Increasing engagement of partners and visibility in the performance of European Structural and Investment Funds

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The Committee on Regional Development adopted an own-initiative report by Daniel BUDA (EPP, RO) in increasing engagement of partners and visibility in the performance of European Structural and Investment Funds.

These EU funding policies have an impact to all EU citizens. Nevertheless, the results have not always been well communicated as regards the extent to which ESI Funds investments changed the daily life of EU citizens and overall public awareness and perceptions about the effectiveness of the EU's regional policy have been declining over the years.

Increased visibility: Members noted that ensuring the visibility of cohesion policy investments should remain a shared responsibility of the Commission and the Member States. The managing authorities and the competent local and regional authorities should be the interface of communication with citizens by providing information *in situ* and bringing Europe closer to them. They are urged to improve the quality of their communication and in particular on the **final results** of projects. Providing visibility for a policy involves a **dual process** of communication and interaction with partners.

Challenges to be addressed: stressing the increase in Euroscepticism and in anti-European populist propaganda, which distorts information on Union policies, the Commission and the Council are called upon to analyse and address their underlying causes.

There is an urgent need to develop **more effective communication strategies** aiming to bridge the gap between the EU and its citizens. Members invited the Commission and the Council to analyse, both for the current framework and for the post-2020 reform of cohesion policy, the impact on the perception of EU policies of the measures aimed at strengthening the link with the European semester and at implementing structural reforms via programmes financed by ESI Funds.

The report reiterated the need to find a proper balance between the imperative to simplify the rules governing the implementation of cohesion policy and the need to **preserve sound and transparent financial management** and combat fraud while still communicating this properly to the public.

Another issue is that the long-term, strategic nature of cohesion policy investments means that results are sometimes not immediate, a situation that is detrimental to the visibility of cohesion policy instruments, especially when compared with other Union tools, such as the European Fund for Strategic Investments (EFSI). Members urged, therefore, that communication activities should, where appropriate, continue for another **four years after closure of the project**.

Noting the important role played by the media in informing citizens on various EU policies and EU affairs in general, Members regretted the rather limited media coverage of EU cohesion policy investments. They stressed the need to develop information campaigns and communication strategies that **target the media**.

Improving communication and the engagement of partners during the second half of the 2014-2020 period: the Commission is called on to provide clear guidance in 2017 on how technical assistance could be used for communication in the current funding period, with a view to ensuring legal certainty for local and regional authorities and other beneficiaries.

The report highlighted the importance of the European code of conduct on partnership and the role of the partnership principle in enhancing the collective commitment to and ownership of cohesion policy. It called for the link between public authorities, potential beneficiaries, the private sector, civil society and citizens to be strengthened through open dialogue and for the communicational dimension of cross-border and inter-regional cooperation to be enhanced.

Fostering post-2020 communication on cohesion policy: Members called on the Commission and Member States to boost the attractiveness of EU cohesion policy funding through further simplification and limitation of gold plating, and to consider reducing the complexity and, where appropriate, the number of regulations and guidelines.

Taking into consideration how EU cohesion policy contributes to positive identification with the European integration project, Members called on the Commission to consider a **compulsory communication field** in the project application forms, as part of an increased use of technical assistance through an envelope set aside for communication, at programme level.

Members further insisted on increasing urban-rural cooperation to develop territorial partnerships between cities and rural areas through fully exploiting the potential of synergies between EU funds and building on the expertise of urban areas and their greater capacity in managing funds.

Lastly, the Commission and the Member States are asked to strengthen the role and position of pre-existing communication and information networks and to use the interactive **EU e-communication platform** on cohesion policy implementation, so as to collect all relevant data on ESI Fund projects, allowing end-users to give their feedback on the implementation process and the results achieved.

Such a platform would facilitate the evaluation of the effectiveness of cohesion policy communication.