

BRIEFING

Requested by the REGI committee



Economic, social and territorial situation of France - La Réunion

This briefing was prepared to provide information for the European Parliament's Committee on Regional Development delegation to La Réunion on 17-21 September 2018.

1. Introduction to France and its political and administrative system

France is located in the Western Europe. To the south-west, France has border with Spain and Andorra and to the east with Belgium, Luxembourg, Germany, Suisse and Italy. On the south it has access to the Mediterranean Sea, on the West to the Atlantic Ocean and on the north to the English Chanel. Due to its colonial past outside the Metropolitan France (the European part of the Republic) it incorporates several overseas areas in various kinds of relationship with it. Thus, the territory of the French Republic consists of:

- Metropolitan France - divided in to 13 regions and 96 departments (including Corsica);
- 5 Overseas departments-regions (Département d'outre-mer - DOM; Région d'outre-mer - ROM): Guadeloupe, Martinique, French Guiana, La Réunion and Mayotte;
- 5 Overseas communities (Collectivités d'outre-mer - COM): French Polynesia, Wallis and Futuna, Saint-Pierre and Miquelon, Saint-Barthélemy, Saint-Martin;
- 2 special territories: sui generis collectivity (Collectivité sui generis) - New Caledonia and overseas territory (Territoire d'outre-mer) - the French Southern and Antarctic Lands.

Map 1: France



Source: Shutterstock

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All five overseas departments, as well as Saint-Martin (the French territory in the Caribbean) are part of the European Union (with the status of outermost region), whereas other territories are not.

Metropolitan France, also referred to as a “hexagon” due to its geographical shape, has the biggest territory in the European Union. The surface area of the country is 638 474 km², 549 060 km² for the metropolitan France and 89 414 km² for the overseas territories¹.

With a population of over 67 million citizens, France is the second biggest country in the European Union after Germany.

Metropolitan France’s landscape is diverse and includes coastal plains, basins and a range of mountain areas such as the Alps in the east (including Mont Blanc, Western Europe’s highest peak, at 4810m), the Pyrenees in the south-west, and the Massif Central in the south. It is also shaped by a large number of rivers of which the most important are the Seine (north), the Loire (west and centre), the Garonne (west), the Rhone (east) and the Rhine (north-east).

Table 1: Key data

	France
Flag	
Total area	638 474 km ²
Population (2018)	67 221 943
Population density (2016) EU-28 estimate: 117.5 inhabitants per km ²	105.5 inhabitants per km ²
Language	French
Currency	Euro

Source: Eurostat

The French Republic is a unitary state with a semi-presidential system. The constitution from 1958 (since modified on several occasions) has introduced strong executive power, represented by the President of the Republic and the government, with the Prime Minister appointed by the president. The president is directly elected every 5 years. The current President is Emmanuel Macron (since 2017). The Prime Minister is Édouard Philippe.

The French Parliament is composed of two chambers: a National Assembly (Assemblée Nationale) and a Senate. 577 Members of the National Assembly are elected by direct universal suffrage for a five-year renewable term. The National Assembly can be dissolved prematurely by the President (but not during the first year after the general elections). Since 1958, it has happened five times: in 1962, 1968, 1981, 1988 and 1997. The polling method used in general elections is the two-round, first-past-the-post poll (scrutin majoritaire à deux tours). The last elections took place in 2017.

348 Members of Senate are chosen by an electoral college (i.e. deputies, members of departmental councils, regional councils and municipal councils, etc.) for a six-year terms. Every three years, one half of its Members is subject to re-election. The last elections were held in 2017.

¹ Source: Eurostat

For a very long time the political scene was dominated by two major parties:

- Republicans (Les Républicains in the past called: Union pour un mouvement populaire) - member of the EPP; and
- Socialist Party (Parti socialiste - PS) - member of the S&D.

However, after the 2017 elections, La République en Marche - a new movement, created by president Emmanuel Macron, gained a dominant position in the French political landscape.

