

PRESS RELEASE

EUROCHAMBRES' annual Congress opens in Paris and assesses competitiveness of European regions

The 15th annual Congress of EUROCHAMBRES, the Association of European Chambers of Commerce and Industry, opened in Paris today. More than 500 representatives from Chambers, business, politics and academia will discuss 'Business and regional development: growth will come from the ground!', i.e. the role of regions and local actors in boosting competitiveness on a European scale.

Pierre Simon, the newly re-elected President of EUROCHAMBRES, explained why this theme is so important: *"A Europe of results needs a bottom-up approach. Political decisions are taken at the highest level by European and national institutions, but it is on the ground that concrete measures can lead to more growth and jobs. Local actors have the right to make their voice heard! Thanks to their historical regional focus and global reach, Chambers of Commerce are in a privileged position to make this happen."*

Jacques Barrot, Vice-President of the European Commission and Michel Delebarre, President of the Committee of the Regions, are among the keynote speakers to address the opening session of the Congress. Then, specific workshops and bilateral meetings will offer participants the opportunity to share ideas and exchange best practices at local level that could inspire future EU action.

The Atlas of Regional Competitiveness

In order to stimulate the debates, EUROCHAMBRES presented its 'Atlas of Regional Competitiveness', a study taking stock of the performance of the 268 regions of the EU in terms of GDP; employment; education and lifelong learning; innovation; access to telecommunications; transport and internationalisation. All findings of the Atlas are based on Eurostat data and serve as a basis for Chambers' policy recommendations towards regional, national and European decision-makers.

Employment – Only 25% of regions reach Lisbon target

Only a quarter of all regions meet the Lisbon target of a 70% employment rate. Strong regional disparities exist, the best performing region (Berkshire, Bucks and Oxfordshire – UK) having an employment rate of 78%, while the worst performing regions are at about 44-45%. The Atlas also shows that there is a considerable gap between male and female participation in the labour market: the male employment rate is on average 15% higher than the female one.

To improve the situation, drastic labour market reforms should be carried out, above all when it comes to increasing flexibility in regular employment contracts and the reduction of non-wage labour costs. An effective management of migration flows and a greater inclusion of young people, women, elderly and low qualified workers into the labour market are also crucial in this respect.

Education and life-long learning – Lifelong learning increases employability

With regard to the level of education of the workforce, the disparity between the 'old' and 'new' member states is less obvious than for other indicators. What stands out is an apparent link between lifelong learning and employment: five countries (UK, Finland, Denmark, the Netherlands, Sweden) share between them the regions with the highest level of participation in lifelong learning and those with the highest employment rates.

EUROCHAMBRES calls for vocational education and training to be more integrated into higher education. New instruments should be developed to increase the mobility of apprentices and concrete measures should be offered for young SME owners/managers to participate in mobility actions.

Innovation – Few regions stand out

The main indicator for innovativeness is the number of patent requests filed with the European Patent Office per million inhabitants. R&D investment and the relative share of R&D personnel are sub-indicators. Enormous disproportions exist: only 21 out of 268 regions meet the Lisbon R&D spending target of 3% of GDP, while amongst the top 15 of regions with the highest number of patent applications, 11 are in Germany.

The improvement of the Intellectual Property Right system towards more efficiency and lower cost should be the priority of the European policy on innovation. Clusters are another valuable means of promoting innovation. The EU must develop active cooperation strategies (including cross-border ones) between clusters, and the actors involved in clusters.

Transport – Strong geographical concentration

Transport is a crucial factor for both attractiveness and competitiveness of a region, but proves to be strongly geographically concentrated. Motorway density is much higher in the 'old' member states, mainly in North-Western Europe. Air freight flows are concentrated in just a few regions with sizeable airports. The same goes for maritime freight transport, which concentrates on the so-called 'Northern Range', a line of ports running from Le Havre in France to Hamburg in Germany.

Measures to optimise the use existing transport infrastructures should be encouraged: for example the use of telematic solutions or the facilitation of co-modality (combining different transport modes).

The Atlas is complemented by a collection of best practices at local level for each of its chapters. These best practices highlight the role of Chambers in fostering local economic development through cooperation and partnerships with other local stakeholders.

The full Atlas of Regional Competitiveness can be downloaded from
www.eurochambres.eu/PDF/pdf_regional_policy/Atlas/Atlas%20of%20Regional%20Competitiveness.pdf

The Best Practices Brochure can be downloaded from
www.eurochambres.eu/PDF/pdf_regional_policy/Atlas/Best%20practices.pdf

*FURTHER INFORMATION: Mr Arnaldo Abruzzini, tel.: +32 2-282 08 51, abruzzo@eurochambres.eu
PRESS CONTACT: Ms Guendalina Cominotti, tel.: +32 2-282 08 66, cominotti@eurochambres.eu*

All our press releases can be downloaded from: <http://www.eurochambres.eu/press/>