

Multi-level Governance or Multi-level Meta-governance: Perspectives of the Post-2027 Cohesion Policy

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Abstract

The paper examines the perspectives of the European Union's cohesion policy post 2027 based on the theoretical framework of multi-level governance (MLG) and meta-governance, and the experience of the implementation of the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF). Its starting point is that the governance of the cohesion policy has gradually moved towards a more centralized and performance-based model of efficiency, which is even more pronounced in the operation of the RRF. However, an efficiency-based and performance-oriented development policy cannot do without the active participation of territorial, local, economic, and social actors in partnership. Based on an analysis of the international literature, EU documents and expert material, the paper argues that the effective implementation of the post-2007 cohesion policy requires a renewal of the MLG, which, based on the experience of the RRF, could be based on meta-governance and its sub-variants, in particular multispatial meta-governance (MMG).

CCS Concepts

• Law; • Sociology;

Keywords

multi-level governance, the cohesion policy, meta-governance, Recovery and Resilience Facility, multi-spatial meta-governance

ACM Reference Format:

Tamas Kaiser and Csaba Fasi. 2025. Multi-level Governance or Multi-level Meta-governance: Perspectives of the Post-2027 Cohesion Policy. In *Central and Eastern European eDem and eGov Days 2025 (CEEeGov 2025)*, December 03–05, 2025, Bucharest, Romania. ACM, New York, NY, USA, 7 pages. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3773002.3773650>

1 Introduction

The European Union's cohesion policy is a pillar of integration as a means of reducing territorial, social and economic disparities. [1] [2] Over the past decades, this policy has gradually adapted to changing challenges, but the systemic crises of the 2020s, such as climate change, energy insecurity, migratory pressures, and the digital and green transition, have shown that traditional planning and governance mechanisms are limited in their capacity to deal with new types of complex problems. Consequently, the objectives and instruments of cohesion policy, its relationship with EU and

national policies, and the institutional and normative framework of multi-level governance (MLG) that provides the framework for its implementation, need to be reviewed and reformed. [3]

The timeliness of the present study is that on 16 July 2025, the European Commission presented its draft Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) for the period of 2028-2034, including proposals for the reform of the cohesion policy. [4] One of the key issues in the reform process is the rethinking of the governance structure of the cohesion policy, in particular the potential adaptation of the lessons learned from the design and implementation of the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF). [5] [6] In order to translate the demand-driven, integrated investment reform model into practice, the RRF has introduced a more centralized and performance-based governance than the known structures of the MLG, which can be described by the concept of meta-governance, a concept familiar from political science. This raises the possibility of a synthesis of MLG and meta-governance and its applicability in a revamped cohesion policy.

The theoretical underpinnings of the study are provided by the concepts of MLG and meta-governance (MG). While the former is based on hierarchical and network-based structures of vertical and horizontal cooperation, the latter focuses on the active coordinating role of the state, with a particular emphasis on the balance between different modes of governance (hierarchical, market and network). In this theoretical framework, RRF can be understood as a new governance model organised along the meta-governance logic, but as a multilevel version of it, i.e. multi-level meta-governance (MMG).

The starting point of the study is that the governance of cohesion policy has gradually moved towards a more centralised, operational system, which has led to a weakening of the territorial dimension. This structure calls for a renewal of MLG in post-2007 cohesion policy, based on the experience of the RRF, which could be based on MMG and its improved version, multispatial meta-governance (MMG).

The research focuses on two main issues, drawing on the international literature, EU documents and expert papers. First, it examines how the logic of meta-governance is manifested in the RRF governance system and how it differs from traditional MLG models in the cohesion policy. Second, in the light of the draft post-2027 cohesion policy, it seeks to answer how the RRF experience can be used to inform institutional and governance reforms of the post-2027 cohesion policy, with a particular focus on the involvement of relevant territorial, local, economic and civil society actors.

