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COMMISSION DECISION

of 27.1.2023

setting up the group of high-level specialists on the future of cohesion policy

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THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION,

Having regard to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union,

Whereas:

- (1) Article 174 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) provides that, in order to strengthen its economic, social and territorial cohesion, the Union is to aim at reducing disparities between the levels of development of the various regions and the backwardness of the least favoured regions, and that particular attention needs to be paid to rural areas, areas affected by industrial transition, and regions which suffer from severe and permanent natural or demographic handicaps, such as islands. Those regions, in particular, benefit from cohesion policy.
- (2) Article 175 TFEU requires the Union to support the achievement of those objectives by the action it takes among others through the European Social Fund and the European Regional Development Fund. Article 175 TFEU also requires the Commission to submit a report to the European Parliament, the Council, the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions every three years on the progress made towards achieving economic, social and territorial cohesion and on the manner in which the various means provided for in that Article have contributed to it. If necessary, that report should be accompanied by appropriate proposals.
- (3) Regarding the cohesion policy funds, Article 18(6) of Regulation (EU) 2021/1060 of the European Parliament and of the Council¹ requires the Commission to prepare a report about the outcome of the mid-term review of programmes supported by the funds covered by that Regulation and submit it to the European Parliament and to the Council by the end of 2026. The mid-term review should assess implementation challenges, as identified in the country-specific recommendations (CSRs), the national energy and climate plans (NECPs) and the European Pillar of Social Rights, the results of evaluations and implementation progress reports and the socio-economic situation of Member States and regions.
- (4) The Communication on the 8th Cohesion Report, Cohesion in Europe towards 2050², identified a series of challenges for the coming years and announced the 2022

¹ Regulation (EU) 2021/1060 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2021 laying down common provisions on the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund Plus, the Cohesion Fund, the Just Transition Fund and the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund and financial rules for those and for the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, the Internal Security Fund and the Instrument for Financial Support for Border Management and Visa Policy (OJ L 231, 30.6.2021, p. 159).

² Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the 8th Cohesion Report: Cohesion in Europe towards 2050 – COM(2022) 34 final.

Cohesion Forum, which launched a debate among stakeholders on the lessons to be drawn from the recent economic and health crises and a reflection on future challenges for cohesion policy, ensuring that no territory is left behind. At the Forum, the need was acknowledged for the Commission to call upon the knowledge and experience of specialists in the format of an advisory body.

- (5) It is, therefore, necessary to set up a group of high-level specialists in the field of cohesion policy and its regulatory framework established by Regulation (EU) 2021/1060 and the corresponding Fund-specific Regulations, namely: Regulation (EU) 2021/1056 of the European Parliament and of the Council³, Regulation (EU) 2021/1057 of the European Parliament and of the Council⁴, Regulation (EU) 2021/1058 of the European Parliament and of the Council⁵ and Regulation (EU) 2021/1059 of the European Parliament and of the Council⁶, in order to gather knowledge and advice on the evolution needs of cohesion policy.
- (6) The group should help the Commission develop the reflection on the way the policy should evolve and how it could support effectively a European Growth Model. In that context, particular attention should be paid to achieving a fair digital and green transition, regional recovery and growth for European regions. The group should also provide the Commission with advice on the implementation of the Regulations referred to in recital (5) and on corresponding programmes and policies. The analytical contributions and recommendations about the future orientations of the policy should be presented in the format of a final report and should feed into the upcoming reports of the Commission on cohesion policy, including the cohesion report and the mid-term review report.
- (7) The group should be composed of qualified specialists, selected on the basis of their vast, high-level competence and experience in regional policy issues and cohesion policy in Europe, including subjects falling under European integration and European economic and territorial governance. The membership of the group should be established to ensure a good balance between academia, politicians and socio-economic partners, in order to allow the group to have a thorough, comprehensive understanding and assessment of the issues at stake and future trends, including a wide range of policy, political and technical choices about the future of cohesion policy.
- (8) Taking into account the required profile referred to in recital (7) and the specific tasks to be performed by the group, members should be appointed by the Director-General of the Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy amongst persons with acknowledged proficiency in the above-mentioned fields. Furthermore, this selection procedure should contribute to ensuring the timely delivery of the conclusions and recommendations of the group in the format of a final report in view of the legislative proposals and policy initiatives relating to the programming period beyond 2027.

³ Regulation (EU) 2021/1056 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2021 establishing the Just Transition Fund (OJ L 231, 30.6.2021, p. 1).

⁴ Regulation (EU) 2021/1057 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2021 establishing the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) and repealing Regulation (EU) No 1296/2013 (OJ L 231, 30.6.2021, p. 21).

⁵ Regulation (EU) 2021/1058 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2021 on the European Regional Development Fund and on the Cohesion Fund (OJ L 231, 30.6.2021, p. 60).

⁶ Regulation (EU) 2021/1059 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2021 on specific provisions for the European territorial cooperation goal (Interreg) supported by the European Regional Development Fund and external financing instruments (OJ L 231, 30.6.2021, p. 94).

- (9) Appropriate rules should be laid down to prevent any conflict of interests.
- (10) Rules on disclosure of information by members of the group should be laid down.
- (11) Personal data should be processed in accordance with Regulation (EU) 2018/1725 of the European Parliament and of the Council⁷.
- (12) It is appropriate to fix a period for the application of this Decision. The Commission will in due time consider whether to extend the functioning of the group,

HAS DECIDED AS FOLLOWS:

Article 1
Subject matter

The group of high-level specialists on the future of cohesion policy ('the group'), is set up.

