

Resolution of the European Committee of the Regions — The contribution of the European Committee of the Regions to the European Commission's 2017 work programme

(2017/C 017/02)

Submitted by the PES, EPP, ALDE, EA and ECR political groups

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS,

- having regard to its resolutions of 4 June 2015 on its priorities for 2015-2020 and of 4 December 2015 on the European Commission 2016 work programme and the Protocol of cooperation with the European Commission of February 2012;
- having regard to the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality, believes it is important for the Commission to continue to display its commitment to respect for these principles in its work, with a joined-up, multi-level approach, and calls for increasing involvement of local and regional authorities in the European decision-making process;

Jobs, growth, investment and cohesion policy

1. calls on the Commission to promptly put forward, on the basis of the mid-term review of Europe 2020 and the implementation of the United Nations Sustainable Developments Goals (SDG), a new long-term strategy for the EU's sustainable development at the horizon 2030 (European sustainability strategy);
2. highlights the role of local and regional authorities in addressing obstacles to investment, as stressed in the 2016 Country Reports and Country-specific Recommendations, and that all levels of government should work in partnership to identify and tackle such obstacles in their respective countries;
3. urges the Commission and the EIB to take further steps on ensuring complementarities and additionality between the European Fund for Strategic Investment (EFSI) and the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) as well as other EU-funded programmes; reiterates its call for the involvement of the CoR in the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the investment plan in particular with regard to the promotion of investment platforms and the analysis of the EFSI's real impact on tackling the investment gap at regional and local level;
4. stresses that the European Commission — in cooperation with the European Investment Bank — should spell out the role of regional promotional banks and other financial institutions in the system of nascent investment platforms as a tool to accomplish the investment plan for Europe ⁽¹⁾;
5. stresses that simplification is needed to boost the impact and better use of the ESIF programmes and suggests the speedy adoption of a number of simplification measures for the current programming period; suggests at the same time intensifying the work on a fundamental review of the delivery system of cohesion policy for the next programming period by intensifying the work of the High Level Group on Simplification, by starting a comprehensive multi-level dialogue particularly with local and regional authorities;
6. suggests developing broader exemptions of ESIF spending from State aid rules;
7. welcomes the 'Cross-Border Review' to remove legal and administrative obstacles to cross-border cooperation and encourages the Commission to present concrete actions in 2017 to remove these obstacles by also taking into account the proposal of the Luxembourg EU Presidency for a 'European Cross-border Convention on specific provisions in border regions'; calls on the Commission to monitor closely the implementation of the cross-border healthcare Directive 2011/24/EU with a view to addressing its possible shortcomings;

⁽¹⁾ ECON-VI/007

8. regrets that mid-term reviews of several EU programmes and initiatives, due to be finalised in the third quarter of 2017, are not aligned with the mid-term review/revision of the current multiannual financial framework (MFF); therefore urges the Commission to conclude their reviews by 1 July 2017 and proceed to a comprehensive proposal for the next MFF, due to be presented by 1 January 2018; hopes, in this light, that delays in reviews of these programmes will not result in a later adoption of legislative proposals for the next MFF;

9. underlines the importance of implementing the EU urban agenda, agreed by Heads of State and Government, in partnership with local and regional authorities. Highlights the importance of ensuring that the EU urban agenda is consistent with the EU's better regulation agenda, calls for the EU urban agenda to be featured in the Commission's 2017 annual work programme and suggests the preparation of a White Paper on implementing the EU urban agenda to be included in the 2017 annual work programme;

10. requests the Commission to include the elaboration of the 2050 territorial vision in its 2017 annual work programme. Underlines the need for a new territorial vision since the European Spatial Development Perspective Agreement of 1999 needs to be brought up to date, as underlined in the conclusions of the 27 November 2015 ministerial meeting on Territorial Cohesion and Urban Policy;

11. calls on the Commission to focus efforts on removing transport bottlenecks and providing adequate cross-border connections in particular addressing the issue of missing cross-border transport links at local and regional level. Adequate funding is to be provided in particular to small scale infrastructures with cross-border relevance; expects the European Commission to present a concrete proposal and timeline for the introduction of cross-border multi-modal journey planners and interoperable integrated transport ticketing systems;

12. reiterates its call on the European Commission to publish a Green Paper on mobility in geographically and demographically challenged regions;

13. encourages the Commission to re-launch the debate on 'GDP and Beyond' and examine the need for and feasibility of developing complementary indicators for economic performance, well-being and sustainable development;

