

Iskra Mihaylova: The future is regional

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Interviews

The chair of parliament's regional development committee, Iskra Mihaylova, says this year's edition of European Week of Regions and Cities is an ideal opportunity to come together to discuss common challenges and to identify possible solutions.



Iskra Mihaylova | *Photo credit: Beau Hart*

What have been your key policy priorities as chair of the Regional Development Committee (REGI) and how successful have you been in achieving them?

Today, more than ever, the EU is facing all manner of challenges ranging from demographics to climate change and security issues. The migration and refugee crisis, Brexit and geopolitical instability add to the mix. Unemployment, notably amongst young people, remains high in many parts of Europe.

The values and democratic principles on which the European project is founded are being tested. In this context, my biggest success and achievement, as well as of REGI committee members, is that cohesion policy remains one of the principal investment instruments available to the EU, member states, all European regions and cities. It's necessary to boost the European economy post 2020, tackle climate change and energy dependence, migration and security issues and to contribute to developing a strong and sustainable economy.

Among the key policy priorities since my appointment as chair of the REGI committee has been gaining support for effective and efficient cohesion policy implementation and ensuring the added value of the investments on the ground, thus maximizing their impact. I have always worked for strengthened links with the economic semester and structural reforms, which can provide the appropriate investment framework for effective and efficient use of cohesion policy funds.

Therefore, I am satisfied in achieving my policy objectives and the proof of this are the Commission's proposals for a reformed and modernized cohesion policy for the 2021-2027 period. The proposed legislative package presents a policy for all regions in Europe, is much more focused, streamlined, simplified and flexible.

When shaping legislation, how effective is the EU in encouraging inter-regional cooperation between the cities and regions, and the main EU institutions?

The REGI committee has always worked closely, in good coordination, with the council, Commission, the Committee of the Regions, the European Economic and Social Committee, inter-regional organisations and local and regional authorities to shape the legislative framework for regional development and cohesion policy. Earlier this year, we invited organizations like Eurocities, the Council of European Municipalities and Regions and the Council of Peripheral Municipalities and Regions to express their views on how to shape post 2020 cohesion policy. With their active involvement, regions and cities have also played a significant role in preserving the cohesion funding for all regions of Europe post 2020.

Given recent economic growth across the EU, is there still a need to fund rural development or close disparities between member states?

During his recent State of the Union speech Commission president Jean-Claude Juncker pointed out the economic growth, including 12 million new jobs, achieved since 2014. However, we live in globalised, dynamically evolving world, facing new challenges like migration and security. Therefore, we need a more competitive, more united, more social and citizen-oriented Europe.

All regions today face the challenges of the digital economy, increasing global competition and economic transformation. It is important that the EU demonstrates its capacity to respond to both the major challenges and the concrete concerns of citizens. Achieving economic, social and territorial cohesion still remains a major challenge. To this end, we should close still existing disparities between member states, regions, and deploy a truly integrated approach to development.

In what ways can Europe's regions drive forward a circular economy approach that Europe's national governments cannot?

Traditionally, for many years, cohesion policy has supported local and regional authorities' projects and has aimed at ensuring environmental sustainability and resource efficiency. Through cohesion policy instruments, cities can make their citizens better aware of the goals of the Paris climate agreement. European structural and investment funds provide the best implementation tools for the circular economy.

I am therefore glad that the cohesion policy legislative package 2021-2027 has its focus on environmentally-sustainable and climate mitigation measures. Local and regional authorities are closer to the citizens and local challenges, they have better insight into local challenges and opportunities. But coordination and greater cooperation is needed between regions, cities, SMEs and other public/private entities.

How concerned are you for future funding of the European cohesion policy and the 2021-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF)? Do you fear a reduction in the size of the MFF?

Cohesion policy helps the EU to mobilise investments across Europe's territories. It is the European strategic investment policy which contributes to the implementation and complements the main EU policies, such as education, employment, energy, the environment, the single market, research and innovation. REGI committee members, including myself, are motivated to work for preserving the role of cohesion policy as the principal and strongest EU investment instrument by transforming it in a new, reformed and modernised policy. The proposals present a delicate balance between continuity, the need for reform and the need for better coordination with other EU programmes and financial instruments.

