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New Membership Perspectives in the Future of the European Union:

Enlargement and Cohesion Policies in the 2028-2034 MFF Proposals

Author **RAFFAELLA COLETTI**

Senior Researcher at CNR Issirfa

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Introduction

This paper aims to explore the future perspectives of enlargement as emerging from the proposals for the new Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) published in July 2025 and from the following negotiations among the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council and public debate on the topic. The aim is to contextualise the enlargement - with the new gradual integration approach and the expansion to the Eastern Trio countries - in the wider future perspectives of the European Union, and the transformations that it is facing.

The MFF is the main instrument for planning the future actions of the European Union. Despite the fact that the process of negotiations and approval is still ongoing and not all the aspects of implementation have been defined or clarified, the proposals of July 2025 and the state of the art in the negotiation allow us to shed light on emerging priorities and strategic investments, as well as on how the EU is equipping itself in the face of present and future challenges.

The chapter will focus on two main topics: enlargement policy and EU cohesion policy. Even if enlargement countries are not included in cohesion policy yet (with the notable exception of the European Territorial Cooperation component), cohesion policy represents a crucial policy in an enlargement perspective for different reasons.

First, cohesion policy represents the main investment policy of the EU aimed at reducing disparities; in the case of effective accession, it would be the main European financial instrument for the economic development of the Western Balkan countries and for compensating the consequences of accession to the Single Market. Consequently, the evolution of cohesion policy is of utter importance in the enlargement perspective.

Second, particularly some think tanks in the Balkan region propose an early access to cohesion policy for the enlargement countries (Zeneli S. 2025); discussions are open on different forms of gradual accession (Tuhina, 2026; Subotic 2024; Mihajlovic et al 2023). The request for a phased, merit-based access to the cohesion policy fund from enlargement countries was also included in the appeal presented by NGOs from the Western Balkans after the MFF proposals of July 2025 and further discussed in section 4 of this chapter. Consequently, it is relevant to understand how the new cohesion policy will work, based on the proposals of the European Commission.

Third, preparedness for the management of regional and cohesion policy is not only included as one of the negotiation chapters (chapter 22), but, being mainly managed at the subnational scale, it has been the objective of several projects and know-how exchange with Western Balkan countries, including many examples promoted or participated by Italian partners (see, for example, Coletti et al. 2025). A change in the mechanisms and governance, as the one included in the proposals for the next MFF and discussed in section 5 of this chapter, could significantly affect the future.

Finally, most of the Western Balkan partner countries are already included in the European Territorial Cooperation component, participating in cross-border and transnational Interreg programmes with Member States. These programs not only offer the opportunity for local communities and stakeholders to cooperate and experiment with innovative solutions, but they also represent an important ground for the management of the funds and for contributing to Europeanization (Coletti and Chiodi 2025; Chiodi et al 2025); consequently, it is particularly relevant to take into account the evolution of Interreg programmes in a future perspective.

The chapter is structured as follows. In section 2, a brief framework on the current turbulent times and their impact on the European Union is presented. Section 3 includes a short introduction on the general framework and architecture of the proposed MFF 2028-2034. The chapter will then focus on two main topics: the provisions in terms of enlargement policy and the future of EU cohesion policy, respectively. Some conclusions will finally be drawn on what we can expect for enlargement and cohesion policy in the near future.

The European Union in a Shifting Geopolitical Landscape

The European Union is going through one of the most challenging periods in its history. The different crises of the last decade – or, the manifestation of a general polycrisis (Lawrence et al 2024), including geopolitical instability and war, economic crisis, health crisis, and environmental crisis - hardly hit on the EU territories, in many different ways. The backsliding of democracy in some EU countries has pushed the EU to search for new instruments to contrast such dynamics (Blauberger and Wonka 2025), but also increased its ambiguity and undermined its credibility on the so called “common values”. The loss of economic competitiveness,[1] in particular with respect to the US and China, has unveiled new challenges, threatening European wealth as well as long-lasting commitment towards convergence and recovery of lagging behind Regions. Crises have manifested in the return of nationalism and border controls, at external (Demirci et al 2025) as well as internal EU borders, challenging European territorial integration at different scales (Coletti 2024, 2025). The conflicts and wars raging in the Eastern Neighbourhood and the Middle East are undermining European stability and driving a dramatic resurgence in military spending, with a new war narrative that is diffusing; one that would have been unthinkable just a few years ago.

In this scenario, European institutions and Member States are, on the one hand, trying to preserve the integration process, by protecting some of the results already achieved also by innovating their implementing mechanisms; on the other hand, it is out of doubt that some of the elements that were considered so far as crucial in the EU integration are now under discussion, in the face of emerging priorities and fears. An example of this dynamic is offered by border governance: the continuous suspension of the Schengen agreements is a signal of the difficulties that the EU is facing, with direct effect on one of the symbols of integration; in this framework, the recent approval (in 2024) of a new Schengen Border Code is an attempt to offer a response and to preserve the integration process in an evolving context (Coletti, 2025).

1 See on this the Draghi Report (2025).

In terms of policies, some innovations have emerged in recent years with respect to previous frameworks, including enlargement and cohesion policy, that represent the focus of this chapter.