Other influential political movements on the national level are:

- Act, the Constructive Right (Agir, la droite constructive) - member of the EPP;
- Generations (Génération.s) - Member of the S&D;
- Democratic Movement (Mouvement Démocrate - MoDem) - member of the ALDE ;
- Union of Democrats and Independents (Union des démocrates et indépendants, UDI) - member of the ALDE;
- Unsubmissive France (La France Insoumise - LFI) - member of the GUE/NGL;
- French Communist Party (Parti communiste français - PCF) - member of the GUE/NGL;
- Europe Ecology – The Greens (Europe Écologie Les Verts - EELV) - member of the Greens/EFA;
- National Rally (Rassemblement National in the past called Front National) - member of the ENF.

In addition, in the overseas departments, local political parties and movements are influential on the local level and have their representation in the National Assembly and European Parliament.

France is one of the important players on the international scene. It is one of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, as well as a member of the G7, NATO, OECD, WTO and of course European Union. France exercised the presidency of the Council in 2008 and will exercise this function in the first half of 2022.

Table 2: Political summary

Head of State – President	Emmanuel Macron
Head of Government – Prime Minister	Édouard Philippe
Minister responsible for cohesion policy	Jacques Mézard, Minister of Territorial Cohesion
Minister responsible for overseas communities	Annick Girardin, Minister for Overseas France
Presidential elections	Most recent: 2017 Next: 2022
Legislative elections	Most recent: 2017 Next: 2022
Local elections	Most recent: 2015 Next: 2021

2. Administrative division of France

France is a unitary state with long traditions of centralisation. Only the reforms from 1982-83 created the self-governing regions. During the last 35 years, a number of modern decentralisation reforms were implemented. In 2015, the law on the New Territorial Organisation of the Republic (NOTRe) not only modified the number of regions but also introduced modifications in the distribution of competences to the French self-governments.

Today, France is divided into 18 self-governing regions with 13 regions in Metropolitan France (including one on Corsica, which has a special status) and 5 overseas regions. These regions are further subdivided into 101 departments (including 5 overseas departments). Finally, the fundament of the French territorial administration are 35 416 communes². France has the biggest number of communes in the European Union (around 40% of all communes in EU).

These 3 levels of the territorial administration have political, legal and financial autonomy. This autonomy is guaranteed by the Constitution and assured by:

- directly elected councils;
- a president (maire in the commune) elected between the members of the council;
- its own budget, decided by the council and based (at least partially) on own resources.

The local, departmental and region elections takes place every 6 years. The next elections are foreseen for 2021.

As most of the French communes are small (over 50% has the population smaller than 500 inhabitants) they are allowed to create together inter-communal entities (établissement public de coopération intercommunale EPCI) that can exercise part of communal responsibilities for its more efficient execution. These public establishments for inter-communal co-operations have their own resources and exercise competences transferred to them by member communes. In 2017, 1266 inter-communal entities of this kind existed, grouping 35 411 communes³. In addition, there is a Lyon's Metropole that has a special status. Three big communes, Paris, Lyon and Marseille are subdivided into municipal districts (arrondissements).

The role of each administration level in France is defined by the law. With the law NOTRe the general clause of competences for regions and departments has been removed, while it remains for communes.

Regions are responsible for regional development (e.g. regional plans for economic development), spatial planning (regional plans for territorial management, regional plans for transport, etc.), education (high schools and some universities), vocational training, culture and health, regional transport and some ports and airports.

Departments are mainly responsible for social aid: support for handicapped, elderly people, children as well as Active Solidarity Income (Revenu de solidarité active - RSA). They are also very active in the area of culture, sport and education e.g. protection of cultural heritage (not owned by the State), conservation of rural heritage, management of libraries and archives, construction and maintenance of junior high schools (collèges). Departments are responsible for departmental roads.

Communes, created in 1798, are the most emblematic level of the local self-government. They are responsible for activities like primary education, social actions (e.g. organisation of social housing, kinder gardens, sheltered housing, etc.) or protection of public order (local police). Communes are obliged to guarantee the basic services like water disposal, trash collection and treatment, creation and management of cemeteries, etc. They are also responsible for urban plans and regulations as well as municipal roads. As the "state agent", the commune organises the elections and maintains the registration of births, marriages, etc.

