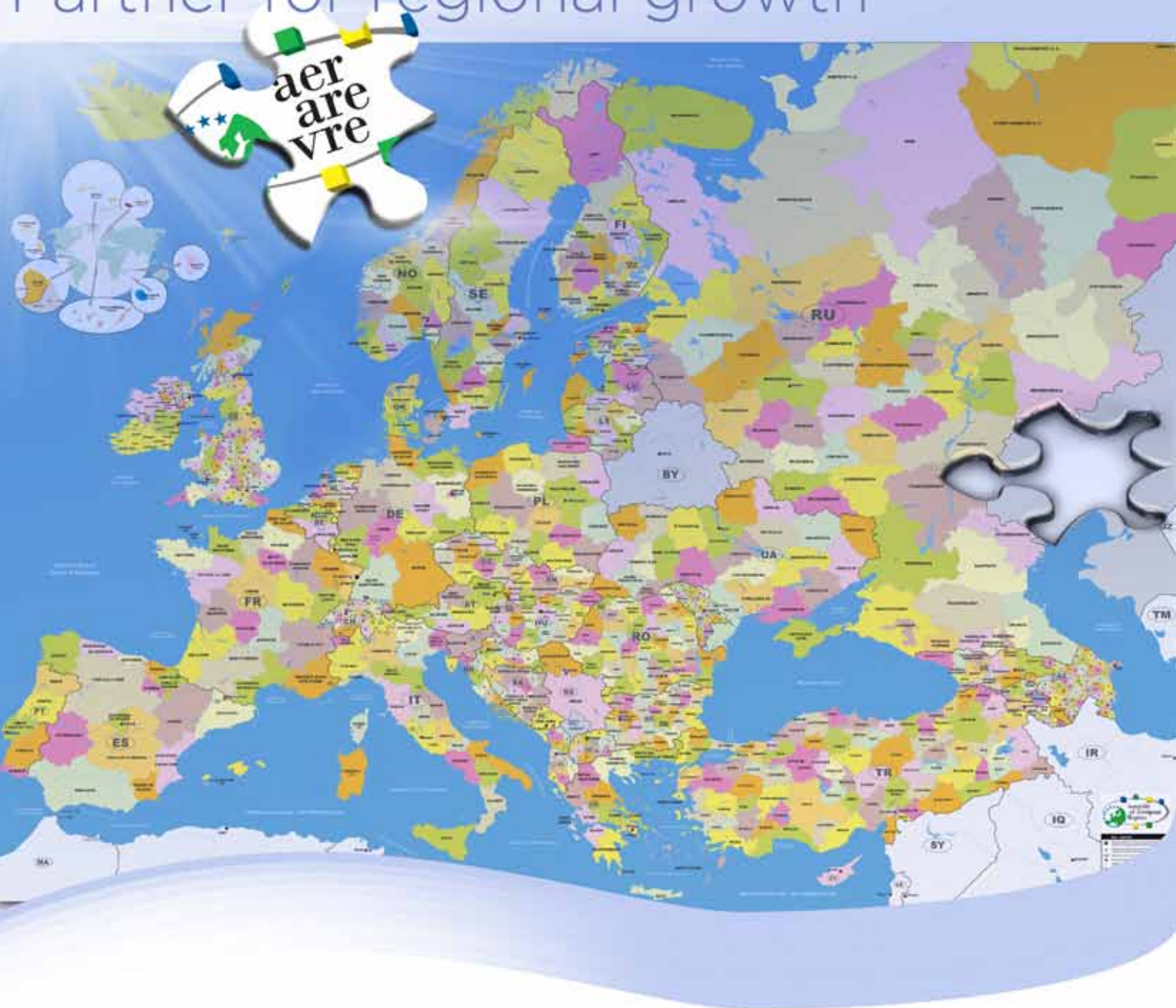


AER

Partner for regional growth



Activity
Report 2013

From the Azores islands of Portugal to the Tatarstan region of Russia, from northern Finland's Lappi region to the Greek island of Kriti, the Assembly of European Regions' (AER) members govern around 240 million citizens in wider Europe.

Since 1985, AER has grown to become the largest network of regional authorities in Europe by offering members a real voice on the European stage and a dynamic forum for interregional cooperation.

This report presents the results of the mandate with a snapshot of AER's activities and achievements in 2013.

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  Tous droits r serv s.

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AER Building Inclusive Societies Conference: Hande Özsan Bozatli and Asunción Sánchez Zaplana, Regional Minister for Social Welfare of the Comunitat Valenciana (ES)

Hande Özsan Bozatli, AER President

I am proud to have been elected President of AER at our General Assembly in May 2013 with a strong Executive Board to support me. I know well that the Presidency of the Assembly of European Regions is not an easy mission: it requires sacrificing a certain amount of one's own business and family life. I am fully aware of the responsibilities of the mission.

We are in need of working even harder for European regions to develop any kind of interregional cooperation deemed relevant by our members. The challenges are numerous: more effective cross-border cooperation, sustainable coexistence of urban and rural areas, and development of macro-regions. Our fellow citizens count on us to always find the best route towards a more prosperous, peaceful, secure and democratic world. Our success depends on your support and contributions as much as our own efforts.

In order for AER to rise to these challenges, our main priorities have always been:

- Building a transparent and effective governance for AER;
- Strengthening our concrete support to AER member regions and conveying strong messages to EU and non-EU institutions;
- Developing our network of partners and supporters for more expertise, visibility and lobbying powers for regions.

A transparent and effective governance for AER

At the beginning of my presidency I felt it was needed to hold monthly Executive

Board (EB) meetings to manage AER on a daily basis and to give political orientation to AER's work. Now that things are rolling, EB meetings will take place every 6 weeks / 2 months. We have always defended democratic governance based on transparent collaboration. I am proud of this fact, and I think we should all be proud of it.

I and the Executive Board members decided to put everything on paper to raise our standards of governance like all transparent European organizations. We decided to sign a **Memorandum of Understanding with all partner networks and with AER programmes** such as ACI, Circom, CALRE or Eurodysey. The formalisation of all these partnerships aims at avoiding that they become person dependent but on the contrary that they last in time.

I am also glad to report that an **evaluation of the effectiveness of our Committees' work** is currently under way and I give my full support to the Monitoring and Evaluation Group which is carrying out this review. The Task Force, made up of AER members led by Håkan Sandgren, has done an important work to design the future of the AER structure. At the same time, a new strategy for 2013-2020 was adopted at the Paris GA.

The Turnaround Group that the EB has put in place in September, has worked on the **implementation of the Task Force's conclusions, the clarification and prioritisation of AER's mission and objectives and the exploration and**

assessment of cooperation possibilities with other European regional associations.

On top of all this, I have had many **meetings with AER members and regional representations** at the occasion of Committee plenaries, conferences and various events in Brussels and all across Europe to listen to your needs.

As a consequence of the developments in various EU policies in the regional field, the issues on our agenda have multiplied. A need for further deepening and specialization is now the order of the day. There are new responsibilities to be assumed by the AER and we are ready for it!

Together with the Executive Board members and the Secretariat, we are continuously working hard for all our member regions.



