

Connecting Europe by bridging networks

Written by Pavel Telička on 20 March 2019 in Opinion
Opinion

Incentivising good cooperation between authorities from different Member States is crucial for the next Connecting Europe Facility, writes Pavel Telička.



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As one of the European Parliament's co-rapporteurs for the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF) for the period 2021-2027, in recent months we successfully conducted the inter-institutional negotiations until we reached a provisional agreement.

With the figures due to be addressed under the Multi-annual Financial Framework (MFF) negotiations, we secured the framework under which the next projects will be selected and carried out in the CEF Programme for the years to come.

The CEF upgrade was not to be limited to the necessity of modernising it to fit the actual investment

needs (for example, the replacement of the telecommunication pillar by a digital pillar) and experience drawn from the current Programme set the ground for potential ways of improving its efficiency.

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Some observations could be made about the 2014-2019 period.

As much as CEF is an extremely successful programme which was largely oversubscribed and with a good quality of projects, it remains mostly unknown and unfairly unacknowledged by anyone not dealing with transport or investment in infrastructure on a daily basis.

The investment landscape and the opportunities for financial support under EU Programmes have drastically changed since the CEF was established.

If it translates into an increase in opportunities, it certainly also introduced complexity and controversy at the time InvestEU was established.

“Without good cooperation, we have seen projects remaining in limbo for years and money being wasted”

Without clear and identifiable priorities and procedures, CEF would lose its attractiveness and visibility in the next period.

The struggle to implement cross-border projects is as real as it is costly: the multiple layers of authorities involved on both sides of a border have the potential to reduce delays and costs in cases of misalignment of the schedules and the priorities, or more generally in the absence of political will.

The impossibility to dilute the quality of the projects and the necessity - in the transport sector - to commit to the deadlines of 2025 and 2030 for the comprehensive TEN-T networks, only set a basic level of ambition.

Based on the abovementioned observations, my objective and main focus for the next CEF is to reaffirm clear priorities for the Programme, to facilitate the access to finances and to strengthen the qualitative monitoring of the progress of each project.

Firstly, in terms of priorities: given the state of advancement of the TEN-T networks, the signal must be clear that now is time to bridge our networks across the borders.

Taking into account the difficulty of implementing cross-border projects in the field of transport, it is necessary, throughout the Regulation, to emphasise and incentivise the good cooperation between authorities from different Member States.

For instance, the next CEF will grant a bonus in terms of co-financing when an integrated cooperation on the two sides of a border is established.

“As much as CEF is an extremely successful programme ... It remains mostly unknown and unfairly unacknowledged by anyone not dealing with transport or investment in infrastructure on a daily basis”

This is, I believe, a win-win situation as without good cooperation, we have seen projects remaining in limbo for years and money being wasted.

An equally important priority was to convey the message that we can no longer think of investment exclusively in terms of transport or energy or digital.

Instead, we need to achieve a comprehensive approach to public spending which encompasses all priorities.

This starts already at the level of projects applicants and this is why the Parliament defended the idea that, under the new CEF, the Programme should allocate extra co-financing for projects that combine the priorities of two sectors.

The simplification of the Programme is to be seen from the point of view of a project applicant.

First, increased predictability of work programmes and their expected timeframes and amounts can help stakeholders mobilise adequate resources.

This is why Parliament defended the idea that a timetable for the whole period, foreseeing a timeframe for each priority and the corresponding amounts, should be published in advance.

Finally, Parliament aimed to improve monitoring of the Programme.

One possible criticism of the evaluations conducted under the current period is that they dwell mostly on financial reporting and little is actually said about the concrete achievements of the Programme.

This lack of information and self-reflection is detrimental for the general awareness of the Programme, at its own expense.

The next CEF foresees that more information about the actual achievements of the projects will be made available on a bi-annual basis, thereby allowing a better assessment of the progress made.

About the author

Pavel Telička (CZ, ALDE) is co-rapporteur of the Connecting Europe facility 2021-2027 report

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