Against this background, the study is divided into three main parts. First, we review the conceptual and theoretical framework



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ACM ISBN 979-8-4007-2197-7/2025/12

<https://doi.org/10.1145/3773002.3773650>

Table 1: Types of multi-level governance [8]

Type I	Type II
General-purpose jurisdictions	Task-specific jurisdictions
Non intersecting membership	Intersecting membership
Jurisdictions at a limited number of levels	No limit to the number of jurisdictional levels
Systemwide architecture	Flexible design

of multi-level governance and its application in the cohesion policy. It then examines the planning and governance mechanisms that have led to the emergence of the meta-governance logic in the implementation of the RRF. Our analysis will then focus on how the experience of the RRF model, and the sub-variants of the meta-governance concept can be related to the reform of the cohesion policy post 2027, with a particular focus on strengthening the territorial dimension of the MLG.

Multi-level governance and cohesion policy: an increasingly changing relationship

Since the mid-1990s, MLG, inherently derived from EU studies, has become inescapable in political science and EU studies, notably through the seminal work of Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks. [7] [8] The concept itself refers to a complex system of cooperation and negotiation (arrangements) between public institutions in the formulation and implementation of public policies. 'Multilevelism' refers to the overlapping of territorial power between different regional, national and supranational levels, and governance refers to the horizontal displacement of policymaking power between central governments and non-governmental actors (ngo's, business actors). By taking as its starting point the 'redistribution of authority upward, downward and sideways', MLG breaks with the state-centric approach to policy-making. [2] On this basis, the concept of MLG expresses a new way of governance, whereby the emphasis shifts from formal decision-making by governments to the sharing of authority between different levels of government, from decision-making to implementation.

The most widely accepted starting point for the practical application of MLG is Marks and Hooghe's typology, which distinguishes between two types of multilevel governance. [8] The first type ("Type1") follows the logic of federal constitutional arrangements based on a vertical division of powers with a limited number of clearly distinguishable general powers, operating in a predictable manner without substantial changes. The second type ("Type2"), on the other hand, is a complex, flexible, task-specific system of governance based on a relatively large number of decision-making levels and overlapping powers that can be adapted to changing needs. This type expresses, in particular, the emergence of a new development paradigm based on local needs and opportunities, based on functional, transnational and virtual governance of spaces based on rescaling, and on the emergence of a new interventionist paradigm of 'one size fits all' solutions, as opposed to the traditional 'top-down' solutions of 'one size fits all' for the upgrading of specific geographical and administrative units (Table 1).

Although it is used in the analysis of many public policies, EU regional policy plays a key role in the development of MLG and

the further development of the concept. The reform of the Structural Funds in 1988, the many new provisions of the Maastricht Treaty and the renewal of the basic principles of regional (and more recently cohesion) policy have created new opportunities and institutional channels for regions to become involved in policy-making at the European level. Of particular importance is the introduction of partnership, which promotes cooperation between government and territorial actors and the development of shared management structures throughout the whole life cycle of aid, from planning to implementation. The regions have formally become key players in the systemic functioning of the EU, but in reality, this has been much more nuanced. The different political and institutional capacities of the regions placed constraints on the unity of territorial actors, and national governments were reluctant to give them additional powers for the sake of structural policy. In the reforms of successive programme periods, national governments have largely regained the positions they had lost from the Commission and are able to assert their influence as 'flexible gatekeepers' at all stages of regional policy implementation. [9] [10] In this context, the reforms of 1993 and 1999 had already brought to the surface the thesis of 'renationalisation' as a counterpoint to multi-level governance, which, as a result of the regulations adopted by the Council of Ministers, strengthened the influence of the Member States in the designation (concentration) of regions to receive aid and in the preparation (programming) of development plans. The introduction of these two principles - where and how aid resources should be spent - created the basis for both the EU and the Member States to articulate interests and to clash positions.

