

INTERVIEW WITH MEP MARKUS PIEPER (EPP, GERMANY)**“An intermediate category? A sleeper-car category!”**By Nathalie Steiwer - *Europolitics*

As the European Parliament's rapporteur on the 'Fifth report on cohesion policy', Markus Pieper (EPP, Germany) strongly opposed the creation of a category of intermediate regions during the vote in plenary, on 5 July. He explains why.

What are the three points Parliament will defend during the cohesion policy negotiations?

Parliament is in fact split over what is essential. In my opinion, the central point is that the regions most in need should receive an appropriate amount of aid. The traditional role of cohesion policy is first to help the poorest regions to

catch up with the European average by developing infrastructure: roads, energy, communication and so on. Such development is the core of cohesion policy and is also a fundamental element of the 'Europe 2020' strategy. For that to happen, we need money. The second essential point is that the 2020 strategy objectives – such as the environment, qualifications or research – have to be developed in all regions of Europe, not just the poorest. Third, it is important to continue work to remove barriers in Europe through the development of energy and transport infrastructure and the like.

Why are you so opposed to the creation of a new category of transition regions?

Personally, I think that continuing to concentrate aid on regions that are no longer “so” poor runs counter to the philosophy of the European Union: we want to help those that are in the greatest difficulty but we also want the other regions to achieve key objectives in terms of research, education or the environment. In a country like France, if a company at the leading edge of progress in renewable energy, for example, is located in one of these intermediate regions, it will have a hard time financing a project with a research centre

based in Paris because Paris will not be one of the regions with high aid intensity. This is counter-productive. I think that the intermediate regions could of course receive more funds, but they will also be confronted with much more bureaucracy



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than before.

What do you think of the idea of making a distinction among transition regions in terms of their GDP and their “ex-convergence” status?

That could be a solution, but it would be complicated. Initially, regional policy helped poorer regions to catch up with the average level of wealth and very few of them, as in Italy, failed to do so. The idea now is to create a sort of “sleeper-car” for the regions that have not made enough progress, without giving them an incentive to pick up the pace.

So, during the negotiations, we will have to examine what this new intermediate category will cover: whether it is limited in time, to three years for example; whether it concerns only regions that have a very specific problem, such as mountain regions or those with very high structural unemployment.

Do you think cohesion policy no longer makes sense for “rich” states like Germany or France?

Yes it does still make sense, through the objectives defined in the ‘Europe 2020’ strategy. In terms of access to health care, combating early school leaving and so on, there is a lot to be done in rich regions as

well. Yet we mustn't imagine that we are going to finance all long-term social policy with EU funds. There is too little money for that. We can only finance examples, pilot projects. This intermediate category, however, encourages the idea that Europe can provide a long-term response to all these regions' problems, a hope that will never become a reality.

Do you support the idea of penalising regions that have not met their objectives?

We would have to see how this idea could be put into practice. It's a good thing to try to tie cohesion objectives to a comprehensive policy in France or Greece or elsewhere. It makes no sense for the Greeks to build an umpteenth

coastal motorway on an island when they have to achieve European objectives on renewable energy or solar installations. We need common objectives and we have to keep to them so that EU funds are used for more than just filling up holes in walls. So, indeed, in the future we should be able to cut off funds if objectives are not met.

Has the Greek crisis hardened your stance on the question of penalties?

Yes, it has become clear that we've often been taken for a ride and that more European officials should be carrying out checks on the ground. When European aid is better managed, Greece will certainly be able to meet more objectives than in the past.

As a geographer by training, how do you react to cohesion policy?

We mustn't expect regional policy to give us solutions to the banking crisis in Ireland, for example. On the other hand, work in terms of infrastructure, internet access or road networks is fantastic. Another strength of cohesion policy has been to encourage cross-border cooperation. What I dislike, though, is the patchwork of small projects. It is not the European Union's role to finance a village museum or flowers in front of town halls. ■