Regional policies of the European Union: implementation in Austria, Finland and Sweden

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OBJECTIVE : This communication concerns the implementation of EU regional policy in Austria, Finland and Sweden (Objectives 1, 2 and 6 and Community initiatives) from January 1995 to May 1996. It reports in particular on the start-up of Structural Fund actions in the new Member States and on the added value of Structural Fund interventions in those countries. SUBSTANCE: In its communication, the Commission focuses on the effects and impact of the Structural Funds on the three new Member States. Overall, the Commission considers that the introduction of the Structural Funds in the three new Member States offered a unique opportunity to test the added value of Structural Funds in relatively prosperous countries. It stresses that the attitude of the national and regional administration is of paramount importance and that, if there is a positive agenda for change in national regional policy, the movement and adjustment created by the introduction of the Structural Funds can help carry that agenda forward. This has been the case particularly in Sweden and Finland, where such trends have always prevailed. In Austria, however, the strong emphasis by the Union on certain problem areas (Burgenland, the only Objective 1 area in the three new Member States) has provoked criticism, since Austrian regional policy was aiming to address structural problems across the whole territory. That said, the introduction of the Structural Funds has undoubtedly had some important effects, of which the Commission believes three types should be highlighted: - the precise definition of the concept of structural adjustment expenditure within the national budget, has enabled cohesion policies to maintain a privileged position at a time of budgetary rigour and also shields the regions concerned from the negative effects of economic convergence; - in the three new Member States, the introduction of the Structural Funds was the occasion for a detailed review of partnership arrangements (in particular in Finland and Sweden, with further decentralization of the management of structural adjustment). Also, the quality of the dialogue within the administration and with the social partners has been strengthened. In general, the transparency of the use of public finance has increased, owing to the Funds assuming a higher profile in the context of specific measures; - the Funds have influenced the national and regional agenda of structural adjustment policies, either through single programming documents (SPDs) for the regions covered by Objectives or through Community initiatives or other pilot actions. In this connection, special attention should be paid to the effects of inter-regional cooperation resulting from the combination of programmes such as Interreg, Ecos /Ouverture and Phare/Tacis with neighbouring third countries. By the same token, the cooperation instigated between the Interreg and Phare programmes may be considered as a pre-accession strategy for the applicant countries. This strategy has also prevailed, albeit at a different level, with the Baltic regions, where joint actions have helped not to prepare the ground for accession, but for greater mutual understanding and a common approach to the interests of the peoples concerned. Lastly, the Commission emphasizes that, with the accession of the three new Member States, the Union has gained three distinct sets of know-how in relation to open government, the mastery of technology, innovative labour market policies and the reform of the public services.