

4th report on economic and social cohesion

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The European Parliament adopted a resolution based on the own-initiative report drafted by Ambroise GUELLEC (EPP-ED, FR), on the fourth report on economic and social cohesion, and pointed out that a comprehensive European cohesion policy continues to be made necessary by the persistence of major disparities and specific structural problems in numerous European regions, a situation that has been aggravated by its recent enlargement.

Contrasting data on the state of cohesion: Parliament welcomes the fact that the former cohesion countries, namely Greece, Spain, Portugal and Ireland, have caught up remarkably well, recording impressive growth rates during the period 2000-2006, but points out that, in spite of their growth, there are still major imbalances between their regions and deep-seated structural problems. It also welcomes the high growth rates recorded in the new Member States but notes that their economic convergence is to be expected only in the medium or long term and that it will be a long process because of the very low GDP per capita starting point in some of these countries.

Members are concerned that the convergence among countries very often masks the widening gaps between regions and within individual regions. They note that this widening of regional and local disparities can be observed in a number of areas, in terms of employment, productivity, income, education levels and innovation capacity.

The resolution emphasises the effect of polarisation in the regions around capital cities – a particularly marked phenomenon in the new Member States – which on average generated 32% of their countries' GDP, while representing only 22% of the population. This polarisation can give rise to great disparities among unemployment rates in city centres. The Commission is asked specifically to address this problem with concrete proposals.

Regional policy and the Lisbon Strategy: Members point to the enormous differences between countries in terms of the sums invested in research and development, and note great regional disparities in terms of innovation, which in the Fourth Cohesion Report are measured by a useful indicator of regional performance in terms of innovation. They regret that the innovation potential of small, micro and craft businesses has not been adequately taken into account in implementing cohesion policy, despite earmarking, and call for the implementation of an active policy to support all forms of innovation in these enterprises. Parliament also invites the Commission to create opportunities for mutual co-operation between businesses, the public sector, schools and universities, in order to create regional innovation clusters, in the spirit of the Lisbon Strategy. It calls for the swift introduction of transparent rules and standard solutions for public-private partnerships that will enable regions to bring private capital to bear in pursuit of public objectives. It emphasises that the scope of cohesion policy cannot be confined to meeting the Lisbon Strategy objectives, and takes the view that achieving territorial cohesion by means of actions under the convergence objective is a precondition for the long-term competitiveness of regions.

An integrated approach to territorial cohesion: Parliament calls on the Commission to include a definition of 'territorial cohesion' in the forthcoming Green Paper on Territorial Cohesion (scheduled for September 2008) in order to make further progress in this Community policy. It stresses that cohesion policy must not favour already dynamic regions, which would happen if there were strict earmarking of appropriations. It also stresses the importance of real partnership and the implementation of genuinely multi-level governance involving every level – Community, national, regional and local, in consultation with economic and social partners – in defining and implementing regional development objectives.

Parliament goes on to warn against the dangers of the sectorisation of policies and favours the development of an integrated approach that identifies the synergies that are possible between cohesion policy and major sectoral policies such as transport, agriculture, fisheries, rural development, environment and energy, research and technology. It proposes that priority be given to policies that serve a genuinely polycentric development of territories, such that the pressures on capital cities are lessened and the emergence of secondary poles is encouraged. Support for rural areas and the important role played by small and medium-sized towns located in rural areas should not be overlooked in this connection. Parliament also calls also for practical steps to be taken to reduce the disparities between territorially accessible regions and regions with structural disadvantages, namely islands, mountain areas, sparsely populated areas and peripheral and border regions, recognising the disadvantaged position of the latter and taking special and permanent measures to support them.

New challenges and the general budget of the EU: Parliament takes the view that the Union will be increasingly faced with new challenges with a strong territorial impact exacerbating existing obstacles to regional development, such as demographic change, urban concentration, migratory movements (which are particularly problematic for rural and peripheral areas), energy supply and climate issues and adjustment to the changes arising from globalisation, as well as enlargement and neighbourhood policies. It stresses the importance of pilot projects relating to the adaptation of regions to these new challenges. Retaining cohesion policy after 2013 is an appropriate response to these new challenges. Parliament feels that cohesion policy should remain a Community policy. It rejects, all attempts to renationalise this policy. Cohesion policy needs to be further reinforced. Parliament calls, therefore, for sufficient financial resources to be allocated to cohesion policy at Community level, and for the revision of the financial framework to be used as an opportunity to define the budgetary resources needed to meet all of the Union's cohesion policy challenges.