



Regional awards



Editorial

From the Oscars to the Olympics, the greatest achievements of mankind have always been celebrated and rewarded. But it is not simply cultural and sporting prowess that is worthy of recognition: the everyday work of millions of people across Europe is also being increasingly acknowledged through awards in every sector of society. The regions of Europe are no exception. The last few years has seen an explosion in the number of awards on offer to regional and local authorities in recognition of the vital role that they play in the European arena.

In some ways, the work of regional and local authorities is clear for all to see – the vast majority of education, health, housing and social services across Europe are managed on a day-to-day basis at the local or regional level. But the regions are far more than mere managers – they are innovators and communicators, forward-thinking institutions at the forefront of Europe's efforts to create jobs, generate growth and provide a sustainable, healthy future for everyone.

That is why we decided to create the AER Awards, to celebrate the work of our member regions in key policy areas – innovation, communication and youth policy. As with any awards, there always has to be one winner – but if the awards can raise awareness of the tireless efforts of the regions to improve the quality of life for everyone across Europe, then in a very real sense we will all be winners. <

Michèle Sabban
AER Acting President
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Regional awards: Credit where it's due

EUROPEAN INTEGRATION MAY BE ON HOLD, BUT THE REGIONS OF EUROPE ARE CONTINUING THEIR WORK TO IMPROVE THE LIVES OF EVERYONE ACROSS THE CONTINENT – A VITAL ROLE THAT IS FINALLY BEING REGONISED



Photo: Antepinna

Family photo at AER General Assembly in Udine, Friuli Venezia Giulia-I, November 2007.

When the EU Constitution was rejected by the voters of France and the Netherlands in 2005, it sent shockwaves through the European elite. Here, for the first time, was proof positive that the roadmap towards greater European prosperity and growth was, in the eyes of ordinary Europeans at least, simply heading towards a dead end.

The message was clear: the powers that be in Brussels were out of touch with the hopes and fears of European citizens – and the much vaunted constitution would merely widen the gap between government and people, not narrow it.

But in fact there was much in the constitution that would – and indeed still will, since the large part of that text has been resurrected in the Lisbon Treaty – give greater power and influence to the one branch of government that is the closest to the people of Europe – the regions. For example, there is the first formal recognition of the role played by the regions on the European political stage – accepting that while the future of Europe may be debated in Brussels, it will be the towns, cities and communities across the continent that will make that future a reality.

That it took 50 years for the role of the regions to be so explicitly mentioned in an EU treaty speaks volumes about the way in which that role has been ignored since the creation of the EU. But the rejection of the Constitution has set in motion real change in the attitude towards the regions, and this once-ignored layer of government has been given a new lease of life. The European Commission now explicitly acknowledges the role of the regions in meeting its policy objectives, from tackling climate change to building jobs and growth, and buoyed by this new-found respect, the regions and their associations, including the AER, have become increasingly vocal about their achievements.

The most tangible evidence of this is the plethora of awards that have been created, rewarding the work of the regions. The AER Awards focus on three areas vital for the future prosperity of Europe – innovation, communication and young people. This dossier revisits some of the winning regions, and looks ahead to this year's awards that will once again reinforce the message that the institutional paralysis in Brussels is not reflected in Europe's local communities. <

– Innovation award –

Competitive edge

INNOVATION IS THE KEY TO BOOSTING EUROPE'S COMPETITIVENESS AND CREATING PROSPERITY FOR ALL. BUT FOR INNOVATION TO FLOURISH, THE RIGHT CONDITIONS NEED TO BE IN PLACE, AND REGIONS HAVE A ROLE TO PLAY IN MAKING THIS HAPPEN.

Photo: Anteprema



José Manuel Barroso, President of the EU Commission, awards the Innovation prize to: Niederösterreich-A (1st prize), Valencia-E (2nd prize) and Oberösterreich-A (3rd Prize).

The Lisbon strategy for jobs and growth is one of the lynchpin policies of the European Union. Agreed in 2000 in the Portuguese capital, it set ambitious targets for turning Europe into the world's most competitive knowledge-based society by 2010. As that deadline approaches, the likelihood of the targets being hit look slim, but Europe nonetheless continues to make steady progress towards creating the right conditions for innovation – the main driver of competitiveness – to grow.

Regions have always been heavily involved in cultivating innovation. It is often down to regional authorities to provide the necessary incentives – financial or otherwise – to encourage innovative companies to locate and grow in the regions. The key role of the regions in helping to meet the Lisbon strategy goals was recognised in 2007 when the European Commission made Lisbon-targeted programmes a prerequisite for regions to receive structural funds, but the regions have been working towards creating the right environment for innovation for many years.

