



## ORIGINAL PAPER

# Some considerations on the basic principles of the European Integration Process

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### Abstract:

This paper analyzes the basic principles of the European integration process, with a particular focus on the policy of economic, social and territorial cohesion, considered as the foundation of European solidarity. The main aim of the study is to explore the role of cohesion policy in the integration of the Member States of the European Union, highlighting its evolution and its impact on reducing economic and social disparities between regions and states. The objectives of the paper include analyzing the main stages of the implementation of this policy, identifying the challenges encountered, the reform strategies adopted and assessing the main results achieved.

The methodology of the study is based on the analysis of EU treaties, strategic documents and official reports on cohesion policy, complemented by the work of national and international researchers.

The results suggest that cohesion policy has been instrumental in supporting less developed regions and reducing economic and social disparities in the European Union. At the same time, the challenges related to the homogeneity and heterogeneity of the European Union, in particular in the regulatory and institutional dimensions, have influenced the effectiveness of the implementation of this policy.

**Keywords:** *cohesion policy, European solidarity, European integration, economic cohesion, regional disparities.*

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### **Introduction**

The European Union's cohesion policy, declared a strategic policy from the very beginning of the integration process, is a crucial instrument not only economically and socially, but also politically, as it is used to support the integration of Member States into the EU. The desire for economic and territorial cohesion, promoted since the creation of the European Communities in the 1950s, has become an important horizontal sectoral policy, and has been given increasing importance with each new Treaty and strategic programming documents adopted at European level. Economic, social and territorial cohesion has become a fundamental prerequisite for European solidarity, with the main objective being to reduce economic and social disparities between regions and between Member States so that all European citizens have access to equal opportunities and a comparable quality of life throughout the Union.

Cohesion policy is the best illustration of the principle of European solidarity, with most of the funds in the budget going to the EU's less developed countries and regions

### **Economic, social and territorial cohesion - key prerequisite for European solidarity**

Economic, social and territorial cohesion has from the outset been a strategic goal of the whole process of European integration and has been placed at the heart of almost all European policies and funding programs. This strategic goal has been based on the need for European decision-makers to reduce economic and social disparities between regions and Member States, so that all European citizens can benefit equally from opportunities and the quality of life is comparable across the Union. One of the most sustainable ways of operationalizing the principle of solidarity at European level is reflected in the EU's efforts to promote economic, social and territorial cohesion.

Bringing together countries with quite different histories, economic performance, social and cultural characteristics under the same common features has been the greatest challenge for national and EU decision-makers in the various subperiods after World War II. However, the regional consortium has survived the test of time and has successfully addressed the complex challenges that have threatened its stability, ranging from economic, financial and or related crises with the challenges of migration flows, to separatist movements and, recently, to health pandemics (Holobiuc, Miron, 2022, p.1). Throughout the process of European economic integration, the concept of cohesion has evolved substantially, gradually adding its economic, social and territorial dimensions. There is no explicit reference to regional policy in the Treaty of Rome, preferring formulations that committed to strengthening the unity of Member States' economies and reducing development disparities between regions. The initial concerns of the decision-makers in the countries participating in the integration experiment focused on securing the foundations for deeper integration by establishing, first a customs union and then a single market, free movement of goods, services, capital and labor, all of which were essential conditions for the future economic union.

An early reference point for the development of the concept of economic cohesion was the adoption in 1987 of the Single European Act, which expressly referred to the desire to achieve a higher level of convergence between the economies of the Member States. The issue of economic cohesion was further structured in regulatory terms in the Maastricht Treaty, which contains an entire chapter on cohesion.

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These documents formally introduced economic and social cohesion, highlighting the importance of gradually reducing the development asymmetries between regions and contributing to the awareness of the need for a balanced development of the entire EU area.

