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European Commission

CALL FOR EVIDENCE
FOR AN INITIATIVE (without an impact assessment)

TITLE OF THE INITIATIVE	Right to Stay Strategy: Your Region, Your Future
LEAD DG – RESPONSIBLE UNIT	DG REGIO – DDG.02 (cities, communities, people)
LIKELY TYPE OF INITIATIVE	Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions
INDICATIVE TIMING	Q4 2026
ADDITIONAL INFORMATION	-

A. Political context, problem definition and subsidiarity check

Political context

The report of the High-Level Group on the Future of Cohesion Policy points out that in 2023 '*More than 60 million EU citizens live in regions with GDP per head lower than in the year 2000. An additional 75 million in regions with near-zero growth. Collectively, about 135 million people, nearly **one third of the EU population**, live in places which, in the last two decades, **have slowly fallen behind.***'

In the 2024 report 'Much more than a market: empowering the Single Market to deliver a sustainable future and prosperity for all EU citizens', Enrico Letta warns that, if left unaddressed, **regional and territorial differences could lead to a new geography of discontent** where people feel left behind. In the areas where economic opportunities are lacking, there is often poor access to services, which further limits economic opportunities and may push people to relocate. As reconfirmed by the Draghi report 'The future of European Competitiveness', socio-economic disparities among regions and EU countries can also hamper European competitiveness.

The Letta report suggests that the deepening of the single market needs to be accompanied by actions to ensure that all EU citizens, wherever they live, can both benefit from and contribute to a strengthened internal market. **Freedom to move and freedom to stay in the community of one's choice** should be developed and ensured together.

As outlined in **President von der Leyen's mission letter to Executive Vice-President Fitto**, the European Commission is committed to tackling regional disparities so that all citizens can effectively exercise their **right to stay in the place they call home**. As part of this effort, the Commission will help to mobilise reforms and investments to support the development of what communities need to thrive: dynamic local economies, quality jobs, public services and private activities, education and skills, appropriate infrastructure, such as energy, transport, water and digital connectivity, and essential services, such as healthcare, childcare, schools and appropriate housing. Only a structured approach and constant investment can enable citizens and economic and social actors to assert their right to live, work and do business where they choose in the EU.

Problem the initiative aims to tackle

Cohesion policy plays a key role in reducing regional disparities, delivering tangible results across the EU and ensuring that relocating remains a choice rather than an obligation. However, economic disparities persist across the EU, with over 25% of people in the EU living in areas where income levels are below 75% of the EU average.

Each region has its own development starting points, needs and capabilities. But some regions are more heavily affected by acute challenges and transformations given their remoteness, geographic particularities, including exposure to climate change risks, or specific socio-economic situations. Some are confronted with stagnant or declining growth, prosperity and competitiveness, limiting the availability of high value jobs and putting them at risk of falling into a vicious cycle of lengthy periods of low or negative growth, productivity and employment. This is often the case for remote regions, which have limited economic and employment opportunities and difficulties accessing key services. Many EU regions are also confronted with acute transformations, including an aging population, the outmigration of young people and a diminishing workforce.

If unaddressed, depopulation trends in certain regions could weaken the EU's competitiveness and deepen territorial imbalances, while further undermining regions' economic capacity, generating resentment in the EU, and causing regions to spiral downward into a development trap. The convergence of megatrends, including demographic decline, shifts in the global economy, and the green and digital transitions, is creating novel distributional challenges that demand innovative cohesion policy solutions. Rural and remote regions, including islands, outermost regions, mountain regions, as well as internal border regions, are particularly exposed to the risks of economic decline and population loss. The eastern regions bordering Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine also face heightened security risks.

Regions also play a vital role in Europe's competitiveness, including through regional research and innovation ecosystems, as major engines of innovation, industrial development and economic growth. Strengthening Europe's competitiveness and safeguarding the integrity of the single market requires the empowerment of regions as key partners in the implementation of cohesion policy. Local and regional authorities manage a lot of public investment across the EU and therefore have a major role to play in promoting innovation, supporting sustainability and strengthening Europe's strategic autonomy. Without strong multilevel governance and a place-based approach, the EU risks increasing territorial disparities instead of fully realising its growth potential.

These shifts have profound implications for economic vitality, labour market dynamics and the provision of public services or access to them. People living in these declining regions often feel compelled to relocate because there aren't enough jobs, good schools, hospitals or access to necessary services to maintain a good standard of living. The outflow of people, especially young people, may exacerbate an already difficult economic situation.

