EU Border Regions: Living labs of European integration

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The Committee on Regional Development adopted the own-initiative report by Younous OMARJEE (SUE /NGL, FR) on EU border regions: living labs of European integration.

Specific characteristics of border regions

The EU and its immediate neighbours in the European Free Trade Association have 40 internal land borders and internal border regions, and whereas those regions cover 40 % of the EU's territory, account for 30 % of the EU's population, produce almost one third of EU GDP and have significant potential to boost its economies even further.

Border regions, especially those with a low population density and, in particular, rural areas, tend to experience less favourable development conditions and are generally less economically successful than other regions within Member States. Administrative, linguistic and legal barriers are still hampering sustainable growth, socio-economic development and cohesion among and within border regions. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic as well as Russia's ongoing military aggression in Ukraine has made those barriers more difficult to overcome.

The report emphasised the need for EU policies to take more account of the specific characteristics of cross-border regions and for effective use and **greater coordination of EU funds** to ensure a more comprehensive approach to the afore-mentioned challenges.

Resilience through closer institutional cooperation

While welcoming the progress the Commission has made thus far in implementing its 2017 action plan, in particular via the 'b-solutions' initiative – which has made it possible to provide legal and administrative support to authorities in border regions and to resolve 90 cases involving barriers to interaction – and via the support provided to improve access to employment, promote multilingualism in border areas and pool healthcare facilities, Members called on the EU institutions and on Member States to **raise awareness** among cross-border regions about the possibility of receiving support from the Commission under the **b-solutions initiative**.

European cross-border mechanism (ECBM)

The report noted that most barriers hindering cross-border cooperation are legal in nature, arising from diverging national laws or general EU laws. The 2018 Commission proposal for a regulation on European cross-border mechanism would have contributed to removing more than 50 % of the barriers concerned, including those resulting from the lack of cross-border public transport and limited access to employment, education, cultural and leisure services. However, Members deeply regret the fact that the legislative procedure relating to the ECBM has been **blocked by the Council**.

The committee called on the Commission to:

- **amend the current proposal** with a view to striking a balance between the co-legislators' respective positions;

- ensure that the proposal takes into account the strengthening of cross-border regions, anticipating the foreseeable damage in the regions that will be most affected by the consequences of the Russian aggression against Ukraine;

- resume negotiations with the Member States with a view to rapidly adopting a system for **clearing legal or administrative border hurdles** in an effort to make life easier for the inhabitants of cross-border regions.

The report also stressed that border regions are also confronted with the consequences of Brexit, which are creating new barriers to free trade and causing serious disruption to cross-border trade between the EU and the UK, making life more difficult for businesses and citizens in border regions.

Dynamic cross-border labour markets

Many important measures have been taken to address the socio-economic asymmetries in border areas. However, the report noted the lack of specific assessments and comparative statistics that would provide an overview of the socio-economic circumstances of cross-border SMEs, something all the more regrettable given that SMEs account for 67 % of total employment and almost 60 % of EU added value.

In the absence of an adequate supply of jobs or other economic opportunities and in view of the low level of salaries, the well-educated workforce tends to migrate to regions where such opportunities are in adequate supply, thus making the situation in remote border areas even more challenging. Therefore, Members called for investments in **innovation, human capital, good governance and institutional capacity** to boost these regions.

The Commission and the Member States are called on to ensure, as a matter of urgency, the proper implementation and enforcement of relevant EU legislation as regards the rights of **cross-border and frontier workers**, to improve their employment, working and health and safety conditions. They should also address the need to revise the existing legislative framework including Regulation (EC) No 883/2004 on the coordination of **social security systems** in order to strengthen the **portability of rights** and ensure adequate social security coordination, and to acknowledge the reality of and the difficulties associated with the increase in **teleworking**, to guarantee that those teleworking from their country of residence have access to social security rights, labour rights and tax regimes, and certainty as regards the authority responsible for their coverage.

Lastly, Members called on the Commission, in close cooperation with the European Labour Authority, to put forward a legislative proposal for a **European social security pass** for all mobile workers and non-EU nationals who are covered by EU rules on intra-EU mobility without further delay.