AER President with EC Commissioner for Regional Policy, Johannes Hahn



Strengthening our concrete support to AER member regions and conveying strong messages to EU and non-EU institution

Priority has been given to the strengthening of our Committee work:

- new working groups have been established: Investments, businesses and SMEs; Eastern Partnership;
- more transversal issues for more coherence: I am glad that representatives on Equal opportunities in each Committees have been appointed;
- more meetings are taking place jointly for better effectiveness.

Working for high quality programmes:

- I am glad to see new regions joining **Eurodyseey**;
- **Rur@ct** is working well with many regions who applied to the first call of interest.

I would particularly like to emphasize the work of our Youth Regional Network, which has been strengthened by having its own legal personality. As a sign of confidence towards our youth, the YRN President is now a member of the EB and I am glad to see that the YRN presidium is getting stronger and always more visible on the international stage. I personally have taken part in various youth events with our YRN President Beat Rohner.

We always need **more peer reviews and training academies** to support our regions as the coming period will require the deployment of all our institutional



Mrs Özsan Bozatlı and Committee of Regions President, Ramón Luis Valcárcel - Open Days 2013

resources in full force. With the new world order, Europe will face political, economic, social and foreign policy choices which will shape our future.

These choices will affect closely the welfare, the quality of life, the level of development of our people and our place in the global arena. We all know that Europe's uniqueness and strength are to be found in the diversity of its territories. Smart, sustainable and inclusive growth and exploiting our potential to the fullest must be priorities for European regions. Moreover, promoting **interregional and territorial cooperation**, which in turn is a good means to overcome territorial conflicts, must be at the core of AER's business.

From this point of view, we have taken some powerful stances over the past few months and voiced them throughout Europe:

On **cohesion policy**, AER has defended a strong budget for European regions. I have met Johannes Hahn, EU Commissioner for regional policy at various occasions. We are currently looking, at his demand, into the possibility of giving the European Commission technical assistance to help them understand the different levels of decentralisation across Europe.

On **innovation**, various events took place such as the "The Answer is Innovation" conference on 5th of November to exchange on how regions can further enhance their role as key actors in shaping virtuous innovation trajectories and in mobilising untapped potential for regional growth. I am also glad to report that the 7th innovation award has been launched with always big interest from members.

On the **Eastern Partnership**, AER has once again been a pioneer. By developing links with regions of Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Moldova and Russia, AER is willing to succeed where States find it hard to find a way forward. Whether Ukraine signs the Association Agreement or not, AER will pursue its efforts to establish a bridge between Europe and Ukraine in order to obtain concrete results at social, economic and human level.

On the **Black Sea Strategy**, AER took the opportunity of its 4th Black Sea Summit in Rize (TR) in October to fight for the Black Sea region not to be forgotten in the future European neighbourhood policy. I personally met Commissioner Füle's head



of cabinet to defend the importance of cooperation in this part of the world.

Developing our network of partners and supporters for more expertise, visibility and lobbying powers for regions

We have strengthened our relationship with the Council of Europe and we will be signing an MoU with the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities at the beginning of 2014 for further collaboration on youth issues and human rights.

We have daily contacts with the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Committee of the Regions. Events such as our bi-annual networking events in Strasbourg and Brussels are good occasions to render AER and its members more visible towards the institutions.

I hope you will agree with me that all the initiatives presented in this activity report were useful for furthering interregional cooperation.

I would like to personally thank all regions, which have contributed to our work throughout this year. AER is nothing without your involvement and I hope you will remain as committed to our work as you were in 2013. Many challenges lie ahead of us. Together we will overcome them all!

AER President with Turkish officials at the 4th AER Black Sea Summit in Rize (TR)

EC President Barroso meeting with the representatives of local and regional organisations



P. Goergen speaking at the AER Seminar on ICT-Based Integrated Care in Barcelona, Catalunya (ES)



Pascal Goergen, AER Secretary General

I believe that 2013 was a transitional year for our Assembly, which will be 30 years old in just a little over a year. We have been fighting for nearly three decades to promote the regional dimension and highlight the regions' role as centers providing citizens - particularly Youth - with assistance for local issues in this ever-changing world.

Building bridges between Europe and its citizens was our governing principle throughout the past year. I am proud of the work that we have carried out together as part of the Eastern Partnership and especially the actions taken in the Ukrainian and other member regions to bring Ukraine closer to Europe. Our Committees' work also benefits from the establishment of relationships with the academic world. Drawing on our academic experts, we provide our member regions with the necessary expertise. The promotion within the AER of concrete actions taken by and for our youth allows us to move forward, exchange and innovate. In our everyday work, this fact is made obvious by the dynamism of our Youth Regional Network and Youth Community members and of course, our annual Summer Academy and Eurodessey programme. We are shaping the future of AER every single day.

The adoption of our new strategy, the election of our new President in Paris and the continuation of a sound financial management, coupled with a transparent and innovating governance, constitute clear answers to our members' need for change,

which I came up with right after taking office. This transitional period was no bed of roses for the General Secretariat's staff or the new political leaders.

President Hande Özsan Bozatlı, the Executive Board and myself hold the keys to making AER our member regions' partner for growth. The increased presence of the regions' political leaders and especially the AER President beside the European institutions, the will to strengthen our team in Brussels to increase our lobbying, human networking as well as creating more links with the press, are all signs of the renewed interest in our activities: the press coverage, number of visits on our website and reactions on our social networks confirm that AER is indeed gaining strength. As a matter of fact, the keys that you have given us have already opened numerous doors: those of the European institutions, academic world, institutional and thematic partners, but also those of the corporate world. More doors should open this year: to new member regions, new partner networks and SMEs.

True to my regional creed, my approach has always been and will always be pragmatic and concrete: "the future of AER is now". Instruments that were deployed in 2012 were approved in 2013 and management procedures were adopted by our authorities during the Bureau meeting in Rize, next to the Black Sea. All we have to do now is ensure that we have the human and technical means to use them properly. To reap tomorrow, we must sow today.

Throughout 2013, we have focused on the promotion of common values through quality political reports, the regions' work within our Committees and in the course of 105 events all over Europe. I would like to take this opportunity to thank each and every one of our member regions, the members of my team for their daily involvement, our partner networks and the first companies that co-founded the AER Business Community. Without their energy, our Assembly could not carry out this work.

This is the dawn of a new year, which I hope will witness the strengthening of our regional Assembly. I hereby promise that the AER will implement new and innovating activities throughout 2014.



AER President and Secretary General met with Olli Rehn, EC Commissioner for Economic and Monetary Affairs and the Euro

AER Executive Board



Members of the AER Executive Board and Partners gathered in Brussels-Capital Region (BE)

Among all the changes that 2013 has seen in the governance of AER, notably because of the Presidential election and the implementation of most of the Taskforce recommendations, an important one has been the transition from the Presidium to the Executive Board (EB) in May.

More than a mere change of name, the ways of working of this group have also changed.

The composition of the EB is wider, increasing from 9 to 11 members. Indeed, in order to represent the youth of our regions, the President of the YRN is now a full member and one more Vice-President has been elected. In addition to the Committee's Presidents, the EB counts a Vice-President Treasurer, Magnus Berntsson (Västra Götaland-SE), two Vice-Presidents, Vasco Cordeiro (Açores-PT) and Jean-Claude Gayssot (Languedoc-Roussillon-FR) as well as the Vice-President of the host region, André Reichardt (Alsace-FR).