The Treaty of Lisbon, adopted in 2007 and in force since 2009, reinforced this development, emphasizing the need to promote economic, social and territorial cohesion and highlighting the important role of regional development policy and the Structural and Cohesion Funds. These funds are an essential instrument in the efforts to reduce economic and social disparities between regions and to promote sustainable and balanced development within the European Union. In this context, regional policy has become a key element of the EU strategy, the central objective of which is to reduce existing asymmetries in development while promoting a new cohesion scheme between regions. As is clear from the literature review (Miron, Holobiuc, 2020, p.96), achieving an adequate level of economic, social and territorial convergence has been consolidated as a strategic objective for decision-makers, both in the Member States and at EU level.

Economic, social and territorial cohesion policy as a whole comprises a kaleidoscope of actions that all interest groups in the European Union need to undertake in order to achieve harmonious and balanced economic development. Cohesion policy has established itself as the European Union's most complex and important horizontal policy, a fact which is also reflected in its main objective of reducing economic and social disparities between the regions of the Community. Sustainable development and equal opportunities are other objectives promoted by cohesion policy, which, together with the reduction of disparities, can help to reduce income disparities and increase the benefits for the EU economy as a whole, by acting in areas such as transport, the SME sector, urban development, vocational training, environmental protection and, last but not least, education.

Cohesion policy, as enshrined in its strategic axes, must be addressed to all regions and cities in the EU area and be implemented in close complementarity with other EU sectoral policies, because it can have a particularly strong impact in many areas of activity, such as education, employment, energy, environment, single markets, research and innovation. Several studies have shown that cohesion policy resources generate a net economic advantage in all these areas.

In the literature (Pîrvu et al., 2011, p. 146), cohesion policy is presented as a "reference to a policy framework designed to contribute to increased solidarity at European level" and participating in "the development of hundreds of projects supported across Europe by two structural funds, the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the European Social Fund (ESF), as well as the Cohesion Fund". These funds, together with the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) and the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF), make up the European Structural and Investment Funds. The analysis of these integrative realities shows that there is a close link between regional policy and cohesion policy, with the support of the Structural Funds providing them with the financial support for their implementation (Dornean, 2016, p. 56-74). Under these circumstances, as some specialists emphasize (Drăgan G., 2003, p. 8), cohesion policy is composed of regional policy (with the main aims of reducing territorial disparities by regenerating declining industrial areas and providing assistance for rural development), some components of social policy, but also part of the common agricultural policy (aimed at providing assistance for rural development).

The strategic objective of cohesion policy is what is now called 'convergence'. To this end, NUTS2 regions receive support, with eligibility and assessment criteria defined mainly on the basis of GDP per capita and unemployment rates.

The implementation of cohesion policy is based on a very rigorous strategic planning process and the definition of a concrete programming and partnership framework. As it is a policy to which a large volume of Community budget resources is allocated and to which multiple, often conflicting, interests are actively positioned, a broad system of interlinkages at all levels of Community decision-making has gradually been created to operationalize it.

The responsibility of European decision-makers for macroeconomic stability and the well-being of citizens is one that must also be shared with the Member States. The only European forum that does not subscribe to the logic of the democratic deficit that the entity suffers from, the European Parliament also emphasizes that the European Union works for social equality, develops social security and seeks to prevent social exclusion and discrimination (European Parliament, 2017). The analysis of the activities carried out by the grouping's governance bodies shows that they are all working in aggregate to ensure that the core values of Europeanism are reflected in European and national legislation and are not ignored. As has been amply demonstrated so far, this horizontal policy promotes economic, social and territorial cohesion in the EU (Article 174 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union). Both the Member States and the EU are obliged to design and implement their economic policies in a way that is conducive to achieving the objectives of cohesion policy.

#### **Analysis of the main steps in the implementation of cohesion policy: components, challenges, reform strategies, main results achieved**

All regions and localities in the European Union (EU) should benefit from the advantages of implementing cohesion policy, not least because it aims to promote the competitiveness of enterprises, support the creation of new jobs, sustainable economic growth and improve the quality of life of citizens. Throughout the process of European integration, this policy has changed considerably, with several reforms, the most important of which were carried out in 1988 and 2006, during which the budget was transferred to the Member States, procedures were simplified, the number of beneficiaries increased and *ex ante* and *ex post* conditionality was introduced in the process of allocating resources. In addition, cohesion policy is now interlinked with the most important other EU sectoral policies and supports a multitude of actions and objectives set out in broad strategic documents. This policy is relevant not only from an economic and social perspective, but also from a political angle, as it has been used as a means to broaden support for the integration of countries into the EU.

