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Cohesion Fund, the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development and the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund and laying down general provisions on the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund, the Cohesion Fund and the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund and repealing Council Regulation (EC) No 1083/2006, OJ L 347, 20.12.2013.

³² COM(2015) 615 final.

	<p>The European Parliament adopted its report in September 2017 and the Council General Approach was adopted by the Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council (EPSCO) on 7 December 2017. Therefore, the trilogue negotiations have started in 2018.</p>
<p>12. The Committee of the Regions emphasises that moving from institutional care to community-based care will also involve a paradigm shift for staff and their skills [...] International cooperation and exchanges in this field should provide a way of increasing the supply of staff with the necessary skills.</p>	<p>The State of health in the European Union Companion report provides analysis and options for health workforce planning and forecasting to strengthen prevention, primary care and integrated service delivery through new technologies, organisational changes, health workforce capacity and skills mix.</p> <p>The European Structural and Investment Funds 2014-2020 can support, as part of the social inclusion objective (approximate allocation of EUR 45 billion), the transition from institutional to community-based care. This includes development of community-based services but also other activities such as training and retraining for staff.</p> <p>The Commission also provides for exchanges of good practices through its peer reviews programmes organised in scope of the Employment Committee (EMCO) and Social Protection Committee (SPC). Another possibility is offered by the Technical Assistance projects of the Structural Reform Support Service of the Secretariat General. This service was created in July 2015 with the aim of supporting Member States in growth-enhancing reforms, providing tailor-made support on the ground and steering the technical support provided by the</p>

	<p>Commission. Types of technical support are studies and diagnostics, study visits, seminars – conferences – workshops, expert – scooping missions, embedded experts, trainings, reform partnerships.</p>
<p>13. The Committee of the Regions suggests that in all European Union countries, children with disabilities and their parents should preferably receive the help and support they need in their own home or within easy reach of it. Parents should be provided with assistance and training regarding their child's disability, together with support from the community/municipality to help them cope with parenting. Financial support should be available for parents who have to work less in order to support children with disabilities;</p>	<p>Already in 2013 the Commission adopted the Recommendation on Investing in children³³. It asked for a stop in the expansion of institutional care and for a shift to community-based and foster care.</p> <p>Thus it called on Member States to provide parents with access to quality services such as childcare and education. For parents of a disabled child this means targeted support services that would give their child the possibility to attend a mainstream school.</p> <p>In November 2017 the European Pillar of Social Rights³⁴ was proclaimed and signed by the Council of the EU, the European Parliament and the Commission. One of its twenty principles is dedicated to childcare and support to children. It states that children have the right to affordable early childhood education and care of good quality; and the right to protection from poverty.</p> <p>A key deliverable of the Pillar is the Work-life balance initiative for parents and carers. In order to help carers to balance professional and caring responsibilities, the initiative seeks to give workers with dependent relatives the possibility to take 5 days of paid</p>

³³ 2013/112/EU: Commission Recommendation of 20 February 2013 Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage.

³⁴ COM(2017)250 final.

	<p>leave per year and a right to request flexible working arrangements. At the same time, the proposal sets out an obligation for Member States to assess whether there is a need to adapt the application of parental leave to the needs of parents having a disability and parents with children with a disability.</p>
<p>14. The Committee of the Regions reiterates that children and young people with disabilities have the same rights and obligations as other children with respect to education and study. This means that schools must be able to meet their needs, otherwise these children run the risk of being isolated outside the institutions as well.</p>	<p>As above in point 13.</p> <p>The European Structural and Investment Funds 2014-2020 support the thematic objective "investing in education, training and vocational training for skills and life-long learning" with approximately EUR 35 billion. Equal access to education is a key principle of this objective.</p>
<p>16. The Committee of the Regions believes that people with disabilities should have statutory opportunities and support in making decisions that concern them, their daily lives and the design of local services[...] The Committee of the Regions calls on the Member States to help set up, and work with, user organisations;</p>	<p>The implementation of the European Structural and Investment Funds 2014-2020 is based on the partnership principle. Moreover, the General ex-ante conditionality 3 on disability requires the existence of administrative capacity for the implementation and application of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in the field of European structural and investment funds. This implies that Member States have to include bodies in charge of protection of rights of persons with disabilities or representative organisations of persons with disabilities and other relevant stakeholders throughout the preparation and implementation of programmes. This conditionality had to be fulfilled by the end of 2016.</p> <p>As concerns the Commission, it supports financially and cooperates with European Union-level non-</p>

<p>19. The Committee of the Regions observes that the lack of data makes it difficult to track the progress of the deinstitutionalisation process and conduct comparative analyses between the Member States. The Committee of the Regions would therefore recommend that work to draw up and develop indicators be prioritised and form part of the strategy and planning for the transition to a more community-based system of care and services. The paradigm shift to a more individual, person-centred approach to care should also be reflected in the standards and indicators developed. They should focus on users' quality of life and rights, rather than on follow-up in the form of data of a more technical nature. The Committee of the Regions calls on Member States to cooperate in developing and defining standards and indicators;</p>	<p>government organisations on disability.</p> <p>The Commission agrees that the lack of comparative data and indicators for long-term care, including on the deinstitutionalisation process, makes it difficult to track progress. The Commission together with the Social Protection Committee's Indicators Sub-Group has already started looking into developing a common framework of indicators for long-term care and will intensify this work over 2018.</p> <p>The Fundamental Rights Agency is implementing the project on "measuring the right to independent living" which aims at developing indicators on Article 19 on independent living of the United Nations Convention.</p> <p>The Commission continues to explore improvements of the statistics on people with disabilities provided by Eurostat and on testing the possibility to include people living in institutions into the surveys.</p>
<p>20. The Committee of the Regions stresses that efforts must be made to enable people with disabilities to work in a way which suits their own personal attributes. Proper rehabilitation and adaptation of the workplace and of job content is of great importance.</p>	<p>The European Structural and Investment Funds 2014-2020 support participation of persons with disabilities in employment; the relevant overall allocation for the employment objective is approximately EUR 41 billion.</p> <p>Antidiscrimination legislation³⁵ is in place prohibiting discrimination on the grounds of disability, age, sexual orientation and religion or belief in employment and occupation. Apart</p>

³⁵ Council Directive 2000/78/EC of 27 November 2000 establishing a general framework for equal treatment in employment and occupation, OJ L 303, 2.12.2000.

	<p>from antidiscrimination, it provides for reasonable accommodation in employment for persons with disabilities (Article 5). The employers are obliged to provide it with the exception of cases where it would bring about disproportionate burden on employer. The Commission is in charge of the careful follow-up of the Directive's implementation and, when appropriate, ensures the launching of infringement procedures.</p>
<p>21. Investment in the form of preventive and early intervention combined with support for children and young people, as well as their parents, can enable them to go to school. This in turn means that they can continue their studies and enter the labour market. It will only be possible to move people out of large institutions and special hospitals if alternative, more community-based forms of care have been drawn up and put in place. This may entail an increase in costs in the initial transition to a more community-based care system;</p>	<p>The European Union supports development of community-based services via the European Structural and Investment Funds. For the years 2014-2020 the European Union has allocated approximately EUR 45 billion for social inclusion and for education approximately EUR 35 billion.</p>
<p>24. The social services responsible for social and labour market inclusion now find that they are working with older people with a disability. The professionals working in these services are unprepared when it comes to meeting needs related to both the age and the disability of older users. The Committee of the Regions therefore considers it necessary to adapt the training requirements of health and social workers who have to continue to provide socially inclusive services for this target group in accordance with European Union standards.</p>	<p>The European Structural and Investment Funds 2014-2020 can support, within the scope of the objectives on social inclusion (approximate allocation of EUR 45 billion) and on education and life-long learning (approximate allocation of almost EUR 35 billion), the development of social, health, long-term care services, as well as the professional development of those working in these services.</p>

<p>N°6 The role of waste-to-energy in the circular economy COM(2017) 34 final – CoR 2017/1982 – ENVE-VI/023 126th Plenary Session – November-December 2017 Rapporteur – Ms Kata TÚTTÖ (HU/PES) DG ENV – Commissioner VELLA</p>	
<p>Points of the Committee of the Regions opinion considered essential</p>	<p>European Commission position</p>
<p>10. The Committee of the Regions points out that bio-waste makes up a significant proportion of household waste volumes, and that more attention should be paid to increasing bio-waste recycling rates, for example by means of processes such as anaerobic digestion of clean and properly sorted biodegradable waste, which combines materials recycling with energy recovery. Bio-waste should be collected on the basis of local and regional conditions, and there should be scope for development and innovation in this task. It is therefore important for waste collection to be organised in line with local views on how best to meet the recycling targets set out in the Waste Framework Directive, rather than by imposing collection methods on local and regional authorities;</p>	<p>The Commission agrees that the recycling of bio-waste is essential for increasing the overall rate of municipal waste recycling. To ensure that bio-waste entering aerobic and anaerobic treatment is of sufficient quality, in its proposal to amend Directive 2008/98/EC on waste³⁶ the Commission introduced an obligation to separately collect bio-waste with a view to promoting its high-quality recycling.</p> <p>In the recent political agreement reached by the co-legislators under the Circular Economy Waste Package, it was decided that by end of 2023, Member States will ensure the separate collection of bio-waste. This new obligation will have to feature in their waste management plans accordingly.</p>
<p>11. The Committee of the Regions considers that, in view of the different levels of development of the regions of the European Union and the relatively high costs of implementing ever more sophisticated recycling and energy recovery systems, it would be a good idea to seek ways of increasing funding for activities of this kind. This is in the</p>	<p>EU funds, especially cohesion policy funds, have been instrumental in financing improved waste management in the Member States.</p> <p>In the particular case of cohesion policy funding for new incineration capacity the Commission stressed in its Communication 'Closing the loop – An</p>

³⁶ Directive 2008/98/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 19 November 2008 on waste and repealing certain Directives, OJ L 312, 22.11.2008.

<p>interests of the citizens of all Member States;</p>	<p>EU action plan for the Circular Economy³⁷ that funding is subject to preconditions such as a proper waste management plan, and will therefore be granted only in limited and well justified cases where there is no risk of overcapacity and the objectives of the waste hierarchy are fully respected.</p> <p>Support may also be available through European Fund for Strategic Investments (EFSI). To this end, the Commission is in direct contact with the European Investment Bank in order to orientate investment platforms and private investments towards the circular economy, including waste-to-energy projects.</p> <p>New “enabling conditions” for waste projects and non-eligible waste projects (e.g. disposal operations) are being discussed under the new Common Provisions Regulation³⁸ and the Regulation governing the European Regional Development Fund³⁹ and Cohesion Fund⁴⁰ for the next financial period.</p>
<p>12. The Committee of the Regions draws attention to the fact that many regions, despite having a high level of separate</p>	<p>The Commission notes that in the European Union as a whole there is still very significant scope for</p>

³⁷ COM(2015) 614 final.

³⁸ Regulation (EU) No 1303/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 December 2013 laying down common provisions on the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund, the Cohesion Fund, the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development and the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund and laying down general provisions on the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund, the Cohesion Fund and the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund and repealing Council Regulation (EC) No 1083/2006, OJ L 347, 20.12.2013.

³⁹ Regulation (EU) No 1301/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 December 2013 on the European Regional Development Fund and on specific provisions concerning the Investment for growth and jobs goal and repealing Regulation (EC) No 1080/2006, OJ L 347, 20.12.2013.

⁴⁰ Regulation (EU) No 1300/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 December 2013 on the Cohesion Fund and repealing Council Regulation (EC) No 1084/2006, OJ L 347, 20.12.2013.

<p>collection, do not have a proportionally high level of recycling, and that specific policy instruments should therefore be developed to remedy this discrepancy, it being particularly important to lay down rules for promoting the use of secondary raw materials within an appropriate framework for price competition regarding original raw materials.</p>	<p>improving separate collection, not only in terms of geographical and material coverage, but also in qualitative terms. Such improvements are needed to achieve high-quality recycling and in this way promote greater uptake of secondary raw materials. This recognition is reflected in the provisional agreement reached on the waste package in December 2017, which contains various provisions to reinforce existing separate collection obligations.</p> <p>The higher and more ambitious recycling targets foreseen under the waste package should prompt Member States and regions to adopt the most effective economic and regulatory instruments to achieve them, including the use of demand measures.</p> <p>The package also foresees modifications to the provisions on end-of-waste to facilitate the use of secondary raw materials. The Commission has also tabled a proposal to review the European Union Fertilisers Regulation⁴¹ so as to facilitate the recognition of organic and waste-based fertilizers in the European Union.</p>
<p>17. The Committee of the Regions considers that the Commission's recommendations are unfortunately solely focused on waste incineration overcapacity, as the high level of waste landfilling in the European Union</p>	<p>The Communication on waste-to-energy⁴² also addresses the case of Member States with low or non-existent dedicated incineration capacity and high reliance on landfill and</p>

⁴¹ Regulation (EC) No 2003/2003 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 October 2003 relating to fertilisers, OJ L 304, 21.11.2003.

⁴² COM(2017) 34 final.

<p>demonstrates that under capacity is also a problem that needs to be addressed. To reduce the quantity of waste, it is important to have clearer rules on reuse and recycling and to promote the use of recycled materials in the manufacturing sector, while also giving consideration to removing harmful substances from circulation.</p>	<p>provides relevant recommendations.</p> <p>The initiatives under the Circular Economy Action Plan⁴³ address comprehensively the barriers to waste prevention and recycling, including at the production phase. On 16 January 2018, the Commission adopted a Communication on options to address the interface between chemical, product and waste legislation⁴⁴.</p>
<p>23. The Committee of the Regions highlights the fact that, in certain regions, people's use of waste in individual domestic heating stoves is a major problem that is partly linked to energy poverty and partly to negligence and lack of awareness regarding the harm caused, and that, unlike specialised incineration plants with proper filtration systems, this practice is causing major environmental damage and presents significant risks for public health, as well as being incompatible with the basic conditions for social integration. The Committee therefore urges the Commission also to incorporate efforts to combat energy poverty into activities relating to waste-to-energy and to adopt strategies to raise awareness of the harm done by using waste as fuel for domestic heating.</p>	<p>The Commission agrees that waste has to be treated in a safe and environmentally sound way in compliance with European Union law and that action should be taken to avoid harmful practices related to burning waste for home heating.</p> <p>Developing a strategy to make heating sustainable and more efficient is a priority for the Energy Union.</p> <p>Energy poverty is a serious problem in the European Union. While many European Union countries have measures in place to protect vulnerable people, nearly 11% of the European Union's population is in a situation where their households are not able to adequately heat their homes at an affordable cost.</p> <p>The scale of the problem is due to rising energy prices, low income and poor energy efficient homes, and it is particularly prevalent in Central, Eastern and Southern Europe.</p> <p>Hence the Commission proposed changes to the Electricity Directive⁴⁵ to</p>

⁴³ COM(2015) 614 final.

⁴⁴ <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52018DC0032>

⁴⁵ COM(2016) 864 final/2.

better identify, monitor, report and address energy poverty. This complements its earlier assistance to Member States in identifying energy poverty and vulnerable consumers in order to be able to draw up appropriate measures. The Commission also facilitates the exchange of best practice not only via the Citizen's Energy Forum but also via the European Union Energy Poverty Observatory inaugurated on 29 January 2018. As part of the Clean Energy Package it will take these services to the next level and provide expert assistance to Member States on a range of topics including data collection, advice and training. The Observatory could also support cross-sector awareness-raising, including waste as fuel in domestic use.

