2004 enlargement: impact on regions bordering candidate countries, action for border regions

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PURPOSE : to present the first progress report on the action plan for regions bordering applicant countries. CONTENT : the progress report demonstrates that the action plan for border regions, which was adopted by the Commission on 25 July 2001, is being well implemented. The action plan proposed a series of measures designed to strengthen economic competitiveness of border regions in view of EU enlargement. Twenty-three regions in Austria, Finland, Germany, Greece and Italy are involved. Particular progress has been achieved in the following areas: - SME support: The Commission has made available co-financing of Euro 10 million for a pilot project developed by the Working Community of the Chambers of Economy in the EU Regions bordering the applicant countries. The project will help SMEs identify the opportunities, challenges and risks resulting from enlargement, assist them in designing new business strategies and activities and promote their co-operation across the borders of the future Member States; - Networking activities: The Commission has approved additional funding of Euro 20 million for three INTERREG III C programmes (North, East, South) as well for the INTERACT programme. Operations foreseen include networks and individual co-operation projects aimed at encouraging and facilitating co-operation in border regions in order to strengthen their economic competitiveness; - Transport / SMEs: The Commission has approved additional funding of Euro 30 million to the 13 Strand A INTERREG programmes covering the borders with candidate countries as well as to the Strand B INTERREG programme for the Baltic Sea Region. Priority shall be given to the strengthening of transport systems, supporting SMEs particularly affected by enlargement as well as supporting training and inter-cultural co-operation actions; - Improved co-ordination between Phare CBC and INTERREG: The Commission has modified the Phare-CBC Regulation in order to achieve more consistency with the INTERREG approach. In addition, it modified the INTERREG guidelines to include Vienna in the INTERREG III A programmes with Hungary and the Czech Republic. The Commission will maintain its support for border regions particularly affected by EU enlargement: The following activities are either ongoing or envisaged for 2003: - continuation of support measures for SMEs, particularly in the most affected business sectors, including the promotion of business co-operation and transfer of technical know-how; - consolidation of actions for workers, such as advice and guidance to workers on social and labour legislation on both sides of the border and other information on the acquis in the area of free movement of persons at the time of accession; - continuation of measures to prepare local and regional public administration bodies for increased mobility and migration and to help implement targeted social, cultural and educational initiatives for their citizens.