

Position
of the General Assembly of the Union of Regions of the Republic of Poland
on EU Cohesion Policy Post-2027
adopted on 28th November 2024

Considering that:

- a) for the past 20 years, the EU Cohesion Policy has served as a significant driver of positive socio-economic and institutional changes in Poland, providing key development funding.
- b) regions comprising the Union of Regions of the Republic of Poland have developed unique expertise and demonstrated their effectiveness as managing authorities for the EU Cohesion Policy programmes, while ensuring a bottom-up and partnership-driven approach to effectively identifying and maximizing potential opportunities and addressing the diverse needs, challenges, and goals of various territorial communities.
- c) through the active involvement of regional and local communities, the EU Cohesion Policy has fostered a sense of a shared European cultural and economic identity and has played a key role in countering euroscepticism and radicalisation.

Whereas:

- d) the proposals outlined in the Report of the High-Level Group on the Future of the EU Cohesion Policy, published in February 2024.
- e) the conclusions and recommendations from the European Commission's 9th Cohesion Report, published in March 2024.
- f) the proposals made by E. Letta report regarding the EU single market (April 2024), alongside the M. Draghi report on European competitiveness (September 2024).
- g) concerns about the centralization of the future EU budget have emerged, suggesting a potential shift away from the active participation of the Regions in the implementation of the EU Cohesion Policy.

As well as in the face of:

- h) territorially asymmetric shocks experienced in recent years across the EU as a result of multidimensional crises.
- i) dynamically changing global conditions.
- j) significant long-term challenges confronting the next generation of Europeans.
- k) historical necessity for the integration of Ukraine, Moldova, the Western Balkan countries, and Georgia with the EU.

we are once again involved in the discussion on the future shape of the EU Cohesion Policy.

We firmly believe that the EU Cohesion Policy should take on an even more pivotal role as both a catalyst and stabilizer for positive structural changes in each region. Its key objectives continue to be highly relevant today.

Consequently, we present the position of the Union of Regions of the Republic of Poland regarding the future direction of this policy.

I. The EU Cohesion Policy should fulfil its Treaty role more strongly than before.

This means that it should:

1. Serve as the EU's main investment policy and a central driving force behind its long-term development, providing the impetus for the structural transformation of the Regions and unleashing the energy and creativity of regional and local communities.
2. Focus on bridging excessive development disparities between and within the Regions, preventing them from falling into development traps, and overcoming negative trends in areas experiencing marginalization.
3. Tailor support to the diverse socio-economic profiles and unique characteristics of regional and local communities, thus supporting the optimal use of their strengths, talents, and potentials, as well as their diversity, which will enhance resilience and provide a competitive advantage for the EU as a whole in the long term.
4. Improve the Regions' ability to optimally respond to external shocks, while avoiding involvement in day-to-day crisis management.
5. Approach the challenges facing border areas, especially those peripheral ones, which are adjacent to the EU's 'impenetrable' external borders, such as with Russia or Belarus, with greater attention.
6. Have a budget adequate to meet the challenges of the EU's social, economic, and territorial cohesion. In the minimum option, this means meeting two conditions: a) maintaining the current share in the MFF structure; b) maintaining (in real terms) the size of the 2021-2027 allocation.
7. Provide a substantial additional financial envelope for the new Member States. This support will accelerate the convergence process of these countries, enhancing the EU's global economic position. It will also encourage introduction of significant reforms and strengthening of institutional capacities in these countries.
8. Take into account the scale and dynamics of inter-regional and intra-regional disparities when determining the volume and rules of financial support.
9. Strengthen the empowerment as well as institutional and financial capacity of regional and local authorities as key actors in development processes, integrating different bundles of public policies targeted at different communities and types of territories.
10. Introduce strong incentives for bottom-up, partnership-driven, supra-local, and integrated projects that comprehensively address the challenges and needs of various functional areas, involving their communities in decision-making processes and activating their specific potentials.

II. EU Cohesion Policy should directly target the Regions.

To this end, it is necessary to:

11. Direct support exclusively to all NUTS 2 through regional (decentralized countries) or national programmes with dedicated sections for each region (other countries).
12. Ensure that the Regions take a leading role in the preparation and implementation of the aforementioned programmes, which is essential for bringing the EU closer to the citizens and reinforcing values such as subsidiarity, decentralisation, and social engagement, while countering disintegration movements. Simultaneously, this approach will strengthen the role of regional and local authorities as key development actors in the EU, enabling them to address diverse territorial challenges, needs, potentials, and objectives in their actions.
13. Adopt a tailored approach – both at the national level and within the European Commission – to shaping the content and implementation of regional programmes, which will enhance the effectiveness of interventions and the dissemination of good management practices.
14. Promote thematic concentration – developed bottom up – without imposing rigid structures for resource allocation (removing top-down ring-fencing); ensure a broad range of support areas, allowing the Regions to define the scope of their programmes tailored to their specific circumstances and needs outlined in their strategies.

