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OUTCOME OF PROCEEDINGS

From: General Secretariat of the Council

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To: Delegations

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Subject: Making Cohesion Policy more effective, relevant and visible to our citizens
- Council conclusions (25 April 2017)

Delegations will find in the annex the Council conclusions on Making Cohesion Policy more effective, relevant and visible to our citizens, adopted by the Council at its 3531st meeting held on 25 April 2017.

Council conclusions on

"Making Cohesion Policy more effective, relevant and visible to our citizens"

THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION:

- (1) RECALLS its conclusions of 16 November 2016 on results and new elements of Cohesion Policy and the European Structural and Investment Funds¹;
- (2) RECALLS that, pursuant to Article 174 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), in order to promote its overall harmonious development, the Union is to develop and pursue its actions leading to the strengthening of the economic, social and territorial cohesion of the Union, in particular to reduce disparities between the levels of development of the various regions, through action specified in Article 175 TFEU;

Effectiveness and relevance of Cohesion Policy

- (3) WELCOMES the Commission's Ex-post evaluation of the 2007-2013 European Social Fund (ESF) Programmes², which reinforces the findings provided by the "Ex-post evaluation of the European Regional Development Fund and Cohesion Fund 2007-2013"³, regarding the measurable economic and social impact of the Structural and Cohesion Funds, their contribution to mitigate the impact of the economic crisis and the effectiveness of programmes in helping millions of European citizens;
- (4) NOTES that, as set out in the above mentioned ex-post evaluations, there are tangible results which can make an important contribution to European integration and to increasing the visibility of Cohesion policy, such as

¹ Doc. 14542/16.

² Doc. 15556/16.

³ Doc. 12371/16.

- a) 121 400 start-ups and an estimated number of 400 000 SMEs were financially supported, and 1 million jobs were created;
 - b) 94 955 research projects and 33 556 cooperation projects between SMEs and research centres were supported, and 41 600 new long-term research related jobs were created;
 - c) 4 900 km of roads, mostly motorways, including 2 400 km of TEN-T networks were constructed, and 1 500 km of TEN-T railway were upgraded;
 - d) 6 million people were connected to new or improved drinking water networks and 7 million people to new or upgraded wastewater treatment facilities;
 - e) 49.7 million participations were registered in human capital interventions, of which at least 46% have been recorded for the achievement of qualifications (13%), employment (8%), and enhanced skills or competencies, or other positive results (25%);
- (5) WELCOMES the first Commission Summary Report on the Annual Implementation Reports of Member States for the period 2014-2015⁴, and ACKNOWLEDGES the efforts made by Member States to reinforce, during the start-up phase of the 2014-2020 ESI Funds, strategies and mechanisms capable of delivering effective investment, as well as the first implementation progress reported;
- (6) CONSIDERS that through the measures, introduced in the 2014-2020 legislative framework linking the programming of ESI Funds to sound economic governance, and relevant country-specific recommendations within the context of the European Semester, Cohesion Policy and the ESI Funds have contributed to support structural reforms;

⁴ Doc. 15784/16.

- (7) REITERATES that while the fulfilment of ex-ante conditionalities sometimes requires significant time and resources to implement legislative changes or complex reforms, they have a positive effect on the overall investment environment, the strengthening of administrative capacity and good governance in many Member States;
- (8) CONSIDERS that Cohesion Policy and the ESI Funds have a proven positive economic, social and territorial impact as they involve Member States and regions towards strengthening European integration by responding to the concerns of EU citizens and increase their trust in the EU through solutions best tailored to their needs;

Communicating Cohesion Policy to EU citizens

- (9) ACKNOWLEDGES that Cohesion Policy is a key EU policy supporting investments for growth and creating jobs with its unique multilevel governance and implementation mode together with the strong involvement of local, regional and national actors, and is an important tool which contributes towards bringing the EU closer to the citizens, allowing them to directly experience the results and added value of the European project;
- (10) RECOGNISES that Cohesion Policy reinforces the European project as it directly serves EU citizens and mobilizes them to communicate, cooperate and take up joint initiatives, and supports the convergence between Member States and regions; CONSIDERS that by strengthening economic, social and territorial cohesion, Cohesion Policy is a strong expression of solidarity;
- (11) NOTES that Cohesion Policy and the ESI Funds are implemented across the Union and support projects which are tangible and visible on the ground, therefore possessing significant potential to affect perceptions of the EU by EU citizens; CONSIDERS that such potential should be better harnessed for raising awareness on the positive impact that the European Union can have on the everyday life of EU citizens;

