Cohesion policy as an instrument to reduce healthcare disparities and enhance cross-border health cooperation

2021/2100(INI) - 08/03/2022 - Text adopted by Parliament, single reading

The European Parliament adopted 582 votes to 35, with 79 abstentions, a resolution on cohesion policy as an instrument to reduce healthcare disparities and enhance cross-border health cooperation.

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the crucial importance of the health sector and exposed the healthcare disparities and inequalities between the Member States and within them, in particular in border, outermost, remote and rural regions, including in regions with low population density.

A **more structured approach at EU level**, complemented by a stronger and more comprehensive legal framework and legally binding means of action, is needed to strengthen cooperation and coordination between Member States, to better protect citizens' health and to effectively address existing healthcare disparities.

Reducing health disparities through cohesion policy

Members stressed that access to public services is crucial for the 150 million people living in internal cross-border areas and is often hampered by numerous legal and administrative barriers. The Commission and Member States are called upon to maximise their efforts to remove these barriers, particularly in the areas of health services, transport, education, labour mobility and the environment.

The EU should develop a strategic and integrated approach to major diseases by pooling resources from several funds, including cohesion funds. The Commission should also propose a new European action plan for mental health.

The lack of basic infrastructure, well-trained staff and quality services in NUTS 2 regions (with a population of between 800 000 and 3 million) with a GDP per capita of less than 75% of the EU-27 average, as well as in transition regions with a GDP per capita of between 75% and 90% of the EU-27 average, significantly hampers access to health care. Members called on the Commission and Member States to work together to **establish minimum standards in both infrastructure and health services** and to use EU funds to ensure equal access to minimum quality standards in all regions, and in particular for urgent problems in border areas.

Members considered that investments in **healthcare innovation**, healthcare systems and qualified and sufficient health personnel will reduce health inequalities. They recommended that when defining healthcare policies at regional, national and EU level, there should be tailored and adaptive approaches between health, social and economic policies, with the goal of improving dialogue, synergies and planned investments from the structural funds and other relevant EU programmes, such as Interreg.

The Commission is invited to:

- establish a **European health advisory board**, bringing together representatives of national, regional and local government authorities and other stakeholders, to promote better use of EU funds;

- make full use of its competence in the field of health policy and assist national and regional authorities in strengthening health systems, promoting upward convergence of health care standards with the aim of reducing health inequalities within and between Member States.

Members also recommended:

- using cohesion policy funds to set up specialised centres of excellence for specific diseases across the EU, which would also cover neighbouring countries and contribute to cross-border cooperation on health care;

- committing to **long-term sustainable investment** in the health workforce, given the serious economic, social and health impacts of the COVID-19 crisis;

- adopting ambitious cohesion measures to address the shortage of health professionals in border and rural areas and make extensive use of advanced technologies, such as eHealth, robotic surgery or 3D printing, as part of the 'smart villages' concept.

Cross-border cooperation in health

Members encouraged the use of NextGenerationEU and cohesion funds to radically upgrade the digital capacity of health systems. They called on the Commission and Member States to use cohesion policy instruments to promote the digital transition of medication services in European hospitals.

Highlighting the importance of patient mobility and cross-border **access to safe and high-quality healthcare in the EU**, Parliament called for the promotion of specific intermediaries, such as zones of organised access to cross-border healthcare and European groupings of territorial cooperation (EGTC), health observatories and other networks to help coordinate cross-border cooperation in healthcare in collaboration with local, regional and national authorities.

Parliament recognised the importance of investing in cross-border cooperation programmes that address identified health needs in border regions, such as **cross-border governance** in emergency situations, e.g. emergency services that cover regions on both sides of the border.

Lastly, underlining the important role of **Interreg programmes**, Members called for a greater focus on patients in projects to be funded by Interreg programmes in the new programming period and for projects to be specifically targeted at vulnerable and marginalised groups as well as the gender-related health priorities of the Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025.