Boosting growth and cohesion in EU border regions

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The Committee on Regional Development adopted an own-initiative report by Krzysztof HETMAN (EPP, PL) entitled ‘Boosting growth and cohesion in EU border regions’.

Internal border regions of the European Union represent as much as 40% of its territory and are home to 150 million of Europeans. They also generate a quarter of Europe’s GDP. Despite these facts, the border regions are facing persistent obstacles, which hamper their growth and development and, as a result, they perform worse economically than regions situated deeper within the Member States.

Members welcomed the document presented by the Commission as a valuable insight into the challenges and obstacles faced by the internal EU border regions and appreciate the proposed solutions. They stressed the importance of applying and disseminating best practices and success stories and carrying out a similar analysis with regard to the Union's external border regions.

Targeting the persistent obstacles: while arguing for a tailor-made approach for each border region, Members acknowledged the shared development potential of cross-border regions in general. They encouraged tailor-made, **integrated and place-based approaches**, such as Community-Led Local Development (CLLD).

The Commission and the Member States were invited to:

- maximise their efforts and step up cooperation to remove barriers to access to public services and to promote and establish the use of egovernment, especially when related to health services, transport, construction of vital physical infrastructure, education, culture, sport, communications, labour mobility, the environment, as well as regulation, cross-border commerce and business development;
- step up efforts to **strengthen skills** and allow for greater powers, funds and sufficient flexibility for regional and local authorities in border regions to better coordinate neighbouring national legal and administrative systems in order to improve the quality of life of cross-border workers;
- better align relevant legal provisions on the adoption and enforcement of **labour and commercial law**, as well as on taxation, procurement and social protection systems, according to the difficulties posed by cross-border areas; **one-stop shops** could enable employees and enterprises to meet their obligations and fully exercise their rights;
- take better account of the difficulties of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) by examining the possibility of providing them with additional support;
- dedicate an adequate budget to the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF) axis, to be dedicated to filling the missing links in **sustainable transport infrastructure** in border regions;
- improve access to health care services on both sides of borders so as to allow full use of health care facilities and cross-border intervention by emergency and rescue services;
- improve cooperation and coordination in **internal water management** to avoid natural disasters such as floods.

Enhancing cooperation and trust: Members called for more coordination and dialogue, more effective exchange of information and more exchange of best practice between authorities, especially at local and regional level. They urged the Commission and the Member States to enhance such cooperation and provide funding for cooperation structures in order to ensure adequate functional and financial autonomy of respective local and regional authorities.

The report stressed the importance of:

- encouraging the adoption of a multilingual approach at all administrative levels;
- facilitating **mutual recognition** of qualifications, diplomas, training and professional qualifications from neighbouring regions;
- adopting measures to combat all forms of discrimination within border regions and remove obstacles to the employment of vulnerable persons and their integration into society;
- creating electronic portals for cross-border business initiatives;
- using Interreg programmes and promote the exchange of best practice between local and regional authorities in border areas in the framework of refugee integration;
- ensuring effective cooperation in the field of cross-border provision of emergency services, such as healthcare, policing and fire services;
- taking account - by making aid available to them - of the EU regions most affected by the consequences of Brexit.

Exploiting EU tools for better coherence: Members welcomed the contribution of European territorial cooperation programmes to removing obstacles at borders, but believed that significant improvements can still be made in this area. They therefore strongly supported the continuation of European territorial cooperation and the increase of the budget allocated to it in the next programming period (2021-2027).

At the same time, the report stressed the need to **simplify programmes**, to ensure that European territorial cooperation is more consistent with the European Union's overall objectives and to increase the flexibility of the programmes.

Lastly, Members welcomed the proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the creation of a mechanism to resolve legal and administrative obstacles in a cross-border context.