



2020/2039(INI)

3.12.2020

OPINION

of the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs

for the Committee on Regional Development

on reversing demographic trends in EU regions using cohesion policy
instruments
(2020/2039(INI))

Rapporteur for opinion: Elżbieta Rafalska

PA_NonLeg

SUGGESTIONS

The Committee on Employment and Social Affairs calls on the Committee on Regional Development, as the committee responsible, to incorporate the following suggestions into its motion for a resolution;

- A. whereas the median age in the EU-27 has risen from 38.3 years in 2001 to 43.1 years in 2018; whereas the working population has been shrinking since 2010 and projections suggest a continuous decline¹; whereas the working population is likely to decrease by 18 % in the next 50 years²;
- B. whereas Europeans can enjoy a longer and healthier life and life expectancy at birth has increased by about 10 years for both men and women over the last five decades; whereas in 2070, life expectancy is projected to reach 86.1 years for men and 90.3 years for women³; whereas the number of dependent persons and persons with disabilities is expected to increase, while the population is ageing; whereas the old-age dependency ratio is projected to reach 62 % by 2030⁴; whereas in 2014, almost half of the elderly population reported difficulties with completing at least one personal care or household activity⁵;
- C. whereas old-age poverty is likely to be a growing concern as demographic trends continue; whereas in 2018, in the EU-27, 15.5 % of people aged 65 or above were at risk of poverty⁶; whereas women are more likely to be hit by poverty and social exclusion in old age; whereas women's life expectancy at birth is 5.5 years higher than men's⁷; whereas women carry a disproportionate burden of formal and informal care for children, older people and persons with disabilities; whereas one third of women aged between 20 and 64 do not participate in paid work because of family or care responsibilities, in comparison to only 5 % of economically inactive men⁸; whereas in 2019, the percentage of women living in a single household was as high as 40 % and was more than double than that of men living alone⁹;
- D. whereas demographic change has a severe impact on social, economic and territorial cohesion in the EU, particularly in rural areas and in regions that have already been lagging behind; whereas the demographic decline in some regions aggravates existing inequalities and undermines people's quality of life; whereas inequalities in the EU may force workers to pursue job opportunities in a different region or Member State; whereas cohesion policy instruments need to address the multiple factors influencing migration to cities, other regions or Member States; whereas young people and women are notably among those leaving rural areas and disadvantaged regions;

¹European Parliamentary Research Service, Demographic Outlook of the European Union, March 2020, p. 3.

²European Commission, Report on the impact of demographic change, June 2020, p. 15.

³European Commission, Report on the impact of demographic change, June 2020, p. 4.

⁴European Parliamentary Research Service, Demographic outlook of the European Union. March 2020, p. 5-6.

⁵Eurostat, Functional and activity limitations statistics, November 2019.

⁶European Commission, Report on the impact of demographic change, June 2020, p. 22.

⁷European Commission, Report on the impact of demographic change, June 2020, p. 7.

⁸EIGE, Gender Equality Index 2019. Work-life balance, 2020, p. 79.

⁹European Commission, Report on the impact of demographic change, June 2020, p. 11.

