Reversing demographic trends in EU regions using cohesion policy instruments

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The Committee on Regional Development adopted an own-initiative report by Daniel BUDA (EPP, RO) on reversing demographic trends in EU regions using cohesion policy instruments.

Current characteristics and challenges of demographic change in the EU

Demographic trends from rural to urban areas, from less developed to more developed national regions, from east to west and from south to north have a direct impact on the lives of EU citizens and local populations. Demographic decline increases existing inequalities between the most developed and the poorest regions.

The report called for particular attention to be paid to the impact of the 'four freedoms' on demographic trends and on the Union's regions and their economic, social and territorial cohesion.

The EU is facing a major demographic challenge which, despite different impacts between regions, should be recognised and addressed in a comprehensive manner. In this context, Members noted significant demographic contrasts related to different economic opportunities, service needs, accessibility, transport and digital connectivity, both at EU level and between metropolitan regions and peripheral areas.

These disparities are particularly visible in rural areas or areas facing natural or specific constraints, such as sparsely populated and mountainous regions, as well as between the mainland and islands and outermost regions. Active ageing policies are needed to reduce the negative dimension of demographic change in these areas. Members also warn of a visible decline in the working population in the regions of Central, Eastern and Central Europe.

Furthermore, the ongoing COVID-19 health crisis will have medium and long-term effects on labour market dynamics. Self-isolating and social distancing measures have had visible effects on production, demand and trade, reducing economic activity. Consequently, a new wave of youth migration within and between Member States can be expected.

Tailor-made responses: finding solutions to the challenge of demographic decline

The report stressed the importance of current initiatives, such as the European Innovation Partnership for Healthy and Active Ageing, the Ambient Assisted Living and the EIT Digital and Health Knowledge Innovation Communities. Members called on the Commission to take into account the solutions already developed by these initiatives for accommodating the demographic shift. They stressed the importance of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning in supporting education and training in areas threatened by depopulation.

Local, regional and national authorities, professional associations and NGOs should play a decisive role as active participants in the development of community-based territorial strategies.

The report stressed the need to develop a rural programme at European level aimed at improving the accessibility, attractiveness and sustainable development of rural and remote areas. In this respect, it stressed the importance of improving transport infrastructure and making investments that will enable a just transition to a digital economy and an online digital education system accessible to all citizens.

The EU Urban Agenda could also serve as a model for providing appropriate instruments to promote growth, integration, cooperation and innovation and to tackle social problems.

Cohesion policy investments should promote the employability of women and single parents struggling to find a job and aim to support young people, the elderly, people with disabilities and other vulnerable groups when entering or remaining in the labour market.

Policy recommendations

Members called on the Commission to propose a strategy on demographic change that prioritises the following areas: (i) decent employment, (ii) work-life balance, (iii) territorial aspect of policies promoting economic activity and employment, (iv) adequate provision of social services of general interest in all territories, (v) efficient local public transport, and (vi) adequate care for dependent persons and long-term care, with special attention to new forms of work and their social impact.

They urged Member States and regional authorities to implement an integrated approach to address demographic challenges through cohesion policy instruments, and encourage the promotion of smart villages and other incentive schemes to retain population and attract young people to rural and semi-urban areas.

In general, Member States are called on take into account the different demographic challenges in the design of their national recovery and resilience plans, their national development policies, long-term strategies for sustainable development and tailored cohesion policy programmes, correlated with the European Semester goals, with a view to ensure proper financing aimed at tackling depopulation and reversing negative trends and enhancing territorial attractiveness.

In this context, it is important that the Commission and Member States share best practice on the use and benefits of long-term cooperative governance and planning tools to support polycentric development.