Following the enlargement of the EU in 2004, the Commission increasingly looked to central government institutions as a guarantee that aid was being used properly and efficiently, in line with the objectives of the aid. This change of direction has been reinforced by the fact that enlargement to the east has significantly increased the number of regions belonging to the EU and their heterogeneity in terms of public law, economic, social and geographical features. The countries that joined the EU in 2004, with the exception of Poland, do not in fact have self-governing regions, nor even effectively decentralised territorial intermediate levels. The relative decline in the role of the regions, and more generally of the territorial dimension, has also been fuelled by the paradigm shift since the mid-2000s, whereby cohesion policy is not only a tool for reducing territorial disparities but also an instrument for the EU's global competitiveness, with the requirement of earmarking covering the territory of all Member States. The requirement of earmarking in the use of cohesion funds has set minimum levels for the contribution to the Lisbon objectives in regions of different

levels of development. In order to achieve competitiveness objectives, cohesion policy has introduced public policies - innovation, R&D, education, training, employment - which are generally managed and administered by central government rather than by the regions. The 'everyone gets something' approach, the extension of development priorities and eligibility criteria has led some net contributor Member States to call again for a 'renationalisation' of cohesion policy. Under the principle of 'renationalisation', the concentrated use of funds reduces the budgetary expenditure on cohesion policy and allows net contributor Member States to use their own resources to help less developed regions catch up. This solution was mainly supported by the United Kingdom and the "frugal four" of Austria, the Netherlands, Denmark and Sweden.

A key element in bridging the conceptual gap between competitiveness and cohesion, and in shaping the Member States' positions on the post-2013 cohesion policy, was the concept of territorial cohesion, which was also included in the Lisbon Treaty of 2009, and whose practical application was based on the place-based development policy paradigm.[11] Although the new approach advocated the introduction of the MLG approach and practice, the promotion of cross-border and functional areas, and the identification and development of territorial assets, it also placed equal emphasis on an integrated approach to the territorial impact of sectoral policies. The shift towards the latter is illustrated by the fact that, of the five thematic objectives of the current interregional cohesion policy - more competitive and smarter Europe; greener, low carbon transitioning towards a net zero carbon economy; more connected Europe by enhancing mobility; more social and inclusive Europe; Europe closer to citizens by fostering the sustainable and integrated development of all types of territories - the last two are in fact closely linked to the original objectives of regional catching-up and social and territorial cohesion. [11] This has made it possible to move towards development policy paradigms based on territorial competitiveness, spatial concentration of production factors and agglomeration advantages, and development policy paradigms based on internal resources and competitive advantages, as well as institutional structures moving towards centralisation.

This is also demonstrated by the fact that cohesion policy has not been able to significantly strengthen the position of the regions in constitutional-political terms. In the 2014-2020 programming period, national governments were responsible for implementing aid in 19 of the 28 Member States at the time. However, in only six Member States - Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Poland and France - were the regions fully responsible for the implementation of cohesion funding, while in three Member States - Finland, Sweden and the United Kingdom - they controlled the administrative and implementation tasks of the funds. [12] Despite the fact that the vast majority of national governments have control over the functioning of the cohesion policy, regions have been increasingly involved in the implementation process. In all the Member States, representatives of the regions are involved as advisers to the managing authorities. In 14 Member States this function is integrated into general-purpose regional governments, 9 Member States have set up specialised regional development councils and only five Member States have given exclusive competence for regional development to central government. [12] [13]

This shows that the governance of the cohesion policy has gradually moved towards a more centralised, operational system, closer to the MLG Type I model. While shared management at project level has been maintained, the dominance of national governments in the management of national development plans and operational programmes has been clear. The influence of regional actors, depending on the constitutional and political situation of the regions, has been weakened, often limited to advisory and consultative roles.

The complex challenges facing Europe today, in the form of climate change, the energy crisis, demographic challenges, mass migration, digital and green transition, and the constant management of crises, are very different from the problems that regional policy was originally designed to address. Over the past decades, the cohesion policy has made serious and successful efforts to achieve balanced and harmonious development. [14] Thanks to cohesion funding, investment has also helped to reduce the gap in GDP per capita between the least developed 10% and the most developed 10% by 3.5%. At the same time, territorial disparities have persisted and even diversified into new spatial categories (low-growth and low-income regions, 'left behind' places) and development problems (regional development traps). [3] The risk of territorial development polarisation is indicated by the fact that in 2023, 120 million EU citizens lived in less developed regions; 60 million in places with a lower GDP per capita than in 2000; and almost a third of the population lived in regions with annual GDP growth of less than 0.5% since 2000.

