

Seventh cohesion report: Time to look forward

Written by Lambert van Nistelrooij on 17 November 2017 in Opinion
Opinion

Cohesion funds can help reduce the gaps between EU member states, if spent wisely, argues Lambert van Nistelrooij.



Lambert van Nistelrooij | *Photo credit: European Parliament audiovisual*

Europe invests substantial amounts of money in both cohesion and research and development. More than ever, EU goals are being met by the intelligent use of knowledge and the ability to make products and provide services.

'Made in Europe' increasingly goes hand in hand with more 'Invented in Europe'. The emphasis is on completing the chain: excel, innovate, produce and export both inside and outside the EU. This enables us to achieve the Europe 2020 goals throughout the bloc.

However, the geographical distribution of the cohesion and research funds is uneven: 90 per cent of

EU research money goes to older ones, while 70 per cent of cohesion funds go to the newer member states. Further imbalance in Europe is in violation of the EU treaties, which enshrine the goal of cohesion across the EU. In the coming years, investment policy needs to be more targeted.

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The seventh cohesion report underestimates the need for more synergies with the research programme Horizon 2020.

The interest and take-up of Horizon 2020 has increased sharply in recent years. Many excellent researchers turn to the EU, but few are rewarded grants. At the same time, studies have shown that research excellence is struggling to translate into production, services and jobs. Cohesion funds are not being spent appropriately.

The timespans that member states have allowed themselves to finalise projects are far too long. This underspending has inevitably led to an avalanche of projects and payments falling due at the end of the 2014-2020 period. This is not good for the beneficiaries, which have to wait for money due to a shortage of cash in the EU budget.

The increasing battle for talent has caused the gaps between EU member states to widen; many young people are flocking to the western countries.

The debate on a multi-speed Europe has done nothing to ease this tension. Cohesion policy should, on the contrary, prevent Europe from moving at different speeds. Fortunately, territorial cohesion was included in the EU goals of the treaty of Lisbon. We now need to test how the major European funds and instruments function at all levels in the EU.

Horizon 2020 and the ESI funds are an indispensable addition to macroeconomic policy and the European semester, which provides recommendations for sound financial management and structural changes. Without strong engagement at a local level, we will not get there.

The EU 2020 strategy has been the guiding principle for the deployment of funds in recent years. Smart specialisation strategies have been embraced by the member states as a successful tool for better planning procurement. All partners have taken great steps forward, boosting innovation, modernising industry, services and improving social welfare.

However, cross-border EU-cooperation on cohesion funds is kept just to a limited portion of investments. Smart specialisation could be scaled up and boost the EU added value of the funds. I call for greater dynamism between the different worlds; strong economic governance supported by research and development and the new generation of cohesion support.

This is where we underperform; Europe is currently like a Maserati missing two wheels: a state-of-the-art machine, in need of a rapid upgrade.

About the author

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