Reversing demographic trends in EU regions using cohesion policy instruments

2020/2039(INI) - 20/05/2021 - Text adopted by Parliament, single reading

The European Parliament adopted by 633 votes to 16, with 45 abstentions, a resolution on reversing demographic trends in EU regions using cohesion policy instruments.

According to the European Regional Competitiveness Index 2019, there is a **gap between central /metropolitan regions** and more peripheral areas. While 78% of the EU population living in urban areas benefit from quality energy, transport and digital connectivity services, many remote regions, including rural areas which account for 44% of the EU's surface area, suffer geographically, socially and economically.

Demographic decline increases existing inequalities between the most developed and poorest regions, while the COVID-19 crisis is likely to have a significant impact on birth rates, death rates and migration flows in Europe both within and between Member States.

Challenges related to demographic change in the EU

Parliament called for particular attention to be paid to the impact of the 'four freedoms' on demographic trends and on the EU's regions and their economic, social and territorial cohesion. They believe that the major demographic challenge facing the European Union should be recognised and addressed in a comprehensive manner.

While warning of a visible decline in the working population in the eastern, southern and central regions of Europe, Members suggested developing active ageing policies to reduce the negative consequences of demographic change in rural and remote areas and to ensure an adequate quality of life for all inhabitants.

The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted significant disparities in the quality of and access to health care services. In this respect, Members recalled the need to strengthen public services in rural areas, such as health care facilities, and to address the **digital divide**, which particularly affects the elderly and those living in less developed regions, in remote rural and/or mountainous areas, as well as in the outermost regions.

Parliament recommended exploring the possibility of using other indicators in addition to GDP and population density for the classification of territories with severe and permanent handicaps.

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

The resolution 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 resolution 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. **Transport networks** could play a decisive role in halting depopulation by increasing connectivity between rural and urban areas. Sustainable rural tourism could also play an important role in promoting job creation and economic and demographic diversification in rural areas.

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. Members encouraged the promotion of **smart towns** and other incentives to retain population and attract young people to rural and semi-urban areas.

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

Parliament 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.

Member States and regional authorities are urged to implement an **integrated approach** to addressing demographic challenges through cohesion policy instruments and to integrate demographic challenges into their national development policies and long-term sustainable development strategies and to link them to the European Semester.

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.