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Debate Article

From "Europe of Regions" to "Europe of Nations"? The Changing Paradigm of the Post-2027 Cohesion Policy Framework

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Abstract

In July 2025, the European Commission presented its proposal for the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) for the 2028–2034 period. Alongside the MFF proposal, the draft regulation was also released, initiating a two-year consultation and negotiation process that will culminate in its final adoption by the Council and the European Parliament. This new proposal arrives at a critical juncture for the European Union, as it seeks to redefine its long-term budgetary priorities in a context marked by growing geopolitical instability, the green and digital transitions, and increasing pressures on cohesion and solidarity mechanisms. This paper offers an overview of the evolving debate surrounding the proposed MFF, highlighting both its continuity with and departure from previous frameworks. It focuses in particular on the paradigmatic shift underpinning the Commission's approach, suggesting that the new MFF marks a definitive transition. from a "Europe of regions" to a "Europe of nations." In doing so, it critically examines how the proposed financial architecture redistributes political and economic influence across and regions, identifying the apparent winners and losers in this emerging configuration of European integration.

Keywords
Multiannual Financial Framework; Cohesion Policy; Europe of Regions; Europe of Nations; territorial cohesion; spatial development

Introduction

The debate on the future of the European Union (EU)'s Cohesion Policy has intensified following the European Commission's proposal, presented in July 2025, for the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2028–2034, along with the accompanying draft regulation. This new budgetary architecture arrives at a moment of significant geopolitical, economic, and territorial turmoil marked by the green and digital transitions, the persistence of regional disparities, demographic pressures, growing political fragmentation across Member States and geopolitical tensions. Against this backdrop, the Commission's proposal introduces a significant

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recalibration of how EU territorial investment is conceived, coordinated, and delivered. At the heart of the reform lies the creation of the National and Regional Partnership Plans (NRPPs), envisioned as the single, overarching planning instrument replacing the current system of Partnership Agreements and Operational Programmes. While presented as a means to simplify procedures, improve coherence, and enhance flexibility, the NRPP framework substantially reshapes the governance of cohesion policy. It centralises strategic control in the hands of national governments, reduces the prescriptive role of the European Commission, and leaves the involvement of regional and local authorities largely to the discretion of Member States. This is raising concerns about the erosion of long-standing principles - such as partnership, shared management, subsidiarity and multilevel governance - that have historically defined cohesion policy. The contribution examines the evolution of these changes, outlining the historical role of regions within EU cohesion policy, the content of the Commission's MFF proposal and regulation, and the reactions of key institutional actors and stakeholders, including the European Court of Auditors, the Council, Eurocities, Council of European Municipalities and Regions, and the Committee of Regions. Drawing on these discussions, it identifies the risks associated with the proposed model, particularly the reduced visibility of regional and urban dimensions, the potential competition between policy fields within a single national envelope, and the uncertain operational value of the envisaged territorial and regional chapters. Overall, the analysis argues that the proposed MFF signals a paradigmatic shift from the traditional vision of a "Europe of Regions" towards a more centralised "Europe of Nations," reflecting broader political dynamics within the Union. In this emerging configuration, the capacity of regions and cities to influence the debate of EU cohesion policy and its implementation - and to safeguard place-based approaches - will increasingly depend on their ability to assert their institutional role within the NRPP process.

Cohesion Policy until 2027

The EU has long recognised the need to promote balanced territorial development and to reduce disparities between its regions. So far, the cohesion policy is the EU's main instrument aimed at this goal (Filipetti and Spallone, 2025). Indeed, it remains the most crucial investment policy in the EU, accounting for nearly one-third of the entire Union's budget and targeting, to varying extents, all regions and cities. With investments in infrastructure, innovation, employment, and social inclusion, cohesion policy has played a crucial role in promoting growth and resilience throughout the Union so far (Capello et al., 2024). Rooted in the EU Treaties, cohesion policy seeks to address the long-standing issue of uneven development, which successive enlargements, economic crises, and demographic shifts have, through time,