In 2013, eleven EB meetings took place with a reinforced rhythm of one per month since the elections. As stated by the President, imposing this intense pace was important for a

new EB to get to grips rapidly with the AER issues.

This steady pace in meetings has proven to be essential in building a solid ground for the new governance and in boosting in-depth discussions on all key issues, both related to content and policy as well as organisation and management.

Working in the spirit of transparency, trust and teamwork, the EB showed a clear will to dedicate the necessary time to fulfil its obligations. Now that the ball is rolling, meetings will happen every 6 weeks to 2 months.

The EB spend time at each meeting scrutinising the AER accounts, the state of membership and the use of resources to ensure a viable future for the organisation. It has worked with the Secretary General at the introduction of new tools to be able to make informed decisions. This includes monthly cash flow forecasts, management indicators to put objective figures on the AER activities, visibility and financial and human resources or progress reports on the implementation of AER's work plan.

The EB is also working very hard to ensure that new members join AER and that current members remain in our organisation despite the economic difficulties. The President and EB members have therefore organised various meetings with potential new members and report every month on their progress. More than random one-off meetings, a reinforced Membership Action Plan (MAP) strategy has been put into place for which each EB member has a concrete role to play.

All the new partnerships with networks or private companies are carefully reviewed before being accepted as well as all new political orientations proposed by the President and EB members.

At the fall Bureau meeting in Rize (TR), which was coupled with the 4th AER Black Sea Summit, all the proposals put on the table by the EB have been accepted, most of the time at unanimity. We take this as a sign of confidence in the work we have undertaken so far. We will continue working hard on that line in 2014 for what will hopefully be a year full of success for our organisation.

European Projects

SMART EUROPE



The Smart Europe INTERREG IVC project is a consortium of 13 partners representing 11 EU regions, aiming to boost employment in the innovation sector through the development of smart and targeted regional policies, as well as increased support to the key economic anchors generating jobs in the region.

After two years of implementation, the Smart Europe consortium can already boast of impressive results: 11 Peer Reviews, 15 Smart Europe Cafés uniting local and regional stakeholders and 2 international conferences, as well as exchanges on numerous good practices. Using the AER Regional Peer Review methodology, the project partners analysed and developed improvements for their regional policies on employment, triple-helix cooperation, the creation of innovative SMEs and cluster development.

committed to identifying, exchanging and transferring effective regional policy instruments and mechanisms to improve access to finance for sustainable energy projects and speed up investments.

During this second year of the project, partners focused on delivering concrete results via the implementation of 7 peer reviews led by international teams of experts, the drafting of reports on how to improve regional policies in the field of energy and the transfer of good practices and knowledge amongst partners through Master-Classes and an international conference organised in Debrecen (HU).

SmartCare



SmartCare, a project co-funded under the Competitiveness and Innovation Framework Programme (CIP), aims to define and pilot services for an open information and communication technologies (ICT) platform enabling the delivery of integrated health and social care to older European citizens, thus contributing to the development of more efficient and economical regional care systems.

Among the 24 partner regions, 10 regions pilot the SmartCare services while the others observe the pilots, learn from their experience and prepare for early implementation. AER is in charge of coordinating the learning process of the observer regions and making the added value of ICT based integrated care known to the wider European regional community. In this framework, AER organised in June a highly attended seminar in Barcelona (ES).

ENGAGED



AER is a partner of ENGAGED, a wide European network for mutual learning and support to the further deployment of innovative solutions for active and healthy ageing. The network is supported by the CIP, it aims to build a growing coalition of stakeholders, raise awareness and disseminate information about age-friendly environments, promote transferability and support regions to implement new models and services. In this context the AER organised a side event to the high-level Ambient Assisted Living forum in Norrköping (SE) in September and will also participate to the ALEC 2014 conference and side events from 4 to 6 February in Norrbotten (SE).

Regions4 GreenGrowth



The Regions4GreenGrowth INTERREG IVC project is an initiative of 13 EU regions with high sustainable energy ambitions that are



Institutional and Academic Affairs (IAA) AER Academic and Training Centre

AER Vice-President in charge of IAA: Roy Perry, Leader of Hampshire (UK)

The impact of the economic crisis

The economic crisis which Europe has been facing in the last years has remained one of the main concerns of AER in 2013. The Directorate for Institutional and Academic Affairs (IAA) took a closer look at the effects of the crisis on territorial structures. Indeed, the budget cuts imposed by the current economic context are also affecting regional authorities. During a debate on this issue at the Chamber of the Regions of the Congress of the Council of Europe, on 30 October in Strasbourg, Sonja Steen, President of Committee 3, underlined that budgetary constraints should not be used to jeopardize the very existence of regional authorities, or to limit their remit, for Regions are key actors of the European economy. The AER recommendations on the Regions and the crisis were also displayed at a stand, where other novelties such as the newly launched AER Academic and Training Centre were unveiled.

Decentralisation and Regionalism

One pillar of this new Centre is the monitoring of territorial and administrative reforms in European countries. In this context, a few days after the Albanian national elections, AER held a Seminar on Decentralisation in the Region of Kukes on 5 July 2013. The seminar, which gathered Presidents and representatives of Albanian regions, but also representatives of the main associations of local and regional authorities, focused on the challenges of efficient multi-level governance in a country, Albania, where regions are quite recent.

European Neighbourhood Policy

Since 2010, AER has been playing a leading role in promoting dialogue and cooperation among regions from the Black Sea. In 2013, the Directorate for Institutional Affairs pursued the successful

cycle of Summits of the Black Sea Regions and organized the 4th AER Black Sea Summit on 4 October 2013 in Rize (TR), in the presence of the Turkish Minister for Trade and Customs. This Summit was the occasion to exchange with the representatives of the EU and the Joint Managing Authority about the achievements and future prospects of the Black Sea Basin Joint Operational Programme (BSB JOP) which represents a major funding source for interregional cooperation projects in this area. On time before the Eastern Partnership Summit in Vilnius, participants called for a strong European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) with appropriate funding and expressed their concerns regarding the budgetary constraints of the European Neighbourhood Instruments (ENI) planned for the period 2014-2020. All agreed that Regions should get increasingly involved in the implementation of the future ENP and highlighted the leading role played by AER as a platform for cooperation in that context.

On the eve of the Summit, representatives from Black Sea Regions could benefit from a tailor-made training session organized by the AER Academic and Training Centre on the main financial tools for cooperation projects in the Black Sea.

AER and the Council of Europe

To tighten the link with the members of the Chamber of the Regions, and raise awareness about its work, AER organized a reception at the Council of Europe, on the occasion of the March plenary session of the Congress. Congress members had the opportunity to learn more about the new AER strategy, and the principle for an official cooperation agreement between the two structures was agreed upon. This official agreement, which aims at institutionalizing the cooperation between AER and the Congress and is accompanied by a two-year joint action plan for 2014-2015, was approved by the Congress Bureau on 25 November and will get into force early 2014.

