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**TEXTS ADOPTED**

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The impact of EU cohesion policy on Northern Ireland

Committee on Regional Development

PE620.793

European Parliament resolution of 11 September 2018 on the impact of EU cohesion policy on Northern Ireland (2017/2225(INI))

*The European Parliament*,

– having regard to the impact of EU cohesion policy on Northern Ireland,

– having regard to the provisions of the 1998 Belfast Agreement (Good Friday Agreement),

– having regard to Rule 52 of its Rules of Procedure, as well as Article 1(1)(e) of, and Annex 3 to, the decision of the Conference of Presidents of 12 December 2002 on the procedure for granting authorisation to draw up own-initiative reports,

– having regard to the report of the Committee on Regional Development and the opinion of the Committee on Budgetary Control (A8-0240/2018),

A. whereas EU cohesion policy in Northern Ireland operates through various instruments, including the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund, the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development, the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund, the PEACE Programme for Northern Ireland and the Border Region and the cross-border Interreg programme;

B. whereas it is clear that Northern Ireland is a region that has benefited greatly from the EU’s cohesion policy; whereas the commitment to future funding in the Commission’s draft multiannual financial framework (MFF) for 2021-2027 is very welcome;

C. whereas, in addition to the more general cohesion policy funds, Northern Ireland has benefited in particular from special cross-border and inter- and cross-community programmes, including the PEACE Programme;

D. whereas EU cohesion policy, particularly through the PEACE Programme, has decisively contributed to the peace process in Northern Ireland, supports the Good Friday Agreement and continues to support the reconciliation of the communities;

E. whereas following the creation of the first PEACE Programme in 1995, more than EUR 1.5 billion has been spent with the dual aim of promoting cohesion between communities involved in the conflict in Northern Ireland and the border counties of Ireland, as well as economic and social stability;

F. whereas the success of EU cohesion funding partly derives from the fact that it is seen as ‘neutral money’, i.e. not directly linked to the interests of either community;

1. Underlines the important and positive contribution of EU cohesion policy to Northern Ireland, particularly in terms of assisting the recovery of deprived urban and rural areas, of tackling climate change and of building cross-community and cross-border contacts in the context of the peace process; notes in particular that assistance to deprived urban and rural areas often takes the form of support for new economic development that promotes the knowledge economy, such as the Science Parks in Belfast and Derry/Londonderry;

2. Emphasises that more than EUR 1 billion in EU financial assistance will be spent on economic and social development in Northern Ireland and the neighbouring regions in the current financing period, of which EUR 230 million will be invested in the Northern Ireland PEACE Programme (with a total budget of almost EUR 270 million) and EUR 240 million in the Interreg V-A programme for Northern Ireland, Ireland and Scotland (with a total budget of EUR 280 million);

3. Considers that the special EU programmes for Northern Ireland, especially the PEACE Programme, are of key importance for sustaining the peace process, as they foster reconciliation and inter- and cross-community and cross-border contacts; notes that cross-community and cross-border social hubs and shared services are particularly important in this regard;

4. Welcomes the important steps forward that have been taken in Northern Ireland under the PEACE Programme, and acknowledges the work of all parties in this process;

5. Sees that inter- and cross-community trust-building measures, and measures for a peaceful coexistence, such as shared spaces and support networks, have played a key role in the peace process, as shared spaces allow the communities in Northern Ireland to come together as a single community for joint activities and develop mutual trust and respect, thereby helping to heal the divide;

6. Emphasises the importance of community-led local development and of the bottom-up approach, which encourages all communities to take ownership of projects, thus enhancing the peace process;

7. Notes the attachment of all stakeholders in Northern Ireland to the continuance of EU cohesion policy goals in the region; stresses, in this regard, the importance of coordinated multilevel governance and the partnership principle;

8. Is of the opinion, nevertheless, that more must be done to increase general awareness and visibility of the impact and necessity of EU funding in Northern Ireland, in particular by informing the general public about the impact of EU-funded projects for the peace process and the economic development of the region;

9. Welcomes the fact that management and control systems in the regions are functioning properly and that EU financial assistance is therefore being spent effectively; stresses, nevertheless, that in addition to compliance, the underlying objectives of the PEACE Programme must always be taken into account when assessing the performance of this programme;

10. Without prejudice to the ongoing EU-UK negotiations, believes that it is crucial, post-2020, for Northern Ireland to be able to participate in certain special EU programmes, such as the PEACE Programme and the Interreg V-A programme for Northern Ireland, Ireland and Scotland, as this would strongly benefit sustainable economic and social development, particularly in disadvantaged, rural and border areas, by reducing existing gaps; urges, furthermore, in the context of the post-2020 MFF, that all relevant financial instruments be used to enable the continuation of the objectives of cohesion policy;

11. Considers that, post-2020, without prejudice to the ongoing EU-UK negotiations, EU support for territorial cooperation, especially regarding cross-border and cross-community projects, should be continued in view of the achievements of the special EU cohesion programmes for Northern Ireland, namely the PEACE Programme and the Interreg programmes, which are particularly important for the stability of the region; fears that an end to these programmes would endanger cross-border and inter- and cross-community trust-building activities and, as a consequence, the peace process;

12. Emphasises that 85 % of funding for the PEACE and Interreg programmes comes from the EU; considers, therefore, that it is important that the EU should continue to reach out to the communities in Northern Ireland post-2020 by playing an active role in the administration of the available EU cohesion and inter- and cross-community funding in Northern Ireland, thereby helping them to overcome societal divisions; in this context, believes that funding should be maintained at an adequate level post-2020; stresses that this is important to allow the peace-building work to continue;

13. Calls on the Commission to promote the Northern Irish experience with cohesion funding, especially with the PEACE Programme, as an example of how the EU is addressing inter-community conflicts and community divisions; stresses, in this regard, that the Northern Irish reconciliation process is a positive example for other areas in the EU which have experienced conflict;

14. Stresses that good practices with cohesion funding and the PEACE Programme should be taken as the EU model and promoted in order to overcome mistrust among communities in conflict and to achieve lasting peace in other parts of Europe and even worldwide;

15. Considers that it is essential that the people of Northern Ireland, and in particular young people, should continue to have access to economic, social and cultural exchanges across Europe, particularly to the Erasmus+ programme;

16. Notes the Commission’s intention to propose the continuation of the PEACE and Interreg programmes in its proposal for the MFF 2021-2027; notes, in addition, the UK position paper on the future of Cohesion Policy of April 2018, in which the UK states its willingness to explore a potential successor to PEACE IV, as well as Interreg V-A, for the post-2020 period with the Northern Ireland Executive, the Irish Government and the EU, in addition to its engagement to honour commitments to PEACE and Interreg under the current MFF;

17. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Council and the Commission, to the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive, and to the governments and parliaments of the Member States and their regions.