

COVID19: regions and cities demand simplified access to EU funds and sufficient time to invest on recovery



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Regional and local leaders shared their experience in fighting the pandemic and their proposals for the recovery with Commissioner Ferreira

The European Committee of the Regions (CoR) debated how EU cohesion policy and its shared management could boost Europe's recovery with Commissioner Elisa Ferreira. The debate took place during the plenary session of the CoR, which also saw the adoption of three opinions on this topic as well as serving as the opening of the European Week of Regions and Cities 2020.

The CoR's Annual Regional and Local Barometer shows that the coronavirus pandemic is widening existing social and economic disparities in the EU. EU cohesion policy, including the REACT EU instrument and the simplifications through the Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative (CRII), is key to fighting this trend and spearheading the economic and social recovery of Europe as well as building resilience and overcoming regional disparities.

" We must use future cohesion policy investments wisely. We cannot look at the future and reproduce the past. We have shown this year what we can do in crisis. We must show next year how we build a green, digital economy in a European way, which leaves no regions behind ", said Elisa Ferreira, Commissioner for Cohesion and Reforms, during the opening of the European Week of Regions and Cities

" Solidarity is a fundamental value of the European Union. With the intervention of cohesion policy in our regions and our

cities to face the pandemic, the EU has shown that it can keep its promises. Let us not forget this in the budgetary negotiations: following the crisis, cohesion policy is more essential than ever ", said Isabelle Boudineau (FR/PES), Chair of the CoR's Commission for Territorial Cohesion Policy and the EU Budget COTER.

In the CoR opinion on the " REACT-EU package ", rapporteur Mieczyslaw Struk (PL/EPP) confirms that thanks to REACT EU, cohesion policy will be better prepared to face the current and possible future crises. He notes, however, that the EUR 55 bn additional funds need to be distributed more evenly in 2021 and 2022 to ease the administrative burden at the end of the 2014-2020 programming period and underlines the need to strike a balance between fast disbursement of newly available resources and the need to avoid irregularities. He further welcomes the currently enhanced flexibility but also warns that a crisis can never justify the centralisation of cohesion policy.

" Our regions and cities are the best level to take effective actions to deal with the negative consequences of crisis situations. Listening to the voice of local and regional communities and leaving competence at these decision-making levels has always worked well. We should therefore refrain from using this crisis to transfer funds from cohesion policy - managed in partnership with regions and cities - to other centrally managed instruments ", said Mieczysław Struk (PL/EPP), President of Pomeranian Region.

Also in the opinion on " the role of EU's cohesion policy with respect to intelligent and innovative economic change in the regions against the backdrop of the coronavirus crisis " rapporteur Michiel Rijsberman (NL/Renew Europe) urges the European Commission to avoid shifting power away from regions. He argues for a bottom-up approach by adding regional allocation criteria to REACT-EU and the Recovery and Resilience Facility.

" Regional policy has strong roots in the EU Treaties. Its principles should never be sacrificed. This policy should be a key investment tool for innovative recovery, as it puts the

regions at the heart ", said Michiel Rijsberman (NL/Renew Europe), Regional Minister of the Province of Flevoland.

He further argues that innovative concepts are needed for the transition to a more sustainable, digital and resilient Europe and that these are elements where cohesion policy can play a crucial role. He highlights that it was vital for funds to not only be spent on crisis repairs but should also ensure that the EU's objectives on climate neutrality are met.

Bernd Lange (DE/EPP), rapporteur for the opinion on " Equivalent standards of living as a joint challenge for all levels of government in Europe " believes that living standards, quality of life and business development are highly dependent on the accessibility, affordability and quality of public services and infrastructure. Cohesion policy can make a significant contribution to creating equivalent structural conditions in all Member States and all local and regional authorities, but must according to the rapporteur not remain the only means of promoting balanced development. He urges that all EU policy areas should contribute to the objective of territorial, economic and social cohesion in Europe as set out in Article 174 TFEU.

" I consider the idea of equal living conditions to be an essential part of European cohesion policy. The opinion should serve as a basis for coming debates on how European funding and legislation can jointly contribute to achieving this goal ", said Bernd Lange (DE/EPP), Head of Görlitz District Council.

The CoR members will adopt all three opinions during their plenary session on 12-13 October.

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