



Cohesion Policy has long been a cornerstone of the European Union's strategy to reduce economic, social and territorial disparities, promote balanced growth, and foster convergence between regions, as established under Article 174 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU).

The ECR Group strongly reaffirms the importance of maintaining a robust and structured Cohesion Policy within the next post-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), grounded in territorial solidarity and effective multilevel governance.

Cohesion investments have delivered an unprecedented positive impact across EU regions—including cities, islands, rural areas, border zones, and peripheral and outermost territories. Every Member State has directly or indirectly benefited from these resources, and the tangible results on the ground clearly demonstrate the visibility and strategic value of Cohesion Policy within the MFF.

Regions remain at the heart of Cohesion Policy. Their active participation is indispensable throughout all phases—design, implementation and evaluation. Any initiative that undermines the role of regional authorities risks detaching Europe from its citizens and jeopardizing the effectiveness of territorial investment.

### **Key priorities and perspectives of the ECR Group**

The ECR Group underlines the importance of maintaining Cohesion Policy funding as a standalone envelope, based on its current structure and mission. We oppose any attempt to consolidate Cohesion resources into a single, centralised fund under a national investment plan that merges various programme allocations. Such an approach risks weakening the territorial focus of Cohesion Policy and undermining the principle of interregional solidarity enshrined in the Treaties.

Furthermore, Cohesion Policy must not be subject to rigid conditionalities or top-down reform obligations. Should enabling conditions be envisaged, they must be

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defined and managed by Member States, respecting regional competencies and territorial diversity—in full alignment with the principle of subsidiarity.

The proposal to assign predefined national envelopes must not lead to decision-making centralisation or diminish the role of regional and local authorities.

A territorial allocation of resources must be safeguarded, ensuring a clear regional anchor and the meaningful participation of subnational actors in all phases, from strategic planning to execution.

The ECR Group believes that simplification remains a key priority—without compromising accountability or spending integrity. Efforts to reduce error rates should go hand in hand with reinforced administrative capacity and strong financial control. The growing number of irregularities—largely attributable to procedural complexity rather than fraud—cannot justify a reduction in Cohesion allocations. Simplification across all programme phases should be the long-term solution, addressing bureaucratic burdens that often hinder beneficiaries.

Given the fundamentally changed geopolitical context, it is essential to take emerging priorities into account and ensure that Cohesion Policy remains flexible and responsive to structural and strategic challenges affecting EU regions.

### **Supporting rural areas**

Rural areas face increasing vulnerability due to ageing populations, youth outmigration, limited services and restricted employment and social opportunities. These territories require targeted and prioritised support. Cohesion Policy must promote a sustainable future for rural regions through tailored investments in essential services, economic and job opportunities, physical and digital infrastructure.

Commission and Member States must facilitate dedicated funding and tailored support for social economy initiatives, and promote rural SMEs, which act as key drivers of local development and innovation.

### **Resource management and environmental resilience**

Rural development programmes should place a strategic focus on the management of water resources, while strengthening environmental resilience and preparedness against natural and climate-induced disasters, through effective preventive measures and smart technologies. Those actions are essential to ensuring food security, quality of life and environmental protection in rural and vulnerable territories.

## **Empowering youth and combating rural exodus**

The ECR Group recognises the essential role of young people in reversing demographic decline and curbing rural depopulation.

We recommend the effective implementation of the “Right to Stay” principle, which entails creating favourable conditions for youth to stay and invest locally, including training and employment opportunities, access to credit and land, support for youth entrepreneurship, improved digital connectivity and public services.

## **Simplification and support for women and families**

The ECR Group strongly advocates for streamlining regulatory procedures to facilitate access to funding and accelerate payments, avoiding delays and implementation bottlenecks. Cohesion Policy is built on a performance-based architecture, with horizontal and thematic enabling conditions, including reform pathways. We firmly oppose any framework that limits operational flexibility or deviates from Treaty objectives and the real needs of local and regional communities.

We also call for greater inclusion of women and families in territorial development and local economic initiatives, acknowledging their essential role in social cohesion and the productive vitality of rural communities.

## **Tackling territorial disparities and smart reforms**

The ECR Group restates its commitment to addressing territorial disparities, with particular attention to the least developed regions and those facing deep-rooted structural challenges. Any reform of Cohesion Policy must fully respect the principles of flexibility and subsidiarity, adapting to the development levels, administrative capacities and local priorities of each Member State and region through a tailor-made approach.

Cohesion Policy must remain a core instrument of the EU to counterbalance the impact of internal market dynamics and EU regulation on disadvantaged territories.

## **Supporting strategic, long-term investments**

Cohesion Policy should foster responsible and durable investments able to enhance competitiveness, innovation, employment and social cohesion.

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These investments must be aligned with the real needs of disadvantaged areas, contributing to the balanced development of the European Union.

### **Conclusions**

The ECR Group calls on the European Commission and European Parliament to preserve and strengthen Cohesion Policy in the next programming period, ensuring it remains robust, territorially rooted and fit to respond to the real needs of local communities—particularly in rural areas, which represent a vital part of Europe’s socio-economic fabric. This must be achieved through the active involvement of regional authorities, the true engine of european cohesion.

Only through an approach rooted in territorial solidarity, genuine multilevel partnership, and tangible support for the most vulnerable segments of the population can we build a cohesive, responsible, and prosperous future—worthy of the challenges faced by a Europe that seeks to grow without leaving anyone behind.

In this regard, the ECR Group opposes the establishment of a single, centralised and conditional fund. Such a proposal would jeopardise the identity and effectiveness of Cohesion Policy, distancing it from its original mandate and territorial foundations.