Enlargement is confirmed as a priority in the EU; in fact, the inclusion of Moldova, Georgia and in particular Ukraine in the enlargement perspectives has increased attention to the policy. The Russian invasion has accelerated the formalisation of their status as candidate or potential candidate countries, in a context that has changed significantly compared to the past course of enlargement. The policy is indeed now mainly conceived as a response to Russia's security threat to the EU (Bonomi and Rusconi 2023; Buras and Morina 2023) and is increasingly framed as a geopolitical imperative in a difficult balance with the traditional merit-based approach (Zeneli V. 2025). According to many observers, enlargement is still a relevant testing ground for the wider perspectives of European internal integration. In order to be sustainable, enlargement should also be accompanied by governance innovation, such as, for example, the introduction of qualified majority vote in more policy fields, including foreign policy (Jahier 2026).

The tension between continuity and new priorities, that it is possible to identify in the evolution of the enlargement process, is also affecting European Cohesion Policy, the main investment policy of the EU that occupies around 1/3 of the overall European budget. In this case, on paper, Cohesion policy is still central to the European project; however, the traditional aim of the policy – that is the reduction of disparities and inequalities - is jeopardised by the emergence of new priorities and emergencies: mainly, competitiveness and defence. The will to address those priorities is affecting the policy, as cohesion resources are increasingly used in the framework of the new European industrial policy (for example, to sustain the Strategic Technologies for Europe Platform STEP, as further discussed in section 5) or to support dual-use infrastructure (as we shall see in sections 3 and 5). Overall, these objectives also require a stronger role of Member States with respect to regional authorities, creating the space for recentralization dynamics in a policy that was traditionally considered as the cradle of European multilevel governance. This centralisation, according to many observers, is also influenced by the more centralised experience of Next Generation EU (Coletti and Filippetti, 2025b; 2026).

Overall, enlargement policy and cohesion policy appear both to be still crucial components of the European project. However, the main features of the two policies are changing in the new political and geopolitical context. The new MFF, despite its technical nature, can offer some elements to reflect on this dynamic and on future perspectives, as we shall see in the next pages.

MFF 2028-2034 Between Continuity and Emerging Priorities

The proposal for the Multiannual Financial Framework for the 2028-2034 programming period was officially launched in July 2025. For the first time, the financial proposal was paralleled by a number of drafted regulations for the different funds and instruments (in previous programming periods, regulations were proposed in a separate phase). A second set of sectoral proposals was presented in September 2025. All the materials are available on a website published in the various EU languages.[2]

2 The website is available at the following page: https://commission.europa.eu/topics/budget/eu-budget-2028-2034-explained_en

The proposal reflects the ambiguities and challenges that the EU is facing. On the one hand, the proposal is very ambitious in financial terms: around 2 trillion euros,[3] more than the previous programming period (the budget in that case reached 1,8 trillion including 1,07 of MFF 2021-2027 and the post-pandemic instrument of Next Generation EU). By proposing this relevant budget, the EU is sending a clear message of enduring commitment in the European integration process.

At the same time, as we shall see, the new budget is clearly influenced by new emerging needs, in particular defence and competitiveness and more generally the need to face a global instability, that affects the general structure and some of the provisions that are foreseen.

The proposals were anticipated by a preparatory document, "The road to the next multiannual financial framework" (European Commission, 2025a), published by the European Commission on 11 February 2025. The document outlines a series of strategic challenges for the future. Among those, the first issues mentioned are competitiveness, security and defence, and migration, followed by regional disparities, food security and nature protection, the fight against climate change, the focus on the global political and economic landscape, and the prospects for enlargement. The document seems to suggest a reorientation of priorities, particularly with the emergence of the new hot topics of competitiveness and defence enlisted for first (Coletti and Filippetti, 2025 a). At the same time, the document includes the topics of regional disparities and enlargement among the EU main concerns.

The proposal of the new MFF includes four main headings and 16 programmes for the next programming period. Consequently, the proposal reduces spending headings from 7 to 4, and programs from 52 to 16, with respect to the current programming period, consolidating many programmes in broader envelopes, in an effort of simplification. The four headings correspond to the main sectors of EU intervention, and they are summarized in the following table.

Table 1: Headings of the New MFF Proposal

	I Pillar	II Pillar	III Pillar	IV Pillar
Themes	Economic, Social and Territorial Cohesion, Agriculture, Rural and Maritime Prosperity and Security	Competitiveness, Prosperity and Security (including the innovation fund)	Global Europe	European public administration
Overall resources (in Euros)	1062 billion	580 billion	215 billion	117 billion

3 €1.8 trillion to finance all planned EU programmes, that arrive to €2 trillion when debt repayments from the pandemic period are included.

