

# THE FUTURE COHESION POLICY SHOULD REPRESENT EU SOLIDARITY IN ACTION

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Before making proposals for the future, we need to look back. Almost exactly 30 years ago, on 15th February 1987, President Jacques Delors gave a famous speech entitled “Achieving the Single Act” in the European Parliament. He explained the fundamentals of the Cohesion Policy (CP) to be launched in June 1988. They combined support to regions which were lagging behind or weak regions under the convergence objective (already written in the preamble of the Rome Treaty<sup>1</sup>), and assistance to fragile areas or regions confronted with new challenges associated with the Single Market and major economic restructuring. As an illustration of this second aspect of the CP, considered by Jacques Delors as EU solidarity in action, the declining rural areas and those under industrial restructuring benefitted from European Funds under the so-called objectives 2 and 5b.

From 2007 onwards, despite the addition of territorial cohesion in the Lisbon Treaty, the supposed simplification of eligibility rules led to a definition of categories of regions based solely on GDP per head and other quantitative criteria, regardless of the structural vulnerability of regions or sub-regions in relation to European integration. Hence, the notion of EU solidarity weakened and disappeared, damaging EU legitimacy in the process. In the current CSF, only support to lagging behind regions and the convergence objective mainly remain, with minor sums dedicated to territorial cooperation.

As the spectrum of the financial crisis becomes blurred, it seems obvious that the contribution of the CP to public investment and to the EU 2020 Strategy is not enough to convince the national policy-makers

and EU citizens to maintain funding for all of the regions. To some extent, the drift towards extremely complex regulation, gold-plating by the national administration, disproportionate controls, so on and so forth, illustrates this weakening legitimacy of the CP.

As a consequence, if we want to ensure the continuity of the CP, we need to substantially reform it in order to make evident that it helps EU citizens wherever they live to face new challenges, and that the CP is the best tool to create EU solidarity.

The PC reform should then simultaneously follow two directions:

- Revisit the convergence objective in the light of new challenges. Considering the widening of intra-regional disparities rather than inter-regional ones, and the various kinds of inequalities, the eligibility criteria should be diversified (GDP per inhabitant, social and environmental indicators, indicators related to democracy and human rights). The kind of socio-economic model that is desirable for the EU citizens by 2030 should be also questioned, highlighting the value of the European way of life as such (peaceful, democratic, tempered, relatively equal, etc.). Bearing in mind that the regions and the local authorities are the best placed to nurture the European lifestyle, the PC post-2020 should aim at building resilient regions from 5 viewpoints — socio-economic (competitiveness and innovation), environmental, democratic, territorially balanced (rural-urban) and well-being (culture, education, health).
- Identify the “EU solidarity needs” which may be addressed by a place-based, multi-annual, and partnership development policy. Among

1. “to ensure their harmonious development by reducing the differences existing between the various regions and the backwardness of the less favoured regions”

the main projects pushed forward by President Juncker the deepening of EMU and the Energy Union (and Climate) Strategy will certainly create asymmetric shocks for certain regions suffering structural weaknesses. Another challenge will result from the coincidence of two opposite

demographic trends. By 2050, 69 regions will experience both a substantial natural decrease of population, while they will have to face more than average net migration. They should be supported by the CP in order to absorb the shock resulting from the EU external policy.

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