Therefore, the complex challenges, shocks and crises of the 2020 decade have led to a perceived 'identity crisis' in the cohesion policy. This realisation was also reflected in Enrico Letta's competitiveness report ("Much More Than Market"): "A reform of Cohesion Policy appears to be decisive". [15] A roadmap for reform was to be prepared by the European Commission by the end of the first half of 2025. During the preparatory phase, several reports and working groups called for the experience of other concepts and support instruments, particularly the RRF, to be considered. This justifies a review of the new governance of the RRF, which will also provide an opportunity to develop a conceptual framework to support the renewal or at least rethinking of the MLG.

2 RRF and meta-governance: towards a new development concept and governance structure?

Since the turn of the millennium, debates on the substantive and conceptual frameworks of the state, government, and governance have regularly featured the concept of meta-governance, which is based on both the need for social self-organization and the inevitability of state and government control using both direct and indirect means. [16]

It does not deny the importance of public policy networks and self-organising autonomies, but stresses that they can only function effectively in the 'shadow of hierarchy', within the framework of state structures. [17] The state is thus not simply one of the actors, but a meta-governor of decision-making, able to frame processes, select actors, thematise discourses and manage conflicts. [18]

Based on the above, we can define the concept and practice of meta-governance within the overall model of state-centred governance as a specific sub-variety of it. To translate this highly abstract concept into the language of practice, it is useful to break down the concept of meta-governance into types that provide a broad interpretative framework, but are also suitable for describing and understanding specific cases. Of relevance to the research topic is the concept of multi-level meta-governance, whereby there are several decision-making levels, from territorial to supranational, with jurisdictions of governmental powers, which manage the same sectoral, territorial or local development programme, organised on a partnership basis, with different tasks. [19]

In response to the complex impacts of COVID-19, the European Union (EU) created the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) in July 2020, which provides € 723 billion in grants and loans to Member States (at constant 2018 prices) across six thematic pillars to promote economic, social and territorial cohesion and address common challenges such as diversifying energy supply. [14]

The disbursement of grants and loans requested by the Member States is based on targets and milestones set out in the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP), which contributes to developing and strengthening the ownership approach. The preparation of the plans is the responsibility of national governments and should be in line with the recommendations of the CSRs in the Country-Specific Reports (CSRs) issued in the framework of EU economic governance and the thematic chapters of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR). The novelty of the RRF lies in the fact that it introduced a demand-driven and performance-based framework, which made access to aid conditional on reforms and investment [20] [21].

The NRRPs are the result of consultations and negotiations with the Commission, resulting in a kind of contractual relationship between the Commission and the Member States. Despite the need to align the planned reforms and investments with the CSRs, the milestones and objectives of the RRF are not imposed by the Commission, but proposed by the Member State. Although the RRF is directly managed by the Commission and the Member States are the final beneficiaries, the NRRPs are not developed on the basis of direct instructions from the Commission, but are formulated by the Member States according to their own priorities, taking into account the recommendations of the CSRs, the priorities of the ESPR and the thematic objectives set by the RRF. This means that a certain level of spending should be devoted to green and digital objectives (37% and 20% respectively), with the principle of Do No Significant Harm applied in line with the EU's environmental objectives.

However, in this highly complex set of conditions, the RRF does not clearly define the governance structures that Member States are expected to put in place for planning and implementation. The involvement of the European Commission and national governments in the planning process has proved to be key and has been seen as the emergence of a new form of governance, like the MLG, which combines several levels but with a more hierarchical structure.

This is also confirmed by the fact that, although the RRF Regulation and the Commission guidelines clearly provide for stakeholder involvement, this has rarely been implemented in practice. [22]

In most Member States, NRRPs have been prepared rapidly in narrow government circles, often under the direction of the Prime Minister's Office or the Ministry of Finance, without real social consultation and without involving regional and local actors. Exceptions are Portugal, where a previous development plan formed the basis, Belgium, where the federal structure has allowed the regions to play a meaningful role, and Spain, where consultation with autonomous communities has been integrated into the planning process. This was generally justified by the Member States concerned on the grounds of short planning timeframes and logistical difficulties caused by pandemic lockdowns.