The first reference to the desire for economic cohesion can be found in the preamble of the *Treaty of Rome* (1957), the leaders of the founding Member States sending a message that one of the basic objectives of the European Economic Community was "*to strengthen regional unity and ensure harmonious development*" (Holobiuc, Miron, 2022, p.3).

The Treaty of Rome did not lay the foundations for a truly comprehensive and structured cohesion policy. Although the treaty allowed the operationalization of three key instruments, their purpose was limited to tackling regional imbalances without creating a coherent cohesion policy. The first instrument was the European Investment Bank (EIB), which provided loans and guarantees to finance development projects in poor and

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restructuring regions. The second instrument was the European Social Fund (ESF), set up to help manage the social effects of the customs union, with the aim of improving labor market mobility through education and retraining in regions in industrial decline. The third instrument, the "Guidance" section of the European Agricultural Guidance and Guarantee Fund (EAGGF), supported underdeveloped rural areas through measures to modernize agriculture and rural development.

In the 1970s, cohesion policy became a priority on the agenda of the European Community, in particular because of the oil crisis and the impact of the accession of Denmark, the United Kingdom and Ireland in 1973, which increased regional disparities. Thus, in 1973, the European Commission began to set up the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the aim of which was to promote industry and infrastructure in disadvantaged regions. The Fund was formally established in 1975, but initially did not have a significant impact because of the national quota approach, which limited the allocation of funds to the poorest regions.

The 1988 reform was a crucial moment, given the expansion of the Community through the integration of Spain and Portugal in 1986. It contributed to a considerable increase in resources for less developed regions, doubling Structural Funds commitments by 1993 to 30.7% of the total EU budget. The reform introduced four key principles: concentrating assistance on the most disadvantaged regions, supporting multi-annual programs, complementing European funds with national contributions and involving national and sub-national authorities in project implementation. Community Initiatives have also been created, addressing issues such as the economic conversion of mining areas, environmental protection and stimulating technological innovation, reflecting a more integrated cohesion policy with a political component.

In 1993, the Maastricht Treaty strengthened cohesion policy, emphasizing its central role in reducing economic and social disparities between European regions. The treaty introduced the Cohesion Fund for countries with a per capita gross national income below 90% of the EU average. This measure was essential to support countries facing major economic difficulties and at risk of remaining excluded from the process of monetary integration.

The 2007 reform was a milestone in the context of the enlargement of the European Union and the structural changes brought about by the Lisbon Treaty. It brought together two camps of Member States: those supporting increased spending on cohesion policy and those opposing a significant increase in their financial contributions. The reform also underlined the importance of cohesion policy as an essential instrument for the harmonious development of the EU, stipulating in Article 174 TFEU that it should support the promotion of balanced regional development and the effective integration of new members.

The 2008 economic crisis had a devastating impact on many European economies, particularly in southern Europe. Austerity measures were often at odds with the need for European solidarity, and cohesion policy was used to mobilize additional resources and support struggling economies. The European Commission has adopted measures to increase flexibility, support regions in crisis by increasing cash flow and simplify state aid rules, targeting smart investments through cohesion policy. These measures have been essential to support the regions hardest hit by the recession and to strengthen struggling economies.

In March 2010, the European Council adopted Europe 2020, a document setting out a ten-year strategy to promote employment and growth in the EU. This strategy set

five headline targets for the EU up to 2020: employment, research and development, climate and energy, education and social inclusion, and poverty reduction. Member states' reactions have varied. Some countries, less affected by the economic crisis, supported cuts in cohesion policy spending, while others were critical of this approach. Thus the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) were introduced, including the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund, the Cohesion Fund, the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development and the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund. These funds have been targeted on 11 objectives linked to the Europe 2020 priorities.