² Source: Les collectivités locales en chiffres 2017, Direction Générale des Collectivités Locales

³ Ibidem

3. French overseas communities

Under the French Constitution, overseas departments-regions and the territorial communities are Guadeloupe, Guiana, Martinique, La Réunion, Mayotte, Saint-Barthélemy, Saint-Martin, Saint-Pierre-et-Miquelon, the Wallis and Futuna Islands and French Polynesia. In addition, French Southern and Antarctic Territories and Clipperton has a special organisation. New Caledonia has a special transitional status and on 4 November 2018 will organise referendum concerning its potential future independence.

Map 3: France and its overseas communities



France has 5 overseas departments that at the same time are overseas regions (Guadeloupe, Guiana, Martinique, La Réunion and Mayotte). They are, in general, based on the same rules as the departments and regions in the Metropole. However, due to the specific characteristics and constraints of such communities, their statutes can be adapted. They may be empowered by statute to determine themselves the rules applicable in their territory in a limited number of matters that fall to be determined by statute (with exception of La Réunion).

As each of overseas regions cover exactly the surface and population of one department, a new type of territorial community (with a single deliberative assembly) can replace the department and region. Currently, there are two such unique collectivities in Guiana and Martinique. La Réunion and la Guadeloupe keep their structure of department and region (DOM-TOM). Mayotte became fifth overseas department in 2011 and has the status similar to the unique territorial community.

All five French overseas departments constitute part of the European Union with a status of the outermost regions (based on the art. 349 of the TFEU).

The five French overseas territorial communities are Saint-Barthélemy, Saint-Martin, Saint-Pierre and Miquelon, the Wallis and Futuna Islands and French Polynesia. Until 2007, Saint-Barthélemy and Saint-Martin had constituted part of Guadeloupe department. Four of these entities are not part of the EU. Saint -Martin is the sixth French outermost region and thus is also a part of the European Union.

4. Socio-economic situation of France

France is the sixth biggest economy in the world (after the United States, China, Japan, Germany and the United Kingdom) and the third biggest in the European Union⁴. In 2017, French GDP per capita (in PPS) reached 104% of the EU28 average and is almost equal to the average of the EURO zone (106%). France is one of the eleven first members of the EURO zone and one of the most active players in the current activities for stabilising and reforming the EURO zone.

France was relatively less affected than other EU Member States by the economic and financial crisis, partly due to sizeable economic stabilisers, which reduced the impact on France of the collapse in world trade. The banking sector also proved to be resilient. However, the economic crisis has substantially impacted France's public finances. The general government deficit rose from 3.3% of GDP in 2008 to 7.2% in 2009. Only in 2017, France has managed, for the first time since the beginning of the crisis, to reduce the general government deficit below the limit of 3% of GDP. The crisis has hardly impacted the labour market and the unemployment raised from 7.4% in 2009 to 10.4% in 2016. For some years, the youth unemployment had been exceeding 24%.

Table 3: Real GDP growth rate (%)

	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
France	-2.9	1.9	2.2	0.3	0.6	1.0	1.1	1.2	2.2
EU	-4.3	2.1	1.7	-0.4	0.3	1.8	2.3	2.0	2.4

Source: Eurostat

Table 4: General government deficit/surplus (% of GDP)

	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
France	-7.2	-6.9	-5.2	-5.0	-4.1	-3.9	-3.6	-3.4	-2.6
EU	-2.5	-6.6	-6.4	-4.6	-4.2	-3.3	-3.0	-2.4	-1.7

Source: Eurostat

Table 5: General government gross debt (% of GDP)

	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
France	83.0	85.3	87.8	90.6	93.4	94.9	95.6	96.6	97.0
EU	60.7	72.7	78.3	81.0	83.7	85.6	86.5	84.5	83.2