Article 2
Tasks

The group's tasks shall be:

- (a) to provide the Commission with advice and knowledge on maximising the impact of cohesion policy in terms of reducing economic, social and territorial disparities and contributing to a European Growth Model for regions built on a fair digital and green transition in a context of regional recovery and growth;
- (b) to provide the Commission with analytical contributions and recommendations about the future orientations of the policy in the format of a final report;
- (c) to bring about an exchange of experience and good practice in the field of cohesion policy implementation.

Article 3
Consultation

1. The Commission may consult the group on any matter relating to the tasks set out in Article 2.
2. The Chair of the group may advise the Commission to consult the group on a specific question.

Article 4
Membership

1. The group shall be composed of up to twenty high-level specialists in cohesion policy, European integration and European economic and territorial governance.
2. Members shall be individuals appointed in a personal capacity.

⁷ Regulation (EU) 2018/1725 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 October 2018 on the protection of natural persons with regard to the processing of personal data by the Union institutions, bodies, offices and agencies and on the free movement of such data, and repealing Regulation (EC) No 45/2001 and Decision No 1247/2002/EC (OJ L 295, 21.11.2018, p. 39).

3. Members who are no longer capable of contributing effectively to the group's deliberations, who, in the opinion of the Commission department concerned, do not comply with the conditions set out in Article 339 TFEU or who resign, shall no longer be invited to participate in any meetings of the group and may be replaced for the remainder of their term of office.

Article 5
Selection process

1. The members of the group shall be appointed by the Director-General of the Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy on the basis of the following selection criteria:
 - (a) the required knowledge and experience in relation to the work to be performed in the fields set out in Article 4;
 - (b) the geographical balance;
 - (c) the gender balance;
 - (d) the balance among the following categories: academia, European, national, regional and local politicians, and socio-economic partners.
2. Individuals appointed as members of the group shall disclose any circumstances that could give rise to a conflict of interest. In particular, the Commission shall require those individuals to submit a declaration on the absence of conflict of interests together with an updated *curriculum vitae*. Where a potential conflict of interest appears, the member concerned shall immediately inform the Chair and shall resign from the group if the Chair so requests.
3. Members shall be appointed until 31 March 2024. They shall remain in office until the end of their term of office. Their term of office may be renewed.
4. The Director-General of the Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy may appoint alternate members, in accordance with the same conditions as members, who shall automatically replace any members who are absent or indisposed.

Article 6
Chair

The Director-General of the Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy shall appoint the Chair of the group.

Article 7
Operation

1. The group shall act at the request of its Chair with the agreement of the Director-General of the Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy.
2. Meetings of the group shall be held on Commission premises or virtually, depending on the circumstances.
3. The Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy shall provide secretarial services for the group. It shall also set up an externally commissioned support body for assisting with these secretarial tasks. Commission officials from other departments with an interest in the proceedings may attend meetings of the group.

4. In agreement with the Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy the group may, by simple majority of its members, decide that deliberations shall be public.
5. Minutes on the discussion on each point on the agenda and on the opinions delivered by the group shall be meaningful and complete. Minutes shall be drafted by the Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy, assisted by the externally commissioned support body referred to in paragraph 3. These minutes will be fed into the final report of the group.
6. As far as possible, the group shall adopt its opinions, recommendations and report by consensus. In the event of a vote, the outcome of the vote shall be decided by simple majority of the members. Members who have voted against or abstained shall have the right to have a document summarising the reasons for their position annexed to the opinions, recommendations or report.

Article 8
Invited experts

The Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy may invite experts with specific expertise with respect to a subject matter on the agenda to take part in the work of the group on an ad hoc basis.

Article 9
Rules of procedure

On a proposal by and in agreement with the Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy, the group shall adopt its rules of procedure by simple majority of its members.

Article 10
Professional secrecy and handling of classified information

The members of the group, as well as invited experts, are subject to the obligation of professional secrecy, which by virtue of the Treaties and the rules implementing them applies to all members of the institutions and their staff, as well as to the Commission's rules on security regarding the protection of Union classified information, laid down in Commission Decisions (EU, Euratom) 2015/443⁸ and 2015/444⁹. Should they fail to respect such obligations, the Commission may take all appropriate measures.

Article 11
Transparency

The Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy shall ensure an equivalent degree of transparency to that applicable to Commission expert groups within the meaning of Commission Decision C(2016) 3301¹⁰, through dedicated webpages.

⁸ Commission Decision (EU, Euratom) 2015/443 of 13 March 2015 on Security in the Commission (OJ L 72, 17.3.2015, p. 41).

⁹ Commission Decision (EU, Euratom) 2015/444 of 13 March 2015 on the security rules for protecting EU classified information (OJ L 72, 17.3.2015, p. 53).

¹⁰ Commission Decision C(2016) 3301 of 30 May 2016 establishing horizontal rules on the creation and operation of Commission expert groups.

Article 12
Meeting expenses

1. Participants in the activities of the group shall not be remunerated for the services they offer.
2. Travel and subsistence expenses incurred by participants in the activities of the group shall be reimbursed by the Commission. Reimbursement shall be made in accordance with the provisions in force within the Commission and within the limits of the available appropriations allocated to the Commission departments under the annual procedure for the allocation of resources.

Article 13
Applicability

This Decision shall apply until 31 March 2024.

Done at Brussels, 27.1.2023

For the Commission
Elisa FERREIRA
Member of the Commission