exacerbated (Schwab, 2024). Article 174 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union provides that, to strengthen its economic, social and territorial cohesion, the Union is to aim at reducing disparities between the levels of development of the various regions and the help of the least favoured regions or islands to catch up. With these intentions, the Treaty of Rome (1957) also established the European Social Fund (ESF). In 1973, the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) was established to address regional imbalances resulting from the predominance of agriculture, industrial changes, and structural unemployment. A decisive impetus to a genuine European cohesion policy was provided by the Single European Act of 1986, which recognised the fundamental importance of achieving economic and social cohesion. As a result, cohesion policy became an essential instrument to bring wealth up to the EU average. To this end, the 1988 Delors Reform introduced four key principles, namely "Concentration", shifting the focus on the poorest regions; "Partnership", with the involvement of regional and local partners; "Programming", with a multi-annual programming frame; "Additionality", the EU expenditure must be completed by national one. This reform paved the way for the adoption of the first regulation integrating the Structural Funds, adopted by the European Council, and the introduction of the multiannual financial framework. For the first time, Operational Programmes (OPs) were drafted to operationalise the EU cohesion policy on a multi-annual basis, according to predefined priorities and geographical objectives. Since 2000-2006, the EU cohesion policy has been structured around seven-year cycles, and it is implemented through a general orientation document, known as the Partnership Agreement (for the last two programming periods). This document sets out the investment priorities and the allocation of resources into the National and Regional Operational Programmes, elaborated by the Member States and, in some countries, by their regions, each of which defines priorities, specific objectives and the articulation of the financial allocations and has to be evaluated and approved by the European Commission.

The role of regions

Regions and cities - engines of economic activity and social change - are central to the success of EU cohesion policy, particularly in areas lagging behind (Medeiros et al., 2024; European Commission, 2022). Promoting economic cohesion among EU regions has been a primary policy objective of the European Commission since the mid-1970s, with the Structural Funds serving as a key instrument to achieve this goal (Idczak et al., 2024). The role of regions in cohesion policy has evolved across programming periods, shaped by both EU- and state-level strategic decisions. In some Member States, regional authorities play little or no role in policy delivery, while in others, such as Italy, they have acted as strategic partners. Despite the diversity

of national administrative systems, EU regulations have consistently recognised the importance of regional involvement. When empowered to do so, regions have played an essential role in implementing cohesion policy, often serving as Managing Authorities for the ERDF and, in many cases, for the ESF as well. This responsibility has allowed regions not only to deliver cohesion policy objectives but also to align national and regional investments within a shared strategic framework. In Italy, for instance, regions have taken a proactive role in developing territorial strategies by defining methods and procedures for implementing Integrated Territorial Investments (ITI) under the ERDF's urban earmark (5% in 2014–2020 and 8% in 2021–2027) (Cotella and Berisha, 2023). In other cases, regions have assumed direct responsibility for cohesion policy on behalf of Member States – for example, in Belgium, where the regions manage ERDF implementation (see the case of Flanders). Through the Regional Operational Programmes, these entities have been recognised as key factors contributing to territorial cohesion policy and, more broadly, to the formalisation of multilevel governance in line with the principle of subsidiarity enshrined in the EU treaties (Faludi, 2012). However, the strategic role of regions is currently in delivery Cohesion Policy framework is currently under debate in the context of the proposed MFF, as discussed in the following section.

Cohesion Policy post-2027: What is foreseen by the new MFF and the regulation?

The European Commission's proposal for the Multiannual Financial Framework 2028–2034, worth €1.98 trillion (1.26% EU GNI), introduced the so-called National Regional Partnership Plans (NRPPs) as the primary delivery mechanism for EU funds, including the European Regional Development Fund, Cohesion Fund, Common Agricultural Policy, and other instruments[1]. According to the European Commission (2025), modernising the financing of the EU budget is an essential part of this package and will enable stable national contributions despite the increase in the budget's size. This modernisation implies making the EU budget and its programmes simpler, more flexible, and strategically aligned with the EU's current and future priorities. Continuing in this vein, the EU budget must be a "policy-based budget" focusing on priority areas such as competitiveness, security, decarbonization, sustainability, and economic, social, and territorial cohesion. Within this framework, the NRPP must combine EU funds implemented by Member States and regions into a coherent, tailored planning process, fully aligned with the Union's common priorities. According to the European Commission, these plans will maximise the impact of every euro, provide more flexibility to adapt to regional and local needs, and simplify rules for Member States and regions. The new delivery system of the NRPP should