More specifically, Pillar I includes cohesion policy, agricultural policy, European Territorial Cooperation - Interreg, EU facility – Union actions (including the Solidarity fund and HOME Thematic facilities), migration, Frontex ed Europol, and resources for the refund of Next Generation EU loans (168 billion). Pillar II includes the European fund for competitiveness, Innovation Fund, Horizon Europe (with a doubled budget with respect the current programming period), resources for defence and space, Erasmus+, AgoraEU (that will merge previous Creative Europe and Citizens Equality Rights and Values - CERV programmes); Connecting Europe Facility (CEF), Single Market Programme; Euratom. Pillar III, Global Europe, includes resources for the Global Europe instrument and the funds for the Common Foreign and Security Policy. Pillar IV, finally, is dedicated to European Public administration. These pillars are complemented by the instrument "Catalyst Europe", that will offer loans for pursuing European priorities and objectives. A further instrument should be established as a crisis mechanism, with a budget of 400 billions; and 100 billions has been proposed for Ukraine, in support to the reconstruction and the European accession path.

The European Commission indicates the priorities to be addressed by the new proposal in greater flexibility (to ensure the capacity to act and react fast, in light of unexpected circumstances) and simplification of the budget and funding opportunities. Moreover, the Commission confirms the intention to tailor the budget to local needs (a key element in previous programming periods, in particular in the EU cohesion policy), but recalls also the need to boost competitiveness, a crucial imperative for the EU (also based on the recently published Draghi report).

To sustain the budget, beyond the contributions from Member States, the Commission has introduced five new own instruments, that are expected to cover around 20% of the overall MFF:

- *EU Emissions Trading System (ETS)*
- *Carbon border adjustment mechanism (CBAM)*
- *An own resource based on non-collected e-waste* through the application of a uniform rate to the weight of non-collected e-waste.
- *A tobacco excise duty own resource*, based on the application of a rate on the Member State-specific minimum excise duty rate levied on tobacco products.
- *A Corporate Resource for Europe (CORE)*, amounting to an annual lump-sum contribution from companies, other than small and medium-sized companies, operating and selling in the EU with a net annual turnover of at least EUR 100 million.

Overall, these instruments are expected to generate around 58,5 billion Euro per year.

With respect to the priorities, both competitiveness and defence are confirmed as crucial topics to be addressed. The two are intertwined and are particularly addressed in the framework of Pillar II. In terms of competitiveness, beyond Horizon Europe (that will continue to support European research and innovation), the MFF proposal includes the creation of a "European Competitiveness Fund", aimed at investing in strategic technologies in four areas: clean transition and decarbonization; digital transition; health, biotech, agriculture and bioeconomy; defence and space.

Consequently, defence is included in the efforts for competitiveness, with 131 billion Euros allocated to support investments in defence, security and space, increasing the resources for the same aim in the previous programming period of around five times. Moreover, defence and military expenses are also included in other instruments. For instance, the military mobility strand within the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF)[4] will be multiplied tenfold, supporting dual-use infrastructure investments alongside civilian ones and contributing to a major boost for cybersecurity, infrastructure, and defence development overall. The Connecting Europe Facility will also provide financing to cross-border energy and transport projects to support energy security.

The new centrality attributed to competitiveness and defence is paralleled by confirmed investments in education and democratic values, also by confirming the mechanism of conditionality, linking access to certain funds to the respect of certain principles or to reform implementation. Also, a focus on the global scale and enlargement on the one hand, and on disparities and cohesion policy on the other hand, are confirmed; but with important innovations (particularly in the latter), that will be further discussed in the next sections.

Overall, the MFF proposal of July 2025 can be defined as in between continuity and emerging priorities. The proposal has officially launched the phase of consultations between EU institutions and Member States, over the overall amount of the budget and, crucially, over its distribution, that will result in the adoption of the budget and regulations. The negotiations are currently ongoing, deeply divided in particular over spending cuts, cohesion funds, and agricultural budgets.[5] Whereas a coalition of 16 nations (including Italy and Spain) has issued a joint declaration demanding more funding for regional cohesion and agriculture,[6] net-contributor countries (led by the Netherlands, Scandinavian nations, Austria, and Germany) are pushing back against the proposed budget size, arguing the framework is too expensive and that member contributions must be lowered. In this framework, the European Parliament is pushing for an even larger budget, seeking to implement new, independent "own resources" (like e-waste and tobacco taxes) to relieve the burden on national treasuries. Discussions are advancing under the Council, with the goal of reaching a political agreement by the end of 2026 to ensure the legislation is adopted in 2027;[7] in the meantime, the proposal with new figures is expected in June 2026.

4 The Connecting Europe Facility (CEF) supports the development of high performing, sustainable and efficiently interconnected trans-European networks in the fields of transport, energy and digital services. Further information are available at webpage: https://cinea.ec.europa.eu/programmes/connecting-europe-facility_en

5 For more information https://www.eunews.it/en/2026/04/24/the-european-council-faces-an-uphill-battle-over-the-budget-meloni-extremely-difficult-negotiations/

6 For more information https://www.eunews.it/en/2026/05/26/multiannual-budget-16-countries-including-italy-oppose-the-commission-and-call-for-more-funding-for-cohesion-and-agriculture/

7 For more information https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eu-long-term-budget/

The Future of Enlargement

The Proposals in the New MFF

In the current MFF proposal, Enlargement policy is included in the Global Europe Pillar (European Commission, 2025 b). This heading is composed of five geographic pillars and a global pillar, each of which includes a programmable and non-programmable component, for emergency challenges; indeed, flexibility emerges as a crucial concern, particularly in external cooperation, in times of evolving geopolitical scenarios.