The integrated reform-investment model aims to generate structural change through EU financial incentives. The key issue in the investment negotiations was compliance with the eligibility criteria set out in the RRF Regulation. In this respect, the Commission acted as a gate-keeper, verifying that the eligibility criteria and thematic objectives set out in the RRF Regulation were met. If these were met, the Commission was no longer able to intervene in the setting of priorities by Member States. In effect, the negotiations took the form of an interactive dialogue in which the Member States were the "brainstormers" and the Commission acted as an advisor and strategic enabler in translating the plans into action.

In contrast to investment, the negotiation of reforms can be described as a real bargaining process between the Commission and the Member States. It was here that the Commission had to assert most forcefully that the NRRPs should make a meaningful contribution to addressing the country-specific challenges identified in the 2019 and 2020 European Semester. While the link to CSRs was already an expectation for the European Structural Funds, under the RRF it must now be delivered through contractual obligations and detailed operational targeting. [23]

The Commission has thus taken on several roles: not only as a guardian of access to funds, but also as a partner in terms of content. Even if it is not formally the final decision-maker, it has had a substantive influence on the direction of reforms. However, it is not a case of unilateral, hierarchical management. Ultimately, the content of reforms was always proposed by the Member States in close consultation with the Commission. The successive submission of draft reforms, the Commission's comments and the subsequent development of new versions have generated a real learning process, both for national administrations and for the Commission.

Under the performance-based approach, funds are not paid based on ex-post costing, but based on the achievement of targets and milestones set in the framework of "operational agreements" between the Commission and national governments. This has transformed the Commission's relationship with Member States into a contractual relationship, with Member States having to set up effective implementation and monitoring structures to ensure compliance, and the Commission monitoring Member States' performance through indicator-based scoreboards (Social Scoreboard, Recovery and Resilience Scoreboard). [5]

The governance structure of the RRF will continue to be framed by the MLG, but the role and influence of the Commission and national governments will be further strengthened at the expense of social and territorial actors. This mode of governance is no longer substitutable with MLG I or MLG II, as both the Commission and the national governments have a wide discretion in the design

and implementation of the single NRRPs, but in fact they manage the same development programme through direct (reforms) and indirect (investments) instruments and institutions. This structure calls for a renewal or rethinking of MLG, based, in our view, on the concept of multilevel meta-governance (MMG). Although both the Commission and national governments are playing the role of meta-governor, this does not mean a return to full hierarchical governance. As we have seen in the definition of reforms, investments, milestones and targets, their final form will be the result of an iterative process of consultation between the Commission and national governments. The rationale of hierarchical governance, which is characteristic of meta-governance, is to strike a balance between control and discretion. This is made possible by the different weight and influence of the EU and national institutions on different thematic objectives, investments and reforms.

However, the effective functioning of the MMG cannot be envisaged without the active involvement of economic, social and territorial actors in partnership. In the light of the above, the preparation of the post 2027 cohesion policy cannot avoid reflecting on the experience of the RRF and synthesising the concept of the "original" MLG and the MMG.

3 Reshaping the cohesion policy after 2027: farewell to the EU multi-level governance?

The preparation of cohesion policy post 2027 started in several expert groups, resulting in the publication of several key expert papers. The Commission's High-Level Group on the future of cohesion policy (HLG) published its report in February 2024 (hereafter: HLG Report). The starting point of the HLG Report is that reforms are needed, and that cohesion policy has in the past often functioned as a "firefighting", crisis management and support mechanism, rather than as a previously successful development, catching up and integration instrument. The Cohesion policy must become a dynamic, proactive instrument that both reduces social and territorial disparities and supports the strengthening of the European socio-economic model and the EU's global competitiveness. As regards the details, the HLG Report strongly emphasises the need to strive for a place-based, people-based and future-oriented approach and confirms that, on the basis of the partnership principle, shared management and MLG can guarantee the active involvement and participation of regional and local authorities, intermediate cities and towns, rural areas, social partners, enterprises, and civil society. This requires a strengthened MLG, including improved horizontal and vertical coordination, clear definition of responsibilities and competences, institutional capacity building, and the establishment of effective and clear joint decision-making structures and communication channels. However, inter-jurisdictional coordination and collaboration is not just a technical issue, it is also the basis for the democratic legitimacy of cohesion policy. If local communities feel involved in decisions, this increases ownership and the effectiveness of implementation.