- E. whereas both the free movement of workers and internal and external migration will continue to have an impact on the size of the population at Union, national and regional level; whereas migration and brain drain are often triggered by social and economic disparities between countries, both within the Union and between the EU and third countries;
- F. whereas population ageing is causing a shrinking working-age population and may result in the decline of municipalities and villages throughout the EU; whereas decisions to merge municipalities and villages or to incorporate them into other municipalities or cities may also result in municipalities and villages disappearing altogether; whereas ambitious investments and quality jobs and improving the accessibility and quality of services and infrastructure are of particular importance in regions at risk of depopulation in order to boost their economic recovery and long-term competitiveness in the single market and to thus reverse negative demographic trends;
- G. whereas the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to affect demographic trends in the EU and has once again exposed the lack of policy responses to the impact of demographic change in the EU, such as the lack of adequate and affordable housing, quality care facilities and sufficient care and support services as illustrated by medical desertification phenomena; whereas negative demographic trends mean that more solidarity is needed between generations, which is crucial for a successful recovery from the COVID-19 crisis and future crises, and for the creation of fairer, more inclusive and more resilient societies; whereas the COVID-19 pandemic has underlined once more the importance of safeguarding and promoting the dignity of the elderly and their fundamental rights in the EU;
- H. whereas the intensity and speed of demographic change impose considerable economic, social and environmental pressures on the Member States' governments and on local and regional authorities in terms of the provision and maintenance of public services, including education, healthcare, social welfare, housing, social services, pensions, utilities and age-friendly infrastructure; whereas, without adequate policy response, these pressures will be exacerbated by a declining active population and a higher dependency ratio and by a growing prevalence of chronic diseases;
- I. whereas tackling demographic challenges calls for coordinated action and a comprehensive set of policies, including targeted measures in the areas of employment, social protection, health and occupational safety, education and skills, which take time to be formulated and to produce an effect; whereas some negative impacts of demographic change in the most affected regions necessitate an immediate response with the support of Union instruments;
- J. whereas proper infrastructure, affordable high-quality services, especially healthcare, elderly care, childcare and long-term care and day-care facilities, will play a key role; whereas the role of teleworking, digital education, telecare and telemedicine needs to be properly assessed first, and then possibly further developed and properly implemented in order to expand their deployment and to ensure the quality of life and safety for citizens; whereas it is essential to acknowledge the importance of the Employment and Social Innovation programme (EaSI) in funding projects related to long-term care; whereas it is vital to ensure the general accessibility of products and services for

families, disabled and elderly people in accordance with the concept of universal design;

- K. whereas it is important for the EU to mainstream demographic issues into all its policies, including by incorporating them in its long-term priorities and in its budget lines, particularly in its industrial and sustainable development policies, and in the European Semester, and to collect and monitor reliable large-scale statistical data and to support research and the exchange of good practices at all levels in order to foster a better understanding of demographic challenges, anticipate their impact on local labour markets, and to develop innovative, effective and green policy solutions on ensuring age-friendly environments; whereas demographic challenges cannot be addressed without a Union industrial strategy in place that ensures public investment, quality jobs, public research and innovation, public education boosting equal development and sustainability; whereas in its resolutions of 15 November 2011 on demographic change and its consequences for the future cohesion policy of the EU¹⁰ and of 14 November 2017 on the deployment of cohesion policy instruments by regions to address demographic change¹¹, Parliament called for the use of all available EU instruments, including cohesion policy funding, to tackle the challenges posed by demographic change;
- L. whereas cohesion policy instruments constitute the main source of public investment in the EU, accounting for 8.5 % of government capital investment in the EU, 41 % at the level of the EU-13 and surpassing 50 % in a number of other Member States¹²;
- M. whereas young people already had to carry a disproportionate share of burden during the 2008 economic and financial crisis; whereas the fight against unemployment, especially youth and long-term unemployment, inequality and exclusion among young and older people remains one of the key challenges facing EU regions; whereas the availability of jobs and opportunities, including during recovery and reconstruction phases, and high-quality services improves quality of life and reinforces rural areas, thus allowing them to counter their depopulation and inequalities between regions; whereas the European Structural and Investment Funds should be used more proactively in order to support young people, older people, persons with disabilities and other vulnerable groups as they enter or remain in the labour market and to have a quality job, with special attention given to the most highly depopulated rural and remote areas;
- N. whereas the importance of work-life balance is not properly recognised; whereas parents, children and families must be guaranteed support, including accessible childcare infrastructure, flexible work arrangements, help for single-parent families and parents with children with disabilities, and adequate financial support during maternity, paternity and parental leave; whereas such support can help to reverse negative demographic trends;
- O. whereas all policies addressing demographic opportunities and challenges must be evidence-based, person-centred and rights-based and, in particular, must not in any way undermine individual reproductive rights; whereas investment in the areas of sexual and

¹⁰Texts adopted, P7_TA(2011)0485.

¹¹Texts adopted, P8_TA(2017)0427.