The first geographic pillar is dedicated to Europe, Enlargement and Neighbourhood East and thus includes the resources for enlargement. The resources for this pillar are around 43,2 billion of the overall 200 billion allocation for the Global Europe heading. Moreover, as already mentioned, additional EUR 100 billion are dedicated to Ukraine, to be managed with a high degree of flexibility given the specific conditions of the Country since Russian aggression in 2022.

In the previous programming period, the Western Balkans region was planned to receive about €14 billion in grants through the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA III)[8] and additional six billion were made available for the 2024-2027 period from the New Growth Plan (NGP), with the Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans that has increased EU budgetary support for the six Balkan countries by 40% (European Commission, 2023). While IPA III provides mostly unconditional grants, the NGP offers conditional loans, grants, and guarantees tied to reform implementation (as in the case of the Next Generation EU in the European Union territory).

According to Enlargement Commissioner Marta Kos, the new allocation represents a 37% increase compared to the current framework, where 31 billions were devoted to enlargement and eastern countries.[9] However, it is not clear how much of the 43,2 billion will be dedicated to enlargement countries and specifically to Western Balkans. The European pillar will indeed encompass all current candidate and potential candidate countries— Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Iceland, Kosovo, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Türkiye and Ukraine—as well as the Neighbourhood East partners, Armenia and Azerbaijan, potentially independent civil society organisations and free media in Russia and Belarus[31] and other European countries as Andorra, Liechtenstein, Monaco, Norway, San Marino, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the Vatican City. Many observers note that it would be advisable to keep at least the same levels of support to the Western Balkans of the current programming period, while an increase in this amount would be an important signal for the enlargement.

Commissioner Kos also stressed the relevance of merit and conditionality in the distribution of the funds, suggesting that reforms will also be sustained by adopting them as pre-conditions for the disbursement of the funds, as in the current Growth Plan (Zeneli and Smolica, 2024).

8 For further information: https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/funding-technical-assistance/overview-instrument-pre-accession-assistance_en

9 See the news at the link: https://rtsh.al/rti/en/eu-enlargement-budget-grows-by-37-says-commissioner-kos/

This kind of mechanism could ensure a stronger alignment of the approach adopted in the enlargement funds with those of cohesion policy (which includes general and sectoral enabling conditions) and in Next Generation EU (where investments are linked to reforms).

Considering that the differences in the management of IPA III and cohesion policy limited the possibility for WB countries to acquire competences in the management of European funds, this approximation can be considered promising insofar as it could favour a better preparation of enlargement countries for joining the EU.

According to the EU factsheet (European Commission: Directorate-General for Budget 2025 a), the resources for enlargement will:

- “support the accession preparations through incentivising reforms and investments via policy-based financing;
- strengthening administrative capacity via targeted technical assistance;
- better respond to and prevent backsliding on the EU accession process, including through a ‘fundamentals first’ approach;
- strengthen alignment between external and internal policies and programmes to pursue EU strategic interests in all dimensions”.

The Regulation on the Global Europe instrument (European Commission 2025 b) will serve the enlargement, neighbourhood, international partnerships and humanitarian aid policies, claiming to maintain the specificities of each policy. Consequently, the proposal of the regulation explicitly builds on NDICI, IPA III, the Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans, Reform and Growth Facility for the Republic of Moldova and the Ukraine Facility.

In this context, enlargement is presented as a “strategic investment in peace, security, stability and prosperity in Europe”; allowing “the Union to be better positioned to address global challenges” and providing “increased economic and trade opportunities to the mutual benefit of the Union and the aspiring Member States”.

Moreover, the proposed regulation highlights that “The prospect of Union membership has a powerful transformative effect, embedding positive democratic, political, economic and societal change”, emphasizing the crucial role of reforms in the accession path. A specific article (and consequent resources) is dedicated to Ukraine, considering its peculiar situation.

Overall, the proposal is based on four main principles:

- simplification of the architecture of external heading;
- coherence of action;
- flexibility of the instrument;
- (increasing) impact of EU action.[10]

10 For an analysis of the proposals for enlargement, see also Baccini 2025.

The proposal was preceded by the mid-term evaluation of 2021-2027 instruments (European Commission, 2025 c). For what concerns IPA III, the instrument was considered effective and aligned with the new enlargement methodology (with the fundamentals of the EU accession process at the forefront). IPA III was considered fairly flexible and effective also in promoting socio-economic development and leveraging necessary investments under the Economic and Investment Plan; however, the balance between the performance assessment and the fair share principle had limited the financial reward to well-performing beneficiaries. Overall, the report highlighted the need to further accelerate socio-economic convergence, as well as the alignment with Union values, laws, rules, standards, policies and practices.

Finally, the proposals for the next MFF acknowledge that enlargements could take place during the 2028-2034 programming period, altering the geographical scope of the policy and, more generally, affecting the overall EU budget (with new Member States that would become eligible for a number of policies, including EU cohesion policy and agricultural policy). Flexibility mechanisms are explicitly introduced to address this scenario. However, despite uncertainty, the most common opinion is that most candidates will not be ready to join the Union during the next MFF, with Montenegro and, eventually, Albania, considered as the most probable exception.