With its Heating and Cooling Strategy⁴⁶, the Commission addresses this sector for the first time in a comprehensive way and identifies areas where update or reform is needed. This will allow the heating and cooling sector to contribute to delivering on the Energy Union objectives, including providing a fair deal for all consumers.

Furthermore, with the amendments of the Energy Efficiency Directive and of the Energy Performance of Buildings Directive⁴⁷, the Commission proposed a number of measures to aid vulnerable consumers and to alleviate energy poverty. For example, facilitating access to financing and building retrofits is one of the means to address high-energy expenditure in households.

⁴⁶ COM(2016) 51 final.

⁴⁷ COM(2016) 765 final.

	<p>Also, Member States will be required in their long-term national strategies to provide an outline of relevant national actions that contribute to the alleviation of energy poverty.</p> <p>In addition, steps have been taken to make the consumers more aware of the value of energy. For example, the Energy Efficiency Directive guarantees that electricity bills are more comprehensive and transparent and that consumption data are available in order to promote efficient means of heating.</p>
<p>24. It is important to clarify how, and by whom, waste management costs are to be borne, given that in a number of Member States they already present a disproportionate burden compared with household income. It will therefore be necessary to monitor the economic and social impact closely.</p>	<p>If properly organised, waste management based on the 'polluter pays' principle and the waste hierarchy can actually lead to lower costs to citizens and society at large. Extended Producer Responsibility schemes are one essential instrument to ensure the efficient application of the 'polluter pays' principle. The political agreement mentioned above has agreed on introducing mandatory Extended Producer Responsibility schemes for all packaging by 2025 and minimum requirements for all Extended Producer Responsibility schemes aiming, <i>inter alia</i>, at producers to cover the majority of costs related to waste management that should lead to a better application of the 'polluter pays' principle.</p>
<p>27. The Committee of the Regions calls on the European Commission to ensure that the Member States involve local and regional authorities closely in drawing up the strategy, adopting the necessary technical and fiscal measures, developing the financial support mechanisms, and exchanging good practices.</p> <p>30. The Committee of the Regions calls</p>	<p>The Commission promotes dialogue on waste policy with and between national regional and local authorities in various ways. For instance, on 21 November 2017 it organised a conference together with the Committee of the Regions on best practices with respect to municipal waste prevention and management.</p> <p>The Commission is also actively</p>

<p>on the European Commission to support the existing platforms for pooling experience, transferring knowledge and exchanging experience in the field of waste-to-energy, disseminating tried-and-tested solutions and providing related technical and financial assistance, in view of the fact that many local and regional authorities have taken a variety of initiatives to promote the efficient use of resources and to support the circular economy, which could serve as models for others.</p>	<p>promoting PEER 2 PEER⁴⁸ under the Environmental Implementation Review (EIR). This tool is designed to share expertise between national, regional and local public authorities in charge of implementing European Union environmental law and policy within the Member States.</p> <p>The recently set up European Circular Economy Stakeholder Platform currently provides for the exchange of best practices and knowledge (including on waste-to-energy) among stakeholders in a circular economy.</p> <p>Also, the Circular Economy Finance Support Platform can contribute to that aim as it is tasked with giving recommendations inter alia on how to ensure access to finance by circular economy business models.</p>
<p>31. The Committee of the Regions calls on the European Commission to work closely with the Committee of the Regions to support the exchange of good practices between cities and regions in order to find better solutions regarding, for example, district heating and cooling systems, problems with sorted waste rejected by recycling companies, and how to raise public acceptance of household waste sorting, in view of the fact that these good practices could encourage greater ambition in the development of waste management systems.</p>	<p>The URBACT initiative is instrumental for the exchange of good practices between cities. Multiple networks and good practices touch upon the circular economy, the waste management or the low carbon economy. The priorities of URBACT are directly linked to the European Union 2020 Strategy⁴⁹.</p> <p>The Commission agrees to work closely with the Committee of the Regions. In February 2016, the Commission proposed a Heating and Cooling Strategy. In this strategy, the Commission concluded that tackling the obstacles to more efficient and sustainable heating and cooling would require action at national, regional and local level, within a supportive</p>

⁴⁸ http://ec.europa.eu/environment/eir/p2p/index_en.htm

⁴⁹ COM(2010) 2020 final.

European framework. In the strategy, the Commission invited Member States to work inter alia with stakeholders to raise consumer awareness of household energy efficiency aspects, and especially with bodies, such as consumer associations, which can advise consumers about efficient and sustainable forms of heating and insulation.

Furthermore, under the Energy Efficiency Directive, Member States were required to comprehensively assess their potentials for efficient heating and cooling, including from waste incineration, first by 31 December 2015 and every five years thereafter. The Commission evaluates the national comprehensive assessments and may take actions to enhance synergies between waste-to-energy processes and district heating/cooling in view of providing secure, renewable, and in some cases, more affordable energy in displacing fossil fuels.

Directive 2008/98/EC on waste provides for public consultation and participation in the elaboration of the waste management plans and the waste prevention programmes, thus allowing the active involvement of society in waste planning.

34. The Committee of the Regions proposes that the European Commission, Member States, and local and regional authorities as the political levels closest to the general public, should take education and training measures to significantly improve the public's and economic operators' knowledge and awareness of sustainable consumption, waste reduction, the protection of natural resources and the environment, producer responsibility and the design of products and advertising, for example by including these issues in educational programmes and information campaigns (which could be realised through social media promotion, school visits, public events, press campaigns etc.).

The Commission welcomes this point and takes the opportunity to draw attention to the fact that Sector Skills Alliances⁵⁰, which aim at tackling skills gaps with regard to one or more occupational profiles in a specific sector, put a particular focus on emerging professional needs for green skills that underpin the transition towards a circular economy.

The Commission also points to the mobilisation of funding programmes such as LIFE, Horizon 2020 to implement actions raising awareness of sustainable consumption and waste reduction.

Finally, the Commission recalls that the exchange of good practices and knowledge on education and skills on the circular economy is encouraged within the framework of the European Circular Economy Stakeholder Platform.

⁵⁰ https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/erasmus-plus/actions/key-action-2-cooperation-for-innovation-and-exchange-good-practices/sector-skills-alliances_en

<p>N°7 EU Citizenship Report 2017⁵¹ (own-initiative opinion) CoR 2017/1319 – CIVEX-VI/022 126th Plenary Session – November-December 2017 Rapporteur – Mr Guillermo MARTÍNEZ SUÁREZ (ES/PES) DG JUST – Commissioner JOUROVÁ</p>	
<p>Points of the Committee of the Regions opinion considered essential</p>	<p>European Commission position</p>
<p>5. The Committee of the Regions is deeply concerned at the implications for citizenship that may ensue from the United Kingdom's decision to leave the European Union and urges that with due clarity and full respect for legal certainty that the rights of European citizens and their families residing in the United Kingdom and United Kingdom citizens living in other European Union Member States should be guaranteed based on the principle of reciprocity.</p>	<p>The Union's first priority during the negotiations with the United Kingdom is to tackle the uncertainty created by the decision of the United Kingdom to leave the European Union, and most importantly to preserve the rights of European Union citizens in the United Kingdom and United Kingdom citizens in the European Union; to agree on a single financial settlement that settles the existing obligations of the United Kingdom undertaken during its period of membership; and last but not least clarify the issues related to the new borders.</p> <p>The December Joint report of the negotiators of the European Union and the United Kingdom Government on progress during phase 1 of negotiations under Article 50 of the Treaty on European Union on the United Kingdom's orderly withdrawal from the European Union confirmed that both parties have reached agreement in principle as regards the protection of the rights of Union citizens in the United Kingdom and United Kingdom citizens in the Union. Under the caveat that nothing is agreed until everything</p>

⁵¹ http://ec.europa.eu/newsroom/just/item-detail.cfm?item_id=51132

	<p>is agreed, the joint commitments set out in that document should be reflected in the Withdrawal Agreement in full detail.</p> <p>On 15 December 2017, the European Council welcomed the progress achieved during the first phase of negotiations, including on the rights of Union citizens in the United Kingdom and United Kingdom citizens in the Union. It called on the Union negotiator and the United Kingdom to complete the work on all withdrawal issues, including those not yet addressed in the first phase, in conformity with the European Council guidelines of 29 April 2017, to consolidate the results obtained, and to start drafting the relevant parts of the Withdrawal Agreement</p> <p>The arrangements setting out the framework for future relations will be part of a separate agreement.</p>
<p>9. The Committee of the Regions considers that the work of local and regional authorities will be key in taking forward the Commission's proposals to raise awareness of citizens' rights. We should seek to involve these authorities so as to facilitate immediate access to this information, given that by their very nature they are the administrations that are closest and most accessible to citizens. In this regard, the role of Europe Direct information centres ought to be maximised so as to raise awareness and provide information to citizens about their EU rights and funding opportunities, European themed events and seminars, and contact details of relevant organisations;</p>	<p>The Commission fully shares the opinion of the Committee of the Regions as to the necessity of maximising the Europe Direct Information Centres' potential in raising awareness and providing information to citizens about their European Union rights and other European Union-related matters. The 2018-2020 generation of Europe Direct Information Centres has notably been designed to proactively reach out to citizens, while fostering the debate about the future of the European Union, in particular in view of the European elections. The Commission considers that a close cooperation with local and regional authorities is key for organising debates and dialogues with</p>

	civil society in this respect.
<p>10. The Committee of the Regions suggests that awareness-raising among the general public should be aimed primarily at young people on the basis that they have been the demographic most severely affected by the economic crisis, and their loss of confidence in an integration process and a citizenship status which do not guarantee their full personal and professional development should be taken into particular consideration.</p>	<p>The Commission's corporate communication campaigns aims to raise awareness about the Union as a whole, its role, values, political priorities and its work to address current issues. The campaigns present real stories and real people and real impact. In this context, the campaign 'EUandMe' is set up with a specific focus on young people (17-35), hence a strong focus on social media channels. The objective is to trigger interest, reconnect young people with European values and inspire a sense of belonging by showing what the European Union offers its people (and specifically the youth). The campaign will highlight the top European Union benefits - concrete and meaningful advantages and opportunities derived from European Union membership, within the five main themes Mobility, Rights, Sustainability, Skills & Business and Digital. The campaign is currently in the development phase, it will start in May 2018 and run until the end of 2019.</p>
<p>14. The Committee of the Regions underlines that one of the core dimensions of citizenship – as well as one of the most immediate – concerns citizens' participation in local elections; it emphasises, furthermore, that participation in European Parliament elections in the country of residence is also an important expression of European citizens' rights, but the fact that these elections are governed by different national rules runs counter to a pan-</p>	<p>Getting mobile European citizens more involved in municipal elections and more broadly in European political life is a challenge that requires a joint effort by the Member States, including their local and regional authorities, the European Union institutions, civil society and political parties. To support this, as announced in its Report on municipal elections⁵², the Commission will support actions to improve knowledge of the democratic</p>

⁵² COM(2018) 44 final.

<p>European approach; therefore suggests adopting the proposals of the European Parliament to make election campaigns more European, and taking up the idea of transnational lists for the election of Members of European Parliament.</p>	<p>participation of mobile European Union citizens, to inform and raise awareness among citizens of their European Union democratic rights, to make the voting process easier in municipal elections, and to engage stakeholders, including the Committee of the Regions. In his State of the Union speech of September 2017, President Juncker expressed sympathy for the idea of having transnational lists, though acknowledging that it is an idea that many disagree with. The President felt that such lists would help make European Parliament elections more European and more democratic. The allocation of seats in the European Parliament was discussed at an extraordinary summit on 23 February 2018.</p>
<p>16. The Committee of the Regions takes the view that in order to increase the participation of European Union citizens in local elections, the adoption of various measures (dissemination of information, awareness-raising campaigns, simplifying the formalities for the electoral register, etc.) is necessary and that obstacles to the political participation of disabled people should be addressed urgently.</p>	<p>In addition to the activities set out above and announced in its report on Municipal elections of 25 January 2018, the Commission will support facilitations to the voting process for disabled people and is organising this year a high-level event on democratic participation with a particular focus on encouraging best practices to increase the participation of young people and vulnerable and underrepresented groups, including the disabled. The Commission will also be providing direct funding to projects concerned with increasing election turnout, enhancing the participation of European Union citizens residing in Member States other than their home state and promoting European Union citizenship rights under the Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme. Getting citizens involved politically is a joint effort among local and regional</p>

	<p>authorities, the European Union institutions, civil society and political parties: many facilitations to support the rights of disabled people to full political participation, such as the provision of adequate adjustments to polling stations, are provided at a local level.</p>
<p>23. The Committee of the Regions considers that the measures envisaged by the Commission in relation to the creation of a "Single Digital Gateway" should involve not only the national administrations but also the regional and local authorities.</p>	<p>The Commission agrees that regional and local authorities should also be involved in ensuring that users who operate in other Member States have online access to comprehensive, reliable and understandable Union and national information on rights, rules and obligations and to online procedures that are fully transactional cross-border. Its proposal for a Single Digital Gateway⁵³ therefore covers not only national authorities, but also regional and local authorities. As defined in article 3.3 of the proposal, the term 'competent authority means any Member State body or authority established at either national, regional or local level with specific responsibilities relating to the information, procedures, assistance and problem solving services covered by this Regulation'.</p> <p>In order to support these authorities in the implementation of the Regulation, and besides the tools of the Connecting Europe Facility that are ready to be reused by Member States, the Commission will offer technical support by developing further information technology tools and by supporting the work of the coordination group. The Commission will also</p>

⁵³ COM(2017) 256 final.

	<p>provide funding to cover translation costs, and invites Member States to make use of European Union funds available under the European Structural and Investments funds, Horizon 2020, COSME, the Interoperability solutions for public administrations programme (ISA) and the Connecting Europe Facility.</p>
<p>24. The Committee of the Regions considers that cross-border dialogue, processes and participation in the border regions should be facilitated and that Member States should be encouraged to coordinate their legislation more effectively with a view to protecting the rights of people in border regions;</p>	<p>On 20 September 2017 the Commission adopted a Communication⁵⁴ and proposed an Action Plan with a view of boosting growth and cohesion in European Union border regions. The Communication envisages implementing 10 actions, which will be facilitated by the creation of a Border Focal Point within the Commission. The functions of the Border Focal Point will be to (1) ensure that key future actions by the Commission take due account of cross-border regional dimensions, (2) provide Member States and other key players with support to address legal and administrative border regional issues, notably relating to the transposition of European Union directives or coordination requirements, (3) make sure that practical arrangements are in place for new actions stemming from this Communication, (4) share experiences and good practices effectively and widely with relevant stakeholders.</p>
<p>32. The Committee of the Regions underlines the particular needs of young people and the need to take action to address the insecurity of employment and difficulties in accessing employment</p>	<p>The Commission is aware that young people making the transition to employment will, for the most part, no longer have a job for life. To help them overcome employment insecurity and</p>

⁵⁴ COM(2017) 534 final.