Source: Eurostat

Table 6: Unemployment rate (%)

	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
France	7.4	9.1	9.3	9.2	9.8	10.3	10.3	10.4	10.1
EU	9.0	9.6	9.7	10.5	10.9	10.2	9.4	8.6	7.6

Source: Eurostat

France has a very strong and successful telecommunication, aerospace, car and arms industry. It also has a very dynamic service sector. The state plays a very important role in the economy. Despite large privatisation activities in the eighties and nineties, government spending exceeds 55% of GDP

⁴ Source: Eurostat

and is among the highest in the OECD⁵. In 2018, France was ranked 71st in the Index of Economic Freedom (by The Heritage Foundation).

As France has limited own energy resources, the country has developed a strong nuclear power sector. In 2016, about 73% of the electricity production was based on the nuclear plants. France is developing also the renewable sources of energy, which in 2016, were responsible for around 18% of energy production⁶.

The ITER project (International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor) is located in Cadarache, in France. This is the second biggest international research project (after the International Space Station) focused on demonstrating that it is possible to produce commercial energy from safe nuclear fusion.

France is the first tourist destination in the world. In 2015, metropolitan France was visited by 84.5 million foreign tourists (including 67 million from the European Union). Tourists' expenses reached EUR 160 billion, more than 7.2% of the French GDP⁷.

France is the sixth biggest exporter in the world (second biggest in the EU). Its main exports are: machinery and transportation equipment, aircraft, plastics, chemicals, pharmaceutical products and beverages. France is also the second-largest agricultural and wine exporter in the world. Around 60% of French exports is directed to EU Member States (primarily Germany, Spain, Italy and Belgium). Other big trade partners are the United States and China⁸.

France is also the fifth biggest importer in the world, with similar trading partners as with exports. The most important partners are: Germany, China, Italy, Belgium and the United States⁹.

Since 2003, France has systematically had a deficit in its international trade balance. French international trade deficit in 2017 reached EUR 63.4 billion¹⁰.

5. EU cohesion policy in France¹¹

For 2014-2020, the total cohesion policy funding to France (ERDF, ESF) amounts to EUR 15.9 billion (in current prices), including a total of EUR 310 million for the Youth Employment Initiative. The special allocation to the outermost regions represents EUR 443.3 million. Total allocation for European Structural and Investment Funds (including ERDF, ESF, EAFDR, EMFF and YEI) is around EUR 27 billion.

Allocation of the Cohesion Policy funds is described in 43 operational programmes (plus additional 31 operational programmes for EAFRD and EMFF)¹²:

- 32 regionalised programmes co-financed by ERDF and ESF;
- 2 regionalised programmes co-financed by ERDF;
- 2 regionalised programmes co-financed by ESF;
- 5 multiregional programmes co-financed by ERDF;
- 1 national technical assistance programme co-financed by ERDF and ESF;
- 1 national programme for Employment and Inclusion co-financed by the ESF;
- 1 national European Youth Employment initiative programme co-finance by the ESF.

⁵ Source: 2018 Index of Economic Freedom on <http://www.heritage.org>

⁶ Source: 2016 review of France's energy policies, International Energy Agency

⁷ Source: Le portail de l'Économie, des Finances, de l'Action et des Comptes publics <http://www.economie.gouv.fr>