- Focus on strategic investment priorities such as innovation, supporting small businesses, digital technologies and the transition to a low-carbon economy.
- A tailored approach to regional development, with investment in all EU regions and their classification into less developed, transition and developed regions in order to distribute funds fairly.
- Simplifying the rules and making the framework more flexible to implement cohesion policy more effectively.

It can be noted that, at EU level, the need for coordination, standardization and simplification of cohesion policy is a frequently discussed topic, and new ways of making this policy more efficient are constantly being sought.

#### **Homogeneity and heterogeneity at EU level. Regulatory, institutional, operational dimensions**

We can appreciate that one of the most relevant definitions of the term region is the one given by the Council of Europe, which perceives it as "a geographically determinable interval of average size which is considered homogeneous" (Iftimoaie, et. al 2003, p. 55).

For Klaus Roth, the concept of "region" is characterized by both homogeneity and heterogeneity, and a number of specific criteria are used to define it as completely as possible (Roth, 2007, p. 21). Some of the authors (Băhnăreanu, Sarcinschi, 2012, pp. 9-10) have structured these criteria into two categories that they consider relevant - the objective (including factors, elements and functions among which the type of political unit, natural morphology, history, economy, infrastructure, religion, language, ethnicity, etc.) and the subjective (among which those related to aspects of everyday life and social interactions).

In order to achieve the goal of high homogeneity, it has become imperative that the existing disparities between the component regions in Europe be reduced as much as possible. To this end, the less developed regions must be supported to progress faster so that the process of homogenization becomes possible. Because regions are the result of the social, economic and cultural diversity existing in society, the European integrative architecture cannot function effectively if it does not give due importance to the proper management of diversity at both strategic and operational levels. At European Union level there are elements that unite the citizens of the grouping, but there are also elements that differentiate between them. Thus, we believe that the main aspects that unite Europeans are: the determination to participate in the integration of the single market, an increasing degree of homogeneity of economies, symmetry in strategic goals and a single international institutional framework which, through variable geometry and multi-level governance, brings together national and Community decision-making structures. There are also elements that differentiate Europeans, and these are of various kinds (political, economic, social, social, cultural, behavioral, etc.).

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From a linguistic point of view, the EU is characterized by great diversity, multilingualism being not only an everyday reality but also a policy actively promoted by the European Union, which supports the translation of all regulations and documents adopted in all Member States' languages in order to facilitate communication between its citizens. However, this diversity can create barriers and at the same time reflect deep-rooted cultural differences. Looking at the religious dimension, EU citizens adhere to a wide range of faiths, with Christianity (Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox) predominating, but also Islam and Judaism. Religious tolerance and acceptance of religious diversity are deep-rooted principles, but the diversity of religious traditions continues to shape cultural practices and even national policies in various ways. Common European values, such as respect for human rights, the promotion of democracy and the rule of law, transparency and freedom of thought and action, while consistently promoted, must continue to be pursued with a strong concern that the motto 'united in diversity' is successfully lived out, so that each country or region can preserve its own traditions, manifested in arts, festivals and customs, which may differ significantly from one area to another. This cultural diversity is also reflected and celebrated through intercultural events of major international resonance, such as the European Capital of Culture at certain intervals.

European cohesion policy is defined as a set of regulations, institutions, actions or concrete measures at both national and supranational level to encourage transnational cooperation and policies. However, the ideological and structural differences between member countries' systems of government - from republics to monarchies - reflect the diversity in policy and legislative approaches. Finally, there are also areas of economic diversity, where important steps have been taken over the decades of integration, structured in the form of the ambitious projects to achieve a single market or economic and monetary union, which has had as its corollary the completion of the euro area. Despite this integration effort, economic disparities between European countries remain evident, with some countries having highly developed economies while others still face significant economic challenges.