<p>many of them face.</p>	<p>difficulties, the Commission continues to invest in the Youth Guarantee and the Youth Employment Initiative.</p> <p>Moreover, the Commission has been implementing the 10 actions foreseen in the New Skills Agenda for Europe aimed at i) improving the quality and relevance of training and other ways of acquiring skills, ii) making skills more visible and comparable, iii) improving information and understanding of trends and patterns in demands for skills and jobs (skills intelligence) to enable people to make better career choices, find quality jobs and improve their life chances.</p> <p>These measures contribute to better provide people the skills they need to increase their employability and adaptability.</p>
<p>33. The Committee of the Regions considers that the undeniable improvement to the education of young Europeans as a result of greater access to European education, training, youth and sports programmes – now gathered together under the umbrella of the Erasmus+ programme – makes it all the more necessary to develop measures aimed at easing their transition from education to the workplace, by allowing young people to gain new qualifications and improve their employability, either by making use of the initiatives already rolled out by local authorities in this area (for instance through the European Social Fund) or through closer cooperation between the sectors involved, and thereby overcoming the contradictory situation wherein the most educated European generation in history is encountering the greatest difficulties in accessing good-</p>	<p>Through the Education and Training Monitor, the Commission is happy to see the trend in better levels of education and training among young Europeans, including a decreasing in early school leaving to 11%, just one percentage point off the 2020 benchmark of 10%.</p> <p>Commission policies emphasise the needs of disadvantaged groups, e.g. promoting inclusive education through further development of the European Toolkit for Schools and the use of Erasmus+ and Horizon 2020 funds, as well as encouraging the universities to increase the intake of students with lower social background; and Upskilling Pathways for adults with low levels of basic skills.</p> <p>In addition, the Erasmus+ programme already contains measures which bring</p>

quality jobs. Lastly, the Committee points out that it is crucial to improve the employability of young people, in order to bring them closer to the European Union and its values.

the education system closer to the business sector with a view to easing the transition from education to the work place: (1) The Sector Skills Alliances aim at tackling skills gaps in a specific sector. They enhance the responsiveness of vocational education and training systems to the labour market needs. (2) The Knowledge Alliances are transnational activities between higher education institutions and businesses. They work on projects that promote creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship by developing new approaches to teaching and learning across all subject areas.

Furthermore, the Commission supports university-business cooperation through the University-Business Forum. Closer cooperation with businesses helps higher education institutions develop relevant curricula that meet the needs of both students and society. This helps give graduates the right skills and mindsets for the job market as well as in their personal lives.

<p>N°8 Work-life balance for parents and carers COM(2017) 252 final, COM(2017) 253 final – CoR 2017/3138 – SEDEC-VI/028 126th Plenary Session – November-December 2017 Rapporteur – Ms Nathalie SARRABEZOLLES (FR/PES) DG JUST and EMPL – Commissioners JOUROVA and THYSSEN</p>	
<p>Points of the Committee of the Regions opinion considered essential</p>	<p>European Commission position</p>
<p>1. The Committee of the Regions welcomes the Commission's proposal, which is consistent with and also builds on existing provisions in this area and the European Pillar of Social Rights, an initiative that seeks to strengthen the social dimension of the Union and enhance Member States' upward convergence in the area of social performance. Combining legislative measures with non-legislative measures provides the means necessary to guarantee bottom-up convergence in the European Union – something that the existing legislation has so far failed to ensure – while maintaining a degree of flexibility.</p>	<p>This is indeed the intention of the 2017 Communication on <i>An Initiative to support Work-Life Balance for Working Parents and Carers</i>⁵⁵, combined with a <i>Commission proposal for a Directive on Work-Life Balance for Working Parents and Carers</i>⁵⁶. The aim of the combination of the legislative and non-legislative measures is indeed to offer a comprehensive approach to enhance female labour participation, with the necessary flexibility for individuals and member states to organise the combination of working life with private life of men and women with care responsibilities.</p>
<p>11. The Committee of the Regions urges, therefore, that local and regional authorities as large public sector employers in many Member States, be supported in their endeavours to implement appropriate employment and social policies, including through support and capacity-building geared towards implementing work-life balance policies; it stresses the importance of the Structural and Investment Funds as tools to promote – in an appropriate manner – the</p>	<p>In its 2017 Communication on <i>An Initiative to support work-life balance for Working Parents and Carers</i>, the Commission states that it will ensure, together with the Member States, that the European Social Fund and other structural and investment funds are supporting adequately work-life balance measures, in particular to develop the provision of accessible, affordable and quality care services. Projects could include initiatives by</p>

⁵⁵ COM(2017) 252 final.

⁵⁶ COM(2017) 253 final.

<p>development of measures to create a better work-life balance, particularly by local and regional authorities. In particular, the European Social Fund should be bolstered to better address deprivation, in-work poverty and social inclusion in addition to employability support;</p>	<p>local and regional authorities if relevant and proposed and decided for in each Member State. The Commission will explore the potential of addressing concerns in the preparation of the post-2020 European Union funding programmes. In addition, the Commission will fund new pilot schemes for the development of innovative working arrangements under the European Union Programme for Employment and Social Innovation (EaSI), which could include schemes from local and regional authorities.</p>
<p>12. The Committee of the Regions highlights that many good practices already exist at local and regional level and should be shared, promoted, and replicated at all levels; those businesses which work to ensure a genuine work-life balance for their employees should be rewarded;</p>	<p>In its Communication, the Commission also commits to share best practices with social partners and Member States through seminars under the Mutual Learning programme in the area of work-life balance.</p>
<p>5. The Committee of the Regions points out that the current demographic trends make it imperative to rethink gender roles and promote more flexible and equal working arrangements, thus facilitating the choice of reducing working times and taking career breaks both for men and for women to care for children and other relatives;</p>	<p>Tackling gender stereotypes is included in the Strategic Engagement for Gender Equality 2016/2019 for instance through the Rights Equality and Citizenship (REC) programmes.</p> <p>In its 2017 Communication on <i>An Initiative to support work-life balance for Working Parents and Carers</i>, the Commission refers to financial support through the Rights Equality and Citizenship programme to support work-life balance projects. Several projects include information campaigns tackling stereotypes with regard to gender roles when it comes to caring responsibilities, and/or initiatives to encourage both fathers and mothers to take up family leaves and/or flexible working arrangements adapted to</p>

	private needs.
<p>6. The Committee of the Regions regrets that the scope of the directive is limited to workers with a contract of employment or an employment relationship and that it does not cover the various forms of atypical work, such as the self-employed, which would be in keeping with Directive 2010/41/EU on the application of the principle of equal treatment between men and women engaged in an activity in a self-employed capacity. This would also cover concealed employment relationships and economically dependent jobs (the bogus self-employed);</p>	<p>The <i>Commission proposal for a Directive on Work-Life Balance for Working Parents and Carers</i>⁵⁷ applies to all workers with an employment contract or relationship. This should include contracts of part-time workers, fixed-term contract workers or persons with a contract of employment or employment relationship with a temporary agency. The proposal does not cover self-employed workers, maintaining the scope of the current Parental Leave Directive⁵⁸. As the proposed Directive lays down minimum standards, it is left up to the Member States to decide whether to extend its scope to cover self-employed persons. At the same time, in the framework of the European Pillar of Social Rights, the Commission launched a second stage consultation with the social partners on access to social protection, with a focus on atypical contracts and on the self-employed⁵⁹.</p>
<p>15. The Committee of the Regions regrets the lack of mention of the Barcelona objectives, which aim to increase women's activity rates and, in 2002, set a target in which the European Council agreed that childcare should be provided for at least 90% of children between three years old and the mandatory school age and for 33% of all children under the age of 3 for European countries. These</p>	<p>In its 2017 Communication on <i>An Initiative to support work-life balance for Working Parents and Carers</i>, the Commission refers to the issue of early education and childcare, including through a report on the state of play with regard to the Barcelona targets and a possible revision of the Barcelona targets. This work is foreseen for 2018 and has already</p>

⁵⁷ COM(2017) 253 final.

⁵⁸ Council Directive 2010/18/EU of 8 March 2010 implementing the revised Framework Agreement on parental leave concluded by BUSINESSEUROPE, UEAPME, CEEP and ETUC and repealing Directive 96/34/EC, OJ L 68, 18.3.2010.

⁵⁹ C(2017) 7773 final.

<p>objectives have not been met by all Member States, and efforts therefore need to be further stepped up to implement them;</p> <p>28. Express recognition should be given to the educational importance of early childhood services and, consequently, the support measures implemented should take account of this aspect in order to value the staff employed and promote the social perception of work in this extremely sensitive area;</p> <p>34. The Committee of the Regions calls on the Commission to urge the Member States to implement measures to reduce the financial cost of childcare during mothers' and fathers' working hours, from birth to the start of compulsory schooling;</p>	<p>started.</p> <p>In its 2017 Communication on <i>Strengthening European Identity through Education and Culture</i>⁶⁰, the Commission commits to preparing a Council Recommendation on a quality framework for Early Childhood Education and Care, accompanied by a more ambitious common benchmark that would call for offering places for at least 95% of children between 3 years of age and the mandatory school age. Among the quality criteria, elements such as access and affordability to all families and children will be included next to quality of the services.</p>
<p>22. The Committee of the Regions is disappointed by the lack of proposals to strengthen maternity rights, regarding, for example, protection against dismissal over an extended period of time and, more generally, discrimination at work. This is a missed opportunity, particularly given the purpose of the directive, which is to replace the directive on maternity leave that was withdrawn in 2015;</p>	<p>In its 2017 Communication on <i>An Initiative to support work-life balance for Working Parents and Carers</i>, the Commission states that it will take action to ensure better implementation of legislation and promote compliance, including through launching a study on the enforcement of dismissal protection by the European network of legal experts in gender equality and organising a seminar in cooperation with the European Network of Equality Bodies (EQUINET) on capacity building activities for equality bodies and other relevant institutions such as labour inspectorates with a focus on dismissal protection.</p>
<p>26. The Committee of the Regions recognises that the introduction of paid care leave is an important proposal as it acknowledges and supports those who</p>	<p>In its 2017 Communication on <i>An Initiative to support work-life balance for Working Parents and Carers</i>, the Commission states that it will continue</p>

⁶⁰ COM(2017) 673 final.

<p>spontaneously and informally care for elderly or disabled dependant relatives and their commitment to solidarity between generations within families. However, efforts are still needed to guarantee that a sufficient number of long-term facilities are in place to meet emerging needs and that European funds are earmarked for providing long-term care services. These two aspects are essential to help Member States manage the current demographic trends in Europe: the ageing of the population, falling birth rates and an increase in life expectancy. Work-life balance and gender equality need to be complemented by investment in quality long-term care and diversification of services in this area;</p>	<p>to develop the provision of long-term care services, including by using support from the European Social Fund and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). The Communication states that the Commission may request Member States to review the programming of European Structural and Investment funds (ESIF) in light of country-specific recommendations and in case of insufficient funding earmarked to address the relevant challenges identified in the European semester.</p>
<p>27. The Committee of the Regions welcomes the proposal to produce more and better data as part of the non-legislative measures proposed by the Commission, and stresses the need to collect data at local and regional level, in order to be able to shape policies in a targeted and resource-efficient way;</p>	<p>In its 2017 Communication on <i>An Initiative to support work-life balance for Working Parents and Carers</i>, the Commission foresees the improvement of data collection at European Union level on work-life balance indicators including formal care services, family-related leaves and flexible working arrangements. The Commission recognises that data should be collected in a sufficient refinement at national and possibly regional and local level, where appropriate, to allow for appropriate monitoring and follow-up policies.</p>
<p>29. The Committee of the Regions underscores that in addition to strengthening protection around leave, the success of the new Directive will depend also on tackling the gender pay gap and ensuring greater equity in the labour</p>	<p>The Commission has launched on 20 November 2017 a Communication on <i>an Action Plan to tackle the Gender Pay Gap</i>⁶¹, with an action to tackle the care penalty through a more gender equal share of care and work-life balance for parents with care</p>

⁶¹ COM(2017) 678 final.

market;	responsibilities.
<p>32. The Committee of the Regions calls on the Commission to urge Member States to include gender equality education in compulsory and pre-school education, and to continue with public authorities' efforts to provide information and raise awareness;</p>	<p>The Strategic Engagement for Gender Equality 2016-2019 refers to the promotion of gender equality, for instance through funding from the European Structural and Investment Funds and the Rights Equality and Citizenship (REC) programmes, which could include provision of information and awareness raising campaigns. However, the Commission has no mandate to prescribe this issue to be included in national educational programmes.</p>
<p>34. The Committee of the Regions urges the Commission to focus its efforts on ensuring the implementation and enforcement of existing European legislation and existing objectives, in order to achieve work-life balance for parents and carers. The European Union should develop and adopt a new multi-annual European gender equality strategy, monitor the situation in the Member States, and disseminate information and good practices in the field of gender equality. Broader gender mainstreaming could provide impetus for efforts at national level;</p>	<p>The Strategic Engagement for Gender Equality 2016-2019 will indeed end in 2019. The Commission will start preparing grounds for the next strategic approach for the next Commission to adopt. Furthermore, in 2018 the Advisory Committee on Gender Equality will prepare an opinion on the future gender equality policy after 2019.</p>
<p>35. The Committee of the Regions calls on the Commission to urge the Member States to consider the situation of small and medium-sized enterprises and micro small and medium-sized enterprises and to implement economic measures so that these businesses can promote a work-life balance for their employees.</p>	<p>In its 2017 Communication on <i>An Initiative to support work-life balance for Working Parents and Carers</i>, the Commission foresees funding through the Programme for Employment and Social Innovation for new pilot schemes addressed to employers for the development of innovative working arrangements such as family leaves and flexible working arrangements. At the same time, the Commission will ensure</p>

	together with Member States, that the European Social Fund and other Structural and Investment Funds are adequately supporting work-life balance measures.
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<p>N°9 Modernising school and higher education COM(2017) 247 final, COM(2017) 248 final, COM(2017) 249 final – CoR 2017/3139 – SEDEC-VI/029 126th Plenary Session – November-December 2017 Rapporteur – Mr Csaba BORBOLY (RO/EPP) DG EAC – Commissioner NAVRACSICS</p>	
<p>Points of the Committee of the Regions opinion considered essential</p>	<p>European Commission position</p>
<p>I. Recommendations for amendments</p>	
<p>1. Aspects related to the inclusion of regional and local authorities besides mention of the outermost regions [Amendments 1, 2, 4, 5, 9, 10 and 11 to Recitals 1, 6 and 10, and paragraphs 1, 5, 9 and 11 respectively of the Council Recommendation on tracking graduates⁶²]</p> <p>2. Aspects related to data collection [Amendments 3, 6 and 7 to Recital 9 and paragraphs 1 and 2 respectively of the Council Recommendation on tracking graduates]</p>	<p>Without prejudice to the principle of subsidiarity, the Commission welcomes the inclusion of such references to the local and regional levels and will keep them in mind during the implementation of the Recommendation.</p> <p>The Commission believes that collecting data beyond borders would yield better results concerning graduate outcomes. A few months ago, the Commission launched a European graduate survey to collect data on quality and relevance of certain study programmes but also the effect that some socio-demographic factors (e.g. gender, socio-economic background) have on tertiary level education. This will entail decentralised methodologies in data collection. The Commission will also provide guidance and support exchange of best practices through the network of experts in graduate tracking.</p>
<p>II. Policy recommendations</p>	

⁶² Council Recommendation of 20 November 2017 on tracking graduates, OJ C 423, 9.12.2017.