¹²European Commission, European Structural and Investment Funds Data, October 2018.

reproductive health, gender equality, healthcare and care services and their related infrastructures, are important elements to tackling demographic challenges;

- P. whereas discrimination on grounds of gender, religious belief, age, disability or sexual orientation is prohibited and presents a breach of fundamental Union values;
- Q. whereas a coordinated approach to demographic change, under the framework of the Treaties, would be of utmost importance in order to reverse the current negative demographic trends, and would promote territorial, economic and social cohesion and reduce unemployment in the EU; whereas, pursuant to Article 174 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), regions which suffer severe and permanent demographic handicaps should be given particular attention in this regard; whereas rural areas and the agri-food sector constitute an important element for society as a whole and for supporting a strong and resilient Europe; whereas agricultural workers in sparsely populated rural areas and in areas at risk of depopulation may face a higher risk of poverty and social exclusion¹³;
- R. whereas demographic change should be perceived as a structural change that must be socially sustainable and must recognise, value and make use of people's potential at every age and will therefore require the involvement of policymakers at all relevant levels and of civil society; whereas, in this context, ageing represents an opportunity to build a silver economy; whereas demographic change can present opportunities and can highlight the need to foster new development perspectives, especially for rural areas, through, inter alia, the demand for quality food, the development of sustainable tourism and the enhancement of the silver economy, social innovation and infrastructure;
1. Calls on the Member States to use the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) and the cohesion-fund resources to enhance the attractiveness of areas experiencing severe and permanent demographic disadvantages, and in particular the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund (ESF) and the future ESF+, to tackle demographic change in a rights-based and socially just manner with a focus on vulnerable and disadvantaged groups, and to improve the quality and accessibility of public spaces for all; calls, furthermore, on the Member States to improve access to social services for all, in particular for persons with disabilities, children and the elderly, and to promote accessible, affordable and resilient healthcare systems in the EU; highlights that the successful absorption capacity of the cohesion funds at regional level is also greatly contingent on territorial, social, political and economic preconditions; calls on the Commission and the Member States to ensure that products and services financed by the cohesion funds are accessible to vulnerable groups, in accordance with the concept of universal design; recalls the responsibility of the Member States for their own public services;
 2. Highlights the importance of fostering social inclusion through cooperation between social partners, civil society, regional and local authorities and with the local population

¹³In 2015, just over one quarter (25.5 %) of the rural population was at risk of poverty or social exclusion, while relatively lower shares were recorded for people living in cities (24.0 %). According to Eurostat figures from 2016, this trend has deepened further, and now a higher proportion of the EU-28 population living in rural areas (compared with urban areas) face the risk of poverty or social exclusion." (European Parliamentary Research Service, Demographic outlook of the European Union, March 2020, p. 16).

in the design and implementation of policies and specific measures as well as at all stages of programming in order to improve planning and absorption of the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESI Funds); emphasises the importance of ensuring the full participation of citizens in the democratic processes;

