Question for written answer E-001953/19
to the Commission
Inmaculada Rodríguez-Piñero Fernández (S&D)
(17 April 2019)

Subject: Access to Internet and broadband in rural areas to curb depopulation

According to data from the Spanish Government, 53% of the Spanish territory is at risk of depopulation. In this context, experts point out that, in order to reverse this situation, it is essential to ensure access to the Internet for rural areas as a basic element for job creation, the revitalisation of economic activity and the modernisation and digitalisation of agriculture and livestock farming, which constitute their means of subsistence.

Although currently 86.4% of Spanish households have access to the Internet according to the National Statistics Institute (INE), speeds above 100 Mbps, as provided by a fibre-optic connection, are only attainable in 28.4% of rural areas, as the lack of demand dampens private companies’ interest in installing such connections.

In light of this, does the European Union have any specific plan to expand the installation of Internet and fibre-optic connections in municipalities affected by depopulation?

Is the Commission aware of any success stories of municipalities in Spain or Europe that have reversed the demographic trend after having secured access to the Internet for their citizens? Can the Commission provide any details as to how economic and social indicators have improved?

Answer given by Ms Gabriel on behalf of the European Commission
(3 July 2019)

The Commission has called on Member States (1) to make available to all households by 2025, a connectivity of at least 100 Mbps. To achieve this, the new European Electronic Communications Code (2) will provide incentives for commercial investment. In the most difficult areas, European financial support is complementing national efforts.

In the current programming period (2014-2020), public support schemes in Spain have benefitted from EUR 655 million from the European Regional Development Fund and more than EUR 18 million from the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development.

In addition, 734 Spanish municipalities have been awarded EUR 15 000 vouchers to install WiFi hotspots in public spaces under the WiFi4EU Programme. Finally, the Connecting Europe Broadband Fund (3) can also support projects in rural and peri-urban areas.

In the next programming period, the Commission has proposed to continue this support through the Connecting Europe Facility, the InvestEU Programme and the possibility to use the European Regional Development Fund (4) and the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (5) to enhance digital connectivity at regional and rural level.

A selection of broadband projects, including in rural areas, is available in the country (6) and projects (7) sections of Broadband Europe on the Commission website. Furthermore, every year the Commission grants the European Broadband Award’s (8) in five categories, including territorial cohesion in rural and remote areas (9).

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The European Digital Scoreboard (\(^{10}\)), the Digital Economy and Society Index (\(^{11}\)) and related studies (\(^{12}\)) allow the tracking over time of the evolution of several indicators. In addition, the European Broadband mapping portal (\(^{13}\)) includes also socioeconomic data from Eurostat.

\(^{10}\) https://digital-agenda-data.eu/datasets/digital_agenda_scoreboard_key_indicators/visualizations


\(^{13}\) Data on Spain will be soon available at https://www.broadband-mapping.eu/