<p>1. The Committee of the Regions deems the Commission proposal for a Council Recommendation a welcome but timid first step when it comes to European cooperation, considering that the availability of comparable information on graduate (un)employment across the European Union is crucial in order to be able to address, inter alia, the brain drain within and across European regions. Such availability would also enable the Commission to formulate its policy recommendations in a uniform way, as part of a global approach;</p>	<p>The renewed agenda for higher education⁶³ and the Recommendation on tracking graduates are part of the Commission's broader strategy to support young people and strengthen the European pillar of social rights. Complementing the Communication on school development and excellent teaching⁶⁴ and the European Solidarity Corps⁶⁵, they recognise the vital role of higher education in laying the foundations of prosperous, inclusive, democratic societies.</p>
<p>5. The Committee of the Regions emphasises the need for access to educational opportunities not to be determined by family income, the student's origin or mother tongue, and for equality to be at the centre of European school and higher education systems allowing all European Union citizens to reach their potential. The Committee welcomes the Commission's approach, which recognises the need to step up investment in the education and training sector, inter alia in order to address school and university drop-out, so that local and regional authorities can guarantee everyone the right to an education;</p>	<p>The Commission agrees that investment, both in infrastructure and human capital, is a key challenge when it comes to enhancing the performance of all learners. It calls on Member States to invest adequately and efficiently in quality education at all levels. This should start with early childhood education and care, which has a particularly positive impact for children from disadvantaged and migrant backgrounds. In fact, the Commission supports socially inclusive education and training systems.</p>
<p>6. The Committee of the Regions calls on the European Commission to give a new impetus to the Bologna process and to take the necessary measures in certain areas, e.g. on rapid and even automatic</p>	<p>As envisioned in its Communication "Strengthening European Identity through Education and Culture"⁶⁶, the Commission is working towards setting up a European Education Area by</p>

⁶³ COM(2017) 247 final.

⁶⁴ COM(2017) 248 final.

⁶⁵ COM(2016) 942 final.

⁶⁶ COM(2017) 673 final.

<p>recognition and equivalence of degrees and vocational qualifications, including doctorates and other academic titles;</p>	<p>2025. In this context it will propose a Council Recommendation on the mutual recognition of higher education and school leaving diplomas and study periods abroad.</p>
<p>7. The Committee of the Regions sees digitalisation as an opportunity to address many educational challenges, as well as a fundamental element in the modernisation of the education system.</p>	<p>The Commission agrees. It proposed a Digital Education Action Plan⁶⁷ in the form of a Communication adopted on 17 January 2018.</p>
<p>8. The Committee of the Regions draws attention to the fact that, with regard to the modernisation of school and higher education, it is not enough to discuss the objectives, particularly given that the planning of European Union funds for the next programming period is already in progress and that, in this respect, emphasis should be placed on the need to provide for specific support after 2020 for projects and measures for the development of training programmes and school and higher educational infrastructure in the less developed regions;</p>	<p>In all of its recent policy communication, the Commission has outlined a range of European Union actions to support Member States in their reform efforts. In this context it also points to the crucial role of the European Union's financial and technical support to Member States, notably through Erasmus+, the European Structural and Investment Funds, and the Structural Reforms Support Service. The Commission presented its proposal for a new Multiannual Financial Framework in May 2018.</p>
<p>10. The Committee of the Regions notes that equal opportunities in terms of mobility must be guaranteed, in order for it to be accessible on equal terms to all young people regardless of where they live;</p>	<p>The Commission agrees. It provides top-ups for mobility to/from overseas regions in the Erasmus+ programme.</p>
<p>11. The Committee of the Regions considers that it would be worthwhile promoting the development of complementary training systems and other catch-up programmes to facilitate the transition from one level of education to the next, while appropriately promoting</p>	<p>The Commission has been supporting peer learning among Member States on the issue of continuity and transition of learners across different stages of education.</p>

⁶⁷ COM(2018) 22 final.

<p>the exchange of best practice in this area;</p>	
<p>13. The Committee of the Regions draws attention to the fact that new measures are needed for the internationalisation of higher education, particular as regards joint European and international exchange and mobility programmes, degrees and the extension of Erasmus to candidate countries and neighbouring third countries, while respecting quality requirements;</p>	<p>Erasmus+ has a strong international dimension: it funds Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degrees and shorter international exchanges through the International Credit Mobility scheme. It also now funds international traineeships. It also funds capacity building actions for universities in partner countries.</p> <p>Two candidate countries, Turkey and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, benefit from all the opportunities offered by Erasmus+. Serbia will follow in 2019. The other Western Balkan countries have access to the international dimension of the Programme in higher education and youth.</p> <p>Erasmus+ is also open to neighbouring regions, offering a mix of mobility and capacity building actions, both in higher education and non-formal education (youth actions).</p>
<p>14. The Committee of the Regions points out that at present the funds available for the internationalisation of education and vocational training systems preceding higher education are insufficient, and therefore considers that there is a need to systematically mobilise new European and national, as well as regional and local resources;</p>	<p>The Commission has announced that it will reinforce opportunities for schools, vocational education and training institutions (VET), teachers and trainers to engage in European activities under the current Erasmus+ programme. Currently, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Turkey are taking part in all programme activities as programme countries.</p>
<p>15. (qualifications and skills mismatch) The Committee of the Regions recommends that efforts be made to introduce into higher education needs-</p>	<p>In order to equip students with relevant skills, the Erasmus+ programme, through Strategic Partnerships and with Forward Looking Cooperation projects,</p>

<p>based training courses which, for example, make it possible for a student to choose freely between courses offered at different universities with the involvement and consultation of all relevant stakeholders, including local employers.</p>	<p>already supports the creation of new and modular curricula at European Higher Education Institutions that involve employers and are more adapted to labour market needs. Erasmus+ students are already choosing freely between courses offered at participating European Higher Education Institutions, provided that those courses are part of the student's learning agreement.</p>
<p>17. The Committee of the Regions considers that there is a real need to develop short training courses in the interests of the flexibility of the higher education system, and with a view to the possible equivalence to higher education of in-house and further training courses provided by vocational organisations and chambers, where appropriate ensuring that successful completion of training of this kind can be recognised, in compliance with the appropriate quality criteria, as at least partially equivalent to one or more courses completed at university level;</p>	<p>The Commission has recognised the need and trend towards more advanced vocational skills which can be acquired through programmes beyond upper secondary level, where initial vocational education and training usually takes place. A Commission study finalised in 2016 has provided a first overview of all forms of higher vocational education and training across the 28 European Union Member States⁶⁸. It focuses on identifying and understanding the main characteristics and features of higher vocational education and training and also reviews the main trends, developments and challenges of this form of education. A specific Erasmus+ call published in October 2017 aiming at preparing or setting up of joint / transnational vocational education and training qualifications includes a strong focus on higher level vocational programmes and addresses issues of quality assurance and proper recognition of such qualifications at national level.</p>
<p>19. The Committee of the Regions believes that, in addition to respecting the</p>	<p>The Commission believes that technology offers new ways to</p>

⁶⁸ <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=738&langId=en&pubId=7893&type=2&furtherPubs=yes>

<p>autonomy of universities, there is also a need to ensure the public availability of face-to-face and online university courses, in accordance with the idea of the "universitas" as a community;</p>	<p>structure the way learning and teaching are organised, including through open, online and blended learning to increase flexibility and teacher-student interaction. With regards to public availability for online university courses, the Erasmus+ programme provides European Union funding to support Higher Education Institutions and funds transnational cooperation projects aiming at improving European education and training systems.</p>
<p>20. The Committee of the Regions notes with concern that, although significant research, funded under the Horizon 2020 framework programme or from national public funds, is being carried out in European universities, its results are very often not available free of charge, at least not for professionals, non-higher-education teachers or other potentially interested persons, which significantly reduces the impact of the European research and development system, while limiting the access of teachers and persons undergoing training who do not have sufficient resources to access the latest research results;</p>	<p>These complaints have been the basis for developing open access policy since 2007. The Commission has made open access to publications mandatory since 2014 and thus naturally increases accessibility.</p>
<p>22. The Committee of the Regions expresses its concern that Brexit may be detrimental to the rights of graduates, schoolchildren and higher-education students being educated in the United Kingdom; it stresses that the risk relates not only to probable changes in education policy in the United Kingdom but also to uncertainty as to the recognition and equivalence of their training, qualifications and degrees in the Member States, a risk which concerns all European Union countries and could therefore</p>	<p>It has already been ensured that students in higher education before Brexit will be able to stay in the United Kingdom under the same conditions as today. Schoolchildren are also fully protected, since family members of European Union citizens are all fully covered by the withdrawal agreement and thus enjoy their current rights under European Union law.</p> <p>The negotiating mandate was clear: only recognition decisions already taken or in the process of being taken</p>

<p>justify joint action at Union level;</p>	<p>should be covered by the withdrawal agreement. This is in line with the overall approach to mirror current European Union law in order to ensure that past life choices are protected. Indeed, if European Union 27 Member States wish to provide for the possibility of their own citizens' UK qualifications to be covered by the European Union recognition rules after Brexit - in addition to the possibility set out in Article 3(3) of Directive on the recognition of professional qualifications⁶⁹ - they are free to decide to do so.</p>
<p>23. The Committee of the Regions calls on the European Commission to ensure, in the context of the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union, that the collateral damage arising from the departure of the United Kingdom, such as any reduction in the excellent ongoing cooperation that currently exists with higher education institutions and research and development centres in the United Kingdom, is limited as far as possible provided that the principle of reciprocity is upheld, even if that entails a reasonable burden on the budget;</p>	<p>The possibility for the United Kingdom to continue to participate and receive funding in programmes applicable to students (Erasmus+) or researchers (Horizon 2020) depends on the criteria set out for those programmes to allow for third countries participation (participation without funding is generally ensured for third countries in Horizon 2020, in line with the Open to the World science policy goal for European Union research). This is a decision to be taken by the European Union 27 Member States.</p>
<p>25. The Committee of the Regions considers that it is high time for the necessary investment to be made in educational infrastructure, both in more developed and less developed regions, always taking care to adapt coordinated investment to the specific features of the region concerned. In this connection, it is particularly important to allow for greater support from the European Investment</p>	<p>European Union level investment in education and training complements national efforts and can create incentives for reform. The European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) supports the investment priority investing in education, training and vocational training for skills and lifelong learning by developing education and training infrastructure.</p>

⁶⁹ Directive 2005/36/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 7 September 2005 on the recognition of professional qualifications, OJ L 255, 30.9.2005.

<p>Bank and the European funds for regional initiatives aimed at developing education</p>	<p>Member States and regions have allocated EUR 6.4 billion to this investment priority for the 2014-2020 programming period.</p> <p>European Regional Development Fund investments for school and tertiary education infrastructure amount to EUR 3.2 billion in 2014-2020, targeting all types of regions. These investments should also contribute to the desegregation of educational facilities or to the prevention of their further segregation⁷⁰.</p> <p>The latest available information shows that in 2007-2013, there were more than 30.000 European Regional Development Fund education projects.</p> <p>The total European Investment Bank lending to education projects (including infrastructure and skills-related projects) amounted to an annual average of EUR 3.5 billion over the last 5 years, an increase compared to the annual EUR 2.7 billion over the last 12 years.</p> <p>The High Level Task Force for Social Infrastructure has assessed that education and life-long learning lack an average of EUR 15 billion a year in investments. To date, 4 projects supported by the European Fund for Strategic Investments in the social infrastructure sector concern the construction of universities or schools. With the extension and increase in firepower of the European Fund for Strategic Investments, and the use of</p>
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⁷⁰ Guidance for Member States on the use of European Structural and Investment Funds in tackling educational and spatial segregation (2015).

	<p>innovative financing models further reinforced with measures to support the strategic capacities of the sector, this support could be upgraded.</p>
<p>26. The Committee of the Regions points out that making higher education, training and publicly funded education systems subordinate to the requirements of effectiveness, direct competitiveness and rapid or even immediate employability could endanger the existence of disciplines and skills whose disappearance would do incalculable medium and long-term damage to European culture, the arts, high-level science and local knowledge, even though they offer very few openings for graduates;</p>	<p>The Commission believes that education is not only a means towards employment but also a societal good in itself aimed at personal fulfilment and active citizenship. The Commission's initiative of tracking graduates is carried out without prejudice of disciplines like arts, high-level science or local knowledge.</p>
<p>27. The Committee of the Regions stresses that, with regard to school, training and possibly higher education provided in the languages of national or ethnic minorities, everything possible should be done to prevent any restriction on access to education for pupils from minorities and to set up systems that will enable any graduate from a minority background or intra-European Union immigrant to enjoy the same opportunities for accessing continuing training and employment as other graduates;</p>	<p>The Commission agrees that learners' language background must not be an obstacle to accessing education. It therefore calls for targeted language programmes to ease integration into the education system, especially in the case of newly arrived migrants.</p> <p>In addition, the provision of bilingual education and/or education fully or partly in the languages of national or ethnic minorities, can help Member States make progress towards improving (multiple) language skills in the population as a whole.</p>
<p>29. (migration crisis and the situation of refugees)</p> <p>The Committee of the Regions reiterates its call for support to the Member States in ensuring access to skills identification, language introduction, upskilling efforts</p>	<p>The European Union's Action Plan on integration of third-country migrants⁷¹ highlights the need for effective strategies for the successful integration of third-country nationals in the European Union. It encourages</p>

⁷¹ COM(2016) 377 final.

<p>and other measures to promote integration at work and in society. It should also be possible for people with training/qualifications acquired in their country of origin to have those skills assessed without delay. It considers that the local and regional authorities concerned should be consulted with a view to joint, effective management of the situation, with due respect for objectives in the areas of integration, equal opportunities and human rights;</p>	<p>Member States to assess, validate and recognise qualifications of third country nationals as soon as possible, with the support of the Commission. It underlines the prime importance for the Member States to provide language learning opportunities in education and training, which is inter alia facilitated under the European Social fund. Erasmus+ provides online language learning opportunities for up to 100.000 refugees, and makes available over EUR 400 million annually for transnational partnerships to develop innovative policy approaches which support social inclusion, including for refugees and migrants.</p>
<p>30. The Committee of the Regions calls for consideration to be given to ways of boosting sports and health education in the education system, with particular emphasis on primary education and support for extra-curricular programmes. The approach to health education should be holistic, including physical and mental well-being, in order to prevent cases of harassment and violence at school;</p>	<p>The Commission shares the opinion that schools have a key role to play in promoting physical and mental well-being. Under the European Union Work Plan for Sport 2014-2017, the Commission worked with experts from the Member States and international organisations to compile recommendations to encourage physical education at school. While it is encouraging to see that some Member States are increasing the number of physical education teaching hours, effective taught time and extra-curricular activities are important elements to be taken into further consideration.</p>
<p>31. The Committee of the Regions stresses that education and training should promote tolerance and the values on which the European Union is founded, that is, of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of</p>	<p>On 17 January 2018, the Commission presented a proposal for a Council Recommendation on promoting common values through inclusive education, training and non-formal learning⁷². It sets out a number of key</p>

⁷² COM(2018) 23 final.