⁸ Source: <http://lekiosque.finances.gouv.fr/>

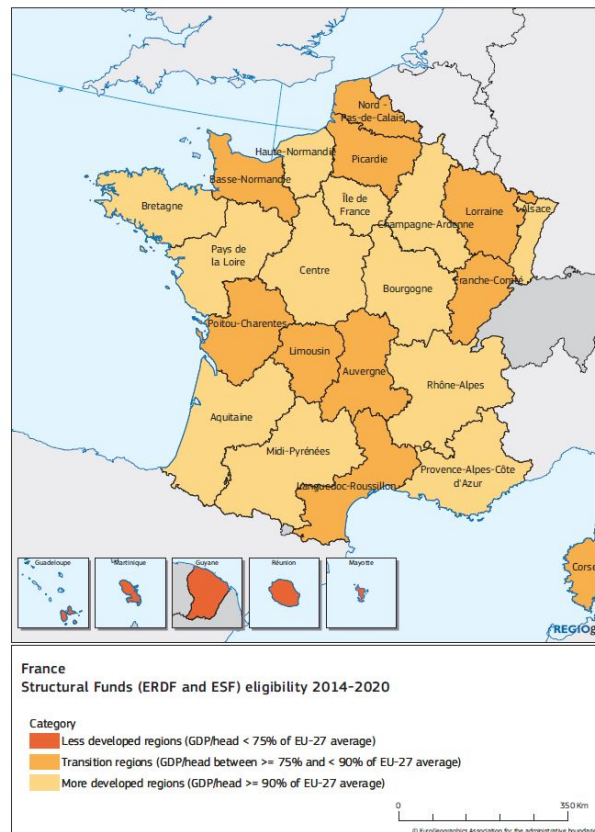
⁹ Ibidem

¹⁰ Ibidem

¹¹ This section is based mainly on DG REGIO webpage

¹² Source: Partnership Agreement for France 2014-2020

Map 4: Cohesion policy in France (27 regions as in 2014)



Source: European Commission

Under the Cohesion Policy, European Union will provide:

- EUR 3.41 billion for less developed regions (outermost regions: Guadeloupe, Martinique, Guiana, La Réunion and Mayotte);
- EUR 4.25 billion for transition regions (Nord Pas-de-Calais, Picardie, Basse-Normandie, Lorraine, Franche-Comté, Poitou-Charentes, Limousin, Auvergne, Languedoc-Roussillon and Corsica);
- EUR 6.35 billion for more developed regions (Haute-Normandie, Ile-de-France, Champagne-Ardenne, Alsace, Bretagne, Pays de la Loire, Centre, Bourgogne, Rhône-Alpes, Aquitaine, Midi-Pyrénées, and Provence-Alpes Côte d'Azur);
- EUR 1.09 billion for European Territorial Cooperation;
- EUR 443.3 million as special allocation for the outermost regions;
- EUR 310.2 million for the Youth Employment Initiative.

Of this, European Social Funds in France represents over EUR 6 billion.

Priorities for the structural funds in France are set out in the Partnership Agreement and include:

- Increase of private R&I investment in general and in knowledge intensity in particular;
- Enhancement of business innovation and competitiveness, especially SMEs and enhance the transfer from research to business;
- Development of the e-economy, in particular e-services and IT applications;
- Promotion of entrepreneurship, access to finance and advanced business services for SMEs;
- Increase of the employment rate through measures to improve the adaptability of workers and actions in favour of the most vulnerable groups;
- Promotion of the adaptability of workers and fight against unemployment through enhanced functioning of the public employment service and a greater investment in human capital;

- Increase of the employment rate of specific groups and maintain the link to the employment of people at risk of poverty and exclusion;
- Stimulation of higher energy efficiency, especially in industry, transport and buildings.
- Increase of energy production from renewable sources;
- Improvement of risk prevention and management and improve performance on Natura 2000 and biodiversity;
- For the outermost regions: development of endogenous potential and promotion of diversification, improvement of accessibility, protection of the environment and in particular water resources, improvement of the inclusion of young people and vulnerable groups in the labour market, improvement of services to the population including social and educational services, improvement of administrative capacity.

Annex XXII of the recently proposed common provisions regulation for the post 2020 EU cohesion policy foresees that in the programming period 2021-2027 France will be allocated over EUR 18 billion (in the current prices).

6. European territorial cooperation¹³

In the 2014–2020 programming period, France is participating in 23 European Territorial Cooperation (ETC) programmes: nine cross-border, five transnational, four interregional and five programmes destined for French outermost region. In the case of 14 of these programmes, French administrative bodies exercise the role of managing authorities. The total budget of the 23 ETC programmes in the period 2014-2020 is EUR 3.021 billion and the French share is EUR 1.09 billion.