3. Calls on the Member States to use the RRF and ERDF resources for supporting independent living and mobility, tackling transport isolation and improving digital and telecommunications infrastructure, particularly mobile and broadband internet connectivity in depopulating, rural, peripheral, remote and outermost areas that are less developed, have high ageing rates, high youth unemployment rates and face brain drain in order to enable access to public services and to increase the number of job opportunities; stresses that, in order to enable young and elderly people to work, study and take an active part in modern society, they must be given the opportunity to acquire the necessary digital skills; encourages, therefore, support for development initiatives, social services and the development of education and training establishments in small communities in these areas;
4. Calls on the Member States for the greater mobilisation of ESF and Just Transition Fund (JTF) resources and to combine them with national and local investment in order to tackle social exclusion, energy poverty, and material deprivation, to effectively counter the digital gap and digital exclusion, especially in rural areas and among the young, the elderly and persons with disabilities, and to secure access to digital tools and programmes and to affordable communication infrastructures; calls, therefore, for accessible and affordable opportunities to acquire digital skills in a way that is adapted to the needs of the elderly; points out that these initiatives have greater chances of success when they are linked to opportunities for intergenerational exchange; believes in this sense that the potential of digitalisation, robotisation and artificial intelligence could be further explored and promoted, along with ensuring high ethical standards while securing inclusion, in order to improve the autonomy and the living and health conditions of older people;
5. Highlights the need to support a just transition, and believes that a well-designed Just Transition Mechanism, including an ambitious JTF, would be an important tool to facilitate the transition and reach ambitious climate targets while addressing social and territorial impacts;
6. Welcomes the Commission proposal for the establishment of the REACT-EU instrument that is designed to increase the amount of funding for the ERDF, ESF and the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived; is nevertheless deeply concerned that this temporary funding is insufficient to tackle the social dimension of the COVID-19 crisis, including the most pressing demographic challenges; expresses regret over the fact that there has been no increase in the allocations for the ESF+ in the 2021-2027 multiannual financial framework agreement; underlines that in order to address demographic challenges, regions should use ESF more proactively in terms of tackling youth unemployment and of giving young people the opportunity to start their career path; encourages the Member States to support training programmes for young people and the development of entrepreneurial mind-set;
7. Stresses that regions and municipalities should make more active use of the ESI Funds

to address demographic change, particularly by supporting education, life-long learning, up-skilling and re-skilling, as well as the development of entrepreneurial skills at all levels of education, in order to help people find a quality job and in order to match labour market needs, by supporting SMEs, creating quality jobs, including in sparsely populated areas and areas at risk of depopulation, and strengthening human capital, research and the capacity for innovation, as well as by fostering inter-regional projects, information exchange and the silver economy; welcomes in this regard the Updated Skills Agenda for Europe, which may help address skilled workforce shortages in regions that are lagging behind;

8. Stresses that population ageing puts more pressure to health services and long-term care services that were designed in a different demographic context and that currently have to respond to the health and care needs of an older society; calls on the Member States to increase investment in rights-based, people-centred and evidence-based policies, health prevention and promotion campaigns, infrastructures, early diagnosis and social protection for long-term care, in order to address the growing demand and to ensure that everyone has the right to access good-quality, affordable, preventive, and curative healthcare in a timely way, as enshrined in the European Pillar of Social Rights; underlines that a high level of human health protection should be ensured in the definition and implementation of all Union policies and activities; calls on the Member States to tackle shortages in terms of healthcare professionals by investing in skills and by valuing and supporting healthcare professions and making them more attractive and accessible, with a specific focus on rural and remote areas;
9. Underlines that the implementation of the revised European Social Charter and of the principles on the right to equal opportunities, health, long-term care and access to essential services, pensions, housing and assistance for the homeless included in the European Pillar of Social Rights are essential to fighting the consequences of demographic change; calls, furthermore, for the use of Union funds to ensure access to health for all by promoting the establishment of medical practitioners and the maintenance of hospitals in rural areas;
10. Believes that cohesion funds should be used to foster active ageing in particular through social innovation initiatives intending to, inter alia, facilitate the employment of older people, update their skills, ensure their autonomy and encourage intergenerational exchanges; calls on the Commission to step up its commitments, such as the Ambient Assisted Living programme, an important initiative that fosters the silver economy in the EU, so as to enable older and dependant people to live longer at home in their familiar environment, including through the use of home automation, human-centred information and communication technologies, artificial intelligence and the continuous exchange of best practices across the EU;
11. Calls for a European care strategy framework that guarantees quality care and long-term care services and allows for a broader use of quality and safe telecare and telemedicine, based on common ethical standards, by providing care professionals with legal safeguards and laying down the necessary requirements for training, with the purpose of securing care and primary care to all, regardless of their age, in any geographical area; calls on the Member States to acknowledge the value of informal care and to improve social protection and support for informal carers; calls on the Commission to draft and

adopt a European Charter for the rights of the elderly on the basis of Article 25 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union;

