Cohesion policy 2014-2020 – implementation and outcomes in the Member States

2023/2121(INI) - 14/03/2024 - Text adopted by Parliament, single reading

The European Parliament adopted by 433 votes to 36, with 51 abstentions, a resolution on cohesion policy 2014-2020 - implementation and outcomes in the Member States.

Outcomes

The resolution stressed that evaluations carried out by the Member States on the outcomes of 2014-2020 cohesion policy investments show that, in general, cohesion policy brought about positive results in the areas that it supported. Members welcomed cohesion policy's contribution to research and innovation, as it, among other things, strengthened cooperation between the research community and businesses and helped turn research into marketable products or services. By the end of 2022, more than 75 000 companies had cooperated with research institutions and around 37 000 had introduced new products to the market thanks to support through the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF).

Energy efficiency and climate change

Parliament noted there is evidence that cohesion policy supported investments in several coal regions that contributed to decarbonisation. Moreover, measures aimed at renewable energy production have increased renewable production capacity in the EU by 6 000 MW by the end of 2022, with a target of 8 700 MW by the end of 2023. Regarding climate change adaptation, thanks to cohesion investments 29 million people are now less exposed to flooding.

Water

The resolution noted that cohesion support from the ERDF and the Cohesion Fund has also increased the number of people benefiting from a better water supply (8.3 million people by the end of 2022 and better management of their municipal waste. Most of the targeted beneficiaries (70 %) of the measures to improve water supply live in Italy, Romania, Greece, Portugal, Bulgaria and Czechia.

Energy and transport

Energy and transport networks have received significant investments from the ERDF and the Cohesion Fund.

Digital transition

Parliament called for a wider use of digital technologies and solutions in the Member States to simplify implementation, monitoring and reporting, hence contributing to more efficient administration and less physical documentation. It invited the Commission and the Member States to endeavour to ensure that all regions in the EU have access to high-speed broadband so that they are placed on an even footing to achieve the digital transition.

Employment

The resolution pointed out that cohesion policy support has also brought tangible benefits to thousands of **SMEs**. It stressed that this has been one of the best performing areas of ERDF support.

Members acknowledged that cohesion, especially through the European Social Fund (ESF) and the Youth Employment Initiative, has supported successful employment, social inclusion and educational and vocational training measures.

Moreover, the ESF has helped entrepreneurs launch new businesses and provided training so that companies can better adapt to changes in the market.

Parliament also stressed that, through cohesion policy financial support for projects in the healthcare sector, mainly through ESF and ERDF investments, 58.3 million people had access to improved healthcare services across the EU by the end of 2022.

Border regions

Stressing that disproportionate burdens, such as the inherent structural disadvantages faced by all border regions, should be compensated with a separate system for regional aid designed specifically for border regions, Parliament demanded that 0.26 % of the EU's cohesion policy budget be reserved exclusively for development in the border regions ('borderland billion') at the beginning of every new programming period, starting with the 2028-2034 period.

Future cohesion policy

Parliament insisted that cohesion policy should remain the EU's main investment instrument for reducing disparities, ensuring economic, social and territorial cohesion and stimulating regional and local sustainable growth and that it should continue to be a key contributor to supporting a socially just transition and recovery from symmetric and asymmetric shocks and the fight against climate change.

Members regretted the **reduction** in the share of the 2021-2027 MMF dedicated to cohesion, compared to the previous programming period. They believe that there must be an increase in real terms in the overall cohesion budget and in the MFF's share of the policy compared to the 2021-2027 programming period.

According to Members, cohesion investments should remain under shared management for programming and implementation in order to be able to respond to the needs of Member States, regions, and urban, rural and remote areas.

The resolution acknowledged the need for **built-in crisis flexibility** and proposed, in this regard, the creation of a dedicated axis for local and regional authorities to address emerging priorities.

Financing

Regretting that delays in the MFF negotiations led to considerable delays in the 2021-2027 programming period, Members called on the Commission to assess the legal possibility of creating two distinct parts within the Common Provisions Regulation, namely the content-related part (political) and the MFF-related part (financial resources), for the post-2027 programming period.

Members called on the Commission, the Member States and regional authorities to use and enhance existing mechanisms to detect and fight irregularities, fraud and corruption in cohesion policy funding.

Streamlining of instruments

Members also considered that further streamlining of the architecture of EU funding instruments should be achieved across the Cohesion Fund, the ERDF, the ESF+ and the Just Transition Fund, and possibly

extended to the EAFRD, as it should be covered by the Common Provisions Regulation. Such streamlining would further simplify the programming and implementation of the policy, enhance its visibility and effectiveness, and improve beneficiaries' access to funding.

Future priorities

The Commission is called on, in the post-2027 cohesion policy regulations, to:

- take rule of law aspects fully into consideration when approving partnership agreements and cohesion policy programmes, so that they are in full compliance with the enabling conditions on the effective application and implementation of the Charter of Fundamental Rights;

- introduce strict criteria to improve the application of the 'do no significant harm' principle;

- continue to underline the importance of tackling climate change mitigation and adaptation, biodiversity loss and protection of the environment, including better water and waste management, resource and energy efficiency, disaster resilience and risk prevention and management;

- guarantee better access to funding for local and regional authorities, and also for cross-border and less-developed regions;

- ensure that every new Commission initiative be accompanied by a corresponding budgetary top-up.