<p>law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities, so as to combat radicalisation, exclusion, xenophobia and the risk of the propagation of extremism in its different forms;</p>	<p>principles to guide Member States in identifying the most effective implementing measures for their specific contexts.</p> <p>In its Communication on a renewed European Union agenda for higher education, the Commission stresses that higher education must play its part in facing up to Europe's social and democratic challenges. This means ensuring that higher education is inclusive, open to talent from all backgrounds and that higher education institutions are not ivory towers but civic-minded learning communities connected to their communities.</p>
<p>32. The Committee of the Regions expressly requests that, within the framework of concerted efforts to effectively reduce the gap between different regions, due assistance should be provided to certain less-developed regions to empower them to modernise school and higher education, while continuing the development of vocational education and training; it should be noted in this connection that employment opportunities in certain regions are mainly available to applicants who have completed vocational education and training and that, if the development of this type of education were no longer included among the priorities, this would do even more damage to the economic and social situation of the region;</p>	<p>The Commission points to the availability and relevance of financial and technical support from the European Union to Member States in all fields of education and training, including Vocational Education and Training, made available in particular through Erasmus+, the European Structural and Investment Funds, and the Structural Reforms Support Service, in particular in less developed regions.</p> <p>With regard to higher education, the Commission believes that European Union activities and funding must be better coordinated and invested strategically.</p>
<p>34. The Committee calls on the European Commission to consider the European Committee of the Regions as a partner in the process of drawing up policy for the development and modernisation of school and higher education and, during the</p>	<p>Considering the role of the regional and local levels in school education and also higher education, the Commission considers regional and local authorities as crucial stakeholders in educational reforms. Consequently it</p>

<p>consultative process, to make as much use as possible of the expertise of local and regional authorities, on the one hand as stakeholders and on the other as the authorities responsible for supporting or organising the educational system.</p>	<p>considers the Committee of the Regions as a key partner at European Union level in this context.</p>
<p>The recommendations included under points 7, 16, 21 and 24 include a number of relevant points for the modernisation of education.</p>	<p>These recommendations by the Committee of the Regions reinforce the Commission's positions on the need to use the potential of new technologies to support learning, make efforts to improve the educational offer by working with (local) partners, support the preparation and professional development of teaching staff, and increase the mobility of learners.</p>

<p>N°10 Local and regional perspective on promoting public sector innovation via digital solutions CoR 2017/3529 – SEDEC/VI-030 126th Plenary Session – November-December 2017 Rapporteur – Mr Frank CECCONI (FR/ALDE) DG CNECT – Commissioner GABRIEL</p>	
<p>Points of the Committee of the Regions opinion considered essential</p>	<p>European Commission position</p>
<p><i>Structural Dimension</i></p>	
<p>29. The Committee of the Regions calls for a comprehensive approach to the development of digital infrastructures, where different administrations find interoperable solutions and share a common technical base as much as possible while devising applications specific to their needs. Such an approach would do away with the need to develop infrastructures individual to each service, thus reducing costs while enabling gains to be made in efficiency. Moreover, this would help prevent the single market being fragmented along regional lines;</p>	<p>The Commission agrees with the approach outlined by the Committee of Regions and works to support this approach for example through the Connecting Europe Facility and Interoperability solutions for public administrations (ISA²) programmes. Connecting Europe Facility Digital supports the development of Digital Service Infrastructures such as eID, eSignature, eProcurement and eHealth, which ensures that the digital solutions are connected and interoperable across borders. The ISA² programme supports the development of digital solutions that enable public administrations, businesses and citizens in Europe to benefit from interoperable cross-border and cross-sector public services.</p>
<p>30. The Committee of the Regions reiterates, however, in this context its call for projects for the development of broadband to be recognised as services of general economic interest⁷³</p>	<p>The Commission would like to recall that in some cases, the provision of a broadband network can be regarded as a service of a general economic interest within the meaning of Article 106(2) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union and the Altmark</p>

⁷³ CoR Opinion on the European Cloud Initiative and ICT standardisation priorities of the Digital Single Market (COR-2016-02880).

	<p>jurisprudence and thus benefit from public funding. When the criteria defined by the Court of Justice of the European Union are met, the compensation granted for the provision of such public service does not constitute State Aid in the sense of article 107 Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union⁷⁴. The Commission assesses those measures in the light of a set of documents referred all together as the ‘Service of General Economic Interest package’⁷⁵. The European Commission has provided guidance on this issue in the Commission Broadband State Aid Guidelines⁷⁶. For a recent case where the European Commission has examined a measure supporting the provision of a service of general economic interest, see also Case SA.37183, Plan France Très Haut Débit⁷⁷.</p>
<p><i>Recommendations</i></p>	
<p>46. The Committee of the Regions affirms the key role that local and regional</p>	<p>Local and regional administrations are at the forefront of delivering many of</p>

⁷⁴ Notably, broadband deployment as a Service of General Economy Interest should normally be based on the provision of a passive, technologically neutral and open infrastructure that provides universal service coverage for the given area. Any compensation should be limited to the related wholesale access services, and should not include retail communication services.

⁷⁵ The Commission Communication on the application of the EU State aid rules to compensation granted for the provision of services of general economic interest (OJ C 8, 11.1.2012, p. 4), the Commission Decision of 20 December 2011 on the application of Article 106(2) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union to State aid in the form of public service compensation granted to certain undertakings entrusted with the operation of services of general economic interest (OJ L 7, 11.1.2012, p. 3.), the Commission Communication on a European Union framework for State aid in the form of public service compensation (2011) (OJ C 8, 11.1.2012, p. 15) and the Commission Regulation of 25 April 2012 on the application of Articles 107 and 108 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union to de minimis aid granted to undertakings providing services of general economic interest (OJ L 114, 26.4.2012, p. 8.).

⁷⁶ Communication from the Commission on EU Guidelines for the application of State aid rules in relation to the rapid deployment of broadband networks (OJ C 25, 26.1.2013).

⁷⁷ OJ C 68, 3.3.2017.

<p>authorities must play in modernising the public sector;</p>	<p>the public services; and are the public sector's primary interface with citizens and businesses. The Commission shares the view that due to their proximity to citizens, local and regional authorities have a key role to play both in modernising administrations and public services.</p>
<p>47. The Committee of the Regions welcomes the involvement of the European Committee of the Regions in existing platforms such as the 2016-2020 eGovernment Action Plan Steering Board. Nevertheless it feels that full membership of this board, as well as partnership with the Observatory of Public Sector Innovation of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), would allow the European Committee of the Regions to make a stronger contribution to promoting innovation in the public sector;</p>	<p>The Commission appreciates the involvement of the European Committee of the Regions as an observer of the eGovernment Action Plan Steering Board. However, full membership cannot be granted, as the steering board is an expert group composed only of Member States' representatives responsible for their national eGovernment strategies, as defined in the Commission Decision of 1 August 2016⁷⁸.</p> <p>The observer status was granted in accordance with article 6 of the Rules of Procedure of the eGovernment Action Plan Steering Board⁷⁹ which states that the Commission's representative may give observer status to individuals, organisations and candidate countries.</p>
<p>49. The Committee of the Regions suggests that concrete indicators be developed to allow reliable comparisons to be drawn between public administrations as regards their openness to digital solutions;</p>	<p>The Commission agrees that comparable indicators in the area of eGovernment are important to monitor and promote public digitisation. In this regard, the Commission already reports on a comprehensive set of eGovernment indicators in the annual eGovernment Benchmark report⁸⁰.</p>

⁷⁸ C(2016) 4832 final, Commission Decision of 1.8.2016 setting up the eGovernment Action Plan Steering Board.

⁷⁹ <http://ec.europa.eu/transparency/regexpert/index.cfm?do=groupDetail.groupDetailDoc&id=25498&no=2>

⁸⁰ <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/new-study-egovernment-services-europe-improving-cross-border-availability-services>

	<p>However, the reporting is at national level and the Commission does not plan to start measuring eGovernment indicators for each individual public administration.</p>
<p>50. The Committee of the Regions urges the public sector to commit to innovation focused on users' needs and incorporating the principles of: indiscriminate access to digital services for everyone and every business; strong protection for sensitive data; "digital by default"; "once only"; "co-production"; and interoperability;</p>	<p>The Commission agrees that the users' needs should be the focus when innovating and designing public services. Moreover, the principles highlighted by the Committee of the Regions are essentially in line with the seven underlying principles of the European Union eGovernment Action Plan 2016-2020⁸¹.</p>
<p>51. The Committee of the Regions proposes that interested cities and regions be declared pioneers of the innovative renewal of public administration and innovative procurement in order to achieve more effective provision of services and economies of scale for the whole of Europe;</p>	<p>The Commission supports the aim to acknowledge cities and regions that achieve good results in modernising public administrations through innovation. In this regard, the Commission is actively promoting best practice cases of local and regional administrations online and at events, for example during the European Week of Cities and Regions.</p>
<p>52. The Committee of the Regions supports the European Parliament's call for the European Commission to lead by example in this domain;</p>	<p>The Commission welcomes the call to lead by example when it comes to modernising via digitisation and is committed to do so in areas such as digital by default, once-only principle, openness and transparency in its dealings with external stakeholders.</p>
<p>53. The Committee of the Regions suggests that an event be developed that would make it possible, at regular intervals, to promote best practices developed by local and regional</p>	<p>The Commission has organised several events targeted at the local and regional authorities with the aim to promote information and best practices concerning modernisation via digital</p>

⁸¹ COM(2016) 179 final.

<p>authorities in the field of innovation via digital solutions.</p>	<p>solutions. One outcome of the workshops is a brochure⁸² on how to implement and find funding for eGovernment at local and regional level. Other events include a workshop during the European Week of Regions and Cities in October 2017 about how to promote prosperity through digital solutions at local and regional level, showcasing several best practice cases and the annual General Assembly of the Smart Cities and Communities European Innovation Partnership (EIP SCC) 'Towards a Joint Investment Programme for Smart Cities' which took place in Brussels. The Commission intends to continue the cooperation with the Committee of the Regions for example during the European Week of Cities and Regions in order to reach out to local and regional authorities.</p>
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⁸² <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/egovernment-local-and-regional-administrations-guidance-tools-and-funding-implementation>

<p>N°11 Action Plan for a Maritime Strategy in the Atlantic Area - Delivering Smart, Sustainable and Inclusive Growth COM(2013) 279 final – CoR 2017/1995 – NAT-VI/022 126th Plenary Session – November-December 2017 Rapporteur – Mr Jerry LUNDY (IE/ALDE) DG MARE – Commissioner VELLA</p>	
<p>Points of the Committee of the Regions opinion considered essential</p>	<p>European Commission position</p>
<p>1. The Committee of the Regions welcomes the mid-term review of the Action Plan for the Atlantic Strategy as proposed by the European Commission to be completed before the end of 2017 and that the Committee was consulted by the European Commission with a request to adopt an opinion on the mid-term review, which will feed into the overall review to be discussed by Member States and regions;</p>	<p>The Commission welcomes the opinion of the Committee of the Regions and its continuous support for the implementation of the Atlantic strategy and its action plan. This opinion has provided a valuable input for the mid-term review, which was published on 23 February 2018 in the form of a Commission staff working document⁸³.</p>
<p>3. The Committee of the Regions notes that the impact of the blue economy at the regional and local level has not been measured to its full extent so far, as a system of indicators based on reliable data, measuring the precise effect of activities directly or indirectly relying on the sea, has yet to be developed; this will require significant cooperation between the European Commission and the various Member States⁸⁴. In this respect, the Committee of the Regions notes the work</p>	<p>The Commission recognises the high relevance of the blue economy for the development of the Union as a whole. To support the analytical capacities of the Union, Eurostat included the coastal typologies in two dimension in the Tercet Regulation⁸⁵, which amended the Nomenclature of territorial units for statistics (NUTS) Regulation⁸⁶ by adding territorial typologies:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Coastal regions at regional level

⁸³ SWD(2018) 49 final.

⁸⁴ The Marnet project which has developed a suite of marine socio- economic data across the Atlantic regions may be a useful addition to this process.

⁸⁵ Regulation (EU) 2017/2391 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 12 December 2017 amending Regulation (EC) No 1059/2003 as regards the territorial typologies (Tercet), OJ L 350, 29.12.2017.

⁸⁶ Regulation (EC) No 1059/2003 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 May 2003 on the establishment of a common classification of territorial units for statistics (NUTS), OJ L 154, 21.6.2003.

<p>of the COTER Commission in relation to the proposed amendments to the NUTS Regulation, specifically in calling for future territorial typologies to include "coastal" and "island" types. This would facilitate developing appropriate indicators (beyond gross domestic product) for measuring blue economic activity;</p>	<p>(NUTS 3);</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Coastal areas at local level (LAU). <p>Island regions were not (yet) included, because the distinct heterogeneity of the island regions makes analysis difficult. Nonetheless, Eurostat will be publishing all available NUTS 3 data for individual islands that are also administrative regions in the near future.</p>
<p>16. The Committee of the Regions invites Member States to continue to integrate the objectives of the Atlantic Action Plan in their respective European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) Operational Programmes; the success of the Atlantic Strategy and Action Plan depend entirely on the commitment of the Atlantic Member States to coordinate their efforts for the areas of cooperation defined in the Action Plan;</p> <p>21. The Committee of the Regions calls upon the European Commission and the Member States to pursue further improvement of coordination, monitoring and support for projects and exchange of best practices taking into account the successful examples delivered so far by the Atlantic Strategy;</p>	<p>The Commission agrees with the importance of aligning the available European Union funding instruments under shared management to the agreed objectives of the Atlantic Action Plan. The mid-term review draws attention to the fact that besides the Interreg Atlantic Area Programme, very few operational programmes have established specific links between their thematic objectives and those included in the Atlantic Strategy or the Action Plan. To this effect, as part of the annual Atlantic Stakeholder Forum Conference, held in Glasgow in 2017, the Commission has invited the European Regional Development Fund managing authorities in the Atlantic area to a discussion on how to support transnational projects addressing common challenges in the area by employing various funding instruments. This is a practice that has clear merits and can be further supported.</p>
<p>19. In this context echoes the Committee of the Regions Opinion on the Future of Cohesion Policy beyond 2020 in noting that macro-regional and maritime strategies for the participating regions and those who live there</p>	<p>The Commission welcomes the statement of the Committee of the Regions and agrees with the fact that maritime (sea-basin) strategies add significant value to the cooperation between coastal regions and the</p>

<p>constitute significant added value, provided that existing and future funding tools can be used for the strategies in a coordinated way;</p>	<p>maritime stakeholders who are active there. In fact, the community of stakeholders in the Atlantic has arguably grown stronger and more competitive in obtaining funding for marine and maritime endeavours. For instance, 8 out of 13 awarded projects in the latest blue calls funded in 2017 under the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund include Atlantic project promoters either as leaders or partners.</p>
<p>26. In view of the fact that both national and European funding represent public expenditure, calls upon the Member States and the Commission to jointly improve the quality of reporting and feedback on the projects under the umbrella of the Action Plan and to develop the Assistance Mechanism as a tool providing a transparent overview of successful initiatives and available funding opportunities;</p> <p>32. The Committee of the Regions supports the continuation of the assistance mechanism for the Atlantic Strategy as currently it is the only dedicated budget line provided for the oversight and implementation of the Atlantic Action Plan;</p> <p>34. The Committee of the Regions encourages the national units to work as closely as possible with national and regional Managing Authorities to ensure the opportunities available under the various funding instruments are clearly explained to potential beneficiaries;</p>	<p>The Commission acknowledges the suggestions in the Opinion in view of maintaining the assistance mechanism as a tool for awareness raising and monitoring on the Atlantic strategy and its action plan. The evaluation suggests refocusing and prioritizing on areas of greatest added value. This could include closer collaboration with regions, funding authorities and business operators in the coastal regions, who to a large extent formulate and carry out maritime development projects and initiatives, and/or who make funding decisions including under the European Union's structural funds. Also, tailored support to project promoters to identify funding opportunities and relay existing resources for developing funding proposals and business projects. Finally, greater synergy with existing collaborative networks, such as the European Enterprise Network, may help extending the community of stakeholders and maritime practitioners.</p>
<p>43. The Committee of the Regions notes, in particular, the potential crucial role of the Atlantic Area Cooperation programme given its focus on maritime</p>	<p>The Commission agrees with the potentially crucial role of the Interreg Atlantic Area Cooperation programme and other territorial cooperation</p>

issues and its geographical spread across the Atlantic space.	programmes in support of the implementation of the Atlantic strategy and its action plan objectives.
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N°12 Revitalisation of rural areas through Smart Villages (own-initiative opinion)

CoR 2017/3465 – NAT-VI/025

126th Plenary Session – November-December 2017

Rapporteur – Mr Enda STENSON (IE/EA)

DG AGRI – Commissioner HOGAN

Points of the Committee of the Regions opinion considered essential	European Commission position
<p>3. The Committee of the Regions regrets the lack of ambition outlined in the paper, which represents a compilation of pre-existing initiatives. It calls for greater ambition and the development of a targeted and forward-looking policy on Smart Villages with a view to the post 2020 period, which builds on the need to consolidate the full range of place based European Union "smart instruments";</p> <p>4. The Committee of the Regions emphasises that the preparatory work must be undertaken now if a sustainable and effective programme for Smart Villages is to be in place for the next funding period, including a consideration of better coordination and synergies between the relevant Union policy and funding streams by way of developing an integrated policy and support instrument for Smart Villages;</p>	<p>The initiative on Union action sets out a number of initiatives which will be taken in the short to medium term to ensure appropriate development of Smart Villages as a concept. This work is ongoing and has inter alia led to the inclusion of the Smart Villages concept into the Communication on the future of the Common Agricultural Policy⁸⁷.</p>
<p>6. The Committee of the Regions proposes expanding the notion of Smart Villages to that of Smart Rural Areas and incorporating the initiative into the European Rural Agenda, so as to also encourage and develop synergies between neighbouring small villages within Smart</p>	<p>Surrounding landscapes are included in the definition of Smart Villages. The concept therefore goes beyond single villages in rural areas.</p>

⁸⁷ COM(2017) 713 final.

