

Accordingly, the Commission deems it necessary to amend the international law of the sea so as to ensure a better balance between freedom of movement and the interests of coastal States who should be able to protect their coast against ecological disasters.

The Commission has asked all of the Union's neighbouring countries as well as its main partners to take firmer action to improve the international legal rules governing pollution caused by ships. It has asked all Member States for their support to actively promote within the United Nations, the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) and other competent bodies the adaptation of the provisions of the law of the sea to the new maritime safety requirements in the 21st century.

Finally, the Commission should like to point out that newspaper reports do not necessarily represent the Commission's position nor, as in the present case, that of the Executive Director of the Maritime Safety Agency.

As for the specific question of navigation under icy conditions, it should be noted that there are currently no Community rules dealing with this and that such rules could not cover vessels on transit journeys not calling at the Union's ports. However, in the framework of measures already taken by the Union to prevent oil tanker accidents, the Directive on monitoring and controlling maritime traffic enables the competent authorities to prevent ships from leaving port in very poor weather conditions. The Directive also gives wider powers to the Member States to intervene when there is a risk of accident or pollution.

In any case, the Commission is ready to fully support the efforts of the Finnish authorities to work towards an agreement with the countries around the Gulf of Finland on safety rules for the maritime transport of hydrocarbons under icy conditions.

(2003/C 222 E/222)

WRITTEN QUESTION P-0386/03

by Ioannis Averoff (PPE-DE) to the Commission

(7 February 2003)

Subject: Progress of 3rd CSF projects in the Epirus region

Under the 3rd CSF, Epirus benefits from a regional operational programme with an overall budget of EUR 581 313 237 and from the construction of part of the Ionian Way, which is the third priority project in the sectoral operational programme 'Roads, Ports and Urban Development'.

According to a statement made by the Greek Ministry for the Economy and Finance in December 2002, the take-up rate of funds for the Epirus regional programme is 10%. As regards the Ionian Way, the annual report of the programme's management for 2001 states that progress in financial terms is nil as no decision was taken to incorporate the project in the programme during 2001, while details of the progress of the works will be given in the annual report for 2002.

Is the abovementioned take-up rate of funds for the regional operational programme correct and does it relate to contractual commitments or actual expenditure?

Does the Commission know why the above programme has such a low take-up rate when Epirus was and remains the poorest region in the Union?

What are the prospects for the future funding of the programme from 2004 and beyond?

What is the likelihood of the programme being financed from the reserve, given that at the current rate only 30% of the budget will have been used by 2006?

As regards the Ionian Way project, can the Commission say what amount has been spent and what contracts have been signed to date?

Answer given by Mr Barnier on behalf of the Commission

(7 March 2003)

According to the information at the Commission's disposal, the amounts of Community aid transferred to Greece under the 2000-2006 Epirus Regional Operational Programme (ROP) are as follows: European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) — EUR 35 935 229; European Social Fund (ESF) — EUR 2 233 022; European Agricultural Guidance and Guarantee Fund (EAGGF) — EUR 6 604 050.

These amounts relate to advances and intermediate declarations of expenditure, and their sum indeed corresponds to approximately 10 % of all the Community aid included in this ROP.

Contractual obligations comprise roughly 9,8 % of the ROP total, while expenditure on the ground comes to approximately 3 % (ERDF around EUR 15,75 million, EAGGF around EUR 1 047 127 million, and ESF zero).

The ROP is indeed behind schedule vis-à-vis its financial plan. The reasons for this include some delay in the ROP's initial launch, the time taken by the Greek authorities to examine the files, and the difficulty experienced by local firms in proposing quality projects which are eligible and whose planning is sufficiently advanced for them to enter the implementation stage and hence generate significant expenditure.

It is too soon to comment on allocation of the performance reserve because the prerequisite procedure for evaluating all programmes under the 2000-2006 Community support framework (CSF) for Greece is in its early stages.

The northern section of the Ionian Way road (Antirrio to Elaioussa) is 210 km long. Part of the project — the Arta-Filipiada and Agrinio bypasses (52,5 km) — has already been completed or is in the process of being carried out.

The cost of part of these two roads was charged to the trunk road Operational Programme (OP) under the 1994-99 CSF, with initial public expenditure of EUR 80,6 for the Arta project (Filipiada to Agios Dimitrios section: 10 km) and for the Agrinio project (Kephalovryssos to Angelokastro section: 13,5 km).

The contracts initially signed were for a two-lane road. The Greek authorities subsequently amended the projects and opted in each case for a four-lane road, which increased the cost.

Some of the overspend on the initial contracts for these bypasses (the overspent amounts were not notified to the Commission) will be covered by Greek national funding without a Community contribution.

Achieving the physical purpose of these roads will be part-financed by the trunk roads OP under the 2000-2006 CSF, with public expenditure estimated by the Greek authorities at around EUR 30 million.

Completion of the remaining 29 km of these two bypasses is being part-financed by the 2000-2006 Cohesion Fund. Two separate projects are involved: the first relates to the Arta-Filipiada bypass (Agios Dimitrios to Sellades section: 8 km) at a total cost of EUR 48,5 million (EUR 26 670 159 in aid); the second forms part of the Agrinio bypass (Angelokastro to Kouvaras section: 21 km) at a total cost of EUR 125 million (EUR 68 737 500 in aid).

The works for these projects are due to be completed by the end of 2006.

The remainder of the northern section of the Ionian Way (which comprises a group of sub-projects about 157 km long) could be part-financed by the 2000-2006 Epirus ROP with EUR 94 million (public expenditure) and by the 2000-2006 trunk roads OP with private funding of EUR 722,6 million (concession). All these future works are currently at the planning stage.

A separate concession could be granted for the southern section of the Ionian Way (Patra-Pyrgos-Tsakona, 177 km), which is likewise at the preliminary planning stage.