Public Reception and Open Issues

Even if still in a negotiation phase, the proposals from the European Commission have been criticized in some of their aspects.

The main concern is related to the creation of a single budget line, that put together enlargement funds with resources for other aims and territories. As Federico Baccini puts it (2025), "Enlargement funds must now compete directly with other pressing priorities, such as humanitarian assistance, development aid, and climate action. Without ringfencing, enlargement allocations may be diluted during negotiations or diverted in response to crises. Global Europe, therefore, provides a stronger framework for coordination but does not in itself guarantee predictable resources for enlargement".

After the publication of the proposals, in October 2025, an appeal to the European Parliament and to the EU Member States was presented, signed by a coalition of 46 civil society organizations from the Western Balkans, Ukraine, and the Republic of Moldova, urging them to make enlargement a core strategic and budgetary priority in the 2028-2035 programming period.[11]

The appeal calls for the creation of a dedicated "Enlargement" budget envelope within the new MFF; proponents suggest that, in its current formulation, the MFF it is not clear about the budget allocated to the advancement in the accession path of candidate and potential candidate countries, and this threatens the achievement of the full membership.

11 More information are available here: https://europe-plus.com/46-civil-society-organisations-call-on-the-eu-to-embed-enlargement-in-the-next/

Among the provisions requested by the appeal, there is the creation of a dedicated budget envelope for Western Balkans, Republic of Moldova and Ukraine integration, including a "pre-accession transition" facility to bridge the gap between negotiations and membership, and, interestingly, a phased, merit-based access to structural and cohesion funds through a dedicated mechanism.

The proposal, moreover, includes the request to ensure that funding scales with performance and reforms, enabling phased and merit-based access to the single market and EU programmes, and ask to maintain an IPA IV with at least €30 billion in grants, merging the effective approaches used in the different instruments available for the 2021-2027 programming period (Ukraine Facility, the WB Reform and Growth Facility and the Moldova Facility).

Other observers question the overall amount of resources reserved for the enlargement in the next programming period, assessing the resources as insufficient for the challenges ahead; however, it will depend mostly on the distribution of the overall "Europe" envelope among the different candidates and potential candidate countries (Baccini, 2026). In particular, the proposals on the MFF do not address the crucial question of how old (Western Balkans) and new candidate countries (and in particular Ukraine) will be addressed by the enlargement policy. Moreover, a crucial point remains connected with the preparation of future Member States to manage European funds. Whereas the overall[37] amount of resources is a crucial factor for the preparation for enlargement, the absorption capacity of beneficiaries should also be taken into account, as a crucial component of a well-functioning management of the resources.

Finally, specific studies have been elaborated to be prepared to adapt the budget should enlargements take place during the 2028-2034 programming period (Rubio et al 2025). In this framework, cohesion policy is considered "safe" from important repercussions in case of enlargements, especially in light of the automatic capping rule (which limits cohesion funds to 2.5% of a country's national GDP). The main issue connected to EU cohesion policy would be the reduction of the average GDP, which is used as the main parameter for the distribution of cohesion resources. In this scenario, some European Regions (including Italian ones) would see their quota of European funds reduced (Darvas and Mejino-Lòpez, 2024). At the same time, some adjustments to the distribution criteria of resources are always possible, and hypotheses to limit the relevance of GDP are already under discussion

The Common Agricultural Policy is the one that would pose the major challenges. This applies, in particular, in the case of countries like Ukraine (Rubio 2024; Baccini 2026), given its size and the share of agricultural production. At the moment, there is no easy solution to this problem; however, this doesn't appear to be a pressing issue, given the small size of the "frontrunners" Montenegro and Albania that might be able to join the EU during the next programming period.

The Future of Cohesion Policy

The Proposals

The proposals published in July 2025 were anticipated by two crucial documents, which introduced the main changes and innovations to be expected (Coletti and Filippetti, 2025 a).

The first elements emerged in the already mentioned document "The Road to the Next Multiannual Financial Framework" (European Commission 2025 a). While confirming the issue of regional disparities as central, the document appears to suggest a reorientation of priorities, particularly with the emergence of new challenges such as competitiveness and defence.

A few months later, on 1 April 2025, the mid-term review of cohesion policy was published, aimed at realigning the policy strategy with the new socio-economic context. The review emphasised the evolution of the context and proposes the possibility, on a voluntary basis, of re-orienting funds towards emerging priorities already in the current programming period. More specifically, the Commission requested that the share of funds to be allocated to the Strategic Technologies for Europe Platform (STEP) be further increased compared to what has already been planned. The STEP, based on recommendations from the Draghi Report, is an initiative designed to strengthen the EU's ability to create and ramp up strategic technologies, making it more competitive globally, supporting sectors like artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, and clean energy. The STEP cannot count on additional resources and should be funded within existing instruments.[12]

In the mid-term review, the Commission also proposed extending the use of cohesion policy funds to support large enterprises in the case of investments in decarbonisation or common defence, so that they can contribute more to the new European industrial policy. The review also refers to the other emerging pillar of the European agenda, that is to say defence, with the Commission calling for a more effective use of funds and proposing that Member States reallocate part of their resources to projects supporting businesses (regardless of size) in the defence sector, or contribute to the construction of dual-use infrastructure to improve the mobility of armed forces in the EU.