Faced by the crisis, regions at Europe's bedside

After Pescara in 2012, AER organized a second Crisis Summit on 8 March in Mazowieckie (PL). "Youth as a source and a lever of regional growth in times of crisis" was the issue at the heart of this Summit, which took place at the College of Europe of Warsaw and gathered almost 100 representatives from European, national and regional authorities, together with students and civil society stakeholders. The participants unanimously acknowledged that regions could do a lot to face youth unemployment by implementing youth mobility programmes, such as Eurodisney. Bearing in mind the role of SMEs as the backbone of the productive system, participants also insisted on the key role regional authorities are playing in helping and supporting young entrepreneurs who want to start a new activity.

Finally, on 16 May, the concluding Summit took place in Paris in the presence of European Budget Commissioner Janusz Lewandowski and French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius. Three roundtables allowed stakeholders from public, private and community sectors to discuss the issues of the financing of regional investments, the role of innovative companies and the construction of a fairer society.

10 recommendations to lead Europe out of the crisis through regions were then presented. The main message? In situations of crisis in Europe, regions can and should take their place as proposition and driving forces. Above all, our current difficulties should not overshadow the fact that we are the driving forces of Europe.



Equal opportunities

AER Vice-President in charge of EO: Monica Carlsson, Councillor, Norrbotten (SE)

Following the recommendations of its Task Force, AER now has a Vice-President in charge of Equal Opportunities (EO): Monica Carlsson, and the work of the EO standing Committee has been replaced by a mainstreaming of this topic across AER.

In 2013 each AER Committee, as well as the Youth Regional Network (YRN), have been asked to nominate representatives in charge of EO. Monica Carlsson is now backed in her work by Mariane Saenen (Wallonia-BE) and Monalisa Norman (Jämtland-SE) from Committee 1 ; Hätice Betül Büyükbese (Gaziantep-TR) and Remus Moraru (Prahova-RO) from Committee 2 ; Dag Rønning (Hedmark-NO) and Lilla

Merabet (Alsace-FR) from Committee 3 and Laëtitia Redonet (Limousin-FR) from the Youth Regional Network.

The role of the EO representatives in each Committee and the YRN is to make sure that the equal opportunities perspective is integrated throughout AER's and the YRN's work. Monica Carlsson will also take an active part in the plenary meetings of the Committees to update them on the EO agenda.

With this group of EO representatives in place, two meetings took place, in Rize (TR) on 3 October 2013 and in Valencia (ES) on 11 December 2013 to discuss the strategic

orientation to be given to this topic in AER. It was agreed that gender equality would be the first focus of the EO work. The AER conference on 'Building inclusive societies' organised by Committee 2 with the active participation of Monica Carlsson on 12 December 2013 was a first step to mainstream the issue across AER Committees' activities and to reaffirm the importance of this topic within AER.

The political priorities and action plan 2013-2015 can be found on the new EO webpage of the AER website.

Regional Expertise Centre

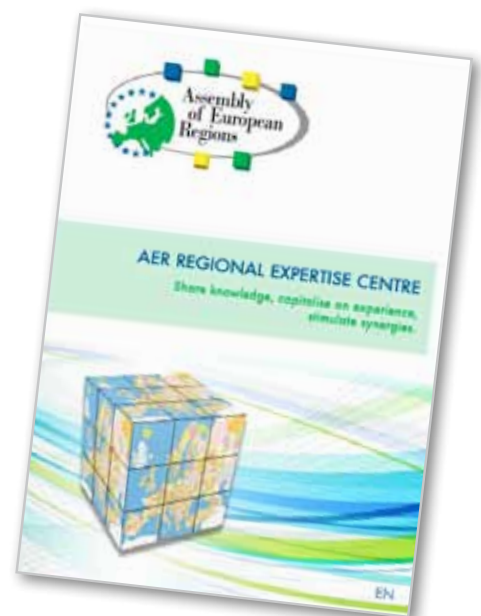
The Regional Expertise Centre is a new transversal AER department, which aims to collect, synthesise and make available to all members the work carried out by the three Committees and in the context of the transversal issues (Institutional affairs and Equal opportunities), whether it be concrete activities or policy recommendations. The Centre optimises the expertise exchanged within AER. In order to achieve this objective of sharing, consolidating and fostering expertise in European regions, the remit of the Regional Expertise Centre is divided into 3 strands:

Sharing the expertise, via the RUR@CT programme, the valorisation of the Regional peer review methodology and the coordination of the AER prizes for the most innovative region (RIA) and for the most youth friendly region (MYFER). In 2013, the Regional Expertise Centre kicked-off the RUR@CT programme (see page 13), as well as the 2013 edition of the RIA and the 2014 edition of the MYFER.

Compiling and disseminating the expertise in a structured way, thanks to the progressive implementation of an internal database of best practices, in order to obtain an extensive referencing of regional expertise, at the service of all AER members.

Coordinating and disseminating information on the various sources of European funding for interregional cooperation and on EU regional policy in general. In this context, the Regional Expertise Centre initiated, in cooperation with the thematic Committees, an information cycle on European funding. The principle of this series of events is to focus on one particular topic and explain the different European funding opportunities existing in this particular field. This service is reserved to AER members. Three sessions have taken place in September, October and November, respectively on rural development, youth and regional innovation. Other sessions are planned in 2014. The Regional Expertise Centre also coordinated the monitoring, lobbying, communication and all activities related to the future EU regional policy.

Members have received regular and detailed information on EU co-funding possibilities for their interregional cooperation activities, via specific meetings, or through information points at the occasion of statutory events.



AER Committee 1
autumn plenary meeting
in Brussels-Capital Region (BE)



Commission 1 :

Économie et Développement régional

Président : Marian-Constantin Vasile, Vice-Président, Timis (RO)

Dynamic, interactive and output oriented. These are the guiding principles that have driven Committee 1 since the election of its new President, Marian-Constantin Vasile, Timis (RO) last spring.

2013 has been a year of transformation and strategic changes for Committee 1 which, by means of a reinforced Presidium and new tools, has focused on supporting its members in the defence of their key interests and maximising their opportunities for interregional cooperation.

Economic development & Innovation

In 2013, helping regions overcome the economic crisis has been a top priority for AER. With this in mind, Committee 1 created a brand new Working Group on Investment, Business and SMEs. Chaired by Jean-Luc Vanraes, Brussels-Capital (BE), the group will focus on supporting the more than 20 million SMEs as well as on boosting investments in the regions.

The Vonlanthen Report on the IDEAL Index (Fribourg, CH), is an example of the member's efforts to shed greater light on actual, tangible progress, taking into account the level of wellbeing, quality of life and sustainable development. This report, which results from the work carried out by

12 pilot regions, was adopted in May 2013 and subsequently disseminated to key stakeholders at EU level.

As a kick-off of the 2013 Regional Innovation Award, a round table reuniting the past winners provided the opportunity to hear more about the success of their projects since receiving the award. Alongside this event, a full day was dedicated to innovation policy, smart specialisation and EU Structural and Investment Funds. Also in the field of Innovation, the Secretariat continued its involvement in INTERREG IVC project Smart Europe on innovation-based jobs.