[1] This fund will account for approximately 44% of the total budget (€772 billion).

accommodate the diversity of Member States, offering them flexibility to develop national, sectoral, and, where relevant, regional and territorial chapters, as is currently permitted under the rules (Table 1). In general, the partnerships will be less prescriptive on how to achieve common objectives, but more demanding on what to accomplish, ensuring full respect for the principle of subsidiarity. Within the NRPPs: (i) agriculture and rural areas remain a priority, strengthening the EU's strategic autonomy, food security and sustainability; (ii) cohesion policy will be strengthened and modernised, with regions at its core; (iii) a social target of 14% will apply to NRPP to steer significant investments towards the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights; (iv) the partnerships will ensure that the EU's support to migration, border management and security challenges is tailored to the needs of each Member State and its regions and: (v) fisheries will remain the lifeblood of our coastal communities and economies. In parallel with the NRPPs, the European Commission has identified the EU Facility[2] as a means to support actions that can be delivered more efficiently at the Union level, complementing projects implemented by Member States and regions. This includes implementing the exclusive competences of the Union in areas such as the conservation of marine biological resources under the Common Fisheries Policy, supporting ocean policy, promoting social actions and investments in social infrastructure and the social economy at the EU level, including the use of guaranteed instruments, and promoting inter-regional or inter-city cooperation.

Based on the MFF, the proposal regulation for only one European Fund for Economic, Social and Territorial Cohesion, Agriculture and Rural, Fisheries and Maritime, Prosperity and Security was published (2025/0240). The regulation aims to respond to these various challenges by: (i) ensuring better coherence between EU priorities and national and regional actions; (ii) achieving simplification and better value for money by building a simpler and more efficient delivery system and (iii) addressing emerging policy priorities by facilitating the reallocation resources to respond to new needs and unforeseen crises, without putting at risk the fulfilment of long-term objectives. This regulation is made up of XIII Titles, of which Title III – National and Regional Partnership Plans [Article 21 to 25] and Title IX - Specific type of support [Article 71 to 79] are highlighted in the table below.

[2] Among the different EU budget envelop, the EU Facility fund includes over 63 billion plus 9 billion (EU Facility cushion). The facility will help to respond to natural and man-made disasters, building synergies with other policy areas covered under the partnerships, such as agriculture. An unallocated cushion will provide the possibility to further respond to unexpected events and disasters in Member States, should other flexibilities within the national and regional allocations not be sufficient (European Commission, 2025b).

Table 1 - European Fund for economic, social and territorial cohesion, agriculture and rural, fisheries and maritime, prosperity and security regulation provision