The mid-term review also adds a 'social' component, proposing to reprogramme funds towards social housing, decarbonisation and funds for urban centres; it is worth noting that, although these issues are surely crucial for European territories, they are not specific to "lagging behind" Regions; as such, they do not specifically contribute to the "cohesion" objective.

The new MFF proposal introduces important changes in the architecture of the EU cohesion policy. First of all, similarly to enlargement, cohesion policy cannot count on a specific budget heading but is included in the same heading as agricultural policy, under Pillar I. What emerges is the consolidation of various funds (including those dedicated to the Common Agricultural Policy) into a single pool, along with greater flexibility to respond to potential emergencies and unexpected events.

12 For more information: https://strategic-technologies.europa.eu/index_en

Cohesion and agricultural policy will be planned within a new defined instrument, that of the National and Regional Partnership Plans, that will replace the current model of Cohesion Policy, where each European region has its own programming document (approved by the European Commission) and own resources, in the framework of the priorities of EU cohesion policy and of the partnership agreement between the Commission and each Member State.

National and Regional Partnership Plans will replace a number of policies; as such, their implementation will be based on different regulations; the proposals are available in the already mentioned EU budget website.[13]

According to the factsheets published together with the MFF proposals (European Commission: Directorate-General for Budget, 2025), the new strategy will have "economic, social and territorial cohesion, agricultural and fisheries policies and security at its core". The Plans aim to "foster convergence and reduce regional disparities, support a resilient, competitive and sustainable EU agricultural and fisheries sectors, invest in people and deliver on the European Pillar of Social rights, bolster security and protect our borders".

The Commission will establish a mandatory minimum amount for less developed Regions (based on the amount of the current programming period) and a minimum target for social objectives. Moreover, it confirms that support for farmers' income and for the fisheries policy will be preserved. The Commission, moreover, proposes to introduce an EU Facility to support Member States and Regions in case of crisis and unexpected circumstances, as well as to support Union actions in specific fields (including, for example, urban initiatives and social innovation).

The new model of National and Regional Partnership Plans pursues the simplification of the EU budget and the efficient use of available resources; it is also very much influenced by the experience of the Next-Generation EU, which determined a centralisation in the hands of the Member States of decision-making and management of European funds (Kölling M. and Hernàndez-Moreno 2023; Coletti and Filippetti 2026). Moreover, the proposals reflect the experience of the Next Gen EU in a number of other ways: they introduce a more results-oriented evaluation and a stronger link between investments and reforms.

Whereas previous programming periods included a strong orientation on specific priorities (concentration being one of the key principles of EU cohesion policy) and a distribution among EU Regions based on horizontal EU criteria, in the current model much higher degree of liberty is left to the Member States in terms of priorities, allocations, and governance models.

13 Specifically, the proposals on National and Regional Partnership plans will be based on regulations on: Common Agricultural Policy; Common Fisheries Policy, European Ocean Pact and the Union's maritime and aquaculture policy; European fund for economic, social and territorial cohesion, agriculture and rural, fisheries and maritime, prosperity and security; European fund for Regional development and cohesion fund; European social fund; School fruit, vegetables and milk scheme ("EU school scheme"); Union support for asylum, migration and integration; Union support for internal security; Union support for the Schengen area, for European integrated border management, and for the common policy on visa.

The central role of the Member States appears to be functional to the new priorities of the EU in the near future, namely the already mentioned competitiveness and defence, which, by their very nature, require a stronger centralised coordination. Regarding defence, moreover, it is worth mentioning that Member States and Regions can support, on a voluntary basis, defence-related projects, in the framework of their National and Regional Partnership Plans.

The Future of Interreg

Based on the negotiations on the future of Interreg (European Commission 2025 d), European Territorial Cooperation appears to be preserved from the important innovation foreseen for the rest of EU cohesion policy. Interreg programmes will indeed be decoupled from the above mentioned National and Regional Partnership Plans, and the European Commission has proposed a budget of around €10 billion for Interreg (slightly bigger than the 2021–2027 period).

The main novelty of the proposed regulation is that it provides for a single "Interreg Plan" instead of formally single programmes; the Plan will serve as a framework for all forms of European territorial cooperation—cross-border, transnational, interregional, and cooperation involving the outermost region.

However, the Interreg Plan will be organised into geographical chapters, each corresponding to a defined cooperation area with specific objectives, strategies, and governance, maintaining the current structure. Moreover, the Commission advocates for the geographical continuity of programs and management structures as well as the co-financing rate.
Consequently, existing programmes have started the programming activities for the future 2028-2034 period. Most of the programmes have activated public consultation processes, including online questionnaires for stakeholders and beneficiaries.

Based on the proposed regulation, in the case of Interreg programmes covering Member and non-Member States (as in the case of enlargement countries), the Global Europe Instrument will contribute to the programmes (in continuity with what happens in the current programming period with IPA III and NDICI).

Interreg will continue to offer a relevant source of experimentation for cross-border initiatives and for approximating the management of cohesion resources. Moreover, Interreg offers an important – yet not unique – source of funding for the European Macroregional Strategies, including, in the case of the Western Balkans, the European Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (Coletti and Chiodi 2025).