Between the programmes designed for outermost regions, two (Saint-Martin and Mayotte) have cross-border character and other three (Indian Ocean, Caribbean and Amazonia) combine elements of cross-border programmes and broader transnational programmes.

Table 7: ETC allocation for France 2014-2020

European Territorial Cooperation 2014-2020			
EUR million ERDF			
Cross-border	Transnational	Overseas	Interregional
1523	983.9	168.4	514.3

Source: Le portail des Fonds européens

7. La Réunion

La Réunion is a volcanic island on the Indian Ocean around 800 km on the east from Madagascar. The island is over 9000 km away from Paris. It has a surface of 2504 km² (comparable with Luxembourg - 2595 km²) and a population of around 860 thousand inhabitants¹⁴. Thus, the population density is 343.5 inhabitants per km² (compared to 105.5 for France and 117.5 for the EU).

La Réunion has 210 km long coastline. The island is comprised of two adjoining volcanic massifs located in the south-west of the Indian Ocean. The highest point on the island is on 3071 m over the sea level. Around 40% of the island surface is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The area of Pitons,

¹³ This section is based on the webpage of Europe en France: le portail des Fonds européens <http://www.europe-en-france.gouv.fr>

¹⁴ Source: Eurostat, data for 2017

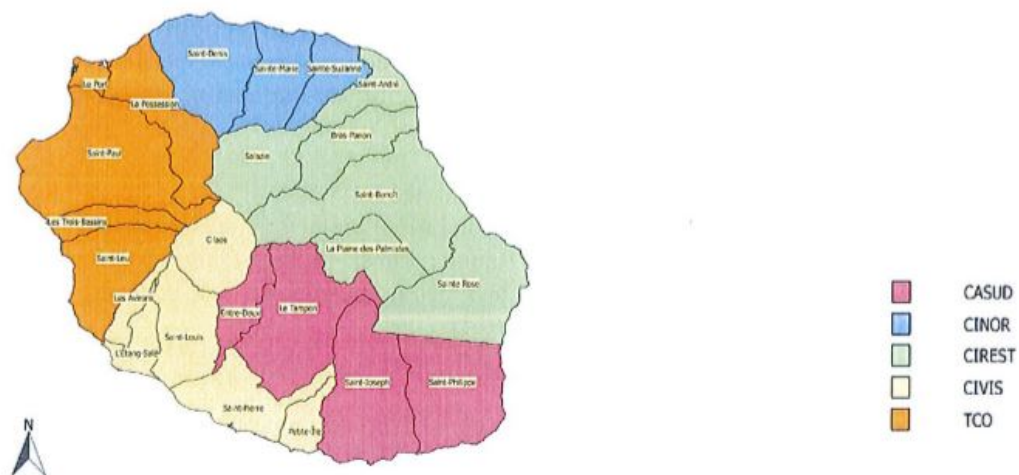
cirques and remparts coincides with the core zone of La Réunion National Park¹⁵. The Piton de la Fournaise (2631 m high) is an active volcano. The island has tropical climate with important differences caused by mountainous landscape.

In 1946, La Réunion acquired the status of the French overseas department (départements d'outre-mer - DOM). Today, it is a mono-departmental region with departmental and regional councils. It is an integral part of the European Union with EURO as a currency and a status of the outermost region. Population of La Réunion has seven representatives in the National Assembly.

The island is divided into 24 communes. These form five public establishments for inter-communal co-operations (EPCI). The capital is Saint Denis and has the population of around 180 thousand inhabitants.

Map 5: Public establishments for inter-communal co-operations (EPCI)

Carte n°1 : les EPCI à fiscalité propre de La Réunion



Source: Arrêté préfectoral N° 442 SG/DRCTCV-1 du 29 mars 2016 établissant le schéma départemental de coopération intercommunale de La Réunion

The economy of La Réunion is based on agriculture (mainly sugar cane, meat and milk), fishing, public sector, tourism, and growing digital industry. The island has a university with around 20 thousand students. In 2015, GDP per capita in La Réunion was around EUR 21 thousand and was around EUR 7 thousand lower than in Metropolitan France.