(12) RECOGNISES that further efforts are required by Member States and the Commission to increase the visibility and the positive image of Cohesion Policy and the ESI Funds, and to show that they represent a tangible and beneficial manifestation of the EU in the daily life of European citizens by providing them with better living and working conditions as well as better opportunities for the development of skills. In this context, and in order to further increase the visibility of the policy, both towards EU citizens and political decision-makers, INVITES:

- a) Member States to communicate the advantages Europe offers to citizens;
- b) the Commission and Member States, including their managing authorities, to enhance cooperation on their communication strategies on Cohesion Policy and the ESI Funds where appropriate and respecting the principle of proportionality; in this context, LOOKS FORWARD to the upcoming Commission action plan on communication;
- c) the Commission to outline and disseminate good practice on communication measures which can best illustrate the positive contribution made by Cohesion Policy and the ESI Funds, in particular towards improving the life of European citizens on the ground;
- d) beneficiaries and authorities of the Member States to communicate widely and in a systematic way the results, benefits and long term impact of the policy;
- e) all stakeholders to make the best use of available communication tools, including new communication techniques, to increase the visibility of the policy in a way adapted to the needs of relevant target groups;

Further Simplification of Cohesion Policy post 2020

(13) UNDERLINES that simplification efforts should not only target beneficiaries, but also the bodies responsible for managing and implementing the Policy;

- (14) STRESSES that simplification efforts should aim at reducing costs of administration, where they are disproportionate, and that therefore a better application of proportionality and, as an option, the introduction of differentiation into the implementation of ESI Funds programmes, based on transparent and objective criteria, should be carefully explored for post 2020 without prejudice to future decisions;
- (15) RECOGNISES that good governance is an important element in the implementation and monitoring of Cohesion Policy and the ESI Funds;
- (16) EMPHASIZES the need for further simplification of the policy post 2020, *inter alia* regarding the shared management and audit systems, thereby ensuring a better ownership and responsibility for the policy implementation among stakeholders; in this respect, it is crucial to find the right balance between the result orientation of the policy and the level of checks and controls as well as simplification of procedures, including for the audit process, which should be proportional, preventive and predictable whilst taking into account the outcomes of national control and audit authorities;

A forward looking policy that addresses future challenges

- (17) RECALLS the importance of Cohesion Policy for achieving the aims set out in Art. 174 of the TFEU beyond 2020;
- (18) EMPHASIZES that Cohesion Policy post-2020 must therefore be a proactive, forward looking policy, which is sufficiently flexible to address new challenges and facilitate the development of innovative solutions throughout the EU, while continuing to provide a stable and predictable investment and cooperation framework to reduce the disparities between the levels of development of the various regions;
- (19) UNDERLINES that in order to achieve the desired impact and added value of Cohesion Policy, a 'one size fits all' approach is not optimal; the policy, its delivery mechanism, legal framework and interpretations need to take account of different social, territorial and economic realities to address the specific situations on the ground;

- (20) LOOKS FORWARD to the 7th Cohesion Forum, which will be organised by the Commission on 26-27 June 2017, and the Seventh Report on economic, social and territorial cohesion, to be issued by the Commission in Autumn 2017;
- (21) INVITES the Commission to seek the policy dialogue with Member States in the preparatory process for the post 2020 period, building on existing structures, and REITERATES its call on the Commission to submit its proposals for Cohesion Policy post-2020 as soon as possible in 2018, with a view to allowing a timely agreement between the co-legislators and an early start of the programming process;
- (22) REMAINS COMMITTED to a regular political debate among relevant ministers in the General Affairs Council to discuss Cohesion Policy and the ESI Funds.
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