Public Reception and Open Issues

The proposals for the next programming period of European cohesion policy and agricultural policy, with the proposed National and Regional Partnership Plans, have drawn widespread criticism from various stakeholders.

Above all, the European Committee of the Regions has from the outset openly opposed the new model proposed by the Commission, emphasising that the new National and Regional Partnership Plans, with the consolidation of various funds and the central role assigned to Member States, risk, on the one hand, creating competition among Regions, local authorities, and other stakeholders for access to available resources; on the other hand, to marginalise the role of Regions and cities in the planning and implementation of cohesion policies.[14] The European Parliament has also levelled a great deal of criticism.[15]

Other voices, particularly in the Italian context, nevertheless point out that the greater leeway granted to Member States may not translate into actual centralisation, since, in practice, an implementation model very similar to the current one could be adopted.[16] However, there is no doubt that the proposals grant Member States greater discretion in this area.

Other criticisms of the proposal concern the issue of flexibility, which, while responding to the unpredictable demands of a constantly changing world, risks undermining the long-term outcomes of investments, as well as the emphasis on new emerging priorities, such as competitiveness and defence. Although the documents tend to present investments in these areas as potential drivers of development even for marginal Regions, the risk is that those Regions already best prepared to meet new challenges will be further advantaged, thereby increasing rather than reducing regional disparities.

Finally, a more general criticism concerns the very influence that the NEXT Generation EU model has had on the new formulation of cohesion policies: a model that was created to address different objectives (recovery and resilience, not economic, social, and territorial cohesion), is characterised by a clearly top-down structure, and whose effectiveness has not yet been adequately assessed.

In line with what discussed so far, a recent study on "Navigating the European Commission's MFF Proposal for 2028-2034" (Rubio and Alcidi, 2026) identifies several problems with the National and Regional Partnership Plans, including the following: (i) The Proposal is not underpinned by a clearly articulated intervention logic for promoting cohesion, assuming that ringfencing resources to less developed Regions and ensuring a balanced territorial distribution will automatically support cohesion; (ii) In the proposal, the role of regional and local authorities in planning and implementation is left largely to each Member State, which may decide whether to include territorial chapters. This points to a more centralised governance model with respect to the current one;

14 The President of the Commttee of the Region, Kata Tüttő, famously declared that the new model would force and "hunger games" competition for resources in the next programming period: https://www.cor.europa.eu/en/news/state-regions-and-cities-strong-and-decentralised-cohesion-policy-key-europes-resilience-and. See also the recent opinion on the MFF adopted unanimously by the Committee: https://www.cor.europa.eu/en/news/future-eu-budget-regions-and-cities-set-out-their-key-requests-reform-cohesion-policy

15 See https://www.akeuropa.eu/en/multiannual-financial-framework-2028-2034-eu-parliament-calls-higher-budget-and-greater

16 See for example https://lavoce.info/archives/108504/che-fine-fanno-le-politiche-di-coesione-nel-nuovo-bilancio-ue/ as well as the speech delivered by Commissioner Fitto at the European Parliament after the publication of the proposals https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_25_1873

(iii) The move towards more integrated programming offers opportunities to reduce overlaps between Common Agricultural Policy and Cohesion Policy, but it risks intensifying budgetary competition between the two; (iv) There is a fundamental tension between the European Competitiveness Fund and the National and Regional Partnership Plans: the first supports competitiveness by exploiting scale economies, while the second namely supports a territorially balanced development promoting convergence.

The report, at the same time, suggests some possible remedies. Some of the most relevant are the following:

- introduce mandatory territorial impact assessments (TIAs). The scope of those instruments is to acknowledge and assess the territorial dimension of interventions. If the TIA identifies important negative territorial consequences of certain interventions under National and Regional partnership Plans, Member States should justify the high net benefit of these interventions or should explain how they intend to mitigate these effects through complementary national policies;
- introduce a “regional check”, to verify the respect for the subsidiarity principle and the legal division of competences;
- clarify and protect the “right to stay”, or the protection and development of marginal territories;
- introduce region-specific milestones and targets for areas of exclusive regional competence;
- ensure that allocations for less developed Regions support cohesion-related interventions;
- support integrated local development strategies in rural areas;
- preserve and reinforce place-based innovation instruments, including interregional innovative investment projects and Smart Specialisation Strategies (S3).

These elements should be taken into account in the negotiation phase of the proposals.

Moreover, as negotiations continue, additional information emerges. A recent study produced by the European Parliament and analysed by Il Sole 24 Ore (Chiellino, 2026) paints a very worrying picture of the future of resources, with funding allocated to Member States in the next MFF that is expected to fall by an average of 8%, from €759 billion to €698 billion at constant prices. In absolute terms, Italy and Spain will be the most penalised countries. The problem is particularly evident in the framework of cohesion policy. Even in the best-case scenario (where all Member States allocate their entire flexible share to cohesion), regional policies would receive the same amount as in the current budget: €364 billion compared to €362 billion. In the opposite scenario, the cohesion budget would be almost halved, to €194 billion. The same applies to social policies, which in the 2021–27 budget are allocated to the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) with a budget of almost €96 billion, whereas in the next budget they will not have a dedicated fund but a ‘horizontal’ spending target ranging from a minimum of €31.8 billion to a maximum of €55.5 billion: 42% less in the best-case scenario.