Rural Areas;	
<p>10. The Committee of the Regions suggests that particular attention be given to the challenges faced by peripheral rural regions that, in addition to broadband infrastructure, face critical challenges relating to transport and energy connectivity, therefore the lack of access to the most important public services. It considers that the concept of "Rural Proofing"⁸⁸ should be incorporated as part of the Smart Rural Areas initiative with a view to applying this approach to the development of broader policy initiatives with implications for rural areas;</p>	<p>The Commission is committed to the concept of rural proofing as it was announced in the Communication on the future of food and farming⁸⁹.</p>
<p>18. The Committee of the Regions supports the provision of training for different population age brackets on how to use digital technologies and adapting the teaching to the target audience, in view of the digitalisation of certain public services at local level or other levels (document orders, tax declarations, electronic bills, traceability, Common Agricultural Policy, etc.); also insists upon the right to digital literacy, which makes it possible to guarantee all citizens access to training on performing basic tasks in the new digital environment, and for this training to receive funding from the European Structural and Investment Funds;</p>	<p>The Commission agrees with the importance on enhancing the digital skills of Union citizens as part of the European Union digital agenda. The notion of enhancing skills is also reflected in the Common Agricultural Policy Communication⁹⁰.</p>

⁸⁸ Rural proofing: making sure that the needs and interests of rural people, communities and businesses are properly considered when developing and implementing all policies and programmes. For central government, rural proofing means assessing policy options to be sure get the fairest solutions for rural areas are realised.

⁸⁹ COM(2017) 713 final.

⁹⁰ COM(2017) 713 final.

<p>27. The Committee of the Regions stresses that the concepts of Smart City and Smart Villages/Smart Rural Areas should not be set against each other, but rather should be seen as mutually complementary with both supporting and reinforcing the success of each other. In terms of strategy, an area does not end at its administrative borders, but interacts with neighbouring entities, rural or urban, and plans its development in harmony with its environment. Thought must be given to setting up positive interrelations between rural and urban populations and not only to making rural areas service providers for urban areas. It stresses in this regard that the whole settlement system will only be viable if all of its elements are viable, from big cities to small villages;</p>	<p>The Commission agrees on the need for enhancing rural urban links; through the concept of Smart Villages but also through better use and coordination of Union funding streams.</p>
<p>33. The Committee of the Regions believes, however, that there can be an over reliance on such approaches, and that there is a role for other actors (e.g. innovation brokers) to catalyse the potential of rural areas. The innovation broker acts to identify strengths and opportunities within the village/rural area and bring the relevant institutions (third level, local authorities, funding sources etc.) together to coordinate existing and future activities and potential funding sources. They must engage and inform the community and get "buy in" from the community to develop the vision, take ownership and share the benefits;</p>	<p>The concept of wider rural innovation brokers is novel and interesting and the Commission is committed to further studying how this can be better promoted.</p>

**N°13 The European Commission Report on Competition Policy 2016
COM(2017) 285 final – CoR 2017/1265 – ECON-VI/023
126th Plenary Session – November-December 2017
Rapporteur – Mr Michael MURPHY (IE/EPP)
DG COMP – Commissioner VESTAGER**

Points of the Committee of the Regions opinion considered essential	European Commission position
<p>2. The Committee of the Regions is of the view that the globalised economy requires an open and fair competition environment and therefore the regulation of competition and not just a competition "culture". The Committee of the regions supports at the same time that the European Commission is committed to engage with other European Union institutions, international organisations and competition enforcers all over the world;</p> <p>5. The Committee of the Regions argues that it is up to the Commission to ensure a comprehensive response to the challenges emanating from international competition and global markets, through enhanced coordination of European Union policies and instruments and through a better recognition of the regional dimension;</p>	<p>The Commission welcomes the support for its policy of actively seeking to strengthen the role of competition policy in international negotiations and organisations and to cooperate with competition agencies globally. Such regulatory and enforcement cooperation helps to ensure effective enforcement and a level playing field for European companies active on global markets.</p> <p>For example, in June 2017, the Commission signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the National Development and Reform Commission of the Peoples' Republic of China on a dialogue to create a permanent forum for dialogue on State aid control and fair competition review.</p> <p>The agreement complements the existing cooperation framework between the European Union and China in the field of competition policy and enforcement.</p> <p>The Commission is also active in competition-related international fora such as the Competition Committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the International Competition Network (ICN), the World Bank and United Nations Conference on Trade and</p>

	<p>Development (UNCTAD).</p> <p>The Commission will further continue to support discussions on enhanced subsidy disciplines in the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. It has also created a dedicated forum with European Union Member States to raise awareness as regards international subsidy policies and to exchange views on ongoing developments at multilateral and bilateral level, as well as regards subsidies given by third countries.</p> <p>In this manner, the Commission works to ensure that a global level playing field between companies also benefits citizens in Europe's regions.</p>
<p>3. The Committee of the Regions applauds the Commission's work in enforcing competition rules but calls for the resourcing of Competition policy enforcement to have due consideration for national and regional Member State industrial policies for investment, particularly for those industrial policies which rely on national competences outside the scope of European Union treaties;</p> <p>4. The Committee of the Regions emphasises that there should be greater transparency surrounding how the decisions are taken by the Commission to resource major competition investigations at an European Union level, and to ensure that those decisions are always associated with identifiable outcomes that enhance the Single Market;</p>	<p>Competition policy is part of the Commission's efforts to achieve its political priorities. It contributes to the Commission's agenda for jobs, growth and investments, including in areas such as the digital single market, energy policy, financial services and the fight against tax evasion.</p> <p>European Union competition policy aims to protect the efficient functioning of markets from competition distortions whether originating from Member States (distortive State aid), market players (distortive unilateral or coordinated behaviour), or mergers that would significantly impede effective competition. This is done by enforcing competition rules when the Commission finds evidence of unlawful behaviour.</p> <p>The Commission has also pursued a policy of simplifying rules where the</p>

	<p>competition distortions where there is a limited impact on the single market, in other words to be 'big on big things and small on small things' to the benefit of European Union citizens and companies. The Commission's objective is to focus its actions on those issues that really matter to people, taking European action only where it is necessary and leaving the Member States to take responsibility for everything else.</p> <p>In terms of the link between competition policy and competitiveness of European industry, competition contributes to an efficient use of society's scarce resources, technological development and innovation, a better choice of products and services, lower prices and higher quality. In this manner, competition services greater productivity in the economy as a whole and enhances the competitiveness of European industries in a globalised world.</p>
<p>6. The Committee of the Regions stresses that the United Kingdom will remain subject to the European Union's competition rules until at least 31 March 2019 and that investigations opened before that date, such as the one opened on 26 October 2017 on UK exemptions granted to multinationals to protect them from tax avoidance rules, may be concluded only after that date but would still have to be applied;</p> <p>7. The Committee of the Regions agrees that Brexit must not be misused as a vehicle for the complete abandonment of all State aid controls but believes that the economic disruption caused to other European Union Member States as a</p>	<p>Following the notification of Article 50 of the Treaty on European Union by the United Kingdom, the Commission has established a Task Force for the Preparation and Conduct of the Negotiations in the relevant areas to prepare the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union. The United Kingdom obligations arising from ongoing procedures at the withdrawal date shall be clarified in the Withdrawal Agreement to be concluded between the Union and the United Kingdom. According to the draft Withdrawal Agreement published by the Commission, the Union shall continue to be competent for ongoing</p>

result of Brexit should result in an expansion of General Block Exemption Regulations and a temporary relaxation or suspension of State aid rules for certain industries likely to be most affected insofar as it does not constitute selective aid which would be contrary to the objective of applying European Union rules fairly to all companies;

administrative and judicial procedures concerning compliance with Union law by the United Kingdom (Title X). This Title remains under discussions with the United Kingdom. During the transition period agreed with the United Kingdom as part of the Withdrawal Agreement, Union law shall be applicable to and in the United Kingdom (Part Four).

As set out in the negotiation guidelines of the European Council, including the latest ones from March 2018, any future trade agreement should ensure a level playing field, notably in terms of competition and State aid.

The 2014 General Block Exemption Regulation (GBER)⁹¹ introduced new categories of aid and to a large extent the reported increase in expenditure on General Block Exemption Regulation measures already reflects the impact of the new Regulation. Thus, total General Block Exemption Regulation spending for aid to culture and heritage conservation, for broadband and for local infrastructure increased more than fivefold, while it doubled for research, development and innovation and for small and medium-sized enterprises. Significant increases were also recorded for environmental protection and energy savings (+68%) and for aid to compensate damages caused by natural disasters (+30%). The General Block Exemption Regulation was further extended on 14 June 2017⁹², especially as regards aid

⁹¹ Commission Regulation (EU) No 651/2014 of 17 June 2014 declaring certain categories of aid compatible with the internal market in application of Articles 107 and 108 of the Treaty Text with EEA relevance, OJ L 187, 26.6.2014, p. 1–78.

⁹² Commission Regulation (EU) 2017/1084 of 14 June 2017 amending Regulation (EU) No 651/2014 as regards aid for port and airport infrastructure, notification thresholds for aid for culture and heritage

	<p>to ports, airports, culture, and made it easier for public authorities to compensate companies for the additional costs they face when operating in the European Union's outermost regions.</p> <p>The first results of the State aid modernisation package (since 2015)⁹³ show that 47% of all State aid expenditure is steered by Member States to objectives of common European interest such as regional and cohesion objectives, culture, employment and training aid, covered by the General Block Exemption Regulation and which do not require prior approval by the Commission – with more than 97% of new measures, for which expenditure was reported for the first time, now being covered by the General Block Exemption Regulation. This percentage further increased after the 2017 extension of the General Block Exemption Regulation to ports and airports. In addition, the schemes with high budgets (i.e. above EUR 150 million per year) are subject to an evaluation in order to see to which extent the common objective has been reached and to assess the impact on the competition and trade between Member States.</p>
<p><i>State aid and tax rulings</i></p> <p>9. The Committee of the Regions insists that, in relation to tax evasion, the</p>	<p>In order to ensure that Member States have access to the information necessary to take action against tax</p>

conservation and for aid for sport and multifunctional recreational infrastructures, and regional operating aid schemes for outermost regions and amending Regulation (EU) No 702/2014 as regards the calculation of eligible costs.

⁹³ Figures from the 2017 State Aid Scoreboard. For further information, see http://ec.europa.eu/competition/state_aid/scoreboard/index_en.html

question of tax rulings is part of the European Union's overall effort to fight tax avoidance by big corporates, i.a. through the Anti-Tax Avoidance Package, the Country-by-country reporting, the Corporate Tax Reform Package and the new transparency rules for tax planning intermediaries. It stresses also that the European Union needs to consider whether new regulation rather than enforcement could provide greater certainty on tax rulings within Member States, and consider whether a sanction procedure in favour of European Union budget own resources should be adopted as part of any new regulatory regime;

10. The Committee of the Regions takes the view that the European Union's exclusive competence enshrined in article 3 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union for establishing the competition rules necessary for the functioning of the internal market does not affect the sovereign right of Member States to determine their own corporate tax systems, or to set their own tax rates. The Committee recognises, however, that Member States must respect a fair level playing field for businesses and consumers throughout the European Union's internal market⁹⁴;

avoidance and evasion, new transparency rules have been introduced with the aim to facilitate administrative cooperation and exchange of information between Member States. The automatic exchange of information on tax rulings between all Member States, which entered into force on 1 January 2017, is an essential element of that. The Commission will be closely monitoring the effective implementation of this directive.

The Commission notes that enforcement action in the field of State aid control cannot be replaced by a regulation as enforcement action in the competition field is based on a case by case assessment. It also notes that in the State aid area a sanction procedure against the Member State does not exist and that enforcement action can under the European Union Treaty only result in recovery of the unlawful and incompatible State aid from the beneficiary.

The Commission's focus on fighting tax evasion and tax avoidance is also in line with efforts at the international level, namely by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, to tackle tax base erosion and profit shifting to better align the right to tax with economic activity⁹⁵. State aid investigations into Member States' tax ruling practices, which began in 2013, is one tool the Commission has to ensure fair tax

⁹⁴ For further information see IP/17/3701 of 4 October 2017 available at http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-17-3701_en.htm

⁹⁵ OECD (2013) Action Plan on Base Erosion and Profit Shifting, OECD Publishing, Paris.

	<p>competition in the internal market. In October 2017, the Commission concluded that Luxembourg granted undue tax benefits to Amazon of around EUR 250 million⁹⁶. On 20 June 2018, the Commission found that Luxembourg gave illegal tax benefits to Engie (former GDF Suez) of around EUR 120 million.⁹⁷</p> <p>The Commission, in four additional final negative decisions, illustrated how tax rulings can be in breach of European Union State aid rules⁹⁸. Further guidance on this issue was given in the <i>Notice on the notion of State aid as referred to in Article 107(1) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union</i>, which was published on 19 July 2016⁹⁹.</p> <p>The Commission continues its formal investigations into tax rulings granted to McDonald's by Luxembourg, as well as the Group Financing Exemption from the Controlled Foreign Company rules implemented by the United Kingdom and Inter IKEA by the Netherlands in order to decide whether</p>
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⁹⁶ Case SA.38944 Aid to Amazon – Luxembourg, available at http://ec.europa.eu/competition/elojade/isef/case_details.cfm?proc_code=3_SA_38944.

⁹⁷ Case SA.44888 Aid to GDF Suez – Luxembourg, available at http://ec.europa.eu/competition/elojade/isef/case_details.cfm?proc_code=3_SA_44888; see also: http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-18-4228_en.htm.

⁹⁸ Ireland, Netherlands, Luxembourg and Belgium have each faced decisions by the Directorate General for Competition that concern tax rulings. Each of those decisions has been challenged by those Member States before the General Court of the European Union.

