

JOINT LETTER OF EUROPEAN REGIONS ON THE FUTURE OF COHESION POLICY

Mr Raffaele FITTO, Executive Vice-President for Cohesion and Reforms
200 Rue de la Loi, 1049, Brussels

In copy to:

Mr Piotr SERAFIN, Commissioner for Budget, Anti-Fraud and Public Administration
Ms Roxana MÎNZATU, Executive Vice-President for People, Skills and Preparedness

Bordeaux, 30 April 2025

Dear Vice-President Fitto,

Following our fruitful exchange on the 28th of January, and in view of our next meeting with you, as representatives of 130 regions of Europe from 16 Member States, we would like to send you some elements that we consider very relevant for the upcoming proposals and negotiations on the future of cohesion policy.

We will also submit these elements to the public consultation on EU's long-term budget (MFF): Implementing EU funding with the Member States.

We want cohesion policy to remain a truly European policy, respecting its core principles, however we are concerned that the future policy may be renationalised, both in terms of governance and content.

We welcome the mid-term review and the simplifications proposed aligning cohesion policy with emerging EU priorities. We believe that housing, water resilience, energy already contribute to cohesion and may be further enhanced.

Our main demands and proposals are the following:

PRINCIPLES AND GOVERNANCE

- Cover all EU regions focusing on bridging development disparities between and within them, preventing them from falling into development traps;
- Respect the core principles of cohesion policy: multilevel governance and partnership, subsidiarity and shared management, people- and place-based approach;
- Ensure a direct negotiation of cohesion programmes between the regions and the European Commission to develop regional programmes, in the respect of the current division of competences and coordination system between the different levels of government in each Member State;
- Establish a specific European regulation for cohesion policy, as a framework of common rules and indicators. This will enable the European Commission to continue to evaluate, monitor and compare the interventions of cohesion policy in different countries and to ensure its visibility, success and efficiency;
- Enable automatic roll-over of implementation arrangements and automatic recognition of the current programme authorities (managing and audit authorities, accounting body) and intermediate bodies for the future programming period;
- Demand that the possible introduction of a performance-based approach, relying on milestones and targets with payments not related to costs, be preceded by a positive outcome of a comprehensive review (including the evaluations and audits conducted by the European Court of Auditors), to ensure that it will contribute to enhancing actual impact. Moreover, the introduction of a performance-based system can only be envisaged if it simplifies the management, monitoring, controls and audits of funds and if it respects the proportionality of controls, audit

and financial corrections as well as the single audit principle. Furthermore, a performance-based approach should not become an obstacle to competitiveness and innovation. It should remain possible to experiment with highly innovative projects, even if the desired result is not guaranteed beforehand;

- Preserve the objective of a Europe close to citizens implemented through integrated territorial strategies designed in close cooperation with local authorities, across urban agenda and in rural areas;

FUNDING AND FLEXIBILITY

- Guarantee robust, predictable and self-standing funding and a long-term perspective for cohesion, which is a structural policy;
- Maintain the definition at European level of indicative regional allocations of funds to avoid only national allocations like in the Resilience and Recovery Facility model, which would require possibly difficult negotiations between national and regional levels. Moreover, it ensures a stronger political control over EU resources and a regional perspective, allowing to avoid risks of EU funds being driven and decided at a Member State level, according to national priorities;
- Ensure the possibility to have regional payment claims to the Commission in order to allow for adequate financial management of programmes;
- Cohesion policy is not a crisis instrument but the regions should be granted the ability to optimally respond to external shocks thanks to flexible and rapid procedures for modifying the programmes. However, the regions could decide to create a voluntary flexibility allocation. The creation of several funds that, directly or indirectly, have been related to cohesion in recent years leads to an overlap of priorities and implementation mechanisms that can hinder Cohesion Policy objectives. In order to avoid these overlaps and administrative burden, the budget of cohesion policy should be reinforced in order to be able to tackle emerging priorities.
- Introduce a new compensation mechanism for areas located at the EU external borders, which will comprehensively address their specific challenges in order to significantly improve their potential, economic attractiveness, competitiveness and security.

COHERENCE AMONG POLICIES

- Incorporate a territorial dimension in the design and implementation of other EU policies and actions;
- Underline that cohesion and competitiveness are interconnected. Regional Smart Specialisation Strategies (S3), S3 partnerships and instruments like Regional Innovation Valleys (RIVs) and Interregional Innovation Investments (I3) consolidate regional innovation ecosystems that represent the backbone of EU competitiveness and resilience. S3 strategies should provide a flexible and adaptable framework for the implementation of EU priorities combining EU direct and indirect management, national, and regional funding opportunities.
- Manage rural development fund at regional level to ensure a direct negotiation between the regions and the European Commission as in the 2014-2020 period.

EUROPEAN TERRITORIAL COOPERATION

- Extend European Territorial Cooperation after 2027 with simplified implementation rules across the different strands. European Territorial Cooperation funding is associated with a particularly high European added value. Funding tied to national, domestic reform objectives would not do justice to the objectives of Interreg's partnership and subsidiary approach.

AN INCENTIVE FRAMEWORK TO FACILITATE REFORMS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO COHESION POLICY AND FLEXIBILITY

- Modernise the European Semester if the link with cohesion policy is strengthened, by reinforcing the subnational dimension of country reports, by integrating the European Semester in a multiannual strategic approach and by involving regions in the drafting of country reports and country-specific recommendations. In the absence of these conditions, we ask to build upon the enabling conditions approach by adopting a positive/incentivising approach rather than a punitive one. The regions reject the idea of linking the disbursement of funds to the fulfilment of centrally defined reform targets, all the more so if reform targets are not within the responsibility of the regions.

TIMING

- Request a timely proposal and adoption of future regulations (at least six months before the start of the programming period) to avoid a delayed start of programming.

As regions, we are committed to develop programmes in close partnership with regional stakeholders. Regions are also committed to prepare programmes that covers all the different priorities, answering European objectives while adapting to regional contexts.

We take this opportunity, to ask for a new meeting with a delegation of European Regions in the coming weeks, as you kindly suggested to do in your last letter.

EURegions4cohesion is an initiative launched in May 2024 by the Nouvelle-Aquitaine Region (France) and the Emilia-Romagna Region (Italy). The coalition's 130 regions come from Austria, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and The Netherlands. This coalition is also supported by the Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions (CPMR) and the European Regions Research and Innovation Network (ERRIN).

Ms. Marie-Pierre Mesplède from the regional office of Nouvelle-Aquitaine acts as Point of Contact for this joint initiative (bureau-bruxelles@nouvelle-aquitaine.fr) and I would be most grateful if your office can liaise with her to confirm the details.

Thank you for your attention, and we look forward to your positive response.

Sincerely,



Alain Rousset

The president of the Nouvelle-Aquitaine region



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Rhône-Alpes



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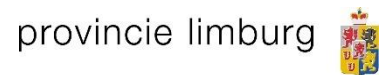
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