Transport and Regional Airports

The ongoing revision by European Commission (EC) of the guidelines on State aid to Regional Airports and Airlines has made 2013 a pivotal year for future of Regional Airports in Europe. These guidelines aim at promoting fair competition and efficiency in public financing, however their application could lead to the closure of around 100 airports. This is a serious issue, when we think about the direct and indirect benefits these airports have on local communities.

In cooperation with our partner ACI Europe, and thanks to the efforts of the Working Group on Regional Airports, chaired by Per Inge Bjerknes,

Østfold (NO), AER issued a common position to respond to the EC's consultation, arguing that a more in-depth analysis of the territorial impact of the guidelines is needed to strike the correct balance between growth and competition.

The AER position was largely discussed throughout the year: at one-to-one meetings with DG Regio's Commissioner Hahn; at working group meetings in Brussels (BE), Dnipropetrovsk (UA) and Charleroi Airport (BE), where members met DG COMP and DG MOVE ; as well as move during a Tales from Europe press event. The AER position, which preceded that of the CoR, gained recognition at EU level and was highlighted in several European media articles, as well as in an open letter to EU President Barroso, whereby over 50 Members of the European Parliament requested the EC reconsiders its stance.

Energy and Climate Change

As a result of the activities of the Working Group on Energy and Climate Change, chaired by Kenneth Backgård, Norrbotten (SE), in May 2013, the AER adopted the Kendal Report on the role of regions in enabling a future for electric vehicles (Hampshire, UK). The report was presented to the Head of Cabinet of Commissioner Günther Oettinger, as

well as at several events including a Workshop on Sustainable Mobility in Urban Areas in Brussels, the World Sustainable Energy Days in Upper Austria (AT) and at the AER debate with DG Move, the European Electromobility Observatory of HyER, the European Automobile Manufacturers' Association, BMW and EURELECTRIC.

Sustainable energy policies remained high on the agenda of the working group, who discussed good practices in near zero energy buildings and the new EC energy efficiency directive with DG Energy. Moreover, AER's participation in INTERREG IVC project Regions4GreenGrowth provided a growing number of transferable good practices on how to boost investments in renewable energy. The working group's expertise was also highlighted at the AER Summer School on the green economy and during the R20 conference on implementing the sustainable energy future.

Rural development

Building on the outcomes of the 2012 conference organised in Limousin (FR), AER adopted the Denanot Report on how to unlock the potential of rural areas. The report advocates full recognition of the role of rural areas in achieving the Europe 2020 objectives in terms of innovation, growth and jobs. Following its adoption, the report was largely disseminated and in November, Jan Jacob Van Dijk, Gelderland (NL), Chairman of the Working Group on Rural Development, presented it to

Commissioner Ciolos at a meeting alongside the European Countryside Movement.

The working group has been actively cooperating with a wide range of thematic networks, as well as providing expert input to the advisory group on rural and agricultural policy at DG AGRI and the European Network for Rural Development. Moreover, many of the working group's regions participated in the 1st edition of the AER RUR@CT programme, which focused on rural development.

Cohesion policy & funding

Historically a Committee 1 priority, this year the AER activities on Cohesion policy and funding have been coordinated transversally by the Regional Expertise Centre. In this respect, the Reichardt Report on information and access to European funding (Alsace, FR) was widely disseminated. The main outcomes of the report were included in a DG Budget video presentation.

Moreover the Secretariat aimed to assist EU regions in the elaboration and negotiations of their Partnership contracts and launched a series of Funding sessions. So far, these have tackled funding for rural development, financing for innovation and research and how to include opportunities for interregional cooperation in Regional Operational Programmes stemming from the use of Art.37.6.b.



AER President with AER Secretary General and Committee 1 President at the World Investment Conference in Strasbourg

External funding Source

The European Commission renewed its annual operating grant to the Assembly of European Regions, under the Europe for Citizens Programme, to support all AER actions dedicated to youth and citizenship. AER is also grateful to the Regional Council of Alsace (FR) for its renewed support for operating costs. The Istanbul Region (TR) is warmly thanked for providing one senior collaborator for an extra year. The Alba County (RO) is hosting an AER office and dedicated two staff members to this task. Finally, the Abruzzo Region (I) is thanked for hosting the AER Brussels office.



AER pursued its partnership with the EDF group this year. In this framework, AER aimed at sharing experiences and good practices within the European territories in view of economic, environmental and social development. Together with AER, EDF took notably an active part in the R20 Summit on climate change held in Vienna (AT) in January. We could also benefit from EDF's expertise during the panel on the role of companies as pool of job and innovation on regional level, held at the AER Crisis Summit in Paris, Île-de-France (F) on 16 May.



AER Committee 2
Presidium members
in Barcelona, Catalunya (ES)



Committee 2: Social policy and Public health

President: Karsten Uno Petersen, Councillor, Syddanmark (DK)

Responding to the current societal and economic challenges requires 3 main qualities: commitment, creativity, and... commitment.

As we are speaking, the social and public health sector is faced with an incredible number of challenges, and with pressing questions: how should we continue to provide good care for all with less money? What will a society where around 30% of the population is aged 65 and over look like? And how do we make it work in the regions? How do we ensure the continuity of care in rural areas? How do we build inclusive societies, where everyone finds a fulfilling role to play? Committee 2's objective is to develop its own perspective and to voice AER member regions' answers to these questions.

Reinventing our care systems

Just like today's phones do not look the same as the phones of yesterday, tomorrow's care system will not look like today's! We need to imagine a smart care system that responds to today's constraints: people are growing older, we have fewer doctors, we have an increasing number of patients, and they have increasing expectations too, etc.

Fortunately, regions have innovation on their side. There are more and more technological solutions to support healthcare, now the question is: how can we, as regional politicians, support something we do not know? Designing tomorrow's healthcare

systems is not something you can improvise. How can we know where to invest money and when it is time to do it? AER has identified a need for training for regional politicians on these issues. In 2013, the AER e-he@lth network developed the AER Leadership Programme for Innovation in Healthcare. This Programme, created by AER for its members, consists of a series of training sessions for politicians and high-level civil servants in the field of healthcare and innovation, so that decision-makers have the tools to make informed choices.

In addition, AER believes that despite the need to cut spending, we should not undermine the fact that additional investment in health might be necessary in order to increase the efficiency of our healthcare systems. This is the message Committee 2 expressed in its Response to the European Commission's Communication on "Investing in Health" accompanying the Social Investment Package.

Tapping into the potential of integrated care

What is integrated care? This sounds like a rather technical and complicated term: in reality, integrated care refers to closing the traditional gap that often exists between health and social care in terms of delivery, management and organisation, thus bringing a response to the fragmentation of services, and creating opportunities for synergies and increased quality of services. In June 2013, AER Committee 2 members came together for

a seminar on ICT-integrated care to better understand the potential of integrated care. This introductory seminar certainly is just the beginning of a long path. It is essential to collect evidence on the benefits of integrated care service provision and to explore how new care models can be further deployed. The SmartCare project, to which AER is a partner, has a leading role in pursuing this mission. No doubt that AER member regions will follow its results closely.

