

ADOPTED EMERGENCY RESOLUTION

EPP CONGRESS ZAGREB, 20 – 21 NOVEMBER 2019



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The demographic challenge in the EU's rural areas: leaving nobody behind

All EU regions are confronted with the impact of a major demographic evolution, driven by a declining birth rate and an increasing life expectancy. Yet, a wide range of areas, in particular rural areas (that are home to more than 50% of EU citizens), are currently subjected to the disruptive loss of young citizens. Their shrinking population entails severe socio-economic and political consequences. According to Eurostat *'over one quarter (25.5 %) of the rural population is at risk of poverty or social exclusion'*.

These regions threaten to be victim to a downward spiral of depopulation, decreasing private and public investment, receding transport connections and diminishing educational, welfare and cultural services. Shops, banking and postal services are disappearing and small schools closing. Citizens feel left behind, hence legitimately feel discontent and disappointed, and this of course is not without impact on the functioning of democracy.

Sound economic growth in the geographically and demographically challenged regions is key to the realisation of the Sustainable Development Goals (in particular access to quality healthcare, education and energy) and *"will contribute to the territorial cohesion of the Union as a whole"* (Committee of the Regions Report on demography). Moreover, via Article 174 of the Lisbon Treaty we commit ourselves *'to pay particular attention to rural areas, affected by industrial transition, and regions which suffer from severe and permanent natural or demographic handicaps'*.

The final report of the Citizens' Consultations, jointly drafted on behalf of the Austrian and the Romanian Council-Presidency, specifically refers to citizens' concerns and *"fears about a brain drain that is facilitated by the free movement of persons, which, paradoxically, is perceived by many citizens as one of the most important benefits of EU membership"*. The EPP stands firmly behind the four fundamental freedoms of the EU as powerful tools to tackle future challenges, *but we want nobody to be left behind*. We stand for an EU that protects and supports the citizens in our rural areas. Because of the alarming consequences of the demographic evolution, we demand urgent actions. Therefore, the EPP Congress:

1. Appeals for an action plan to be jointly developed by local, regional and national authorities and to be coordinated by the EU's Vice-President for Democracy and Demography in order to fully exploit, support and promote the economic potential and assets of the affected regions

(eco-tourism, high quality, healthy products, innovative circular projects, cultural and linguistic heritage), and to stimulate and support young people to start up initiatives in their home grown region and as such to foster a dynamic environment in rural areas;

2. Underlines and fully supports the demand of the European Parliament (in its Resolutions of 13 June and 14 November 2017 and of 17 April 2018 on cohesion policy) to optimally deploy the European Structural and Investment (ESI) and Innovation Funds and programmes to address these demographic challenges, by investing in quality and affordable public services and digital infrastructure, and by mobilising InvestEU and Connecting Europe Facility (CEF) to enhance the economic opportunities and accessibility in regions with the most unfavourable demographic dynamics;

3. Insists on mobilising all instruments of the EU's Green Deal action plan, including a vigorous Just Transition Fund, and of the Digital investment tools to enhance the economic resilience and transition in regions that are facing shrinking populations;

4. Emphasises that the roll-out of broadband internet connections in rural areas must be a priority of the next EU-Commission, in order to facilitate distance working, online learning, access to better health care;

5. Stresses that in the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) demographic considerations should be incorporated throughout its policy spectrum and that special impetus must be given to efforts addressing demographic change;

6. Fully supports the EESC's (Economic and Social Committee) demand towards the European Investment Bank EIB to develop tailor-made support schemes for small and medium-sized rural businesses, both private and social enterprises, including co-operatives and young farmers;

7. Emphasizes in this respect to fully utilize the potential of cross-border alliances and partnerships between urban and rural development actions, whether in the sustainability or the digital field;

8. Invites all citizens and stakeholders on the local and regional level, the civil society, schools, enterprises to jointly, bottom-up engage in this operation in order to commonly develop and roll out innovative and smart actions to reinvigorate rural areas that are faced with these thorough changes;

9. Invites the EU institutions and its stakeholders to bring together and twin successful, innovative and cohesive rural village and small-town communities annually, supporting their role as the economic backbone of rural areas;

10. Recalls that the severe demographic decline does have a direct gender dimension and that therefore systemic and relentless measures are necessary with regard to balancing work and family life;

11. Recognizes that the ageing of Europe significantly affects the solidarity between generations and that further measures and incentives need to be established for the strengthening of rural families, including the care for elderly people in the places where they live.

a. Demands that EU member states strengthen platforms for intergenerational dialogue in order to secure the best possible models of cooperation between younger and older populations and to develop a maximum of opportunities for lifelong learning, to optimise the skills of workers across all age groups.

b. Calls upon the politically responsible EU institutions and national governments to invest in the rapidly growing 'Silver Economy', to the benefit of all generations, by creating economic growth, innovation and new jobs.

12. Underlines that effective and affordable childcare facilities are key to enable young parents to fully deploy their skills and talents on the labour market.