Comprehensive data and evidence are essential for identifying the EU regions more heavily affected by these acute challenges and for determining the support needed for local communities to grow and succeed. The EU, through many of its sectoral policies and initiatives, already supports the development and implementation of interventions in support of the right to stay. Coherence among policy interventions is fundamental, including in areas such as competitiveness, employment, rural development, mobility (relocating), tourism, skills, connectivity, young people, equality and non-discrimination, research and innovation. Integrated approaches and place-based policies are also necessary to deliver multidimensional and effective solutions, as regional and local governments have extensive knowledge of the specific strengths and weaknesses of their territory.

The lessons learned by one region from addressing specific challenges and using innovative strategies can provide valuable insights that can be used in other areas. Sharing these experiences can be instrumental in helping other actors rise to similar challenges and improve their own development initiatives.

Without EU action, it would be increasingly difficult to identify which regions and territories are struggling the most in supporting communities and in promoting competitiveness, growth and prosperity. This could result in the overlooking of the most pressing needs of struggling regions, potentially leading to the inefficient allocation of resources and undermining the effectiveness of interventions designed to ensure that all citizens have an effective right to stay in the place they call home. Valuable learning and

exchange opportunities would also be missed, ultimately leading to lost opportunities to leverage available solutions.

Basis for EU action (legal basis and subsidiarity check)

Legal basis

This initiative falls under a policy area (economic, social and territorial cohesion) for which the EU and EU countries have a shared competence.

Article 174 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union provides for the European Union to develop and pursue actions leading to the strengthening of its economic, social and territorial cohesion, in order to promote its overall harmonious development. In particular, the provisions indicate that the Union should aim at reducing disparities between the levels of development of the various regions and the backwardness of the least favoured regions. Among the regions concerned, particular attention shall be paid to rural areas, areas affected by industrial transition, and regions which suffer from severe and permanent natural or demographic handicaps such as the northernmost regions with very low population density and island, cross-border and mountain regions.

Practical need for EU action

The EU has been helping EU regions and territories to implement EU policies and priorities for decades. The benefits of EU action stem from its complementarity with the support EU countries provide. EU action has particular value because it: (i) informs decision-making and implementation at all levels of governance; (ii) provides tailored support, including best practices; (iii) triggers political incentives and commitments; (iv) mobilises decision-makers and cooperation partners, including the general public; and (v) enables regions, regardless of their size and location, to benefit from EU actions, broad exchanges, networking and collaboration. A structured approach and constant investment are necessary to address the needs of and challenges faced by people living in these declining regions. Otherwise, declining regions risk further discontent and a prolonged development trap.

B. What does the initiative aim to achieve and how

Likely impacts

The initiative is expected to lead to more coherent and effective EU action to help regions and territories overcome barriers to regional development, in particular those more heavily affected by structural transformations, stagnant economic growth and depopulation. It will help EU countries, regions and local authorities to design tailored, place-based policies and strategies focused on necessary investments and reforms to boost competitiveness, support sustainable development, attract people to these regions, and secure the right to stay.

The initiative is likely to contribute to several relevant Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations' 2030 Agenda, including good health and well-being, decent work and economic growth, industry, innovation and infrastructure and sustainable cities and communities.

Future monitoring

Monitoring of the initiative's implementation will be ensured through data collection across different actions under it, feeding into future measures and policy initiatives.

C. Better regulation

Impact assessment

The initiative will take the form of a Commission communication. It does not create new funding streams or legislative proposals, so no impact assessment is envisaged. The initiative will provide guidance on programming and implementing EU funds, leverage existing EU policies and showcase examples of

successful policy implementation. Any subsequent policy proposals will undergo their own impact assessment.

Consultation strategy

The Commission is seeking input from citizens and stakeholders across the EU. The public is invited to respond to this call for evidence. A Eurobarometer on the right to stay will also be launched to collect people's views regarding the essential conditions and factors influencing individuals' decisions to remain in a certain place, as well as the role of public policies in supporting prosperity and helping to make EU regions attractive places.

The call for evidence will be promoted through the communication channels of DG REGIO. Replies can be made in any of the EU's 24 official languages, using the 'Have your Say' portal (the Commission's central public consultations page). A synopsis report, with a summary of all consultation results, will be prepared.