At the same time, cohesion policy is increasingly perceived as an instrument to tackle territorial fragilities in times of emergencies, rather than a policy with a long term view for economic, social and territorial convergence. This results, for example, from the letter that Commissioner Raffaele Fitto sent in May 2026 to European ministers and regions, suggesting to use cohesion resources to tackle the high cost of energy.[17]

Moreover, rumours have begun to circulate about a possible reorganisation of the European Commission, involving the abolition of DG REGIO, which plays a central role and acts as a key interlocutor at various levels (including at sub-national level) in the implementation of cohesion policy.[18] At the same time, a public letter was published by a group of 26 countries (the Friends of Cohesion), including Italy and Spain, asking to preserve the resources for cohesion policy, common agricultural policy and common fisheries policy in the next programming period.[19]

Conclusions

The analysis presented in this chapter offers some preliminary elements on the future of the European Union budget, with a specific focus on enlargement policy and European cohesion policy.

Even if negotiations are still in place at the time of writing, and some of the provisions that have been discussed in the previous pages might ultimately change, the proposals from the European Commission offer an overview of the general EU strategy for the next programming period.
New pressing needs – above all, competitiveness and defence – have contributed to a reconfiguration of the European Union and its policies. The objective of enlargement is mainly framed in terms of geopolitical imperative, as functional to European security; the objective of cohesion has, to some extent, been subsumed under that of regional competitiveness, in a fusion of two objectives that are not always consistent or compatible. Furthermore, cohesion funding is at risk of being significantly reduced.

The new model foreseen in the National and Regional Partnership Plans marks a milestone in a gradual process of recentralization of EU cohesion policy that has been ongoing for several programming periods (Molica et al 2024). The recentralization is particularly relevant not only in terms of governance (where each Member States have traditionally adopted its own model), but mainly in terms of decision making, in the distribution of resources across territories and priorities. The centralisation appears to be functional to the abovementioned new objectives of competitiveness and defence, whereas a central responsibility is more suitable for the management of investments in those areas. At the same time, the model is clearly and extensively based on the experience of Next Generation EU, where the pressing deadlines for using the resources pushed for a more centralised and top-down model compared to the cohesion policy.

17 See https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/caro-energia-fitto-manda-lettera-regioni-ue-dirottare-fondi-coesione-Alpk2fPD

18 See: https://www.eunews.it/en/2026/05/13/eu-mulls-reform-of-the-directorate-general-for-regional-policy-with-fittos-backing/

19 The letter is available here https://vm.ee/en/news/joint-declaration-multiannual-financial-framework-2028-2034-friends-cohesion

The clearer performance orientation of both cohesion policy and enlargement policy for the future suggests possible greater similarities in the management of the funds, which would help enlargement countries to get prepared for the management of European resources. At the same time, it is very important for enlargement countries that cohesion policy maintains its crucial ambition to reduce disparities across the European territory, in order for them to take full advantage of European integration. From this point of view, even if enlargement and cohesion policy represent separate domains, each with its own logic, the two are intertwined in many different ways.

Indeed, both policies were included in the motion proposed in February 2026 for a European Parliament resolution on EU enlargement policy.

Among other things, the document clearly combines the merit-based nature of the enlargement process with new geopolitical imperatives. It emphasises the support for enlargement from 56% of European citizens according to the recent Eurobarometer, as well as the understanding of enlargement as a “key driver of long-term security, peace, stability and prosperity in Europe, based on shared democratic values” and the “merit-based” nature of the process. In parallel, it also recalls recent instability following Russia’s aggression of Ukraine, including the “dangerous” expansion of China’s influence, and frames enlargement as a “strategic response to the new geopolitical reality and an investment of the utmost importance for the EU’s security and stability” (1). The document “reiterates that accession must remain a merit-based and reversible process” and underscores that “there can be no shortcuts on EU values and fundamental principles” (8). Moreover, it highlights the importance for candidate countries to align with the CFSP.

At the same time, the document recalls the need to ensure “an effective functioning of an enlarged Union”, by preparing for the enlargement within and outside the EU (30), intervening on political mechanisms such as the Qualifying majority Vote, but also by safeguarding for an enlarged EU cohesion policy and the common agricultural policy, “that play a central role in promoting convergence among EU Member States” (35). The document also calls for an application of gradual integration (36).

These contributions to the debate undoubtedly provide valuable insights for the finalisation of the MFF, which will be adopted at the end of the negotiation phase – a process that is proving complex and whose outcome remains largely unpredictable at this stage.

20 https://www.eurparl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-10-2026-0016_EN.pdf

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Raffaella Coletti, PhD in Economic and Political Geography, is Senior Researcher (Prima ricercatrice) at the National Research Council of Italy, Institute for the Study of Regionalism, Federalism and Self-Government (CNR ISSIRFA). Her research interests include EU-focused cross-border policies and practices, disparities and territorial cohesion, regionalism and nationalist populism, neighbourhood and enlargement policies.

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www.balcanicaucaso.org | redazione@balcanicaucaso.org