

Transport infrastructure in low-density and depopulating areas



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Remoteness is characterised by **low-density areas** which are likely to be faced with **locational disadvantages**, leading to low socio-economic development. **The demography** of remote and low-density areas are categorised by **specific phenomena** e.g. **emigration, low-birth rates, and population ageing**. Low-density areas are also likely to present **specific geographical features** (proximity to a border, presence of mountains, insularity and geographic remoteness) which may imply particular **development challenges** as well as challenges in **accessibility**.

In addition, the **absence** of the so-called “**urban agglomerative advantages**” means that such areas are unable to benefit from economies of scale, unlike the more populated areas. Many regions which lag economically behind are rural and on the periphery of the EU. These regions are not on a direct path between major urban centres and the main markets. As a result, they suffer both from having to travel **increased distances** which are a necessity, as well as from a generally lower level of overall investment and skills, which **limits their ability to innovate and grow**.

The study

investigates key challenges and trends concerning transport infrastructure in low-density and depopulating areas. It also provides a comprehensive assessment of relevant transport policies and projects already implemented as well as policy recommendations aimed at overcoming those identified challenges and gaps.

Main observations

Transport in low-density and depopulating regions faces issues resulting from the **low number and dispersed nature of the population**, which makes providing **conventional public transport** **challenging**. Difficulties also relate to the distances from the centres of economic activity, which **increases costs**. This challenge is exacerbated by

increasing car use, which is leading to a **decline in public transport use**. Ageing societies and population **movements from rural to urban areas** make providing **public transport services** even more **complex**.



The study highlights the fact that **no specific EU strategy** for the provision of transport in low-density and depopulating areas has been drawn up. **Regional and Cohesion Policy** is the main EU support to transport policies and projects in low-density and depopulating areas, especially through the **European Regional Development Fund (ERDF)**. Apart from some references and exemptions granted to sparsely-populated



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areas and outermost regions, **EU Regional Policy does not have a specific approach** to low-density and depopulating areas, most of them are included in larger Operational Programmes.

The **European Commission's framework** for the development of transport policy in the EU over the past decade set out in the **2011 White Paper** makes **few references** to the needs of 'low-density or depopulating' regions.

TEN-T Guidelines (2013), however, underline that one of the 'general priorities' is to ensure "enhanced accessibility and connectivity for all regions". The guidelines explicitly mention islands, sparsely populated, remote and outermost regions.

Conclusions and policy recommendations

- Ensure that **local needs are better addressed through Cohesion Policy and other EU funds** through the design of specific applications of EU policy to low-density and depopulating areas. Two immediate actions can be taken: 1) to clearly mention specific needs and features of low-density and depopulating areas in the Connecting Europe Facilities (CEF); and 2) to make the most of the proposed Digital Europe Programme's reference to smart rural areas.
- Prioritise **the revitalisation of existing transport infrastructure and the provision of links to the TEN-T** in order to **close the gap** between low-density and depopulating areas and other regions. This should be done through substantial improvement of local infrastructure and by focusing on local needs

rather than favouring infrastructure related to tourism.

- Consider a **NUTS 3** (sub-regional administrative unit, such as provinces or departments) **approach** to designing transport policies for low-density and depopulating areas, thus ensuring policy-making is more relevant for their specific

needs. An alternative approach would be to better exploit the opportunities of Interreg Programmes, which often directly cover low-density and depopulating regions.

- Allow the use of **ERDF funding to cover operational costs** due to specific demographic and geographical issues **to partly offset transport inequalities**. This would allow EU funds to finance extraordinary maintenance rather than focusing on flagship investments which are often more expensive and less effective.
- Introduce **"equity" as a horizontal principle in transport policies**, leading policymakers and evaluators to expand the criteria for project appraisal which are too focused on efficiency and disregard distributional effects.

Key areas for EU action

1. Ensure that local needs are better addressed through Cohesion Policy and EU funds.
2. Close the gap between low-density areas and other regions through the revitalisation of existing transport infrastructure and the provision of links to the TEN-T.
3. Consider a NUTS 3 approach to designing transport policies.
4. Allow the use of ERDF funding to cover operational costs of transport inequalities.
5. Introduce "equity" as a horizontal principle in transport policies.

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