14. recommends that the European Commission develop a 'minimum qualifications and skills guarantee', recognised and validated in all Member States, without undermining the responsibility of the Member States for the content of teaching and the organisation of education systems under Article 165 TFEU, and expects that the arrangements for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning will be in place no later than 2018; underlines the need to match labour skills with market needs taking due note of training needs of the unemployed youth in the 2017 annual Commission work programme;

15. invites the Commission to develop an EU strategy on Demographic Change and include a flagship initiative on demographic issues in the mid-term review of the Europe 2020 strategy, and to have an early dialogue with the CoR on the future definition of regions that suffer from severe and permanent demographic handicaps;

16. expects that the Commission will present in early 2017 a legislative proposal for the European Pillar of Social Rights in order to address the asymmetry between economic freedoms and social rights;

17. urges the Commission to present a legal framework which would encompass a body of common definitions applying to the different forms of social economy in Europe, i.e. cooperatives, foundations, mutual societies and associations in order to enable social economy enterprises to operate on a legally certain basis and thus enjoy the advantages of the internal market and free movement;

18. urges the Commission to propose a new strategy for gender equality and women's rights 2016-2020 and to come up with a legislative proposal for the revision of Council Directive 92/85/EEC on maternity leave;

19. calls on the Commission, with the involvement of the CoR and Member States, to submit a second report on the European disability strategy 2010-2020 and to examine the possibility of developing the strategy further;

20. calls on the Commission to address the phenomenon of 'letterbox companies';
21. intends to contribute to the 2018 European Year of Cultural Heritage by bringing knowledge of cultural heritage to a wider audience at grassroots level;
22. stresses the need for a renewed European tourism strategy and points out that the Committee of the Regions has in this connection begun work on the opinion on 'Tourism as a driving force for regional cooperation across the EU' and will submit proposals on this renewed European strategy to the European Commission;
23. calls on the Commission to take a more systematic account of the rural dimension of all EU policy areas and to come up with a White Paper on rural areas to serve as a starting point for a post-2020 rural development policy;
24. calls on the Commission to promote further blue growth through a new comprehensive plan for the development of the blue economy in Europe based notably on a common European strategy on coastal mapping and marine data in order to help develop the blue economy through better availability of data while avoiding fragmentation and making use of cross-border synergies. Also pleads for the establishment of a Knowledge and Innovation Community for the Blue Economy;
25. calls on the Commission to streamline the principle of disaster resilient investment into its policies and Funds. Calls on the Commission, in consultation and cooperation with local, regional and national governments and with stakeholders, to produce guidance on what the Sendai framework on disaster risk reduction means for Europe and how it can best be implemented;

Sustainable development

26. calls on the Commission to fully implement the circular economy action plan and to evaluate the need to come forward in 2017 with the necessary proposals including an ambitious strategy on plastics in a circular economy, legislation setting minimum quality requirements for reused water, as well as new initiatives on the construction and demolition sector;
27. calls on the Commission to conduct territorial impact assessments on all existing and environmental binding targets;
28. urges the Commission to review the EU climate targets and the necessary means for their implementation in accordance with the global objectives adopted in Paris during the COP21; reminds the Commission about its initial recommendation of a 50 % reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 compared to 1990 levels. Believes that any new objectives should undergo a territorial impact assessment and should not restrict the right of the Member States to determine their energy mix;
29. calls on the Commission to put into practice the global climate agreement Preamble 15 recognising the importance of a multi-level governance approach, which not only includes cities, but also regions;
30. asks to be associated with the EU Energy Infrastructure Forum to represent the voice of local and regional authorities in the process of policymaking regarding energy infrastructure investment, in particular in the area of decentralised energy generation, including micro-production and distribution;
31. asks to be involved, from the early stages of the policy planning process, in the review of the EU Directives on energy efficiency, promotion of energy from renewable sources and electricity market design;
32. calls on the Commission to propose more specific initiatives in the area of combined heat and power production and district heating and cooling networks with a view to further reducing CO₂ emissions and to increasing energy security;

33. considers that the Commission should raise its ambitions on renewable energy policy by further supporting, adapting and spreading the Covenant of Mayors' model inside and outside the EU, helping to transform urban governance, climate action and citizen involvement in a more consistent and sustainable manner;

34. calls for the full implementation of the European Union seventh environment action programme 2014-2020 and urges the Commission to present a proposal for an EU directive that would establish compliance assurance provisions across the EU environmental *acquis* ⁽²⁾;

35. calls for the full implementation of EU biodiversity strategy to 2020, and consequently urges the Commission to present in 2017 its long overdue initiative on no net loss of biodiversity and ecosystem services; also reiterates its request to the Commission not to revise the Nature Directives, but to present soon a Communication that includes concrete actions to support their better implementation ⁽³⁾;