12. Calls for a framework directive on long-term care that would lay down fundamental principles and provide evidence-based criteria for accessible quality long-term care and support services across the EU and that would also facilitate the implementation of alternative approaches, promoting the transition to person-centred and community-based services;
13. Stresses that fair and healthy work-life balance has to be guaranteed to all; calls for the tackling of in-work poverty to become one of the EU's top priorities;
14. Underlines the need to tackle the age-dependency ratio by reducing long-term unemployment and in-work poverty and unemployment among young people and the elderly; recalls that universal access to affordable childcare and other care and support services is a precondition for many people, in particular women and single parents, to become or remain economically active and to ensure a healthy work-life balance;
15. Expresses its concern about the migration flows of young people in the EU from rural to urban areas and to third countries; stresses that in order to address these migration patterns and to prevent the reduction of the working age population, it is essential to provide opportunities for young people in their home countries; notes that if this situation is not properly addressed, any potential increase in birth rates will just lead to increased migration;
16. Urges the Member States to exchange best practices in order to support young people to lead independent lives and to provide them with benefits such as housing allowances and preferential loans; encourages the Member States to recognise the significance of rural and remote areas in their diversity, and to develop their potential through improving their connectivity and stimulating investments in the local economy, fostering entrepreneurship and further empowering women living in those areas – both in economic and social terms, and through securing work-life balance and promoting family-friendly policies; recognises the prominent role that cohesion policy and the common agricultural policy could play in encouraging and boosting the employability and inclusion of women in these areas; calls on the Member States to develop rural and remote areas in particular by investing in appropriate access routes, high-speed broadband internet and vital and adequate resources and materials for schools, including up-to-date technological equipment in schools, hospitals and all other relevant services, including by developing effective e-governance, and in the promotion of social, cultural and sports activities that encourage a healthier lifestyle and better quality of life in a more affordable way;
17. Stresses the need to tackle the negative impacts of demographic change in a rights-based and socially just manner, in line with the principles outlined in the European Pillar of Social Rights, especially those on the right to equal opportunities, health, inclusion of persons with disabilities, long-term care and access to essential services, old-age income and pensions, housing and assistance for the homeless, which are essential to support the quality of life for people of all ages at local level; calls, furthermore, on the Commission to develop a European strategy on demographic

change that provides for a comprehensive and integrated approach to address demographic challenges and handicaps, as set out in Article 174 TFEU, thereby securing the economy, the social inclusion of vulnerable groups and job creation in EU regions; highlights, in this regard, the importance of adequate, reliable and comparable data to better cover the living and working situation of elderly people, including those people living in care facilities and people aged 65+; believes that enhanced cooperation could be an adequate mechanism to establish and implement this strategy and therefore calls on the Commission to cooperate with the Member States to that end;

18. Reiterates its call on the Member States to adopt without further delay the draft Council directive on implementing the principle of equal treatment between persons irrespective of religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation (COM(2008)0426 final);
19. Calls on the Commission to strengthen its support to national and local authorities' migration and inclusion policies, especially through policy coordination, knowledge exchange and financial support; calls on the Commission and the Member States to improve migrants' access to education and the labour market, especially for female migrants;
20. Highlights that employment and other relevant policies should involve workers' representatives and trade unions to ensure that workers' interests are at their core; stresses the need to promote collective bargaining and increase collective bargaining coverage to ensure decent working conditions for all; highlights the importance of occupational health and safety, age-friendly working environments and the continuous reskilling and upskilling of workers to ensure that people can work until they reach the statutory retirement age; reiterates the need to close the gender employment gap, pay gap and pension gap; encourages the Member States to make use of the cohesion funds to improve the level of employment and inclusion of women, especially in rural areas and in less developed areas, with focus given to the needs of women returning to the labour market at an older age;
21. Underlines the need for support and counselling services that provide people with a life-cycle perspective and counter structural ageism, especially in employment; calls for the provision of support to the national public employment services and to the European network of public employment services, especially in their efforts to support long-term inactive and older jobseekers; highlights the need to ensure the economic and social integration of workers with disabilities and to combat all forms of discrimination in order to achieve a more inclusive labour market; stresses the paramount importance of companies across the EU supporting a more extensive use of teleworking schemes, which may serve as a tool to retain businesses, strengthen local communities and tackle rural depopulation, thereby positively changing demographic trends and curbing the brain drain; calls on the Commission to propose a legislative framework with a view to regulating telework conditions across the EU and to ensure decent working and employment conditions in the digital economy.

