Current and future challenges regarding cross-border cooperation with neighbouring countries

2023/2076(INI) - 16/01/2024 - Text adopted by Parliament, single reading

The European Parliament adopted by 559 votes to 20, with 36 abstentions, a resolution on current and future challenges regarding cross-border cooperation with neighbouring countries.

EU cross-border cooperation with neighbouring countries, whether at land or sea borders, covering 184 regions, 33 countries and 260 million inhabitants, is key to EU policies. Cross-border cooperation contributes to peace and sustainable development along the EU's external borders.

General considerations on Interreg NEXT programmes

Parliament welcomed the alignment of Interreg NEXT programmes with Interreg programmes as this has the potential to simplify procedures, enhance synergies between programmes and increase the effectiveness of European investments. It highlighted, however, the need for more simplified procedures.

The resolution emphasised the **importance of cross-border projects**, including people-to-people projects, in bringing people together and, in that way, opening up new potential for sustainable local development and cross-border cooperation. Stressing that the allocation for the period 2021-2027 is far from optimal, it consequently underlined the importance of strengthening the financing of these programmes.

Members raised the point that major challenges faced by the EU can also be met by promoting cross-border cooperation between neighbouring regions (e.g. a sustainable future for the Mediterranean, the Black Sea, the Baltic Sea and other maritime basins; a sustainable future for the Alps, the Pyrenees, the Carpathians and other mountain ranges; a sustainable future for the large river basins of the Rhine, the Danube, the Meuse, and so on).

The resolution emphasised that cross-border cooperation is an **important step in EU pre-accession processes**. It also highlighted the crucial role of cross-border cooperation in the sustainable management of natural resources and **climate change challenges**, including natural disasters, environment, biodiversity and food security, as well as ecosystems in border areas.

Cross-border cooperation with the Eastern Neighbourhood

Parliament welcomed the suspension of cross-border cooperation with Russia and Belarus as a consequence of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, as well as the re-routing of funds to Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova. It drew attention to the difficult situation of regions sharing a border with Russia and Belarus following the suspension of cross-border cooperation with these countries and encouraged the Commission to work closely with the affected Member States to find sustainable solutions to address the social and economic challenges in these regions.

Members called for funds from cross-border programmes to be used for the **development of sustainable transport infrastructure**, including the construction of railway connections and storage facilities near the EU's borders with Ukraine and Moldova, in order to streamline the flow of goods and grain so as to ensure global food security, contribute to fostering the development of a sustainable economy for both countries and help frontline Member States, as well as Moldova and Ukraine, to meet these challenges.

They underlined the urgent need to support local and regional authorities in Ukraine while continuing to help neighbouring regions and encouraging increased cooperation.

Cooperation relating to sea basins

Concerning the **black sea basin**, the resolution stressed the importance of granting increased financial support to the programme, given the security challenges in the Black Sea resulting from Russian attacks and the blockade on sea and Danube ports, which aim to prevent grain shipments that are essential to Ukraine's economy. It called for a strong focus on the Black Sea, enhancing regional cooperation to address security issues, including those related to regional conflicts and energy security.

The resolution stressed the importance of strong socio-economic partnerships with **third countries in the Mediterranean basin**. Cross-border programmes must play an active role in addressing common security concerns and seeking regional stability. Members called for better management of migratory flows and the fight against illegal migration and human trafficking. They invited the European Council to ask the Commission to submit a detailed macro-regional strategy for the Mediterranean.

Challenges in the field of cross-border cooperation

The resolution stressed the importance of: (i) simplifying administrative procedures by making them more accessible and transparent; (ii) overcoming language barriers and cultural differences through appropriate measures; (iii) encouraging dialogue between local authorities and fostering the participation of civil society in territorial cooperation projects; (iv) developing a long-term exchange and entrepreneurial collaboration programmes between institutions and businesses in cross-border regions; (v) establishing a short- and medium-term intercultural exchange system to promote the learning of common languages, foster a deeper understanding of regional cultures and facilitate collaboration between cross-border communities.

Policy recommendations

Parliament recommended: (i) greater **complementarity** between projects and stresses the need for synergies with other EU funding tools that have the same geographical and thematic coverage in order to avoid any double funding; (ii) enhancing the role of **EU macro-regional strategies** in addressing challenges related to border regions; (iii) developing, in the area of cross-border governance, a fully integrated infrastructure strategy (road, rail, water), taking into account the cross-border region as a whole; (iv) improving coordination, **dialogue** and further exchanging of best practices between regions and states, for instance through a platform like INTERREG Europe; (v) **increasing the overall budget** for cross-border territorial cooperation.

The Commission is called on to: (i) reduce the bureaucratic burden, considerably simplify procedures and reduce hurdles related to different legislation; (ii) continue integrating the Sustainable Development Goals into the future action plans for cross-border cooperation so that no place and no one is left behind; (iii) further cooperate with partner states to promote cross-border cooperation, supplying, where necessary, know-how in order to help counterpart authorities in partner countries.