PREŠOV REGION, SLOVAKIA

OPINION

ON THE FUTURE OF EU COHESION POLICY

✓ The Fourth Report on Economic and Social Cohesion includes outcomes of monitoring economic, social and territorial situation, and trends in these areas. Resources of Structural Funds and Cohesion Fund according to EU cohesion policy should be targeted in the elimination of regional disparities. In this respect, the report recognised that the regional disparities in Slovakia have even aroused. Therefore, the implementation of EU cohesion policy in the Slovak Republic should be examined and revised.

In fact, the report indicates that in the period 2000 – 2005 member states recorded a trend of gradual decrease in regional disparities. However, if the unemployment rate is considered in Slovakia, the regional disparities in Slovakia increased to the contrary to general positive trends (comparison of the Bratislava Region and Eastern Slovakia). The level of GDP indicates apparently different regional situations within individual objectives.

✓ Research and innovation is one of the key factors in determining innovation capacity of regions. Even though, not every region can obtain a great research and innovation capacity, the concentration of massive expenses in research and innovation into the “limited” number of regions in the EU, creates uncertainties in the less-favoured regions (including Eastern Slovakia).

✓ Referring to R&D and innovation, the less-favoured regions should be enabled to enforce their R&D and innovation capacities in order to be able to receive technological transfers, know-how, and innovation, which improve their competitiveness position. Therefore, if the preparedness for receiving great transfers of innovation programmes of middle and bigger cohesion countries (including Slovakia) is considered, it is necessary to clarify that regions of Slovakia just elaborated their own Regional Innovation Strategies (RIS). Yet, the successful implementation of the RIS can bring an increase of the regions´ competitiveness and innovation level, and this should be happening in the period 2007-2013.

✓ Access to the ICT is also considered as the important stimulus for the development of knowledge economy. The data comparison indicates that there exist visible differences among the member states: the penetration rate of Netherlands, Denmark, and Sweden is 70%, while in Lithuania, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia and Greece it is just 20%.

✓ The report observes that there are many regional centres in the EU, which are not yet connected to motorway network. As an example, Poland is mentioned; however, similar situation is also in Eastern Slovakia.

✓ We positively perceive a new regulation on the ESF for this programming period, which also includes a new priority in the objective Convergence targeted at the strengthening institutional capacity and efficiency of public authorities and public services at the national, regional and local level. The provided support in this priority should enable public sector become a strong engine of competitiveness, development, and growth of member states and regions.
While domestic politics and cohesion is considered, we can observe a process, where decision making and management of public investments in the EU regions gradually decentralises and realises at the regional and local level. However, in the case of Slovakia, this process is often formal. The report points out that enhancing institutional and administrative capacities is a key element for promoting structural changes, growth, and employment. Therefore, cohesion policy should focus on the enforcement of efficiency of state and public authorities. In this context, it is important to state that the empowerment of territorial authorities in the form of decentralisation of competences, financing, and approaching public services to citizens more closely is reasonable.

Since the situation of border regions in Europe is characterised by a wide range of barriers and imbalances on the internal and external borders of the European Union, particularly in Eastern Europe, there is definitely the need to continue supporting all border regions beyond 2013. Indeed, territorial cooperation should remain one of the EU priorities in the future.

Since the EU funding period of 2007 – 2013 has launched significant instruments to advance territorial cooperation, we should capitalise on gained experience and enhance development of regions. This process cannot be brought to an end after this period; on the contrary, we need to continue in territorial cooperation and developed partnership beyond 2013.

Cross-border cooperation instruments on the internal and external borders (INTERREG IIA 2004-2006, New Neighbourhood Programme 2004-2006, Cross-border Cooperation Operational Programme 2007 – 2013, ENPI 2007-2013) have contributed and will stipulate regional development of the least developed regions like the Prešov Region.

Indeed, the emphasis should be put on cross-border cooperation after 2013, which should be supported by higher decentralisation, so that citizens in regions, cities and municipalities of border regions could benefit from cross-border cooperation.

In addition, we call for more emphasis on the regions at the Eastern external border of the EU, which are remote to the progressing regions of Europe and which have to face similar but vital challenges that are ahead of their development.

In conclusion, there is definitely the need to continue and support regions beyond 2013, so that EU cohesion policy brings sustainable social-economic, environmental, and cultural development to regions in the EU. Cohesion policy of the EU is a major tool, which assists regions in addressing challenges, bringing sustainable development, and increasing their competitiveness, which in fact, contributes to the competitiveness of the whole EU. For this reason, the regions should play a key role together with European and national decision-makers in the definition of the future of EU cohesion policy. Furthermore, territorial cooperation should remain EU priority as it benefits all regions regardless of their level of development. A greater emphasis should be made on border regions, especially on the Eastern external EU border.

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