Demographic change and its consequences for the future cohesion policy of the EU

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The Committee on Regional Development adopted the own-initiative report drafted by Kerstin WESTPHAL (S&D, DE) on demographic change and its consequences for the future cohesion policy of the EU.

Members believe that the impact of demographic change varies substantially from region to region. Therefore, different adjustment strategies are required and must be tackled in a coordinated way by all European, national and regional authorities.

The report sets out the following recommendations:

Structural policy reforms: the report highlights the fact that demographic change, especially **population ageing**, has a clear impact on the provision of social infrastructure, such as pension systems, nursing care and healthcare. It calls for proactive measures to prevent the negative consequences of demographic change and increase technical assistance to the regions suffering the most from depopulation and ageing, in order to ensure that they retain their absorption capacity and the ability to benefit from the Structural Funds. Members call on the Commission to include demographic change as a **horizontal objective in the future cohesion policy**. The report encourages the Member States and regions to pay greater heed than in the past to demographic change and its effects, making measures to tackle it a horizontal objective in the shaping of the national strategic framework programmes (or any corresponding document) and in their operational programmes.

The Member States and regions are asked to consider the divergent development levels of the regions and also demographic indicators, for example the dependency ratio, when allocating and distributing EU structural funds and when defining impact indicators.

Urban development/infrastructure: the report encourages the regions to use the Structural Funds to help address demographic challenges and to improve access to social and administrative services, including in small and remote towns and villages, by promoting the specific potential of each region and strengthening the factors that make people want to stay. The Commission is called upon to create more flexible conditions in order to promote cross-financing between ERDF and ESF when devising and implementing **integrated urban development plans/strategies**.

If depopulation is to be prevented, then **child- and family-friendly towns and cities need to be developed** and adapted to the needs of people with disabilities and with restricted mobility.

The report also focuses on the following aspects:

- further development of teleworking opportunities;
- highlighting that ERDF funds can also be used to prevent the social exclusion of the elderly;
- development of elderly-friendly towns and cities;
- taking into account and develop urban tourism potential and heritage objectives, as these present opportunities to attract new residents into areas at risk of depopulation;
- developing innovative concepts for local public transport in order to address, among other things, the challenge of dwindling passenger numbers, particularly in rural areas.

The elderly, children and families: the report advocates that loans with low interest rates which could support the adaptation of **housing to the needs of the elderly** could be given priority under the ERDF. It proposes offering the opportunity for financial resources to be provided under certain conditions for sheltered housing complexes and multi-generational housing, with a view to preventing the isolation of the elderly and harnessing their creative potential, in order to guarantee a better quality of life for an ageing society.

Member States are called upon to:

- bring welfare and healthcare benefits into line with the needs of everyone, especially families and children, and provide funding to ensure the availability of care at home and universal healthcare for elderly people, irrespective of their income, age and social status, so as to prevent the depopulation of rural areas and peripheral regions;
- ensure good healthcare provision in rural areas as well, for example through the provision of regional medical care gateway clinics and health services which make it possible to combat 'medical desertification', and, in border regions, through closer cross-border cooperation between clinics and between stakeholders;
- consider the possibility of using the Structural Funds to promote additional measures in the field of telemedicine and care and to support active ageing.

The report also underlines the importance of:

- creating conditions which enable people to achieve a work/family/private life balance and, for example, of providing, where feasible, universally available, reliable, all-day childcare facilities of high quality for children of all ages, including facilities and opportunities for pre-school-learning, in order to prevent depopulation;
- providing enough affordable housing space should be available for families, so that family and working life can be reconciled more effectively, because support for young families can help to increase the birth rate in Member States.

Migration/integration: the report emphasises that the migration might give rise to certain integration problems. It recognises, however, that migration offers, in particular to regions experiencing net outflows, the opportunity to stem the negative impact of demographic change. Members call, therefore, on the Member States to **recognise the integration of migrants as a strategically important policy measure**.

Members call on the Member States to agree on a common strategy on legal migration, not least since Europe is, especially in certain given sectors, reliant upon the migration of skilled workers (both between the Member States and from outside the EU, particularly those bordering the Union) for demographic reasons. They propose that more funding should be provided for the integration of immigrants in order to dispel prejudices, and that training and communal events to encourage exchanges could be promoted.

Employment: Members believe that the regions should use ESF funds in a decisive manner to **combat youth unemployment** by supporting training measures for and entrepreneurship among young people. They also believe that support should continue to be given with a view to raising the **female employment** rate.

Lastly, the report considers that demographic developments in the regions should be statistically measured and calls on the Commission to submit proposals to make local, regional and national databases on demographic development comparable, so that data can be evaluated at European level and that the **exchanges of best practices** between States, regions and localities can be fostered.