The HLG Report underlines that cohesion policy alone cannot address all problems, and therefore coordination and synergies with EU and national policies, European economic governance and the European Semester are needed. Indirectly, the above has several similarities with the RRF approach: demand-driven investments

and reforms tailored to the specific development needs of a country, integrated into a common systemic strategy rather than fragmenting development programmes. The reference to the RRF is most explicit in the proposals to improve the implementation of cohesion policy. [3] Here, the HLG Report emphasises that the value of the use of resources is determined by the concrete impacts and results they produce, and that the allocation and evaluation of funds should be based on performance and impact, rather than merely on formal criteria of accountability. And measuring the effectiveness of cohesion policies requires qualitative data and continuous feedback.

A rich literature has developed in recent years examining the current interaction between the RRF and cohesion policy, mainly focusing on demarcation, cannibalisation or synergies between the two policies. [24] [25] On this basis, several scenarios can be envisaged for the role that the RRF model will play in the post-2027 cohesion policy. However, the first concrete conclusions will only be possible after the presentation by the Commission of the new EU budget proposal for 2028-2024 (Multiannual Financial Framework, MFF) on 16 July 2025. The proposal, which will have to be negotiated and approved by the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union as co-legislators, is worth € 1.9 trillion (€ 1,984,894 million) and consists of four pillars: € 1 trillion for economic, social and territorial cohesion, € 590 billion for competitiveness and security, € 215 billion for "Global Europe" (the EU's external action pillar) and € 117 billion for administrative expenditure. [4] The strategic goal is to provide "greater flexibility" to the multiannual budget by simplifying financial programmes, to "target impact where it is most needed", to increase competitiveness to "lead the global race" in clean and smart technologies, and to create a European Defence Union that is "capable of defending itself and acting quickly when needed".

Under the budget proposal, the future functioning of the cohesion policy will incorporate several elements of the RRF model, in addition to the other strategic considerations indicated above. The elements where the impact of the RRF on cohesion policy after 2027 can be identified are set out below.

Firstly, the Commission's proposal is to merge the Cohesion Funds (ERDF, Cohesion Fund, ESF+, EAGF, EAFRD, EMFAF and the Just Transition Fund) into a single "megafund". Because of the merger, the current Partnership Agreements and Operational Programmes will be replaced by 27 National and Regional Partnership Plans (N and R Partnership Plans, PNRPs), like the way in which NRRPs were prepared under the RRF. This structure indicates that the practices developed under the RRF - such as demand-driven strategic planning, ownership, coordination with other EU policies - will be reflected in the draft renewed cohesion policy.

Secondly, the crisis management mechanism established by the RRF could become a potential priority for cohesion policy 2028-2034: it will provide increased flexibility to address crisis situations and unforeseen needs in a volatile geopolitical context, including rapid re-alignment of priorities and quicker adjustment of programmes. This is clearly an effect of the RRF's adaptive approach.

Thirdly, in line with both the HLG Report proposal and the operational logic of the RRF, the cohesion policy will in future operate in a result- and performance-oriented delivery mode, where payments are linked to the delivery of investments and reforms. Investments

and reforms will be defined in the Member States' PNRPs, as in the NRRPs, which will allow Member States sufficient flexibility. To guarantee this, the NRPs are developed and implemented in close partnership between the Commission, Member States, regions, local communities and all other stakeholders. This integrated programming process allows for better coordination between policy areas and a more targeted approach.

Almost immediately, the Commission's draft was the subject of much criticism, for the reduction of funding for cohesion policy, the marginalisation of the territorial dimension and the centralisation of implementation. As regards the amount of aid, although the EUR 453 billion for cohesion represents an increase of EUR 60 billion compared with the current MFF, in practice it could represent a significant reduction, as future funds could be used to replace the regional part of the common agricultural policy and to support fisheries and tourism. This is why it is problematic that the draft does not address the different problems of different types of regions (lagging regions, left behind places, rural areas, 'trapped' regions), despite the Ninth Cohesion Report's recognition that the cohesion policy is an important driver of sustainable development and economic growth, as realising the full potential of each region will strengthen the competitiveness and resilience of the EU as a whole. [26] The precarious position of the territorial dimension, based on the experience of the implementation of the RRF, can be a major constraint to the achievement of strategic objectives.

