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

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The European Parliament adopted a resolution on demographic change and its consequences for the future cohesion policy of the EU.

Parliament considers that the rising life expectancy in Europe is to be welcomed and that the **opportunities inherent in demographic change need to be carefully examined and exploited**, including with the support provided by the cohesion policy instruments. It believes that the impact of demographic change varies substantially from region to region, depending on whether it is rapid or slow and whether the region concerned is a region of net immigration or of shrinking population and therefore requires a different adjustment strategy, and must be tackled in a coordinated way by all European, national and regional authorities.

Parliament considers that the current worsening demographic situation in at least some Member States will **stimulate discussions regarding pension-systems reform** in the near future

The resolution sets out the following recommendations:

(1) Structural policy reforms: the resolution 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. Parliament 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.

Parliament calls on the Commission to include demographic change as a **horizontal objective in the future cohesion policy**. It also 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.

(2) Urban development/infrastructure: the resolution 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. This implies, among other things: i) wherever possible, distances between workplaces, housing and recreational areas should

not be excessive; ii) residential, commercial and green areas should alternate; iii) connections with suburban areas earmarked as new residential areas should be improved; and iv) the further development of teleworking opportunities;

Parliament stresses the following aspects, in particular:

- the need to take into account, in the future funds, the anchor function of small towns in regions of net migration which have a particularly important role to play as service centres;
- the use of ERDF funds to prevent the social exclusion of the elderly;
- the development of elderly-friendly towns and cities as one of the priorities of urban policy;
- the need to revitalise and restructure inner cities;
- the importance of making the most of tourism potential;
- the development of innovative concepts for local public transport in order to address the challenge of dwindling passenger numbers, particularly in rural areas.

(3) The elderly, children and families: Parliament 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. Member States are called upon to:

- 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 and border 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 resolution 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.

(4) Migration/integration: Parliament emphasises that 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. It calls, 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.

In the area of **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, Parliament 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.

The Commission is invited to find ways of reshaping the idea of an Erasmus programme for local and regional elected representatives in an appropriate form.