Public consultation on the future of EU Cohesion Policy

Contribution of students attending a seminar on „Regional policy and regional development in the EU“ at the University of Hamburg, Germany, Department for Geography.

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During the course the students got to know how regional policy works in the EU, and they also analysed the main strategies that are meant to lead the member states and their towns and regions towards a competitive and innovative Europe. At the end of the seminar, the idea was to write down some ideas and comments on cohesion policy and its future challenges as a contribution to the public consultation enabled by the Commission. In my opinion, involving young academics in such important aspects of European affairs and giving them the opportunity to comment on relevant issues, is a motivating approach to the Commission’s “Telling the story” – appeal, and a good way to spread the “European spirit”.

The main aspects given by the students’ contributions are summarised below. The focus has been put on questions 1.2 to 2.1 of the published list. Nevertheless, it is worth reading the individual statements, too. Please find them in the separately attached files. They contain interesting details to the following excerpts.

- **Solid education** seems to be a very important factor for the future cohesion policy. As sustainable economic growth requires inventive ideas and creative people, education and the raise of awareness towards geographical patterns and regional strengths and weaknesses is crucial. The development of educational systems should not be regarded as subordinate goals.

- It is still necessary to inform the public about the positive effects of interregional work. Public relations must be enhanced, if possible as a part of a regional or even local **communication** strategy.

- The EU should be more aware of the spatial diversity and the already existing polycentrality. The special **geographical characteristics** could be a “trademark” of Europe. In this respect, it is also important to consider the regions responsible for their own welfare and economic strength.

- Globalisation and economy have their own rules which do not take care of EU policies. There is a huge amount of **external factors** that do not contribute to a balanced development at all. Therefore, on the long run, regional policy and structural funds will face the borders of possibility concerning equalising disparities. Those external influences must be taken into account when it comes to defining new general goals and targets for the cities and regions.

- More **funding** could mean more **disparities**, if the EU policy is not flexible enough in using their instruments. An overall harmonisation of living standards is utopian. The big and medium sized towns must take over the responsibility for surrounding rural areas.

- **Environmental resources** should be used in a much more sustainable and cautious way. One of the biggest momentary and future challenges is land destruction by urban sprawl. In this respect, it is also necessary to keep on educating people on the possible results of additional **soil consumption**, respectively wrong land use. Cohesion policy should not only
support with money, but also “punish” regions that obviously develop in a not sustainable way.

- Economic growth and migration are closely related to each other. Cohesion policy can push a shift of industry and employment, which will in some parts of Europe become a disadvantage for regional development. This raises the question, how expensive it will become for the EU to support infrastructure and regional development in economically forgotten areas (not only in Romania, also in Germany and other parts of West Europe).

- The climate change is to be seen as a big danger and should in any case be taken into consideration when it comes to identify challenges for cohesion policy. It does not only affect coastal zones, it also may destroy the economic base of tourist industry, i.e. in the mountain regions (Alps), and reduce harvest.

- The Lisbon and Gothenburg strategies are good and sensible guidelines toward a joint balanced EU regional policy. But: unique and specific counties and districts need a more diverse (and less general) approach to solve the problems. This might be more useful than a transnational policy that could negatively affect the inhabitants’ attitude (acceptance) towards regional policy in future. It remains the question, whether cohesion policy is able to prevent a certain amount of European regions from becoming the losers of EU-funded regional development.

- It is not quite clear which role the rural areas will play in future. Most of the strategies and papers published by the EU deal with innovation, strengths, metropolitan areas – rural areas seem to be neglected. Is EU policy driving away from the EUREK?

- A very important challenge for the EU cohesion policy is the fact that in future the disparities within the regions will be probably bigger than the interregional disparities in the EU as a whole, due to demographic change and all its consequences. Regions with population decline will be confronted with prosperous regions that gain more and more people. That means: convergence at European level, divergence at regional (or even national) level. This development is already in process and would be more obvious if indicators like the GDP were avoided – or at least supplemented by others.

- A lot of transaction costs given by the EU structural funds could be saved by implementing support of the regions at national level, of course combined with financial means from the structural funds.

- Territorial cohesion and a high level of living standard (as a specific European “image”) can only be achieved by a Europe of people, not by a Europe of economy.

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