Title	Article – title	Provision
Title III – National and Regional Partnership Plans	**Art. 21 - Preparation and submission of the Plan steps**	Each Member State shall prepare and submit to the Commission the NRPP setting out its agenda of reforms, investments and other interventions (comma 1). The plan shall be prepared in partnership with the partners as set out in Article 6 [Partnership], including regional and local authorities, and in accordance with their institutional, legal, and financial frameworks. It shall also include national, sectoral, and, where relevant, regional and territorial chapters (comma 2).
	Art. 22 - Requirements for the NRPP	The NRPP shall support the general objectives laid down in Article 2 (i.e. reduce regional imbalances) and contribute in a comprehensive and adequate manner to all the specific objectives laid down in Article 3 (support the Union's sustainable prosperity etc.). Among the others, the NRPP should effectively contribute to promoting the use of cooperation interventions as referred to in Article 74 [cooperation interventions], including integrated territorial investment in cities, urban, rural and coastal areas, and community-led local development. It also should include indications concerning the minimum % of funds allocated to social (a minimum of 14% of EU Contribution or Loans), climate and environmental objectives.
	Art. 23 - Commission proposal and Council implementing decision	The art. describes the process (and timelines) for the assessment and approval of the plan following the scheme: the Commission makes the proposal assessment; the Council takes the implementing decision
	Art. 24 - Amendment of the NRP Plan	A Member State may submit to the Commission a reasoned request for an amendment of its NRP Plan, together with the amended NRP Plan.
	Art 25 – Mid-term review	The Member State shall review their NRP Plans taking into account the challenges identified, as per art. 22, the socio-economic of the Member State, the main results assessed and the progress towards the achievement of the measures etc.
Title IX – Specific type of support	**Art. 74 - Territorial and local cooperation initiatives**	Member States may establish and provide support for cooperation in the following areas: integrated territorial and urban development; community-led local development, including LEADER and other citizen-led initiatives; and smart village strategies.
	Art. 75 - Integrated territorial and urban development.	Support for territorial development shall be based on integrated territorial development strategies, including via community-led local development, focused on urban areas, rural areas, islands, coastal areas, or any appropriate territorial area as well as smart specialisation or territorial just transition strategies, or strategies for decarbonisation developed with the support of Union instruments in the 2021 to 2027 period, taking account, where relevant, of a functional area and place-based approach. More specifically, integrated territorial and urban development strategies shall: set out the geographical area and population covered by the strategy; provide an analysis of the development needs and a description of an integrated; approach to address the identified development needs; set out key objectives with measurable targets; set out the involvement of partners in the preparation and implementation of the strategy (comma 2). In its comma 3, it is established that Strategies implemented pursuant to this Article shall be selected by the managing authority(ies) in view of providing support, including for their preparation. They shall be implemented under the responsibility of the relevant territorial or urban authorities or bodies, who shall select or be involved in the selection of operations.

	Art. 76 - Community-led local development	Community-led local development shall: focus on subregional areas, rural and coastal areas; be designed and implemented by local action groups composed of representatives of public and private local stakeholders, in which no single interest group controls the decision-making; be carried out through strategies in accordance with Article 75, supportive of innovative features in the local context, networking and cooperation with other territorial actors (comma 1). Support from the Fund for community-led local development shall cover shall cover: capacity building and preparatory actions supporting the design of the strategy; preparation and implementation of the operations selected under the strategy, including cooperation activities and the management, monitoring and evaluation of the strategy and its animation, including the facilitation of exchanges between stakeholders and communication of the strategy and the Union (comma 2).

How is the current discussion around the new MFF evolving?

The following sections provide an overview of the current debate by unpacking the institutional discussion surrounding the new MFF. They outline the main arguments in favour of changing the current configuration of cohesion policy, highlight the elements that should be maintained, and discuss the potential risks associated with the present MFF framework.

Main arguments to change: an institutional view

According to "The road to the next multiannual financial framework" published by the European Commission (2025a), cohesion policy has been successful in reducing territorial disparities. However, 29% of EU citizens still reside in regions with a GDP per capita below 75% of the EU average, and approximately 30% of citizens live in places that, over the last two decades, have slowly fallen behind. In view of MFF restructuring, in early 2025, the European Commission advocated for a simpler EU budget, which necessitates improved coordination (over 50 spending programmes are currently active) to complement the complexity and rigidity of regulations. Indeed, it has been recognised that beneficiaries have difficulties in navigating the multiplicity of rules and criteria, despite the simplification measures introduced in the current financial framework. The fragmentation of the financial landscape also results in an excessive number of programming documents, which are resource-intensive for all administrations involved and cause severe delays, thereby reducing the capacity of local units to truly benefit from them.