In recognition of this work, in 2006 the AER, together with Friuli Venezia Giulia, launched its Innovation Award, designed to showcase the work being carried out by the regions of Europe to stimulate growth and meet the commitments of the Lisbon strategy. Regions use a diverse range of methods to

do this – many are stakeholders in local scientific institutions, technology centres or educational establishments, providing vital support to these bodies not only through investment but also, often, by facilitating the transfer of knowledge from academia into the business arena. But regions can also foster innovation through the way they

legislate or implement rules, provide training and education or offer financial incentives or grants.

The 2007 award was won by Niederösterreich for its RIS-NÖ programme, whose achievements the judges felt met the criterion of having been of tangible benefits to the citizens of the region. The five pillars of the 10-year programme – innovation, technology, cooperation, internationalisation and help for start-up companies – have helped Niederösterreich remain competitive in an increasingly globalised world, and the long-term, holistic approach to fostering innovation shown by the Austrian region was considered an excellent example of best practice to be shared with other regions. It, along with innovation projects from other regions, will feature at an AER conference on innovation to be held in Linz in Oberösterreich in October 2008.

The AER Innovation Award will be offered again in 2008, and is open to all regions of Europe, whether they are part of the EU or not. The closing date for applications is June 1, 2008. <

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<http://www.aer.eu/home-en/main-issues/economic-development/aer-innovation-award.html>

Interview

Lukas Reutterer

Lukas Reutterer is Spokesman for Ernest Gabmann, vice governor of Niederösterreich

"Politicians in our region have shared the same consensus about how to act"

AER: What does winning this award mean for your region?

Lukas Reutterer: It is a great pleasure for Niederösterreich to win this award. It shows that business and politicians are working together in the right way to develop the region's economic policy. And don't forget that this is a 10-year programme, so it means that, regardless of their party politics, they have spoken with one voice for the last decade, and that brings stability.

AER: And has the work of the political leaders of Niederösterreich been recognised by the people living there?

L. R.: We had our most recent round of local elections here on 9 March 2008 and the current local government was re-elected with support from 54 per cent of the voters, which we believe shows that we have the popular support of the local population for our policies, including the innovation programme. It underlines the work we are doing for the development of the whole region.

– Communication award –

Talking loud and clear

WE LIVE IN A COMMUNICATION AGE, BUT COMMUNICATING MORE EASILY DOES NOT NECESSARILY MEAN MORE EFFECTIVELY. THE MORE 'VOICES' THERE ARE TO LISTEN TO, THE HARDER IT IS TO HEAR WHAT EVERYONE IS SAYING – WHICH IS WHY REGIONS HAVE TO WORK HARD TO MAKE THEMSELVES HEARD.

Europe has been particularly poor at communicating its achievements to the European public – the rejection of the Constitution is evidence of a serious failure to both talk and listen. The European Commission, belatedly, launched its Plan D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate to try to show that it was willing to communicate more effectively, and one key element of that programme were the visits by key Commission officials to the towns and cities in the member states. In other words, the Commission realised that the place to start re-engaging with European citizens was in the regions where they live.

In fact, the regions have been much better at talking to citizens than the remote institutions in Brussels and elsewhere, not least because they are much closer to the people they are trying to serve. In recognition of the work of Europe's regions at communicating about Europe, the AER launched the Communicating Europe award in 2007. The aim is to showcase the various approaches taken by the regions of Europe to communicate to the people living in their local communities about their place in Europe – not merely the EU, but the entire continent. This idea of European integration – helping citizens to see Europe as one big family, working together for the benefit of everyone, rather than as some remote institution where diplomats make decisions that affect us all without regard for the consequences – is at the heart of the AER award. Getting that message across inevitably necessitates a new approach to communication – the days of a simple brochure setting out the benefits of EU membership are long gone, and regions need to be far more proactive in their approach, using public debates and other events to allow people to take part in European integration.

The first winning region was Extremadura in Spain, which beat off competition from 23 other regions to clinch the award for its Extremadura in Europe project. The second AER Communicating Europe award will be held in 2008, and will focus on projects in three areas: communicating the Lisbon Treaty, the successor to the EU Constitution whose rejection kick-started the entire communication debate; engaging the regional media on European issues; and educating young people about Europe. The award is



open to regional authorities from any Council of Europe country, and the deadline for applications is June 15, 2008. <

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<http://www.aer.eu/home-en/main-issues/communication/aer-communication-award.html>



Photo: Antepinna



Riccardo Illy, Michèle Sabban and Brian Greenslade award the Prize for Communicating Europe: 1st place to Extremadura-E, 2nd place to Kärnten-A and 3rd place to Sisak-Moslavina-HR.

Interview

Ignacio Corrales Romero

Ignacio Corrales Romero is head of the Foreign Action Service of the Regional Government of Extremadura, Spain

"This award will act as an incentive to keep on working in the same way"

AER: How do you feel as the winners of the first AER Award for Communicating Europe?