36. calls on the Commission to present the Communication on Sustainable Food, setting out a coherent EU-wide policy framework to address the sustainability of farming, food production and supply chain and trade aspects and reminds the European Commission of its past call for more specific objectives to be set for reducing food waste by 30 % by 2025 ⁽⁴⁾. Also reiterates its call for the introduction of a new logo and identification of a common symbol and scheme identity for local products;

37. calls on the Commission to publish a new alcohol strategy 2016-2025, based on the latest evidence and taking societal changes into consideration and supporting programmes already undertaken at national, regional and local level;

Internal market and competition

38. supports the European Parliament's call for the inclusion of the single market pillar in the European semester, with a system for regular monitoring and evaluation;

39. welcomes the upcoming VAT simplification package for SME and the Start-up initiative as concrete steps to reduce the regulatory and administrative burden on them; underlines the need for significant further regulatory simplification in particular with regard to SME access to public procurement and to their participation in ESIF-funded projects;

40. welcomes the Commission's attention to the sharing or collaborative economy, but reiterates that any hard regulatory initiative should keep a sectoral approach and take into account the scale of the initiative as a criterion to draw regulatory lines;

41. believes that the Commission has to be more responsive to the significant financing challenges that Services of General Interest (SGIs) face and, therefore, calls on the Commission to assess the territorial impact of EU legislation on the provision of SGIs, with a special focus on State aid and public procurement rules and use any existing margin for simplification, including the simplification of EU's financial instruments; expects against this background to be properly consulted on the 2017 review of the 'Almunia package' in relation to the financing of Services of General Economic Interest;

42. proposes the Commission's ongoing evaluation of the directive on remedies in the area of public procurement is followed by a review of the Directive to address shortcomings as seen from the perspective of local and regional authorities;

Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) and the European semester

43. reiterates its call for the Commission and Parliament to adopt a code of conduct to guarantee that local and regional authorities are involved in a structured way in the European semester and undertakes to engage in a dialogue with the Commission on this issue;

44. reiterates its call on the Commission to assess the impact of the new ESA 2010 rules on the ability of local and regional authorities to invest;

⁽²⁾ COR-2015-05660

⁽³⁾ COR-2015-02624

⁽⁴⁾ CoR Resolution on Sustainable Food.

45. urges the Commission to involve the CoR in the preparation of the White Paper on the reform of the EMU, in which the EMU's competitiveness and social dimension ought to be addressed;

Digital single market, research and innovation

46. believes that one of the main challenges for a digital single market lies in the creation of a sustainable data economy, also in an industrial context (Industry 4.0); recommends creating conditions which facilitate the connection of all areas to broadband services and working with the Commission and the European Investment Bank to tap into funding and support schemes for ICT infrastructure and calls on the Commission, as part of the implementation of the digital single market, to report regularly on progress made in overcoming the digital divide, particularly at regional and local level;

47. calls on the Commission to put forward proposals aimed at making better use of the EU-funded research programmes by further developing synergies between Horizon 2020, ESIF and EFSI financing and by strengthening the links to smart specialisation strategies at regional level; suggests putting particular emphasis on the impact of Horizon 2020 funding on growth and addressing the 'innovation divide' when carrying out the interim evaluation;

48. suggests a close CoR involvement in the review of the bio-economy strategy in 2017;

49. stresses that the implementation of new EU tools such as the European Innovation Council as well as initiatives on Open Data and Open Innovation need to take into account the regional dimension, and contribute to narrowing the innovation divide;

EU trade policy

50. asks the Commission that every significant initiative in the field of trade policy should be accompanied with territorial impact assessments and that new trade agreements should not introduce new restrictions on local and regional authorities as regards the provision of services of general interest;

51. requests the Commission to systematically carry out *ex-post* evaluations in order to measure the positive and negative economic, environmental, social and territorial impact of trade agreements;

52. asks the Commission, in order to address problems with transparency on trade policymaking at the EU Member State level, to present guidelines on how trade policy objectives are formulated before negotiations are started, i.e. at the stage when the 28 Member States set a mandate;

Justice, fundamental rights and migration

53. with regard to justice, urges the Commission to encourage forms of incentive that help Member States to improve prison conditions for detainees, promote the establishment of penal mediation processes and focus on restorative justice, deployment of alternatives to imprisonment and training courses which help people to find a way out of a social environment defined by illegality and crime;

54. welcomes the European Commission's willingness to address challenges stemming from the unprecedented influx of asylum seekers, refugees and economic migrants to Europe and considers the proposals on the reform of the Dublin system an important step in this direction; expects, however, further concrete proposals to follow in 2017 to build a comprehensive EU migration and asylum policy founded on respect of fundamental rights and international obligations, and on the principle of solidarity;

