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FOR INFORMATION

Strasbourg, 23rd October 2009

Open letter to Mr. José Manuel Barroso

President of the European Commission

Dear Mr Barroso,

I am writing to you to express our grave concerns regarding your draft communication to the European Parliament and Council, dated 6 October 2009, which proposes “a reform agenda for a global Europe [reforming the budget, changing Europe]”.

Having read about the draft communication in this week’s press and obtained a copy of the draft since, we are at a loss to fathom why those that would be most affected by the draft communication’s proposals – Europe’s regions – appear to be the last stakeholders to have found out about them.

We find it ironic that the Commission is re-thinking its own cohesion policy when the real work on implementing the 2007-2013 funding period has only begun in the last year. How can Europe’s regions have confidence in a Commission that considers overhauling a policy in the first stages of implementation?

Your draft communication appears to imply a substantive or de facto “re-nationalisation” of the cohesion policy. This would be a mistake. At a time when local and regional authorities are looking forward to the Lisbon Treaty’s extension of the subsidiarity principle to sub-national levels and its affirmation of multi-level governance, the Commission appears to be prepared to undermine those provisions via “a concentration on national convergence”.

May I suggest that the “academic experts” that provided “a sound analytical basis for assessing EU finances” read our study, “From Subsidiarity to Success: The Impact of Decentralisation on Regional Growth”, which shows that regions innovate and perform better economically when they are empowered with more – not less – competences and funding. The study also shows that applied research, which is key to innovation, has better results when regions have strong competences for universities and research.

The European regions have been very active and successful in fighting the economic downturn. Since Europe's 22 million SMEs are at the core of employment, it is regions that have had to deal with this urgent matter. Nevertheless, regions were never included in decisions concerning the EU recovery plan. The Lisbon Agenda on Growth and Jobs has shown that a centralistic approach does not lead to results. We fear that you are now again on the same path. We also fear that by calling into question Objective 2's strategy of "strengthening strength", the Agenda's objectives will only be undermined further.

Moreover, the suggestion that more resources should be channelled to the lagging Member States rather than regions only serves to propagate a culture of centralised and sectoral policy-making over what should be the real objective: territorial cohesion. The implication of such an approach is the regional policy equivalent of a "two-speed Europe" that is discriminatory at best and disastrous at worst.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Michèle Sabban". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Michèle Sabban

President
Assembly of European Regions (AER.eu)

Note to media: AER's study "From Subsidiarity to Success: The Impact of Decentralisation on Regional Growth", produced by the independent research institute BAK Basel Economics, is available at: <http://www.aer.eu/publications/aer-study.html>.