As emphasised above, the governance of the cohesion policy relating to the overall operation of the MLG has gradually shifted towards a more centralised mode of governance (Type I), and the RRF is best described by previously mentioned MMG model. In its current form, the Commission's draft is silent on the institutional and governance mode of implementation, nor has the RRF clearly defined the institutional governance structures it expects Member States to implement. In our view, the synthesis of the strengthened MLG highlighted by the HLG Report and the MMG in the operation of the RRF could provide a good basis for the design of institutional and governance arrangements post 2027. The shared governance model, which is a key principle of cohesion policy, coupled with a clear definition of responsibilities and competences, will allow decisions to be taken closer to citizens and developments to be better adapted to local needs.

The return of the territorial dimension is therefore not a farewell to the MLG. At the same time, Member States should be given greater room for manoeuvre to ensure that cooperation and coordination can take place not only between jurisdictions but also between different categories of territory. Multispatial meta-governance (MSMG), which can be seen as a further development of multilevel meta-governance, provides a good starting point and theoretical basis for this. [27] The multispatial aspect considers that governance is not limited to geographical places, national boundaries or territorial institutional structures, but takes place simultaneously in overlapping functional, digital, policy-based and symbolic spaces of different scales. [28] [29] For example, an urban climate strategy is not only a matter of local planning, but is shaped at the intersection of digital data platforms, global financial mechanisms and international norms.

4 Conclusions

The objective of this study was to examine, from a theoretical and practical perspective, the changing governance logic of the European Union's cohesion policy in the context of the preparation for the post-2027 period. The study was based on the premise that the MLG model of cohesion policy, based on shared management but gradually moving towards centralisation, no longer provides a sufficient framework to address the current complex challenges and that the operation of cohesion policy post 2027 will require a strengthening and repositioning of the MLG, combining a meta-management logic and a reinforcement of the territorial dimension.

In response to the first research question of the study, it can be concluded that the governance system of the RRF differs from the traditional models of the MLG in several points. While the MLG is essentially based on a decentralised, network logic of decision-making and implementation, the RRF employs a centrally coordinated, performance-based and contract-type governance mechanism in which national governments and the European Commission play a dominant role. Although the RRF formally recognises the principle of partnership, in practice the involvement of regional and local actors remains limited. The resulting structure fits into the conceptual framework of MMG, where hierarchical and networked logics are balanced, with both the Commission and national governments playing the role of 'meta-governor'.

The second research question - how the experience of the RRF will influence the reform of the cohesion policy after 2027 and the perspectives for the involvement of territorial, local, economic and civil actors - cannot be answered clearly at this stage, although the main directions of change are already clear. The new MFF, presented on 16 July 2025, and the reforms proposed as part of it, continue the operational logic of the RRF in many areas. The creation of a PNRP per country, integrated financial instruments in a "mega-fund", and performance and results-based resource allocation, all imply the establishment of centralised management systems. At the same time, there is a strong demand, both from stakeholders and expert material, to maintain and even reinforce the partnership-based approach, the place-based development logic and, more generally, the territorial-local dimension, as emphasised in the HLG Report, which is a reference to the original normative values of the MLG. In our view, the synthesis of the strengthened MLG highlighted by the HLG Report and the MMG in the functioning of the RRF could provide an appropriate basis for the design of institutional and governance arrangements post 2027.

In other words, the future governance model of cohesion policy is not a binary choice between MLG and MMG, but a synthesis of the openness and participatory nature of MLG with the governance and coordination logic of meta-governance. These conceptual frameworks contribute to a reconceptualisation of the spatiality of politics and help to rethink the effectiveness and democratic legitimacy of governance as a response to the political challenges of the 21st century.

Acknowledgments

Project No. TKP2021-NKTA-51 was realized with the support of the Ministry of Culture and Innovation from the National Research

Development and Innovation Fund, financed by the TKP2021-NK TA tender program.

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