By contrast: what to maintain

The Council of the European Union (2025), underlined the need to reflect on how to make cohesion policy more performance-based to enhance its efficiency, building on its own experiences as well as lessons learned from other EU instruments, and on its strengths – shared

management, multi-level governance, a place-based approach, and the partnership principle. In the same period, the European Commission (2025b) calls for a performance-based instrument following the method used for the Recovery and Resilient Facility (RRF) while the European Court of Auditors (2025) does not consider RRF a pure performance-based instrument, suggesting that the next MFF should focus on examining the flexibility of the EU budget to ensure both a sufficient degree of predictability and the ability to react promptly and proportionately to changing circumstances. It suggests strengthening the link between EU funds supporting the reform of recurring structural challenges, while taking into account national and regional specificities. Again, the Council of the European Union (2025), in its Conclusions on the cohesion policy post-2027, recognising the centrality of cohesion policy, stresses that cohesion policy should continue to achieve strategic goals and priorities of the European Union while addressing national and regional priorities. This must be guaranteed by its key principles: shared management, multi-level governance, partnership, as well as a people and place-based approach. These principles have also been highlighted by the Group of High-Level Specialists on the Future of cohesion policy[3], in charge by the European Commission for elaborating a report on how to ensure that cohesion policy post-2027 continues to support growth and recovery across Europe's regions, all the while delivering on the green and digital transition and helping regions adjust to ongoing demographic, industrial, and geopolitical challenges. Furthermore, experts have also emphasised that cohesion is more crucial than ever if the EU is to address its growing long-term structural challenges effectively. Cohesion is thus critical for all, as it addresses low development, long-term economic stagnation, and a lack of opportunities across all regions.

What are the risks of the new MMF?

Beyond this institutional debate, there is a growing discussion among EU cohesion policy experts (Coletti and Filippetti, 2025) and various stakeholders regarding the new MFF proposal. The primary concerns pertain to the potential loss of regional and urban dimensions (Eurocities, 2025; CEMR, 2023). Although the MFF acknowledges the importance of the regional level, it grants national governments complete flexibility in determining the extent of regional involvement in the programming process. Combined with the absence of any earmarked funds for cities, this approach raises serious concerns about the weakening of multi-level governance. According to the Assembly of European Regions' Policy Brief (2025), the new MFF entails several implications for the functioning of cohesion policy, such as, for instance: (i) centralisation and

[3] For more details: Report of Group of High-Level Specialists on the Future of Cohesion Policy - EURoma

simplification - Member States will be required to prepare a single NRPP to replace the 14 separate programmes currently in place. While this is presented as a simplification and is meant to reduce administrative burden, the reality is that the inclusion of regional and territorial chapters is left entirely to the discretion of Member States; (ii) competition for funds - by expanding the NRPPs to cover a broad range of priorities - from cohesion and rural development to fisheries, migration, tourism, and even security - programmes will be forced to compete against each other within a single national envelope; (iii) dilution of cohesion objectives - the proposal explicitly opens the door to using cohesion funds to finance new policy areas such as defence and security, alongside traditional objectives. Grouping such diverse priorities under one plan risks blurring the focus of cohesion, creating divergence between goals, and undermining efforts to reduce inequalities; (iv) weak multi-level governance - the NRPPs include only a vague mechanism for stakeholder consultation, which places regional authorities on the same level as other secondary actors such as academia or civil society organisations and; (v) too much flexibility diverts resources from territorial needs - Member States are granted significant leeway to amend their NRPPs in response to crises or unforeseen circumstances, with no obligation to consult regions when making these changes.

Discussion: Who are the losers and who are the winners?

As outlined above, the launch of the MFF by the European Commission is under scrutiny. The negotiation phase is ongoing and is expected to last approximately two more years. Most likely, the MFF will be amended in certain parts, and details will be changed to accommodate various interests. However, it is becoming increasingly clear that the values and principles underlying this MFF proposal diverge significantly from what has been associated with EU cohesion policy in the past. Upon examining the current proposal and the various discussions surrounding it, it becomes apparent that the new configuration of the MFF is subtly altering its mission from being a tool to reduce regional disparities to a purely financial tool at the disposal of Member States. It appears that the new format has clearly highlighted the role of the European Commission, which is delegating responsibility to Member States to utilise the allocated funds without any additional responsibility towards sub-national actors (as was done, in particular, towards regions with the previous Regional Operational Programmes). On the other hand, Member States have complete flexibility in using the allocated funding to shape the NRPP priorities, with no effective obligation in terms of content, partnership, or governance. While the winners are identified, who are expected to be the losers?

