

Research for TRAN Committee – Transport infrastructure in low-density and depopulating areas

KEY FINDINGS

- Existing classification and definitions found in EU Legislation and Guidelines cannot fully capture the features of low-density and depopulating areas. Given the interplay among different features, a multi-dimensional assessment should be considered. However, local uniqueness should prevail over the aim to group similar regions into pre-defined classifications.
- With the exception of some references and exemptions granted to sparsely populated areas and outermost regions, EU Regional Policy does not have a specific strategic approach to low-density and depopulating areas.
- The level of economic development appears to be more important than demographic and geographical considerations in defining objectives and the selection of projects.
- Road infrastructure receives the highest share of EU funding – both in terms of total and average budget. In the framework of Cohesion and Regional Policy, traditional modes of transport still have a significant weight in EU policies in these areas.
- Effective and equitable policies to overcome the challenges require an overall acknowledgement of the unique features of these areas. In order to assess their specific needs, policymakers should focus on designing tailored strategies within the existing EU transport policy framework.



The provision of transport in low-density and depopulating areas is an important challenge for European and national policymakers. While economic logic implies that transport projects and policies should be focused on connecting the most advanced and inhabited areas, low-density and depopulating regions are at risk of being overlooked. Policymakers may find it challenging to reconcile equity and efficiency considerations when deciding on what transport projects to carry out or to support via EU funds.

The present document is the executive summary of the study on Transport infrastructure in low-density and depopulating areas. The full study, which is available in English can be downloaded at: : <https://bit.ly/39AlpJV>

Defining low-density and depopulating areas and assessing their features

Low density and depopulating areas display unique demographic and geographical features. EU legislation and guidelines have helped define specific territories which are affected by demographic or geographical features. The concept of low-density and sparsely populated areas is outlined in the TFEU (Art.174). Cohesion Policy Regulations and Guidelines provide definitions for geographical features such as islands, mountains, border areas, and outermost regions.

However, low-density and depopulating areas are characterised by several interconnected factors, and the interplay of these factors is not adequately captured by the existing definitions. Regions belonging to the same group may display significant differences in terms of demography, socio-economic context and transport needs, and strict classifications may fail to capture their uniqueness.

It appears that the current definition may need to be expanded by combining demographic, geographical and socio-economic considerations. Yet, some are sceptical about an EU-wide definition of low-density and depopulating areas.

Providing transport infrastructures in low-density and depopulating areas: recent trends and challenges

Transport in low-density and depopulating regions faces issues resulting from the low and dispersed nature of the population, which makes providing conventional public transport challenging. Difficulties also relate to the distances from the centres of economic activity and the resulting increase in car use, which is leading to a decline in public transport use. Ageing societies and population movements from rural to urban areas make providing public transport services even more complex.

Many regions that lag economically behind are rural and on the periphery of their respective Member State and of the EU. In addition, many of these regions are not on a direct path between major urban centres and the main markets. As a result, they suffer from the increased travelling distances that are needed, but also from a generally lower level of overall investment and skills, which limits their ability to innovate and grow.

Overview of the policies and strategies to provide transport in low-density and depopulating areas

Although no specific EU strategy for the provision of transport in low-density and depopulating areas has been drawn up, these types of region are mentioned in wider EU strategies. The 2011 White Paper makes few references to the needs of 'low-density or depopulating' regions, although the policies contained within the White Paper would have some impact on these regions. TEN-T Guidelines (2013), however, underline the need to ensure "enhanced accessibility and connectivity for all regions" and explicitly mention islands, sparsely populated, remote and outermost regions (Article 10).

EU Regional Policy does not have a specific approach to low-density and sparsely populated areas. In fact, EU Regional Policy is defined at the NUTS2 level and specific local features may be overlooked in the wider regional context.



The level of economic development appears to be more important for the definition of objectives and the selection of projects than demographic and geographical considerations. Road infrastructure receives the highest share of EU funding – both in terms of total and average budget. In the framework of Cohesion and Regional Policy, traditional transport modes remain the focus of EU policies.

Combining equity and efficiency in the delivery of transport policies and infrastructure in low-density and depopulating areas has been shown to be challenging. Indeed, the number of users remains a pivotal variable in the appraisal of projects, which clearly disadvantage these regions.

Policy recommendations

Considering the key findings of the study, several policy recommendations addressed to both EU and national policymakers are identified:

- Ensure that local needs are better addressed through Cohesion Policy and other EU funds through the design of specific applications of EU policy to these areas. Two immediate actions can be taken: 1) to clearly mention specific needs and features of low density and depopulating areas in the Connecting Europe Facilities (CEF); and 2) to make the most of the proposed Digital Europe Programme's reference to smart rural areas.
- Prioritise the revitalisation of existing transport infrastructure and the provision of links to the TEN-T in order to close the gap between the concerned areas and other regions. This should be done through substantial improvement of local infrastructure and by focusing on local needs rather than favouring infrastructure related to tourism.
- Consider a NUTS 3 (sub-regional administrative units, such as provinces or departments) approach to designing transport policies for low-density and depopulating areas, thus ensuring policymaking is more relevant for their specific needs. An alternative approach would be to better exploit the opportunities of Interreg Programmes, which often directly cover low-density and depopulating regions.
- Allow the use of ERDF funding to cover operational costs due to specific demographic and geographical issues in order to partly offset transport inequalities. This would allow EU funds to finance extraordinary maintenance rather than focusing on flagship investments which are often more expensive and less effective.
- Introduce "equity" as a horizontal principle in transport policies, leading policymakers and evaluators to expand the criteria for project appraisal which are too focused on efficiency and disregard distributional effects.

Further information

This executive summary will be available in the following languages: English, French, German, Italian and Spanish. The study, which is available in English, and the summaries can be downloaded at: <https://bit.ly/39AlpJV>

More information on Policy Department research for TRAN: <https://research4committees.blog/tran/>



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