Pursuing our conquest of the "silver age"

The year 2012 marked the beginning of our commitment towards active and healthy ageing. In 2013, we strengthened this undertaking by organising a talk show on the regional politicians' involvement in the European Innovation Partnership on active and healthy ageing. This event, jointly organised by AER and two other regional networks (CORAL



and EUREGHA) and supported by the ENGAGED project, took place on 24 September in Norrköping (SE), as a side event to the AAL Forum. It aimed to demonstrate that the European Innovation Partnership is relayed by regional politicians all over Europe. This well-attended event also enabled to reinforce the cooperation with other regional networks in the field of health and social policy.

Building inclusive societies

What is the point in making progress happen if this progress is reserved to a few? Committee 2 has made building inclusive societies one of its priorities for 2013. We want to build a fair society that guarantees access to services and full participation to every citizen, regardless on their gender, their age and their mental and physical abilities.

In this regard, AER is following closely the development of the European Accessibility Act, whose adoption was foreseen for the end of 2012. A position on this important piece of legislation was adopted in June 2013:

Committee 2 members called for its early adoption to complement the existing EU legal framework in this field and support the creation of a market for accessible goods and services. AER also called for guidance for the regions in the implementation process of the European Accessibility Act.

Moreover, one of our key events this year is the Conference on Building Inclusive Societies. Policy, e-participation, education, social entrepreneurship: this cross-cutting conference focused on the means regions have at their disposal to remove the barriers of race, gender, class and generation, delivering a positive message and a new perspective on this too-often denied issue.

Supporting regional networking in the field of health and social affairs

In times of crisis, we need to surround ourselves with inspirational partners and to keep our ears open for good ideas. In order to achieve its objectives, all along the year, the AER Secretariat and Committee 2 Presidium



Ambient Assisted Living Forum, Östergötland (SE)

met with representatives from international organisations such as the UNDP and the World Health Organisation, as well as with representatives from interregional networks, the industry, and patients' organisations.

Finally, we believe it is crucial to maintain a privileged dialogue with institutions through key stakeholder fora: AER took part in two stakeholders' meetings with DG SANCO. Moreover, Committee 2 Vice-President Urban Blomberg (Jönköping-SE) represented AER at the meeting of the European platform against poverty and social exclusion in September this year.

Lobbying and Partnerships



2013 has been a dynamic year for lobbying and cooperation. In order to promote the cause of the regions and to increase AER's visibility in Europe and particularly in Brussels, new partnerships with other European networks such as ACI Europe (supporting regional airports) or CIRCOM (representing regional TV stations) and important partners such as CALRE (representing regional parliaments) have been established. AER enforced its networking activities, which led to the organisation of its first annual networking event in Brussels on 5 November, bringing together 120 persons including AER member regions, representatives from the European institutions as well as stakeholders from the business world.

With its new allies, AER has been advocating the cause of regional airports and regional economic development in the context of the publication of new guidelines from the European Commission on financing regional airports. Commissioner Hahn, MEPs and President Barroso were target of AER's and ACI Europe's campaign to establish the best conditions for regional airports.

AER also made its voice heard in the preparations towards the recent Eastern Partnership (EaP) Summit, one of the EU's main policy initiatives towards the Eastern Neighbourhood. As a keen promoter of regional values and regional democracy, and as the largest network in the wider Europe including many regions from Ukraine, Georgia and Armenia, AER lobbied for a strong regional dimension in the European Neighbourhood Policy towards the East, and for a strong European strategy towards the Black Sea taking into account the regional specificities. Meetings with the Cabinet Füle as well as with the various ambassadors of the EaP countries in Brussels enforced the message, the AER President delivered.

AER also continued to provide short information sessions for its member regions in Brussels through its breakfast briefings on up-to-date political developments such as the MFF or e-health, regional airports or the latest news concerning the EGTC.

AER Committee 3 autumn plenary session at the Alsace Regional Council in Strasbourg (FR)



Committee 3: Culture, Education, Youth and International Cooperation President: Sonja Steen, President, Nordland (NO)

2013 marked a change in the political leadership of Committee 3: an (almost) completely new team has been elected and started working under the guidance of the new Committee President Sonja Steen (Nordland-NO).

International Cooperation

The year started with a strong focus on international cooperation and in particular the Eastern Partnership. Committees 1 and 3 joined forces for the organisation of an AER Conference "Boosting interregional cooperation in the context of the Eastern Partnership" (EaP) that took place in April in Dnipropetrovsk-UA. At the end of the Conference and in view of the Third Eastern Partnership Summit in Vilnius at the end of November, AER adopted a resolution asking for the principle of subsidiarity to be taken into account and for regions to be recognised in

the future of the Eastern Partnership strategy. Even though Ukraine finally refused to sign the Association Agreement with the European Union, AER will not stop the strong cooperation initiated with our Ukrainian regions that are members and friends since 1992. At the Committee 3 Autumn plenary meeting, the decision was taken to create a new working group on the Eastern Partnership which will focus on further lobbying activities, explore funding opportunities for EaP regions and develop further thematic activities in the framework of the EaP.

Furthermore AER continued cooperating with ARLEM, the Euro-Mediterranean Regional and Local Assembly. Former AER President Michèle Sabban (Ile-de-France-FR) was member of the Committee for Sustainable Development and rapporteur for sustainable tourism in the Mediterranean. Her re-

port was adopted at ARLEM's plenary in February 2013.

In November AER participated in a meeting between ARLEM and its partner organisations to prepare the next steps in the framework of the neighbourhood policy and to develop synergies for the strengthening of the territorial dimension of this area.

Youth participation

Lilla Merabet (Alsace-FR), President of the "Youth" Sub-Committee, proposed to launch a political report on the involvement of young people in democratic life at regional level. A first meeting between interested regions and AER partner organisations, such as the Council of Europe and the Association of Local Democracy Agencies, took place in June to discuss the general objectives and the draft structure of the report. This structure consists of observations, good practices and recommendations for regions and partners. The first draft of the report, based on the contributions from the participating regions and partners, has been presented and discussed at a second meeting on 31 October in Strasbourg. The report will be submitted for adoption at the AER Bureau in spring 2014.

This summer, the 2014 edition of the Most Youth Friendly European Regions award (MYFER) has been launched. The topic of this MYFER edition is "Active Youth Participation in the Regions" and the submitted projects and policies will complement the Merabet report with examples of good practice. The prize will be awarded in 2014.



AER Committee 3 President presenting AER during the Council of Europe's Congress Plenary in Strasbourg, Alsace (FR)



Sonja Steen speaking at the Council of Europe's Congress Plenary

Youth employment & youth mobility

Youth employment and youth mobility were at the heart of the second Summit on the Crisis and the regions in Europe early March in Warsaw (PL). Regional politicians and young people exchanged their experience with experts from the European Institutions and with various stakeholders.

At the third 'Crisis Summit' in Paris in May, Committee 3 contributed to different workshops by sharing good practice in the field of youth employment.

Education: combating school dropout

Upon the initiative of Västernorrland (SE) a working group on school dropout has been created. On 12 June, participants from 15 different regions kicked off AER's school dropout initiative in Brussels. They defined their objectives, work plan and methodology and set a 2-year calendar. The work programme is divided in 3 parts: prevention measures, intervention measures and compensation measures, the so called "second chance". Members collected and presented prevention measures at a working group meeting on 30 and 31 October 2013 in Strasbourg. Due to the big success of the theme, the second meeting of the working group will also be dedicated to prevention before starting the work on intervention measures.