We appreciate that, despite substantial efforts to transfer as many powers as possible from national governments to common supranational bodies, some elements of differentiation are maintained and, in some cases even accentuated, fuelled by cultural heritages, religious backgrounds, linguistic differences and economic disparities that shape the diverse landscape of the continent. This duality between unity and diversity is undoubtedly a source of challenges, but it is also a valuable driver for innovation and cultural progress in Europe. Cohesion policy has to be shaped and implemented taking into account the very different local contexts and the very heterogeneous regional economic and social developments. Even though cohesion policy has an almost unified regulatory framework, the different national and regional circumstances need to be carefully taken into account in its operationalization. To this end, institutional arrangements need to be carefully designed and joint programmes need to include measures and instruments that allow for sensitive harmonization of national, regional and local plans.

Cohesion policy at EU level has gradually become a fundamental pillar of European integration, supported by several basic anchors: regulatory, institutional and operational. Success in this plan depends fundamentally on the correct identification and understanding of the challenges facing the grouping. This requires the constant adjustment of the institutional landscape of the European Union, the gradualization of the responsibilities of the various societal actors, the congruent consideration of the deepening and widening

processes of integration, the international role of the EU as a global actor, and the adaptation of European institutions to the growing range of challenges and crises.

The process of European integration has evolved on several levels, the most important of which remain economic (the European Union as a market) and institutional (the European Union as a state actor). Institutional integration (sometimes also called political integration or positive integration) focuses on the allocation of some of the political powers to the supranational level in order to reduce the inefficiencies of transnational markets. The highest stage of institutional integration is the formation of a political union, in which all the basic attributes of national sovereignty are transferred to the supranational level (Gilbert, 2003). The process of economic integration at the European level has taken place within a regulatory and institutional framework that has been continuously supplemented over time. The regulatory dimension, made up of a complex regulatory framework, has a significant impact on the way cohesion policies are managed and implemented within the EU. For example, the Regulation on the operation of the European Regional Economic Development Fund (ERDF) sets precise criteria for the allocation and use of common financial resources in regions with specific needs, thus contributing to reducing economic and social disparities. By reinforcing and improving the regulatory dimension of cohesion policy, the European Union demonstrates its commitment to promoting economic and social cohesion, facilitating the harmonious and balanced integration of Member States into the aggregate economic machinery. Cohesion regulations and legislation are thus a fundamental pillar in building a united, cohesive and prosperous Europe. With regard to the institutional dimension of cohesion policy, the European institutions (the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union) are fundamental in the process of formulating, implementing and monitoring the specific actions of this horizontal policy.

### **Conclusions**

In conclusion, the research highlights the fundamental principles of the European integration process, emphasizing the importance of economic, social and territorial cohesion as an essential pillar of European solidarity. Cohesion policy is a key instrument in reducing disparities between regions of the European Union and promoting balanced and inclusive economic development. Economic and social cohesion has been, and remains, a vital prerequisite for ensuring the successful integration of the new Member States, but also for supporting the less developed regions of the Union.

As the process of integration has evolved, new challenges have arisen related to the homogeneity and heterogeneity of the European Union, both at institutional and operational level. These structural differences between Member States and regions of the Union have required the adoption of reform strategies and continuous adjustments of cohesion policy to respond to economic and social diversity. The analysis of the stages in the implementation of this policy has also highlighted its key components and the importance of constant adjustment to new economic and political realities.

Thus, a unified approach to economic and social cohesion has been shown to be essential for reducing asymmetries and strengthening solidarity within the European Union. At the same time, cohesion policies need to be constantly rethought to respond to new global and internal challenges. The effective implementation of these policies will not only improve economic conditions, but will also promote a stable and prosperous climate in which all regions and EU Member States can benefit from equal opportunities.



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Against this background, the overall conclusion is that European integration cannot be complete without effective cohesion, which reduces disparities and ensures balanced, sustainable and inclusive development across the Union. Thus, the fundamental principles of the European integration process continue to evolve and the successful implementation of cohesion policy remains essential for strengthening the unity and stability of the European Union in the long term.

### Authors' Contributions:

The authors contributed equally to this work.

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