Ignacio Corrales Romero: The Extremadura European Information Network which created the winning project is very young – it has only existed for two years, but during that time we have worked hard to spread European information throughout our region. That is why we are proud that a prestigious organisation like the Assembly of European Regions has awarded our Extremadura in Europe project as the best regional communication project in Europe. This award will act as an incentive to keep on working in the same way, to make our citizens aware of the significance of being Europeans and encourage them to active citizenship.

AER: Will you continue with the Extremadura in Europe project this year, and how if at all will it change from previous years?

I.C.R.: Yes, we will continue with the programme in 2008, and it will continue to focus on the same five key areas. The Europe in

villages strand will focus on talking about Europe to people with little idea of European politics, covering most of the towns and villages in Extremadura. Europe in schools involves talking about the EU to children in primary and secondary schools, while Europe in universities continues the work at the higher education level, using a website to target both Erasmus exchange students from other parts of Europe as well as students from the region who want to study in other European countries. The Europe with professionals strand focuses on round table meetings with businessmen, trade unionists, farmers, health professionals, shopkeepers, the security forces, etc. – anyone whose work could be affected by European policies. Finally, the Europe with the media strand will continue to inform the Extremadura media about Europe to help them provide better information about Europe to the people of the region. We have planned a trip to Brussels for local journalists to help them learn and understand a little more about how Europe works and why it is important.

– MYFER award –

Building a better future

THE AER'S MOST YOUTH FRIENDLY EUROPEAN REGION (MYFER) AWARD PROVIDES AN OPPORTUNITY FOR REGIONS TO LEARN FROM EACH OTHER AND IMPROVE EDUCATION, SOCIAL INCLUSION AND UNDERSTANDING AMONG THE CHILDREN OF EUROPE.



Marian Oprisan, President of the Romanian region of Vrancea, is awarded the MYFER prize 2007 by Riccardo Illy.

“Youth comes but once a lifetime,” wrote American author Henry Wadsworth Longfellow – an irrefutable truth, of course, but one with the profoundest of implications. The people we become as adults are formed in our youth – the seeds of all we might eventually achieve in our lifetime are sown during this most vital period. That is why politicians set such store by youth policies: young people have the potential to be anything they want to be, but so many of them are unable to fulfil that potential because of their particular social, geographical or educational background.

European youth policies have therefore focused primarily on improving conditions for the most disadvantaged young people at the same time as creating the right surroundings for young people from every background to flourish both academically and in society as a whole – and as the main providers of many social and education services, the regions are at the forefront of this effort. The AER's Most Youth Friendly European Region award was launched in 2001 to highlight the many varied approaches taken by the regions of Europe to address the issues affecting young people. Awarded every two years, it helps promote and encourage the adoption of more ambitious and effective youth policies across Europe, and offers regions a chance to learn from the experiences of each other in this vital policy area. But it also meant to raise awareness of the fact that the rights of children

and young people are often ignored or abused in modern society – and that there is still much more that needs to be done to address this situation.

The winner of the 2007 award was the Romanian region of Vrancea. Its President, Marian Oprisan, said he was surprised to have won at the first attempt – Vrancea only became a member of the AER in late 2005 – but suggested that the region's achievements in improving the quality of life for young people had been all the more remarkable given the relative lack of economic and social cohesion in Romania compared to other European countries. *“This was not an obstacle for us,”* he said. *“On the contrary, we saw it as an opportunity to prove that when you really want something, ambition and determination can overcome the lack of financial or legislative means.”*

The 2007 competition focused on the relation between youth policies and equal opportunities and intercultural dialogue, and 34 regions from 16 countries took part in the competition. Vrancea's victory was based on the efforts of the County Council to forge links with youth organisations and NGOs, as well as the variety of projects and initiatives developed by the regional government for young people, including a European Youth portal, debates on European citizenship, awareness raising campaigns about Europe's linguistic and cultural variety and many others.

For Marian Oprisan, the AER award shows that being part of Europe means that achievements are recognised and rewarded no matter what country or region they come from. *“When you are doing something right, nobody can dispute that fact, and it doesn't really matter if you come from Romania, Italy or any other European country.”* More than that, the award shows that the people working on youth projects in Vrancea *“have become an example of good practice not only for all the counties of Romania, but also for all the other AER member regions, and a source of pride for the people of Vrancea and Romanians everywhere”.*

But the award has offered more than pride and recognition – important as they are to Vrancea. Many other AER member regions are keen to work with Vrancea on other projects – not just in areas relating to youth policy but also in other areas such as tourism and the culture. *“It is clear to us that this prize has offered us the opportunity of accessing new European programmes, by ourselves or in partnership with other members of the AER,”* said Marian Oprisan. *“That is why we must take advantage of this opportunity and prove to everybody that it wasn't just a fluke that Vrancea won this award.”* <



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