In 2015, 40% of inhabitants of La Réunion lived below the poverty level of the Metropolitan France (in Metropolitan France it was 14% of inhabitants). Incomes of inhabitants of La Réunion are lower than in any of Metropolitan France regions and are heavily dependent on social assistance: for a quarter of households, social benefits are the main source of income, four times more than in metropolitan France¹⁶.

Poverty is particularly strong in small rural communities. In Saint-Philippe, Cilaos, Sainte-Rose and Salazie, more than one inhabitant in two lives below the poverty level¹⁷.

¹⁵ Source: UNESCO web page

¹⁶ Source: INSEE, Flash n138, June 2018

¹⁷ Ibidem

The population of the island is steadily growing and is relatively young and well educated. This growth is challenging for the labour market, which is characterised by high level of unemployment. In 2017, the level of unemployment reached 23%. However, the economic growth, faster than in the Metropolitan France (over 3% per year during last 3 years), is supporting the creation of the new jobs and the level of the 23% is already a very positive change compared to the previous years (in 2004 unemployment was over 32% and over 56% for young people)¹⁸ and is close to the lowest level in the history of the department (22.4% in 2016).

There is no time change on the island. Thus, during the summer, visitors have to add 2 hours compared to Brussels time and in the winter 3 hours compared to Brussels time.

8. Operational Programme “La Réunion”¹⁹

In the programming period 2014-2020, the Operational Programme “La Réunion” has the budget of EUR 1.94 billion and the EU financial contribution of EUR 1.13 billion. The programme is financed from ERDF.

The priorities of the Operational Programme “La Réunion” are:

- Increase research and innovation in RIS3 (smart specialisation strategy) sectors;
- Strengthen very high speed network deployment and access to ICTs for SME;
- Improve the creation of SMEs and their competitiveness;
- Enhance renewable energy production, energy efficiency in housing and tertiary;
- Improve natural risk management;
- Improve waste and water management;
- Preserve biodiversity;
- Develop infrastructures of transport;
- Sustainable urban development;
- Develop education and health infrastructures.

The managing authority is Regional Council of La Réunion.

9. Operational Programme “Indian Ocean”²⁰

In the programming period 2014-2020, the Operational Programme “Indian Ocean” has the budget EUR 74.3 million and the EU financial contribution EUR 63.2 million. It focuses on cooperation between the outermost regions of La Réunion and Mayotte, and 12 third countries in the southern Indian Ocean (Union of the Comoros, Madagascar, Mauritius, Seychelles, South Africa, Tanzania, Mozambique, Kenya, India, Sri Lanka, Maldives and Australia), as well as the French Southern and Antarctic Lands.

The programme has two strands: one strand concerns cross-border cooperation between La Réunion and its closest neighbours grouped together within the Indian Ocean Commission (Comoros, Madagascar, Mauritius and Seychelles), and the other is a broader transnational strand relating to cooperation between La Réunion, Mayotte and the group of countries and territories that are programme partners.

¹⁸ Source: Insee

¹⁹ Source: DG Regio

²⁰ Ibidem

The programme consists of five strategic priorities:

- Creating a research and innovation centre, with a particular focus on pooling research and development resources in the pharmacopoeia, biotechnology, energy and climate change sectors;
- Strengthening trade, particularly in the agricultural and agri-food sectors, sustainable fisheries management and cooperation in the tourism sector;
- Developing capacities for climate change adaptation and risk prevention and management, by strengthening regional civil protection measures; cooperation on epidemiological and infectious risks; and prevention of risks associated with marine activities (marine and coastal pollution) and the very real shark risk in the region;
- Promoting natural and cultural heritage through joint environmental and biodiversity conservation measures;
- Raising skill levels by developing high-quality training (initial, vocational and tertiary), and fostering staff mobility and exchanges.

The managing authority is Regional Council of La Réunion.

Further information

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