With the proposed budget of €373 billion, cohesion policy remains Europe's strongest investment policy, despite the budgetary gap left by Brexit. However, I would have expected and welcomed more ambition in the MFF and would like to point out that with its resolution on the next MFF, adopted in May, Parliament reaffirmed its position to have adequate funding for key EU policies to enable them to effectively carry out their tasks and objectives, including preserving cohesion policy funding to at least the level of the 2014-2020 budget.

The proposed budget for European Territorial Cooperation (Interreg) programmes, which have proven their added value, is insufficient for the ambitions goals set. Parliament has called on the Commission to consider a budget that matches the needs and challenges of the cooperation across borders. However, I would like to point out that it is of utmost importance to focus on flexibility and interrelations between the funding sources and instruments.

The UK withdrawal from the EU creates a shortfall in the next MFF. How will the departure of Britain's regions affect regional policy making?

There is no doubt that the next round of cohesion policy is being formulated during a period of significant new challenges for Europe as a whole, including Brexit. Therefore, it is important that there is a continuation of European Territorial Cooperation programmes such as PEACE and INTERREG post-Brexit. In June, parliament adopted its resolution based on a REGI committee report on the impact of cohesion policy on Northern Ireland.

Cohesion policy has helped to improve the economic and social situation of Northern Ireland following

implementation of the peace process. The parliamentary report concluded that it is crucial for Northern Ireland to be able to participate, post 2020, in certain special EU programmes as this would strongly benefit sustainable economic and social development, particularly in disadvantaged, rural and border areas.

Considering the upcoming departure of the UK and of Britain's regions, the new cohesion package proposes a new "Peace Plus" cross border programme that should continue and build on the work of previous programmes between the border regions of Ireland and Northern Ireland. I personally consider that the EU should use all the tools available, including cohesion policy, to demonstrate solidarity and support for all regions and cities that are especially affected by externally imposed challenges, including Brexit.

How important is the European Week of Regions and Cities in bringing together stakeholders and key decision makers, as well as influencing EU legislation?

This year, the 16th European Week of Regions and Cities will take place and in the course of the years, the event has established itself as a communication and networking platform for regional policy and a key event for providing good practices, exchanges of views, attracting regions and cities from all over Europe and further beyond.

Moreover, it provides the possibility to discuss comprehensively the new challenges, which regions and cities encounter today like security and migration, and to look for joint solutions, to exchange best practices. I expect that the event again will bring together political representatives, decision-makers, experts and practitioners of regional policy, as well as stakeholders and the media, to discuss common challenges for European regions and cities and to identify possible solutions.

The event is the real opportunity to clearly demonstrate that cohesion policy has delivered real and tangible improvements for Europeans, and to reiterate that a strong cohesion policy is needed.

In terms of regional development policy making, what should the main priorities be for the next European Commission (2019-2024)?

Above all, the future of regional development policy is linked with the way the policy responds to the expectations of European citizens. It is important to further encourage investments through synergies and complementarities with financial instruments and other EU programmes in order to implement an efficient and sustainable policy in line with the Paris Climate Agreement.

Regional development policy priorities should be in line with the current legislative proposal towards achieving a smarter Europe, a green and circular economy, digital technologies, better connectivity and support for social Europe and investments closer to citizens. The focus should be on achieving long-term competitiveness, growth and environmental sustainability.

Further simplification, flexibility and complementarities should also be among key priorities. It is also of the utmost importance that we better communicate the positive results of the policy.

Will you be standing again as an MEP in the upcoming European elections, and, if so, what will be your key campaign issues concerning EU policy making?

I will support the party, which I represent, in the European elections, because for us a unified, stable and strong Europe is a pre-requisite for the prosperity, peace and solidarity of all member states. Destructive nationalism and populism destroys and undermines the fundamental values and freedoms of the EU.

I know that my constituency considers the EU as a Union of prosperity, fundamental human rights and tolerance. A policy of cohesion, social inclusion and environmental sustainability ensures the future of each city and region in Europe. Cohesion policy is the most powerful weapon to fight populism and to promote European integration and solidarity.

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