

High-speed broadband must reach all European citizens to eliminate digital divide

Mart Vörklaev's opinion summarises the conclusions of the Broadband Platform and highlights the crucial role of the EU's structural funds in boosting connectivity

A strong cohesion policy in combination with other financing instruments is key to boosting broadband connectivity in Europe, according the European Committee of the Regions (CoR). In an opinion adopted at the plenary session on 22 March, it points out that lack of fast and reliable broadband coverage remains a problem in many rural and sparsely populated areas where there is not enough market-driven development.

As one of the measures for improving connectivity, the European Commission and the CoR have set up a joint Broadband Platform made up of local and regional policymakers and experts. Its initial conclusions are reflected in this [opinion](#), which points out that the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) play a crucial role in improving ICT and broadband infrastructure: in the current programming period, EUR 14 billion is available for that purpose.

“Currently high-speed broadband coverage only reaches 40% of rural residents in the EU compared with 90% of urban areas”, says rapporteur **Mart Vörklaev** (EE/ALDE), Mayor of Rae Municipality. “This presents an obstacle to achieving the EU's ambitious goals for the Digital Single Market and contributes to the growing problem of rural depopulation and marginalisation throughout Europe. Therefore broadband infrastructure needs to be supported by strengthening cohesion policy in parallel with other financial instruments combining public and private financing, such as the Broadband Fund launched by the European Investment Bank.”

Following concerns raised by Broadband Platform members, the opinion calls for efforts to tackle administrative burdens resulting from overregulation and lack of consistency. In particular, the EU guidelines for the application of State aid rules in relation to rapid deployment of broadband networks should be aligned with the various EU funding options for broadband rollout.

Local and regional representatives also pointed out the need for more data and technical knowledge, which is why they are urging the European Commission to extend its network of Broadband Competence Offices to all Member States. Local and regional authorities should be active partners in the design and roll-out of national broadband development plans, together with telecommunications companies and national governments.

The opinion notes that mobile and satellite broadband can often provide quicker and less costly alternatives to fibre networks, especially in

sparsely populated areas. As the rapid development of high-capacity 5G communications networks raises new challenges for radio spectrum management, it is important to seek a common approach for the allocation of licences for the higher frequencies that will be used in the future.

Finally, the Committee considers it necessary to separate services from network operation, in the same way as in the energy sector. This “unbundling” should apply to both the fixed and 5G markets, in the interests of competition.

“There should be no dependence on basic infrastructure owned by the telecommunications companies that dominate the market. Networks need to be operator-neutral so that large numbers of service providers can operate on the market on an equal basis and consumers can choose the services they prefer”, Mr Vörklaev stresses.

Background information:

[The Broadband Platform](#) was launched in October 2017 by CoR President Karl-Heinz Lambertz and the Commissioner for Digital Society, Mariya Gabriel. Comprising 12 CoR members and ad-hoc experts from the European Commission, it aims to contribute to the deployment of faster, better and sustainable high-speed broadband in all European regions.

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