⁹⁹ Commission *Notice on the notion of State aid as referred to in Article 107(1) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union*, OJ, C 262, 19 July 2016, available at http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv:OJ.C_.2016.262.01.0001.01.ENG&toc=OJ:C:2016:262:TOC.

	<p>these measures provided the companies with undue financial advantages.¹⁰⁰</p> <p>Beyond the cases involving tax rulings, the Commission remains vigilant to ensure that Member States do not use fiscal tools to unduly favour certain companies/sectors and shelter national companies from European Union competition.</p>
<p>12. The Committee of the Regions notes that the implementation at national level of Council Directive 2016/1164 laying down rules against tax avoidance practices that directly affect the functioning of the internal market is currently causing problems. Article 4(4) of that directive contains a derogation from the interest limitation rule in respect of loans used to fund a long-term public infrastructure project. Even though the directive offers broad scope for a derogation on activities considered to be in the public interest, Member States are not making full use of this possibility;</p>	<p>This provision refers to an option that was included in the Directive at the request of some Member States. Thus, it is for Member States to decide whether they want to avail of this option or not.</p>
<p><i>State aid modernisation initiative</i></p> <p>16. The Committee of the Regions recalls¹⁰¹ that European Union State aid rules for services of general economic interest (SGEIs) should not be limited in their application to competition principles, but must be fully consistent with the broad discretion granted by the Treaties to the Member States in determining what represents a service of general economic interest, as well as the principles of local</p>	<p>The Commission recalls that Member States have a wide discretion to define their services of general economic interest. However, it must be ensured that their financing does not over-compensate incumbents and unduly distort competition not only in the markets directly affected by the aid but also, through potential cross-subsidisation, in neighbouring markets.</p> <p>The services of general economic</p>

¹⁰⁰ For further information see IP/15/6221 of 3 December 2015, http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-15-6221_en.htm; IP/17/4201 of 26 October 2017 http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-17-4201_en.htm; and IP/17/5343 of 18 December 2017 http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-17-5343_en.htm.

¹⁰¹ See point 2 of Committee of the Regions opinion on "State Aid and Services of General Economic Interest" (ECON-VI/013), adopted on 11 October 2016.

and regional self-government, economic, social and territorial cohesion, and neutrality as regards ownership in the Member States (Article 3 of Treaty on European Union, and Articles 14, 106 and 345, and Protocol 26 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union). Services of general economic interest must reflect the differences in needs, user preferences and public procurement systems that can result from variations in geographical location, social and cultural situations, and democratic processes in the Member States. State aid scrutiny may only be carried out if national, regional or local regulation or financing of a service of general economic interest has cross-border effects or implications for the internal market;

17. The Committee of the Regions regrets that the Annual Competition Report 2016 gives very little prominence to the issues relating to State aid for services of general economic interest and does in particular not provide clarity on the review of the so-called "Almunia package" and the revision of the regulation on de minimis aid for services of general economic interest. It recalls in this regard that the Committee of the Regions had called for:

- detailed guidelines, with a view to meeting the fourth "Altmark" criterion, as to what a typical, well-run and adequately resourced undertaking is;

- a revision of the definition of reasonable profit of an service of general economic interest, in particular so as to reflect the fact that, through incentives or an increase in the percentage of recognisable reasonable profit, such profit is often reinvested in services of general economic

interest can reflect national or local specificities, as long as they are set up in the 'general' interest, and thus the interest of society. The Commission only checks for 'manifest errors' in the definition of services of general economic interest. Moreover, the financing of services of general economic interest is only subject to State aid control if it affects trade between Member States. Further guidance on this criterion can be found in the Commission Notice on the notion of State aid, as well as in the Commission's decisional practice.

The current rules serve well in achieving a balanced and proportionate approach that recognises the societal importance of services of general economic interest. In this regard, the Commission recalls:

- The fourth Altmark criterion was set by the Union Courts. It includes two possibilities to conclude that the financing of a service of general economic interest does not involve an advantage, namely tendering and benchmarking. Many Commission Decisions give concrete and detailed guidance on the application of this part of the Altmark test.

- As the Services of General Economic Interest Package foresees, the reasonable profit is determined by reference to objective elements, such as the rate of return on capital and the level of risk in the sector concerned. The 'reasonable profit' is determined beforehand as a parameter to calculate the compensation for the services of general economic interest.

- As regards the thresholds of the

<p>interest;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the increase of <i>de minimis</i> thresholds in the case of State aid for services of general economic interest; - the increase of the threshold for exemption from the notification obligation under Article 108(3) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union of State aid in the form of a public service compensation for companies entrusted with delivering services of general economic interest to the threshold in effect before 2011, which was EUR 30 million per year; 	<p>Services of General Economic Interest <i>de minimis</i> Regulation¹⁰² and the 2012 Services of General Economic Interest Decision¹⁰³, the Commission has no indications that the thresholds led to practical difficulties. The Commission recalls that the 2012 Decision provides for exemptions from notification without any thresholds for services of general economic interest meeting social needs such as health and long term care, childcare, care and social inclusion of vulnerable groups, and access to and reintegration into the labour market. For sectors where the notification threshold is at EUR 15 million, the 2012 Services of General Economic Interest Decision removed the requirement of a capped average annual turnover. This widened the application of the Decision.</p>
<p>22. The Committee of the Regions welcomes the Commission's efforts to simplify the application of State aid rules, namely the Notice on the notion of aid, and the fact that the Competition Report acknowledges that it is particularly important to facilitate public investment and maximise the effect of investments on economic growth and jobs, which echoes, in a way, the Committee of the Regions demand for further simplification and exemptions in the field of services of general economic interest;</p> <p>23. The Committee of the Regions</p>	<p>The Commission welcomes the general support for its Notice, which gives guidance on all aspects of the definition of the notion of State aid by systematically summarising the case law of the European Union Courts and the Commission's decision making practice. The aim is to help public authorities and companies to identify when public support measures can be granted outside the remit of State aid control and approval by the European Commission. In relation to the services of general economic interest, the</p>

¹⁰² Commission Regulation (EU) No 360/2012 of 25 April 2012 on the application of Articles 107 and 108 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union to de minimis aid granted to undertakings providing services of general economic interest, OJ L 114, 26.4.2012, p. 8–13.

¹⁰³ 2012/21/EU: Commission Decision of 20 December 2011 on the application of Article 106(2) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union to State aid in the form of public service compensation granted to certain undertakings entrusted with the operation of services of general economic interest, OJ L 7, 11.1.2012, p. 3–10.

<p>challenges, however, the degree of legal certainty achieved through the Notice as in the field of services of general economic interest in particular relevant stakeholders point at the complexity and possible inconsistencies between different documents to be taken into account, making it difficult for them to assess which rule is to be applied in a specific case¹⁰⁴;</p> <p>24. The Committee of the Regions also expresses concerns in respect of the administrative burden triggered by the reporting requirements pursuant to the Decision and the Framework on services of general economic interest as stated in some of those country reports;</p>	<p>Notice complements and updates the 2012 Services of General Economic Interest Communication¹⁰⁵ and thus provides further guidance for Member States and local authorities.</p> <p>Furthermore, the Commission continues updating the analytical grids on the financing of infrastructure projects which set out, sector by sector, when, in view of the Commission, public funding does not involve State aid and when a notification for State aid clearance is needed. The grids also contain references to the most relevant Commission decisions relating to the sector concerned.</p> <p>Together, these different measures further clarify the notion of State aid and, thus, the scope of European Union State aid rules, reducing the administrative burden for public authorities and companies, avoiding lengthy procedures, and increasing legal certainty for aid beneficiaries and competitors.</p> <p>As regards the reporting requirements for the services of general economic interest, only a very limited bi-annual reporting is required. The reporting exercise is useful for the Commission's continuous assessment of the application of the 2012 Services of General Economic Interest Package and the identification of possible difficulties faced by Member States and/or their local authorities.</p>
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¹⁰⁴ See Member States Reports on the application of the services of general economic interest decision during 2012-2016.

¹⁰⁵ Communication from the Commission on the application of the European Union State aid rules to compensation granted for the provision of services of general economic interest Text with EEA relevance, OJ C 8, 11.1.2012, p. 4–14

Digital Single Market

26. The Committee of the Regions refers in this context to its opinion COTER-VI/012 on Simplification of European structural and investment funds (ESIF) from the perspective of Local and Regional Authorities, in which it discusses the impact of the application of state aid rules on the implementation of European structural and investment funds and draws attention inter alia to the existence of a significant inconsistency in the application of state aid rules. The Committee of the Regions notes that while programmes managed centrally by the European Commission (such as Horizon 2020, Connecting Europe Facility (CEF) and the European Fund for Strategic Investment) are exempt from state aid procedures, funding under the European Union's cohesion policy is not exempt. In terms of state aid, then, projects are not in practice judged on their merits but according to whether it is the Commission or the Member State that grants the funds and the source of their funding;

28. The Committee of the Regions stresses, moreover, again in the light of opinion COTER-VI/012 on Simplification of European structural and investment funds from the perspective of Local and Regional Authorities, that particular attention should be paid to the use of state aid under European Territorial Cooperation programmes. Generally speaking, in the case of these programmes, the effort needed to comply with state aid rules is disproportionate to the risk of distortion of competition.

Operational Programmes are set at the beginning of the 7-year period. At that moment, regional authorities do not yet know what projects they want to implement, and consequently Member States cannot yet provide the level of detail to assess State aid compliance. A project approval across the board, including on State aid aspects, would require a very detailed description of the actions to be financed, which would end up delaying the approval of programmes.

State aid rules can, for example, prohibit regional aid that only leads to the closure of plants somewhere else, and in such cases they can be more restrictive than those of Structural Funds. However, the objective is to prevent the use of Structural Funds to encourage companies to simply relocate jobs from more developed regions, which would in turn undermine social cohesion in the European Union.

More generally, State aid rules aim at avoiding distortion of competition, while the goal of Structural Funds is to promote regional development.

The Reflection Paper on the Future of European Union Finances¹⁰⁶ emphasises complementarity between centrally-managed European Union financial instruments and those in cohesion policy in order to avoid overlaps.

¹⁰⁶ COM(2017) 358 final.

<p>Moreover, state aid is often subject to different interpretations in different Member States and it is therefore not possible to apply these rules with adequate legal certainty, which often makes it quite impossible to carry out high-quality projects. One measure that could be implemented quickly in order to simplify the European structural and investment funds would be to remove European Territorial Cooperation from the field of application of state aid rules, as is the case for the Horizon 2020 programme, for example;</p>	
<p>27. The Committee of the Regions is particularly concerned about barriers to cross-border online trade that businesses may themselves establish, about geo-blocking and about potential competitors being artificially excluded from certain business opportunities by dominant players;</p> <p>29. The Committee of the Regions welcomes, in this context, the initiatives of the Commission to better enforce competition law in the digital world, namely the e-commerce sector inquiry and the recently opened investigations aimed at tackling the specific issues of retail price restrictions, discrimination on the basis of location and unjustified geo-blocking¹⁰⁷;</p> <p>30. The Committee of the Regions encourages the Commission to implement competition enforcement in the Single Digital Economy on a level global playing field with similar competition authority counterparts around the world, to ensure</p>	<p>One of the main goals of the Commission's Digital Single Market strategy is to ensure better access for consumers and businesses to goods and services.</p> <p>In May 2017, the Commission published the final report of its e-commerce sector inquiry¹⁰⁸. The objective of the sector inquiry was to allow the Commission to identify possible competition concerns in European e-commerce markets.</p> <p>The Report confirms that certain practices by companies in e-commerce markets may restrict competition by unduly limiting how products are distributed throughout the European Union. These restrictions could limit consumer choice and prevent lower prices online. At the same time, the report found that there is a need to balance the interests of both online and 'brick-and-mortar' retailers, to the benefit of consumers. The findings are</p>

¹⁰⁷ European Commission, *Antitrust: Commission opens three investigations into suspected anticompetitive practices in e-commerce*, http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-17-201_en.htm.

¹⁰⁸ COM(2017) 229 final.

that innovation is not hampered and calls on the Commission to help bring about closer cooperation between National Competition Authorities (NCAs), the European Commission and international organisations such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development;

helping the Commission to target the enforcement of European Union competition rules in e-commerce markets.

In February 2017, the Commission opened three separate investigations into holiday accommodation, personal computer video games distribution and consumer electronics pricing practices that may limit competition. Additional investigations were launched concerning certain licensing and distribution practices.

Furthermore, the sector inquiry has prompted companies to review their commercial practices on their own initiative. This can help consumers to purchase products more easily cross-border and benefit from lower prices and a wider choice of retailers.

The regulation to end unjustified geo-blocking will enter into force on 3 December this year. The new rules will boost e-commerce for the benefit of consumers and businesses who take advantage of the growing European online market.

For citizens this means they will be able to buy their new electrical goods online, rent a car or get their concert tickets across borders as they do at home. It will ensure that they no longer face barriers such as being asked to pay with a debit or credit card issued in another country. For businesses, this means more legal certainty to operate cross-border.

The new rules define three specific situations where no justification and no objective criteria for a different treatment between customers from

	<p>different European Union Member States are conceivable from the outset. These are the sale of goods without physical delivery, the sale of electronically supplied services, and the sale of services provided in a specific physical location.</p>
<p>31. The Committee of the Regions also supports the European Commission's efforts to rebalance the effective taxation rate paid by traditional companies and those in the digital sector, as a Commission communication on the taxation of the digital sector presented on 21 September 2017 states that the effective rate paid by the international internet companies is 10.1%, compared to 23.2% for traditional international businesses. It expects therefore the Commission to examine the possibility of introducing specific taxes on turnover and/or on digital transactions and consider proposing within the common consolidated corporate tax base (CCCTB) the concept of "virtual permanent establishment";</p>	<p>Following the September 2017 Communication on a fair and efficient tax system in the European Union for the Digital Single Market¹⁰⁹, the Commission proposed, on 21 March 2018, new rules to ensure that digital business activities are taxed in a fair and growth-friendly way in the European Union¹¹⁰. In parallel, the European Union is actively engaging with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development/G20 for ambitious international solutions to this problem.</p>
<p><i>Single Market</i></p> <p>32. The Committee of the Regions notes the important role played by National Competition Authorities in key competition areas¹¹¹ and recommends better resourcing of different Member</p>	<p>The Commission and Member States' National Competition Authorities work closely in enforcing the European Union competition rules in the framework of the European Competition Network.</p>

¹⁰⁹ COM(2017) 547 final.