55. invites the Commission, in cooperation with the Member States to continue building a consensus on a common European list of safe countries of origin, and to work with countries of origin and transit that are deemed to be safe in order to implement effective and swift return policies in full respect of human rights and international obligations;

56. calls on the Commission to propose establishing mechanisms to enable asylum seekers to apply for a humanitarian visa from outside the EU, enabling legal entry into the EU;

57. recognises the important contribution of migration towards the growth of the European economy and calls for the European semester to take this dimension into account notably with regard to the expenditure to ensure the integration of migrants;

58. deems it more important than ever to preserve Schengen and urges the Commission to make all efforts, together with the Member States, to bring back the necessary stability to the system; recalls that suspending the Schengen agreement on border free movement has significant consequences in terms of physical controls and risks creating serious economic effects while failing to solve the problem of migration pressure;

59. urges the Commission to grant more funding to LRAs so they can more effectively fulfil their important role in the support and integration of asylum seekers, refugees and migrants;

60. believes that better regional and local assignment of resources from the European Investment and Structural Funds is a pre-requisite for supporting integration policies. In this connection, calls for more resources to be dedicated as well as a better distribution and greatest efficiency in the use of these resources in addressing the issue of asylum seekers, refugees and migration in the coming years;

61. calls on the Commission to (1) support local and regional authorities in developing local, regional and national prevention strategies to counter radicalisation; (2) continue to collect and publicise best practices of how to prevent radicalisation in a handbook; and (3) support city-to-city cooperation in addressing radicalisation;

62. is concerned by the difficulty of monitoring the presence of unaccompanied minors and the risk of them falling prey to trafficking and exploitation; calls strongly for inclusion and training programmes to be implemented, particularly for minors, and for reception practices to be introduced that involve the communities of origin of the minors themselves which are already well established in the host country, ensuring that minors are able to live in a family or similar environment;

Stability and cooperation outside of the European Union

63. stresses the need, when implementing the reviewed ENP, to give high priority to initiatives supporting decentralisation processes, twinning and capacity-building at the sub-national level; urges the Commission to revive the Local Administration Facility (LAF) and extend it to all neighbouring countries and reiterates its proposal to incorporate the methodologies, concepts and instruments of European cohesion policy in the implementation of the reviewed ENP;

64. urges the Commission to examine in greater detail decentralisation processes, as well as the situation of local self-government in the enlargement countries in the context of its annual enlargement progress reports;

65. insists on the need for EU local and regional authorities to make an appropriate contribution to development cooperation in order to achieve sustainable results, including in the follow-up of the United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III);

66. invites the Commission to pay particular attention to the protection of refugees in their areas of origin, as an important element in dealing with the growing number of people in need of international protection. Welcomes in this context the European Commission's proposal for a new partnership framework with third countries housing large numbers of refugees; these countries need to develop sustainable reception capacities and provide lasting prospects close to home for millions of individuals fleeing from war and persecution. In this regard, acknowledges the need for an external investment plan by mobilising investments in third countries, and calls for the European regional and local authorities to be fully involved in this process. Local and regional authorities should be encouraged to help their hosting counterparts outside the EU by providing technical assistance and advocating for a more structural approach to the protection of the refugees;

Citizenship, governance and better law-making

67. reiterates its call for simplifying and improving the legal framework of the European Citizens' Initiative as the only direct participation tool at the EU level;

68. draws the attention of the Commission to its successful activities in organising decentralised communication activities on EU matters in close cooperation with local and regional media, civil society and EU institutions and urges the European Commission to intensify its efforts in this domain well ahead of the European elections in 2019;

69. calls on the Commission to draw up an EU-wide standard definition of gold-plating for the purpose of legal certainty in the implementation and application of EU law and for limiting excessive red tape;
70. calls for increased transparency, cooperation and efficiency among the EU institutions following the adoption of the new Interinstitutional Agreement on Better Law-making, and the inclusion of the CoR in all stages of the legislative process to fully use their potential in the legislative cycle and consultations;
71. underlines the good cooperation with the Commission on the pilot test of Territorial Impact Assessment (TIA) carried out during 2015 and 2016; building on this good cooperation, the CoR calls on the Commission to implement TIA as a standard practice in the impact assessment of legislation that could potentially have asymmetrical territorial effects and in the wider better regulation agenda;
72. expects ever closer cooperation with the European Commission and the European Parliament in monitoring subsidiarity, and around its 2017 Conference devoted to subsidiarity;
73. instructs the President to forward this resolution to the Commission, the European Parliament, the Council and the President of the European Council.

Brussels, 15 June 2016.

The President
of the European Committee of the Regions
Markku MARKKULA
