

# Abstract

European fragile territories are undergoing profound transformations driven by globalisation, which concentrates resources, economic activities, and decision-making power in urban areas, generating socioeconomic trajectories characterised by the progressive erosion of institutional and social infrastructures. EU Cohesion Policy, despite being the main instrument for addressing these disparities, continues to show persistent gaps between stated objectives and achieved results.

Building on the co-evolution framework between pragmatism and institutionalism theorised by Salet (2018), this research integrates contributions from experimentalist governance (Morgan, 2018; Sabel & Zeitlin, 2008) and new institutionalist theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 2014), advancing the hypothesis that misalignment among the constituent elements of institutional arrangements (regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive pillars) generates systematic implementation gaps. This problem is particularly acute in institutionally fragile territories characterised by conditions of "policy without polity" (Hajer, 2003), where the weakness of Type I governance structures necessitates recourse to Type II governance arrangements (Hooghe & Marks, 2002) and soft planning (Purkarthofer & Granqvist, 2021) as institutional innovation (Raffaelli & Glynn, 2015).

The research is structured as a collection of five peer-reviewed articles that collectively address three research sub-questions. Articles I-IV provide diagnostic and descriptive analyses that identify the factors causing misalignment and document how these manifest in implementation. Article V offers prescriptive contributions toward institutional design solutions.

The thesis employs a mixed-methods research design, grounded in insider action research methodology, with participant observation as the primary method, complemented by documentary analysis, dialogical exchanges, and semi-structured interviews with practitioners. The empirical investigation focuses primarily on Italian territorial policies, with comparative analysis extended to France, examining five policy domains: mountain and rural areas (SNAI, Rural Agenda, LEADER/CLLD), small and medium-sized cities, cross-border cooperation (European Territorial Cooperation projects and macro-regional strategies), and territorial welfare systems.

The findings reveal four distinct mechanisms of institutional misalignment. First, uncoordinated simultaneous transformation (Paper I): all pillars transform simultaneously without distinct logics, resulting in high innovation but low implementation. Second, constitutive cognitive blockage (Paper II): dominant imagined geographies render territories cognitively "unthinkable" as policy objects. Third, uncoordinated regulative proliferation (Paper III): each theme generates separate sectoral

instruments without systemic integration. Fourth, deliberate regulative absence (Paper IV): when the regulative pillar is absent, implicit coordination through normative/cognitive dimensions may favour territories with established interpretive frameworks.

The analysis demonstrates that experimentalist governance privileges regulative innovation while assuming spontaneous adaptation of normative-cognitive pillars. In institutionally fragile territories characterised by "policy without polity", where innovation produces only discursive institutions, this assumption proves fallacious. Soft planning, the dominant form of institutional innovation in these contexts, lacks the capacity to establish stable and democratically legitimate governance structures, creating what the thesis defines as the "institutional paradox of soft planning".

The research makes five contributions. First, it identifies a new specific dimension in Salet's (2018) co-evolution pragmatism-institutionalism framework: the relationship between experimentalist governance and institutional innovation. Second, it proposes decoupling innovative practices characterised by soft planning and place-based approaches from experimentalism and pragmatism, refounding them on deliberate construction of institutional preconditions through explicit political work rather than assumed spontaneous emergence. Third, it positions this rethinking in consideration of the construction of the new Cohesion Policy programming period, characterised by hyper-Lisbonization (Molica et al., 2025), which undermines territorial embeddedness through procedural flexibility and renationalisation. Fourth, it demonstrates that institutional fragility constitutes the constitutive condition of left-behind territories and, based on empirical evidence, shows the possibility of overcoming left-behindedness through the capacity to identify and activate hidden territorial resources (Colletis & Pecqueur, 2018), deliberately building alignment among pillars before implementation. Fifth, it diagnoses the Italian territorial governance system as an anticipatory laboratory of wider European challenges and proposes a transition toward functional intermediate actors, preventive policy integration, and capacity-first instrument design.