III. EU Cohesion Policy should have a clear thematic focus.

Key areas of intervention should be defined as follows:

15. Addressing negative climate change through a combination of investment, regulatory, and educational measures, focusing on: 1) water management; 2) green energy, energy security, and the development of energy communities; 3) reducing energy intensity, emissions, and waste across all sectors (including industry, construction, mobility, and agriculture); 4) enhancing environmental quality and biodiversity.
16. Mitigating the negative effects of demographic change (ageing, depopulation, talent outflow) through comprehensive measures to improve the living conditions of the elderly, economically active individuals, young people, and migrants – this requires, inter alia: modernizing technical and social infrastructure; enhancing the quality and availability of key public services (such as education, healthcare, labour market access, social integration, culture, and mobility); and revitalising of degraded areas.
17. Tackling exclusion in all its forms (social, health-related, professional, educational, transport, digital) while fostering an open and inclusive civil society characterized by creativity, cooperation, and highly skilled individuals.
18. Upgrading and improving the efficiency of, and increasing the security and resilience of critical infrastructure, with a focus on transport, energy, digital systems, and water resources.
19. Promoting economic transformation in its broad sense, for leveraging specific territorial resources and potentials, with a focus on:

- a. developing zero-emission, zero-waste, digitised, supply-secure, and diversified industries and services.
 - b. strengthening the SME sector to foster the creation of sustainable and high-quality jobs.
20. Introducing 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 settlement potential, economic attractiveness, and security (e.g. areas bordering with Ukraine).
21. Maintaining mechanisms, similar to the current Just Transition Fund, to support coal and carbon-intensive regions in rebuilding the foundations of their competitiveness, social stability, and environmental security.

IV. EU Cohesion Policy delivery mechanisms require a new approach.

To achieve this, it is essential to:

- 22. Adopt the legislative framework at the EU level by mid-2027 at the latest.
- 23. Incorporate 2nd pillar of the Common Agricultural Policy into the EU's Cohesion Policy to provide more diverse and better-coordinated structural support for rural areas, ensuring their mutually beneficial links with urban areas.
- 24. Create a single fund dedicated to all EU Cohesion Policy objectives across all EU Regions (NUTS 2), with contributions from existing funds, without requiring changes to the Treaty.
- 25. Ensure the relationship between the European Commission, national governments, and regional authorities is best practices in multi-level governance, cultivating a culture of equal dialogue and trust during programme development, negotiation, and implementation.
- 26. Develop a catalogue of indicators to illustrate the potential effects of interventions, while allowing the use of more relevant, tailor-made indicators within specific programmes.
- 27. Combine the payment system in programmes with the achievement of milestones and tangible results rather than expenditures incurred; replace the 'n+3 rule' with a strengthened monitoring system for payments and eliminate automatic penalties in this respect.
- 28. Hold management institutions accountable for implementing reforms, independent of national legislation, in the form of practical systemic solutions that positively impact the socio-economic conditions of the Regions.
- 29. Apply the same rules in the EU Cohesion Policy as in the other European policies under shared or direct management, including those concerning the eligibility of expenditures and state aid.
- 30. Grant the Regions greater decision-making powers in the day-to-day programme management, allow them to independently determine how and in what ways the objectives agreed in the programmes will be achieved, through:
 - a. reducing administrative burdens by adapting solutions from the pandemic period or those used under the Just Transition Fund (complex projects with a broad thematic scope).
 - b. expanding options to combine different forms of support.

- c. shifting away from a purely competitive approach to fund distribution in favour of bottom-up, regionally agreed (negotiated) bundles of projects.
 - d. developing grant schemes to simplify access to funding for small entities and to facilitate the implementation of standard projects.
 - e. enabling pilot and experimental projects where a high risk of failure will be acceptable.
31. Allow Regions to initiate "fast track" programme revisions independently and streamline the European Commission's approval process for other programme revisions so as to enhance the responsiveness to significant changes in the regional socio-economic environment.
 32. Introduce the option to appeal audit decisions to courts, ensure financial corrections are proportionate to the scale of irregularities identified and limit the impact of audit findings on the shape of ongoing programmes to prevent disruptions.

V. EU Cohesion Policy should significantly strengthen territorial instruments (TI).

To this end, it is necessary to:

33. Ensure a more flexible framework for TI by agreeing on their general principles and types during programme negotiations with the European Commission, while allowing managing authorities to determine the TI detailed implementation arrangements, including the thematic and territorial scope of support.
34. Adapt TI to the level of maturity of territorial partnerships, treating them as tools for building institutional capacity, particularly in areas with relatively low levels of cooperation but significant potential for growth.
35. Focus TI on high-quality and efficient activities that meet territorial strategy objectives; at the same time, introduce a variety of positive incentives, including financial ones, to encourage effective implementation rather than prioritizing rapid expenditure.

We are convinced that the active and strong involvement of regional and local communities in addressing the challenges facing the EU is essential to unlocking its positive energy.

We express our commitment to a long-term support programme for Regions of the new EU Member States, focused on enhancing their empowerment and improving the quality of their administrative capacities, particularly in the implementation of the EU Cohesion Policy.

**We are ready to collaborate
with all institutions, organizations, and bodies
dedicated to ensuring a high profile for the EU Cohesion Policy beyond 2027.**

Adam Struzik
(-)
Secretary of the General Assembly

of the Union of Regions
of the Republic of Poland

Olgiard Geblewicz
(-)
President of the General Assembly

of the Union of Regions
of the Republic of Poland