Access to internet and digital services is vital to achieve cohesion between EU territories

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The growing digital divide between urban and rural areas is one of the major challenges faced by citizens and businesses in Europe. EU, national, regional and local governments must therefore intensify cooperation to ensure a decent access to internet and digital services in key areas such as healthcare, education, public services, social inclusion. This was one of the main messages that emerged from the meeting of the Commission for Economic Policy (ECON) of the European Committee of the Regions (CoR) on 8 July.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted a growing digital divide between well-connected urban and rural areas, between those who know how to use the digital space and those who do not. The availability, actual use of technology and the ability to take advantage of the enormous opportunities offered by digital technologies has therefore a huge impact on cohesion in the EU and can jeopardise the achievement of the 2030 digital decade goals.

The need to promote digital cohesion in Europe is the topic addressed by a draft opinion adopted by the Commission for Economic Policy (ECON) of the CoR during its meeting on 8 July. The opinion is seeking to add the digital dimension to the definition of economic, social and territorial cohesion recognised by the EU Treaties and to develop a clear understanding of the digital concept for the less developed regions so that they can catch up with the rapid digital transformation. CoR members particularly called for the provision of necessary resources in different regions so that they can invest more in digitisation, provide skills and training to citizens and ultimately develop a stronger digital capacity.

The rapporteur Gaetano Armao (IT/EPP), Vice-president and regional minister for Economy of the Region of Sicily, said: " We have an opportunity to make an eco-digital transition. We can't have one without the other. This is a crucial policy for the recovery of Europe on

digital cohesion and focuses on the essential role that technology plays in our life: transport, administration, innovation, environment. We must not forget about the specificities of islands and that is why the digital transition is essential for them and to make sure nobody is left behind. "

Furthermore, ECON members adopted the draft opinion on the European Chips Act, highlighting in particular the importance of chips to achieve the European Green Deal's objectives and the need to produce semiconductors in a more circular way, in order to reuse raw materials and be less dependent on suppliers from outside the EU. The current crisis has revealed structural weaknesses in European value chains.

To support the expansion and diversification of the chip sector in the European Union, local and regional authorities urge the EU to invest more on the Chips Act implementation, building first on existing clusters and ecosystems. Cities and regions can play a major role to strengthen the European semiconductors industry by bringing together all involved actors to further develop local production and research facilities. In addition, they are ready to increase investment on training and upskilling at regional level, for example through the establishment of a "Semiconductor Academy" and a "Knowledge and Innovation Community".

The rapporteur Thomas Schmidt (DE/EPP), Minister for Regional Development of the Free State of Saxony, stated: "The European Chips Act is the right initiative at the right time. We must continue to consolidate our strengths in the EU and promote research and development of new technologies. To do this, the EU must provide more money and we need a take-up in the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2028—2034. A key to the success of the chips act is the training of skilled workers from research to production through the establishment of a ‚Knowledge and Innovation Community (KIC) Semiconductor' and a ‚Semiconductor Academy' following the example of the ‚Battery Academy'. SMEs should also get access to new pilot lines and the new ‚Chip Joint Undertaking'."

ECON members also adopted the revised draft opinion "Protecting Industrial and Craft Geographical Indications in the European Union", where local and regional leaders assess the impact of recent proposal by the European Commission on protecting the intellectual property

for craft products.

Martine Pinville (FR/PES), rapporteur of the revised opinion and of the first opinion adopted in 2021, Member of the Regional Council of Nouvelle-Aquitaine, stated: " I welcome the European Commission's proposal that recognizes industrial and craft geographical indications in a similar way as what already exists for agricultural products. The Commission proposal thereby follows up on what the Committee of the European Regions unanimously requested in 2021. We were heard and are confident that we will also be heard with suggestions for further improving the Commission proposal. Our thread remains the need to protect the skills, the know-how and the workforce behind these industrial and craft products, which are firmly rooted in European cities and regions and are often part of their identities."

All three opinions are scheduled to be adopted in the CoR plenary session, which will take place during the 20th European Week of Regions and Cities in October.

Furthermore, ECON members appointed Muhterem Aras (DE/Greens) as rapporteur for the opinion "Single Market Emergency Instrument", Rob Jonkman (NL/EPP) as rapporteur for the opinion on the "Review Report on the Implementation of the Recovery and Resilience Facility", Michele Pais (IT/ECR) as rapporteur for the "Interoperability Governance Act" and Ricardo Rio (PT/EPP) as rapporteur for the opinion "Progress in the implementation of SDGs".

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