WRITTEN QUESTION E-1526/08
by Rosa Miguélez Ramos (PSE)
to the Commission

Subject: EU contribution to the revival of the Couto Mixto

In the early Middle Ages the Couto Mixto - a territory located to the south of Ourense province (on the border with Portugal) and currently situated between the Calvos de Randin and Baltar districts - emerged as an institution which was politically and administratively independent of the Spanish and Portuguese crowns and which had its own laws and customs privileges. These included the possibility for each inhabitant to choose freely between the two nationalities, the right of asylum for fugitives from justice, tax-exemption and the freedom to produce and to trade in products such as salt and tobacco.

Under the 1868 Treaty of Lisbon (which was intended to settle frontier disputes between Spain and Portugal) the Couto Mixto ceased to exist as a legal entity and its three villages became part of Spain. Since then this highly unusual institution has gradually weakened and it has been prevented from sinking into oblivion solely as a result of the perseverance of its inhabitants, who are still committed to keeping its ancient traditions alive.

In the 1990s a process aimed at securing recognition of the territory's unusual political and administrative nature was launched by inhabitants and institutions with the backing of various prominent individuals. However, the territory experienced mass emigration throughout the 20th century and it has one of Europe's lowest birth rates, oldest populations and most vulnerable socio-economic profiles, for which reason the process requires coordinated action on the part of all the authorities (including the EU), especially if the intention is to allow the well-defined homogenous district that straddles the border to benefit from the Couto Mixto.

In this particular case, what Community instruments could be used in order to provide EU support for the territory's economic revival and in order to ensure that the experience which it represents (which began in the 12th century and which constitutes an early form of cross-border cooperation) is not lost for ever?

Is the Commission aware of any other, similar cases in Europe which in the future could constitute a network of cross-border territories with special historical legal and administrative characteristics?