The regulation proposal can provide some clear warnings on it. Accordingly, Article 21 mentions the principle of partnership, understood as the involvement of regional and local

authorities in the process, yet it remains only loosely defined, lacking clear guidance on the timing and manner of such participation. Moreover, the regulation provides neither a clear procedural framework nor binding requirements for Member States to establish a common roadmap for co-designing the NRPP with regional and local authorities. The only reference made is that "the Plan shall include national, sectoral and, where relevant, regional and territorial chapters." However, this formulation leaves several critical aspects undefined: How will Member States interpret the relevance of these chapters? Could they consider including regions and local authorities as optional? Moreover, the content and scope of the "chapters" remain unclear. For instance, will Member States be obliged to include a dedicated "territorial chapter" or a "regional chapter"? If so, what should such chapters contain, and through which participatory or institutional mechanisms should they be developed? Importantly, the implementation of the NRPP is subject to compliance with Title IX of the regulation. Articles 74, 75, and 76 reaffirm the fundamental logics underpinning the ITI and Community-led Local Development (CLLD) instruments that have been progressively developed within the framework of the cohesion policy. This confirmation is generally regarded as a positive step. However, the regulation does not guarantee the actual adoption of ITI and CLLD mechanisms. No binding provisions require Member States to allocate a specific share of NRPP funds to these instruments, nor has an earmark been considered. More importantly, no clear role of regions in conceptualising, managing and implementing these kinds of instruments is defined. Last but not least, and perhaps somewhat surprisingly, some central-level authorities may also be among the losers. Although the new configuration clearly reflects a process of centralisation, it could produce unpredictable effects on the (re)balance of power among ministries - with some potentially becoming significantly more influential, while others lose ground[4].

To summarise, there are three main issues that appear from the new MFF:

- *Erosion of partnership*: the proposed MFF weakens the partnership principle that has long underpinned cohesion policy. Although formally referenced, the partnership becomes optional rather than mandatory, with no binding requirements for timing, procedures, or depth of involvement of regional and local authorities. This shift reduces sub-national actors to peripheral consultees and undermines the multilevel governance model that previously ensured territorial knowledge and shared responsibility in cohesion programming.

[4] This could be the case for ministries that, up to the current programming period, were responsible for the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development. In the new configuration, they no longer have an exclusive role, as the decision is now left to the discretion of the Member States.

- *Centralisation of strategic control*: with the introduction of National and Regional Partnership Plans, strategic authority becomes concentrated in the hands of Member States. The merger of funding lines into a single national envelope and the absence of dedicated regional or urban instruments favour national priorities over territorially differentiated needs. Combined with a lighter supervisory role for the European Commission, the new architecture reintroduces a predominantly intergovernmental logic, limiting regional influence on the definition and allocation of cohesion investments.
- *Unclear role of "territorial chapters"*: territorial and regional chapters could, in principle and potentially, preserve attention to place-based needs, yet their status is vague and non-binding. The regulation does not specify if and when these chapters are required, what they should contain, or how they should interact with existing territorial strategies. Without earmarked resources or procedural safeguards, their function risks remaining symbolic and/or centrally driven. Indeed, whether they become meaningful instruments of territorial governance will depend entirely on national discretion.

Bearing that in mind, it can be said that the progressive role of regions (and cities) in delivering cohesion policy might be reduced compared to the past. While, on the contrary, the role of Member States is further increased to the detriment of regional and local authorities, first, and although underestimated, also the ability of the European Commission to supervise the process seems (voluntarily) reduced. Overall, these transformations mark a clear shift from the long-standing notion of a "Europe of Regions" - which for decades represented the normative and operational foundation of cohesion policy - towards an emerging "Europe of Nations." This evolution reflects the broader political climate of recent years, characterised by increasing nationalisation and centrifugal pressures within the EU. In this context of growing polarisation, it becomes strategically essential for regions and cities to reassert their role in shaping and implementing cohesion policy and to actively influence the design and substance of the regional and territorial chapters that may be incorporated into the NRPPs.

Conflict of interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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