Partnership between AER and FREREF

AER President opened the 11th European University of the Foundation of European Regions for Research in Education and Training (FREREF) on 30 September in Lyon (Rhône Alpes – FR). Together with Jean-Jack Queyranne,

President of the Rhône Alpes Region and Mercedes Bresso, Vice-President of the Committee of the Regions, the AER President defended the role of the regions in life-long learning policies. This meeting between the President and FREREF will lead to the drafting of a Memorandum of Understanding. FREREF will feed into AER's work thanks to its deep and recognised knowledge of European education and training policies. AER, on its side will disseminate the work of FREREF, and both organisations will join forces to defend education and training policies in Europe, as they already did in the past for Erasmus for All.

On 21 November, AER co-organised together with FREREF and the Committee of the Regions a conference on "Territorial Cooperation and the European Social Fund: What new practices 2014-2020?". Participants have worked on how to use European tools in order to finance policies for youth employment, mobility of persons in the labour market or transregional cooperation projects.

Following this meeting, a joint declaration of AER and FREREF has been issued about the implementation of the 2014-2020 European Lifelong Learning Programmes. This declaration calls for greater coordination among European financial arrangements and simplification of the programme's implementation.

AER and FREREF will support the European Commission in carrying out the communication, information and accompanying actions in this field by organising targeted activities for their members.

Press and Communications

New Presidency, new tools

Following the election of Hande Özsan Bozatli, the AER Press and Communications team updated some existing tools and implemented new strategies in order to promote our newly Executive Board.

We were glad to present the 8th edition of our *Tabula Regionum Europae*, in other words the unique map of European Regions (cover feature).

This year we reached almost 800 press clippings, from 706 medias, of 33 countries. This is the AER's best result ever press wise. We would like to underline the diversity of topics approached by the press and also the fact that the main European affairs newspapers wrote about AER.

Some figures:

- General Assembly: 152 articles
- Black Sea Summit: 105 articles
- Eastern Partnership: 105 articles
- Summer School 2013: 52 articles
- Eurodysssey: 48 articles
- PR event with EurActiv Italy: 35 articles
- Regional Airports: 21 articles

Social Networks

We have a growing number of followers on our social networks. We have reached 1500 followers on Facebook and 712 on Twitter.

This is also due to the increase of a daily interaction between our politicians, regional officers and the wider public. We have also improved the interactivity between the participants that attend our events and the speakers.

Audiovisual

14 videos were published on our AERRegions channel.

The real bread and butter of Europe

As usual, we brought to Brussels our Tales from Europe. At our Tales evening, politicians and regional experts, ACI and a Member of the European Parliament discussed the potential impact of the revised European Commission guidelines on State aid to Regional Airports and airlines on the Regions of Europe. AER's main message: the European Commission needs to show more flexibility over the new guidelines on State aid for airports and airlines as, if left untouched, the guidelines will have harsh consequences for our regions. With the right policy and regulatory approach, Regional Airports can do more to connect their regions, serve their communities and ultimately Europe's citizens and businesses.



Debating the future of Regional Airport at AER's Tales from Europe – Brussels Press Club



Youth Regional Network

One step forward for the YRN

2013 marked a new step for the life of the AER Youth Regional Network (YRN) since its establishment in 2008: on 8 May YRN adopted in Brussels its own Statutes as an international non-profit organisation. Nevertheless, YRN will continue to be closely involved in the work of the AER, as the relationship between both structures is regulated by a cooperation agreement.

In March, YRN, together with AER members and European stakeholders, focused on the AER Warsaw Summit, dedicated to 'Youth as a source and lever of regional growth'. They exchanged about successful measures to foster youth mobility and youth entrepreneurship, both considered to be two key elements in preventing and reducing youth unemployment, and restoring young people's confidence in the future.

At its last General Assembly in Paris, a new AER Executive Board team was elected. From that time onward, YRN President is a member of the EB and

has taken part in all its meetings.

60 young participants from the wider Europe discussed the 'Role of Education in Inclusive Society' at the last YRN meeting in Covasna County (RO), in November. They drafted recommendations on the following important topics: the development of inclusive education systems, the importance of non-formal education, the access to healthcare for young people in precarious conditions affected by the crises as well as the Erasmus+ programme.

On the same occasion, young regional representatives nominated the new YRN Presidium. Beat Rohner from St. Gallen (CH) has reconfirmed his dedication and his commitment to the work of this unique platform, and has been re-elected as YRN President for the next year.

In line with the so called "Merabet report", the political report submitted by Lilla Merabet, Regional Councillor

(Alsace, FR), YRN worked on the matter of youth participation in democratic life at regional level. At the occasion of the plenary meeting of AER Committee 3 in Strasbourg, a public debate on that topic took place in cooperation with the Youth Parliament of Alsace.



YRN Presidium and YRN members at the autumn plenary meeting in Covasna (RO)

RUR@CT



Established in 2008 by the Limousin Region (FR), RUR@CT aims to build on European regions' innovating experience through their transfer from one region to another. This programme has already paid off, building-up 155 best practices and supporting the implementation of over 40 action plans towards territorial innovation.

During the General Assembly held on 17 May in Paris, Jean-Paul Denanot, President of the Limousin Regional Council and Michèle Sabban, former AER President, officially signed the partnership agreement that makes the RUR@CT network a full-fledged programme of the Assembly of European Regions.

With the RUR@CT methodology and tools, AER member regions are now

provided with an innovative instrument for the transfer of best practices and the strengthening of their regional expertise, integrating continuous and tailored technical support from the AER secretariat.

RUR@CT also provides AER member regions with political added-value, namely:

- an extensive database including the best practices revealing both the regions' commitment and the concrete measures they take;
- evidence that best practices can be transferred to and implemented in other territories and that interregional cooperation is indeed efficient;
- an instrument that allows to turn political principles and orientations into concrete actions and outcomes.

In June 2013, AER launched the first call for expression of needs in the framework of the programme and received answers from 25 regions. As the majority of them expressed interest in working on rural development, this topic was chosen for the first edition of the programme, which finally involves a dozen regions in the transfer of best practices.

The first training seminar was held on 26 September in Brussels and gathered the AER member regions interested in the programme. On this occasion, the RUR@CT methodology was further explained and the benchmarking phase launched. This phase will end in spring 2014 with a second seminar that will enable the involved regions to identify a good practice to be concretely implemented on their territory.



Summer School So long Summer School, welcome Summer Academy!

2013 saw the last edition of the AER Summer School. From 2014 you will be invited to the AER Summer Academy! In a constant strive to improve the quality of this landmark AER programme, the Organising Committee has decided, among various changes, to give a new name to our yearly summer gathering. This new name underlines the importance of the event and the concrete nature of its work.

This year's Summer School gathered more than 120 participants from 18 countries in Nyköping, Sörmland (SE). During one week, regional politicians and officers, together with representatives of the AER Youth Regional Network (YRN), discussed the topic of green growth in the framework of several plenary sessions and workshops. The discussions were completed by site visits, organised by the host region.