¹¹⁰ https://ec.europa.eu/taxation_customs/business/company-tax/fair-taxation-digital-economy_en

¹¹¹ The sector inquiry into data processing in the on-line advertising sector opened by the French Competition Authority, the fine imposed on WhatsApp by the Italian Competition Authority for allegedly obliging users to agree to share their personal data with Facebook, the fine imposed by the Italian Competition Authority on Aspen Pharma (Aspen Case), and the fine imposed by the UK's Competition Market Authority on Pfizer and Flynn Pharma (Pfizer/Flynn Pharma case);

<p>States National Competition Authorities and improved European coordination of NCAs through the European Competition Network (ECN). The Committee would also be supportive of a legislative proposal by the Commission on strengthening the enforcement and sanctioning tools available to the National Competition Authorities, the so-called European Competition Network+ (ECN+), which would ensure that the full potential of the decentralised system of European Union competition enforcement can be realised;</p> <p>33. The Committee of the Regions welcomes in this respect the Commission's initiative to make national competition authorities even more effective enforcers since for some levels of the market, the national authorities are better placed to deal with the enforcement of EU competition rules while respecting national specificities;</p>	<p>On 22 March 2017, the Commission presented a proposal for a Directive¹¹² intended to empower Member States' competition authorities to be more effective enforcers (European Competition Network+). The proposal aims to ensure that when applying the European Union antitrust rules, national competition authorities have the appropriate enforcement tools in order to bring about a genuine common competition enforcement area. To that end, the proposal provides for minimum guarantees and standards to empower national competition authorities to reach their full potential.</p> <p>By ensuring that national competition authorities can act more effectively, the Commission's proposal aims to contribute to the objective of a genuine Single Market, promoting the overall goals of competitive markets that deliver jobs and growth.</p> <p>On 30 May 2018, a political agreement was reached by the Parliament and the Council on the Commission proposal for a Directive.</p>
<p>34. The Committee of the Regions insists that where dominant businesses are exploiting their customers, by charging excessive prices or imposing unfair terms, competition authorities need to intervene in order to deal with those excessive prices, in particular when it comes to pharmaceuticals with a view to guaranteeing patients access to effective and affordable essential medicines and promoting the best possible outcome for patients and society;</p>	<p>Ensuring access to novel and high quality healthcare and medicines at competitive prices is an important objective in competition law enforcement in pharmaceutical and health services sector. Competition law enforcement can complement regulation that exists in this sector. On 15 May 2017, the Commission opened a formal investigation into concerns that Aspen Pharma has engaged in excessive pricing concerning five life-saving cancer medicines. The</p>

¹¹² COM(2017) 142 final.

	<p>Commission is investigating whether Aspen has abused a dominant market position in breach of European Union antitrust rules¹¹³. The Commission equally monitors patent settlements between originator and generic companies, and investigates agreements that may delay the entry of cheaper generic medicines, and may therefore cause substantial harm to European Union patients and health service budgets by leading to higher prices.</p>
<p>35. The Committee of the Regions expresses its concerns in relation to the unprecedented wave of corporate consolidation which is taking place in the already highly concentrated market of the world's seeds, chemicals and pesticides and genetically modified crop genetic traits as this is likely to reduce competition and lead to oligopolistic structures;</p> <p>36. The Committee of the Regions points out the risks of a substantial vertical integration between traits, seeds and chemicals resulting from the unprecedented global market dominance in this sensitive area which would grant the dominant companies in this industry even greater influence over policy, compromising independent science and the public interest by abusing their position on the market;</p> <p>37. The Committee of the Regions emphasises the important role of small farmers in the sustainability of regional ecosystems, and calls on the Commission to ensure that the mergers underway will</p>	<p>The Commission agrees that competition should be effective in the whole food supply chain, including at the level of suppliers to farmers, processors and retailers. Seeds and pesticides are crucial inputs for farmers and the starting point of the food supply chain. Effective competition in these markets needs to be ensured so that farmers have a choice and can purchase products at competitive prices and companies continue to innovate and invest in improved products.</p> <p>The Commission enforces competition law in the markets for seeds and crop protection products, by controlling mergers as well as by sanctioning anti-competitive behaviour (such as abuse of a dominant position or agreements between market operators to raise prices).</p> <p>All proposed mergers notified to the Commission are rigorously assessed to determine if they would significantly impede effective competition in the single market.</p>

¹¹³ For further information see IP/17/1323 of 15 May 2017 available at http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-17-1323_en.htm

<p>not raise entry barriers for smaller innovators, will not increase the risk that smaller innovators are excluded from access to technology and other resources needed to compete effectively, and will not result in higher agricultural input prices and less choice for farmers;</p>	<p>For example, the Commission only approved ChemChina's acquisition of Syngenta (on 5 April 2017) after they agreed to divest a large number of pesticides and plant growth regulator product lines. Similarly, Dow's merger with DuPont was approved (on 27 March 2017) after the companies agreed to divest large parts of DuPont's worldwide pesticides business including almost its entire global research and development organisation. Both decisions followed an in-depth review of the proposed transactions.</p> <p>Importantly, the assessment of competition issues is subject to scrutiny of European Courts.</p>
<p>38. The Committee of the Regions stresses the vulnerability of farmers and small and medium-sized enterprises, which represent 79% of European Union farms, due to their weaker bargaining position and to unfair trading practices in the food supply chain; highlights, in the same vein, that farmers are the main shock absorber in the supply chain as regards market risks such as price volatility or prolonged periods of low prices and calls on the Commission to help farmers to counter-balance the effects of increasing concentration at the processing and retailing stages of the chain;</p> <p>39. The Committee of the Regions urges the Agriculture and Competition Commissioners to work more closely to simplify the application of state aid rules</p>	<p>The 2013 Regulation on the common organisation in agricultural markets (CMO Regulation) supports the organisations of farmers in producer organisations as a means to strengthen their position versus other supply chain operators and to contribute to an efficient functioning of the food supply chain.¹¹⁴ In certain sectors, such as the fruit and vegetables sector, European Union co-funding is granted to recognised producer organisations (PO) and associations of producer organisation (APO) to implement operational programmes with a view to e.g. improve product quality, plan production, promote products and prevent and manage crisis. The Common Market Organisations Regulation also contains derogations</p>

¹¹⁴ European Parliament and Council Regulation (EU) No 1308/2013 of 17 December 2013 establishing a common organisation of the markets in agricultural products and repealing Council Regulations (EEC) No 922/72, (EEC) No 234/79, (EC) No 1037/2001 and (EC) No 1234/2007, OJ L 347, 20.12.2013.

in the area of rural development, including by providing for an integrated procedure for the simultaneous approval of an RDP and state aid relating to funding for the forestry sector and agricultural diversification, which have been excluded from simplification efforts in the agricultural sector. This would support efforts towards market diversification for the agri-food sector; particularly for agri-food industries in Member States most affected by BREXIT;

40. The Committee of the Regions reiterates its call, as explained in its opinion on the Common Agricultural Policy after 2020, for a review of European Union competition law so as to allow all stakeholders in a given sector, including consumers and public authorities, to decide on a fair distribution of the added value and profit margins along the value chain and to allow farmers to strengthen their position on the market;

from the competition rules for certain activities of recognised producer organisations, associations of producer organisation and inter-branch organisations. The modifications of the recent Omnibus Regulation to the Common Market Organisations Regulation which entered into force on 1 January 2018 introduced an explicit competition derogation for *inter alia* production planning and contractual negotiations (joint sales of the producer members via the producer organisation/ association of producer organisation) of recognised producer organisations / associations of producer organisation in all agricultural sectors under defined conditions.

As regards unfair trading practices vis-à-vis farmers, several reports (2012 European Competition Network (ECN) Report¹¹⁵ and the Commission Green Paper on Unfair Trading Practices¹¹⁶) found that most complaints about such practices are not relevant under European Union competition law because they affect only bilateral relationships and do not affect the market and consumers overall.

The Commission proposed on 11 April 2018 to tackle the more damaging unfair trading practices in the food supply chain to ensure a fairer treatment for small and medium-sized food and farming businesses. In addition, the proposal includes effective enforcement provisions: sanctions can be imposed by national authorities where infringements are

¹¹⁵ ECN Report available at http://ec.europa.eu/competition/ecn/food_report_en.pdf

¹¹⁶ COM(2013) 37 final.

	established.
<p>41. The Committee of the Regions reiterates its call for a review of European Union law on awarding public contracts in the mass catering sector that introduces incentives for supply of European Union food products and/or km 0 food products through short supply chains, with a view to promoting the internal market and the safety of the product used;</p>	<p>The 2014 Public procurement Directives¹¹⁷ already offer contracting authority the necessary flexibility to take into account, throughout the whole procurement process, the characteristics related to quality and the environmental impact of the products that they are purchasing through public contracts. This makes it possible to shorten the supply chain of food supplies and catering services contracts. There are several ways in which these considerations can be taken into account, under European Union public procurement law. For instance:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Technical specifications describing the characteristics of the product may include aspects related to the production process of food products: for instance, public buyers may require a product to be seasonal, organic, or to bear a specific environmentally friendly label. 2. Contract award criteria which are used to assess the technical offer may award points to the tenders offering the lowest environmental impact in terms of transport of the food products. 3. Evaluation of tenders can also be based on life-cycle costing methods, which allow public buyers to take into account elements such as any kind of environmental externality produced by the production process (pollutants, emissions) as well as externalities linked to transport and delivery of the

¹¹⁷ Directive 2014/24/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 February 2014 on public procurement and repealing Directive 2004/18/EC, OJ L 94, 28.3.2014 and Directive 2014/25/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 February 2014 on procurement by entities operating in the water, energy, transport and postal services sectors and repealing Directive 2004/17/EC, OJ L 94, 28.3.2014.

	<p>products.</p> <p>Furthermore, in 2008 the Commission published standard green public procurement criteria for food products¹¹⁸. These criteria are currently under revision to integrate the novelties brought about by the 2014 European Union public procurement reforms and the more recent practices in this field.</p>
<p>43. The Committee of the Regions notes, however, that the lack of uniformity in the application of the Bank Recovery and Resolution Directive (BRRD)¹¹⁹ poses greater uncertainty for State aid control for measures taken to resolve or provide temporary recapitalisation of Financial Institutions;</p> <p>44. The Committee of the Regions believes that there should be much greater certainty on the role of bail-in versus bailout and how that corresponds to different sized financial institutions, where there would be a clear level playing field for the application of State aid control for the entire European banking system without Member State exemptions;</p> <p>45. The Committee of the Regions is of the opinion that more efficient deposit guarantee arrangements are needed at the level of the Banking Union to ensure sufficient financial means to underpin the confidence of all depositors and thereby safeguard financial stability;</p> <p>46. The Committee of the Regions welcomes the fact that State aid rules are flexible enough to allow Member States</p>	<p>The European Union has introduced tools (legislation and institutions) to deal with banks' failure, and a clear cost distribution between the creditors and the rest of the banking system for the protection of the taxpayer. The bail-in provisions of the Bank Recovery and Resolution Directive entered into force on 1 January 2016.</p> <p>The Bank Recovery and Resolution Directive is shifting the cost of bank failures to shareholders and creditors, and has the objective to minimise State aid. However, also under this new resolution framework, State aid is still possible, both outside resolution and in resolution cases.</p> <p>The Commission's assessment of bank restructuring plans under the State aid crisis rules is built on three pillars:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Restore long-term viability without further need for State support in the future, by restoring sustainable profitability and reducing risk; if this proves not possible, consider an orderly winding-down; ii. Minimise the use of taxpayers'

¹¹⁸ They can be consulted at http://ec.europa.eu/environment/gpp/eu_gpp_criteria_en.htm

¹¹⁹ Directive 2014/59/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 May 2014 establishing a framework for the recovery and resolution of credit institutions and investment firms, OJ L 173, 12.6.2014.

<p>to help vulnerable citizens, struggling small companies and savers without that help being considered as State aid as the Commission confirmed with its decisions on the Cyprus State grant Scheme to borrowers and micro-companies¹²⁰ and on the Resolution of the Cooperative Bank of Peloponnese (Greece)¹²¹;</p>	<p>money, through appropriate burden-sharing measures, including aid remuneration and contributions by the bank, shareholders and junior creditors;</p> <p>iii. Limit distortions of competition through proportionate remedies.</p> <p>The Commission will continue to play a key role in controlling future public supports in the financial sector, to make sure that the aid given is kept to the necessary minimum and that adequate measures are taken to ensure return to viability and minimise distortions of competition, to preserve equality of treatment among Member States and to maintain the integrity of the internal market.</p>
<p><i>Climate-friendly Energy Union</i></p> <p>47. The Committee of the Regions welcomes the Commission's inquiry into the capacity mechanism while stressing that the first priority guiding European Union action in this field must be to promote sustainable energy (renewables and further energy efficiency efforts) as a means to achieve reduced carbon dioxide emissions in accordance with the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Paris agreement as well as fighting energy poverty, securing energy supply, and enhancing territorial cohesion;</p> <p>48. The Committee of the Regions highlights also that the availability of energy at affordable prices is a key condition for regional competitiveness, in particular for less favoured and peripheral regions, and that regions which have a</p>	<p>The Commission welcomes the support of its inquiry into the capacity mechanism. Since the inquiry found that a number of existing capacity mechanism have major shortcomings, the Commission is working with the Member States concerned to bring these schemes in line with State aid rules.</p> <p>The Commission's enforcement of competition law in the energy sector plays a key role in removing obstacles to the free flow of gas and electricity across Member States, promoting interconnectivity and avoiding artificial market partitioning within the European Union.</p> <p>Promoting competition in the energy sector means, ultimately, empowering consumers – whether energy-intensive users, small and medium-sized</p>

¹²⁰ Case SA.45004 (2016/N).

¹²¹ Case number SA.43886.

strong industrial base, which is a sector energy-intensive per se, are highly influenced by taxes and charges on energy and depend on an affordable and secure energy supply;

enterprises or citizens – to demand a fair deal, as well as keeping overall energy costs under control. Under certain conditions, energy intensive users can benefit from State aid in the form of reductions in environmental taxes and charges for support of electricity from renewable sources.

Beyond competition policy, the Commission is also implementing an ambitious energy policy in the framework of the Energy Union strategy. The Energy Union and its achievement is a key priority for this Commission.

Achieving the main goals of the Energy Union strategy will be facilitated by the implementation of the initiatives in the 'Clean Energy for All Europeans' package¹²² currently under discussion in the Parliament and Council. These initiatives aim to make the European Union the world leader in the field of renewables, complete the internal energy market, and promote competition and the removal of barriers to pricing flexibility through a new market design. This should help maintain energy prices and costs in check, to the benefit of consumers.

The initiatives should promote diversified and wider markets fostered by improved interconnections, market coupling, and energy efficiency policies that enhance the competitiveness of the European Union industry and reduce costs for citizens.

As part of the Package, the Commission launched a new Platform for Coal Regions in Transition last

¹²² COM(2016) 860 final.

	<p>year. Its objective is to help regions and Member States affected by the decline in coal production and demand to develop strategies and projects which can kick-start the transition process, both in the area of post coal economy and structural transformation and in the area of eco-innovation advanced coal technologies.</p>
<p>49. The Committee of the Regions notes that energy prices on the retail market have increased in recent years despite lower wholesale prices and agrees with the Commission's view that the clean energy transition should be fair and take into account its transformative impact on stakeholders, including industries and workers¹²³;</p> <p>50. The Committee of the Regions calls on the Commission to optimise its support to the structural transition in coal and carbon-intensive regions, in compliance with competition rules, and to work in partnership with the stakeholders of these regions, to better target European Union support, encouraging exchange of good practices, including discussions on industrial roadmaps and re-skilling needs and promoting synergies/joint cooperation;</p>	<p>The Commission and the National Competition Authorities of the Member States continue to enforce the European Union and national competition rules in the energy sector. The Commission also proposed in 2016 to revise the regulatory framework of the sector with its package of measures entitled Clean Energy for all Europeans. Together, this should help increase competition in the different retail markets across the European Union, which can be expected amongst other things to reduce the spread between retail and wholesale energy prices. It should also help to ensure that different sources of electricity and gas can compete on fair and objective terms.</p> <p>Regarding coal regions, the Commission provides support as part of the enabling framework to accompany the clean energy transition. In December 2017, the Coal Regions in Transition Platform was launched to support a successful economic transformation of these regions while taking into account the socio-economic impact of the energy transition.</p>

¹²³ COM(2017) 53 final.