INFORMATION ON ADOPTION IN COMMITTEE ASKED FOR OPINION

Date adopted	1.12.2020						
Result of final vote	<table style="width: 100%; border: none;"> <tr> <td style="width: 100px;">+:</td> <td style="text-align: right;">44</td> </tr> <tr> <td>-:</td> <td style="text-align: right;">2</td> </tr> <tr> <td>0:</td> <td style="text-align: right;">9</td> </tr> </table>	+:	44	-:	2	0:	9
+:	44						
-:	2						
0:	9						
Members present for the final vote	<p>Atidzhe Alieva-Veli, Abir Al-Sahlani, Marc Angel, Dominique Bilde, Gabriele Bischoff, Vilija Blinkevičiūtė, Andrea Bocskor, Milan Brglez, Sylvie Brunet, David Casa, Leila Chaibi, Margarita de la Pisa Carrión, Klára Dobrev, Jarosław Duda, Estrella Durá Ferrandis, Lucia Ďuriš Nicholsonová, Rosa Estaràs Ferragut, Nicolaus Fest, Loucas Fourlas, Cindy Franssen, Helmut Geuking, Elisabetta Gualmini, Alicia Homs Ginel, France Jamet, Agnes Jongerius, Radan Kanev, Adám Kósa, Stelios Kypouropoulos, Katrin Langensiepen, Miriam Lexmann, Elena Lizzi, Radka Maxová, Kira Marie Peter-Hansen, Dragoş Pîslaru, Manuel Pizarro, Dennis Radtke, Elżbieta Rafalska, Guido Reil, Daniela Rondinelli, Mounir Satouri, Monica Semedo, Beata Szydło, Eugen Tomac, Romana Tomc, Yana Toom, Marie-Pierre Vedrenne, Marianne Vind, Maria Walsh, Stefania Zambelli, Tatjana Ždanoka, Tomáš Zdechovský</p>						
Substitutes present for the final vote	Alex Agius Saliba, Marc Botenga, José Gusmão, Eugenia Rodríguez Palop						

FINAL VOTE BY ROLL CALL IN COMMITTEE ASKED FOR OPINION

44	+
ECR	Helmut Geuking, Lucia Ďuriš Nicholsonová
GUE/NGL	Marc Botenga, Leila Chaibi, José Gusmão, Eugenia Rodríguez Palop
NI	Daniela Rondinelli
PPE	Andrea Bocskor, David Casa, Jarosław Duda, Rosa Estaràs Ferragut, Loucas Fourlas, Cindy Franssen, Radan Kanev, Stelios Kypouropoulos, Ādám Kósa, Miriam Lexmann, Dennis Radtke, Eugen Tomac, Romana Tomc, Maria Walsh, Tomáš Zdechovský
Renew	Abir Al-Sahlani, Atidzhe Alieva-Veli, Radka Maxová, Dragoş Pîslaru, Monica Semedo, Yana Toom
S&D	Alex Agius Saliba, Marc Angel, Gabriele Bischoff, Vilija Blinkevičiūtė, Milan Brglez, Klára Dobrev, Estrella Durá Ferrandis, Elisabetta Gualmini, Alicia Homs Ginel, Agnes Jongerius, Manuel Pizarro, Marianne Vind
Verts/ALE	Katrin Langensiepen, Kira Marie Peter-Hansen, Mounir Satouri, Tatjana Ždanoka

2	-
ID	Nicolaus Fest, Guido Reil

9	0
ECR	Elżbieta Rafalska, Beata Szydło, Margarita de la Pisa Carrión
ID	Dominique Bilde, France Jamet, Elena Lizzi, Stefania Zambelli
Renew	Sylvie Brunet, Marie-Pierre Vedrenne

Key to symbols:

+ : in favour

- : against

0 : abstention