The topic 'Green growth – regions towards a resource efficient Europe' is very closely linked to the current European ten-year strategy 'Europe 2020' about smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, and responds to different flagship initiatives, in particular the one on 'Resource efficient Europe'. One major aspect of green growth is the creation of green Jobs. Green jobs are all jobs that depend on the environment or are created, substituted or redefined (in terms of skills sets, work methods, greened profiles, etc.) in the transition process towards a green economy. According to the European Commission, this sector could be one driving force to face unemployment!

During the workshops it has been demonstrated that, notwithstanding the potential of this sector, with the financial crisis that we are facing, Europe is partly losing its leadership on green jobs and investments.

In the concluding statement it was underlined that European regions are ready to play their part, but a successful policy in this area will need to be multi-level, continued and predictable. European regions, with the help of AER, will definitely continue to work towards this end.

In 2014, AER is invited to hold its Summer Academy from 17 to 23 August in Novi Sad, upon the kind invitation of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina (RS). The main topic will be "3M - multicultural, multiethnic and multilingual regions - European regional diversity to spur economic growth".

Eurodyssey: Professional mobility for ALL young people

Eurodyssey was the first mobility programme for young professionals to be established at European level and it remains today a particularly effective tool to enable young people to enter the job market. Eurodyssey remains, after 28 years, one of AER's landmark programmes. It gives AER member regions one more tool to combat youth unemployment. If the Eurodyssey programme constantly evolves, the basics remain the same: to give young Europeans access to a first job experience abroad and - where appropriate - to improve their language skills. As stated by AER regions taking part in this programme, Eurodyssey is a valuable instrument in their fight against youth unemployment.

By confronting Eurodyssey participants to other regions' socio-economic realities, the programme broadens our youth's horizon which will also be an asset in today's globalised work places.

This year again, around 500 young people were able to get a first professional experience abroad thanks to the Eurodyssey programme.



The 2013 Eurodyssey Forum was held in Ajaccio (Corsica-FR) in October with the topic: Access to European professional mobility for ALL young people. EU Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, László Andor, sent a video message to the participants outlining the new European policies and tools to be used by regions such as the 'Youth on the move' package. The discussions of the participating Eurodyssey coordinators were completed by testimonies from young people and companies involved in the programme.

2013 was marked by the transfer of the Presidency and the Secretariat of the Programme. This year's AER General Assembly approved the proposal of Ile-de-France (FR) to take over the Eurodyssey Presidency and Secretariat. The cooperation between AER and the region in charge of the programme is consolidated by a Memorandum of Understanding outlining the tasks and responsibilities of each party.

AER thanks the Azores (PT) who managed the programme over the past years for their longstanding cooperation and commitment to Eurodyssey!

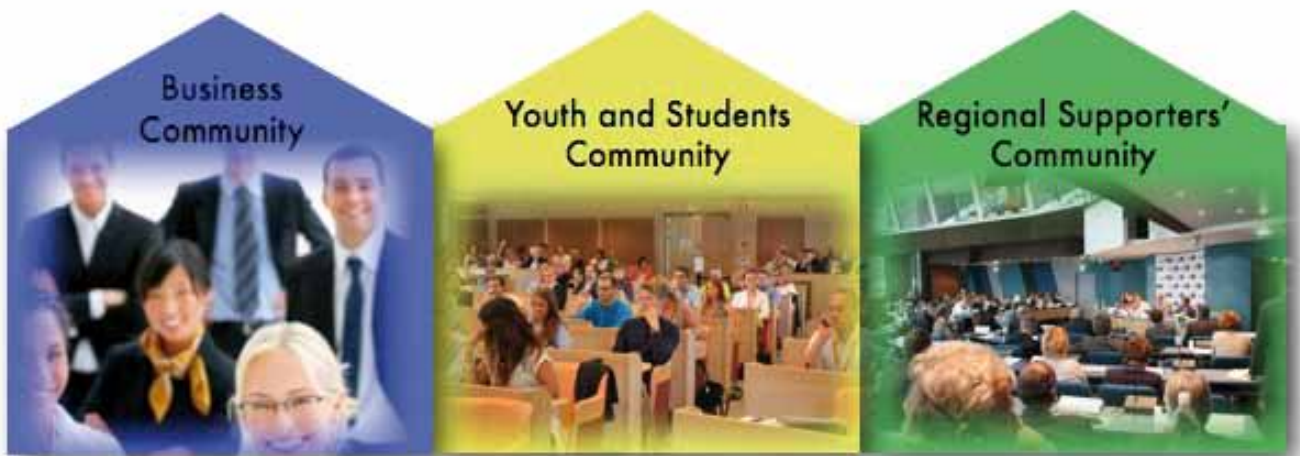
Next year's Eurodyssey Forum will take place in Valencia-ES (23-24 October 2014).

The AER Community and its three pillars

Raising awareness and visibility of the regional dimension

In its new strategy 2013 - 2020, one of AER's priorities is to increase and improve its visibility among external actors and the general public, to enhance its image and increase its influence by disseminating more widely its message, while providing a first choice showcase to its member regions and the work of its Committees.

2013 marked the implementation of this commitment: in addition to partnerships with thematic networks and AER relations with European and international institutions, the AER Community was created. Based on three pillars (business - youth & students – regional supporters), this community is designed to open up to the several actors working in various fields, to rely on strategic partners and enable everyone to understand and visualise all the stakeholders inside and outside of AER.

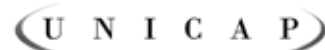


AER Business Community

AER has launched its Business Community with the ambition of creating links between private partners and regions throughout Europe. Acting as a genuine partner for growth, AER aims at improving competitiveness for all and proposes "win-win" partnerships to the enterprises by placing them in connection with the regional world and vice-versa. AER benefits from the expertise provided by the companies while acting as a facilitator in the contacts with its member regions.

This community will consist of about 25 co-founders and other member companies coming from various sectors enjoying a privileged position within AER. Involved in the work of AER, they have many opportunities to meet and share their expertise while improving their visibility and brand image. This community will be strengthened in 2014 with the launch of the AER Dynamic Regional SMEs.

AER has officially launched its Business Community at the annual networking reception held in Brussels on 5 November, attended by over 120 guests from the business world, the European institutions, the media and of course AER member regions. The first four cofounders were introduced: Accor, Volvo Group, Unicap and Brussels Airlines, the latter also being the host of the evening.



AER Youth & Students Community

Launched in October 2013, the AER Youth & Students Community is dedicated to the 16-30 seeking to improve their understanding of Europe and its regions, and bring their views as well as innovative ideas. After a quick and free of charge online registration, they benefit from an access to the news of the regions, AER events, information about student and professional mobility programmes in Europe, and a privileged link with the Youth Regional Network.

In a few weeks, more than 100 young people from 16 countries and 40 regions registered online for free.



AER Regional Supporters' Community

Designed for universities, research centres, NGOs, institutes and citizens but also for elected representatives from the European, national and regional assemblies keen on promoting the regional dimension in Europe and convinced by our ideas, our values and our work. This third pillar will be launched in 2014.

In **2013**, AER was once again on all fronts, organising **105 conferences and meetings** in **27 regions**.



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