Teruel is a NUTS III territorial unit and so cannot be eligible for Objective 1. In view of its socio-economic problems the entire province has Objective 2 eligibility for the current programming period, population density being one of the eligibility criteria for this Objective. The province’s particular situation has already been taken into consideration in the single programming document for Aragon.

Further, low population density areas are given specific treatment in the regional State aid system guidelines. First, low population density is a sufficient criterion for regional aid to be eligible for exceptional treatment under Article 87(3)(c) of the EC Treaty. Second, the maximum level of investment aid that can be granted in such regions has been set at 30% net grant equivalent instead of the 20% that is the normal rule. These provisions cover all of the province of Teruel.

To establish a solid and transparent legal basis the Commission in February 2001 adopted a proposal for a Parliament and Council Regulation on establishment of a common classification of Territorial Units for Statistics (NUTS) (2). This has been the subject of a report to Parliament and is at present under discussion in the Council. One of its purposes is to secure application of objective criteria in the definition of Member States’ regions in order to guarantee impartiality and comparability when regional statistics are compiled. For Spain Annex II to the proposal places the Autonomous Communities at NUTS level II.

For the purpose of defining cohesion policy for the period after 2006 the Commission with publication of the Second Report on Economic and Social Cohesion (3) launched a wide-ranging debate. In the report the Commission examines as a possible priority for future cohesion policy zones with grave geographical or natural handicaps, including low population density. The debate is in progress and in due time the Commission will in the Third Cohesion Report make proposals to the Council and Parliament on the best way of taking account of these specific factors in regional policy.

(2) OJC180E, 26.6.2001.

WRITTEN QUESTION E-1351/02
by Alexander de Roo (Verts/ALE) and Erik Meijer (GUE/NGL) to the Commission

(13 May 2002)

Subject: Alternative routes for the Sofia-Kulata motorway

For the construction of the Sofia-Thessaloniki motorway, Bulgaria has opted for a route through the valley of the Struma near the town of Kresna. Originally, five variant routes were prepared, but it seems that the only variant to which consideration has genuinely been given is widening and alteration of the existing motorway which follows the course of the Struma river via the Kresna gorge.

The Commission is undoubtedly aware of the existence of the E-79 Highway Soňa-Kulata Motorway Feasibility Study & Design (SPEA Ingegneria Europea, November 2000), which rules out two possible routes for the planned motorway because they would be too expensive. The two alternative routes outside the Kresna valley are not described at all.

1. What does the Commission think of the quality of this study, which is two pages long and was drawn up using EUR 394,000 in funding from PHARE?

In answer to written questions by Erik Meijer (E-3147/00 (1)) and Alexander de Roo (E-0220/01 (2)), the Commission referred to an EIA report which was to be drawn up and which was duly published at the end
of December 2001. Bulgarian environmental organisations are highly critical of this EIA report, in which the alternatives are not properly considered and virtually no attention is devoted to the principles of the directives on wild birds and habitats.

2. What is the Commission's assessment of the quality of this EIA report?


Answer given by Mrs Wallström on behalf of the Commission

(20 June 2002)

The original terms of reference of the PHARE contract for the feasibility study and design project of the E-79 Sofia — Kulata Motorway had not required SPEA to look for alternatives outside the existing E-79 alignment and roadbed in studying the section of the Struma Motorway between Kresna and Kulata, but to take account that the presence of protected flora in the Struma river gorge was reported. It was understood at this time that this gorge, through which passes the existing road, was not a protected area, except a part of it (Tisata reserve) registered as a Corine sub-site.

The draft feasibility study for the Struma Motorway, including the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), was submitted to the Commission in December 2000. The submitted EIA report was not accepted by the Commission, as it was considered not to be complete. The Ministry of Environment and Water of Bulgaria also decided to reject the proposed EIA report on a similar basis.

The draft feasibility report also included a very preliminary assessment, at pre-feasibility level, of alternative corridors avoiding the Kresna Gorge. This preliminary assessment, as noted in the draft feasibility report, was undertaken by SPEA on their own initiative and apparently following a verbal request from the Bulgarian Road Administration. In any case, the Commission did not accept this as being an adequate examination of alternatives. Both SPEA and the Bulgarian Road Administration confirm that there was no additional contract or disbursement involved in the production of this very preliminary assessment.

There has not been any complementary study financed by PHARE to identify alternative routes outside the E-79 existing corridor, nor has any project of this kind yet been proposed for financing by a Community instrument. In the case where such proposals were made, the Commission would certainly be ready to consider them.

The preliminary EIA for the Struma Motorway was finalised by SPEA in November 2001 and submitted to the Ministry of Environment and Water. The subsequent public meetings required by the Bulgarian legislation were held in March 2002 with the participation of the interested public and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The Ministry of Environment and Water is still reviewing the EIA following the public meeting and the Commission is not aware that any decision has yet been taken.

It is only after the completion of the Bulgarian internal procedure that the Commission becomes involved in the process.

(2002/C 301 E/145) WRITTEN QUESTION P-1353/02

by Freddy Blak (GUE/NGL) to the Commission

(6 May 2002)

Subject: Cost-effectiveness of the EU-US fellowship programme

An EU-US fellowship programme was set up 20 years ago, whereby EU officials may be sent on long-term missions to American academic institutes while keeping their Commission salary. In the 1999 discharge resolution (A5-0113/2001), the Commission was asked by Parliament to carry out an evaluation of the cost-effectiveness of the programme, as there were serious doubts concerning the added value of this programme.