

EU cohesion policy: Out of sight, out of mind?

Written by Lambert Van Nistelrooij on 11 October 2016 in Opinion

The EU must better communicate the extensive positive impact regional funds have on citizens' lives, writes Lambert Van Nistelrooij.



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

During the European Week of Regions and Cities, held from 10-13 October, thousands of representatives, decision makers and experts in regional policy will gather in Brussels.

They will exchange best practices, participate in debates, workshops and lectures. It is a unique opportunity to reflect upon the European structural investment (ESI) funds, or regional funds, the financing instrument in the field of regional policy.

The ESI funds have a long history and stem directly from the cohesion articles of the treaty. Even now, in times of rising nationalism, the regional funds still serve the purpose of inclusion and connection throughout the European Union.

However, our regional funds are currently afflicted by their Achilles' heel: an obvious lack of visibility.

Unfortunately, the Brexit referendum outcome proves my criticism of the ESI funds. It illustrates all too well the state of mind of many European citizens. On 23 June, a majority of the people of Wales voted in favour of the UK leaving the EU.

This was a bitter pill to take, as Wales has greatly benefited from the ESI funds over the last few years. The Welsh example therefore raises many questions about the way citizens throughout Europe perceive the EU and instruments like the ESI funds.

On 15 September, I raised precisely this point during the opening debate on European cohesion policy summit in Bratislava, organised by the Slovak EU Council presidency. I am glad that European regional policy Commissioner Corina Crețu appears to be going down the same lane as I am in the redesign of EU communications style.

I denounce the lack of a modern communication strategy. What is the use of all our success projects, if we cannot reach out to the hearts and minds of our citizens in our regions and cities? Unknown is unloved.

On 11 October, we will announce the winners of the EU Regiostars Awards. As President of the jury, I promote successful projects. To me, it is one of the best examples of how Europe has a positive impact on people's lives. Our EU Regiostars demonstrate the progress achieved in several fields, such as innovation and creativity.

The winners receive extensive EU-wide press coverage.

I strongly support cohesion policy, whose architecture is like the Sagrada Familia, the Spanish masterpiece. Like Gaudí's renowned chef d'oeuvre, EU cohesion policy is still under construction.

Jacques Delors laid the basis for it, close to citizens and partners from society throughout the Union. We have to engage our citizens to both modernise and strengthen the very foundations of this architecture.

We need to nominate and support more EU "tour guides", who have been involved in fruitful projects financed by our regional funds. These so-called "tour guides", or ambassadors, would be citizens themselves, who are aware of the added value the EU delivers.

I therefore suggest we intensify the number of partnerships among regions and cities. Within the framework of city-to-city projects, people will learn from one another on how to tackle specific issues.

Through this kind of cultural exchange between cities, innovation can directly find its way to citizens, as many of them are personally involved in the projects. This bottom-up approach would deprive Eurosceptics of the blatant lie that the EU is trying to dominate every aspect of the lives of its citizens.

The EU's Sagrada Familia, cohesion policy, is out there. Let us therefore take advantage of the Week of Regions and Cities to give it the spotlights it deserves. This way, we will be able to make the stars of the European Union sparkle again.

The stars of the Union are our citizens themselves. Let this serve as wake-up call. We still have time to act. Let us show our citizens how they truly benefit from cohesion policy, so that they can spread the word.

About the author

Lambert Van Nistelrooij (EPP, NL) is jury President of the EU Regiostars Awards