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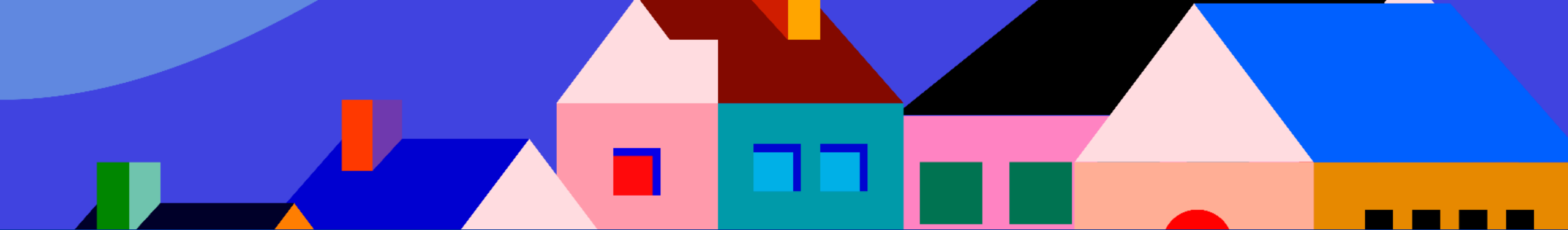
// ESPON URDICO

The role of cities in implementing the
Cohesion Policy: from implementers to
partners

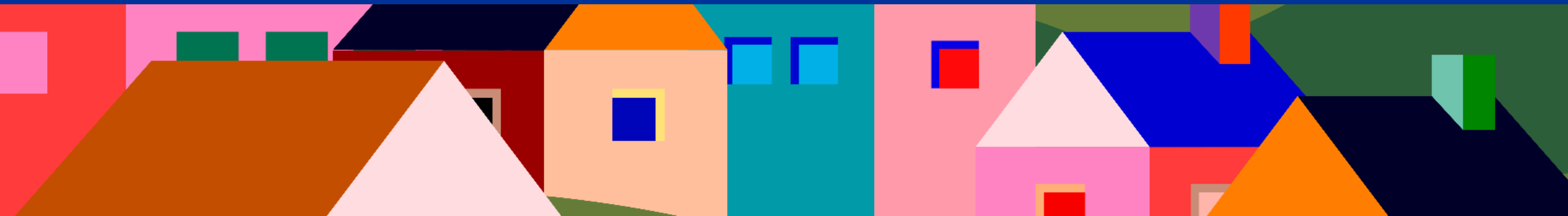
Erblin Berisha, Politecnico di Torino

September 24, 2026





Results of the Comparative analysis of URDICO project



Why do we compare?

In institutional studies, comparisons are used:



To understand **whether and how** a specific policy is implemented across different institutional contexts.



To identify the **institutional reaction and adaptation mechanisms** triggered by external or internal stimuli, such as the EU Cohesion Policy.



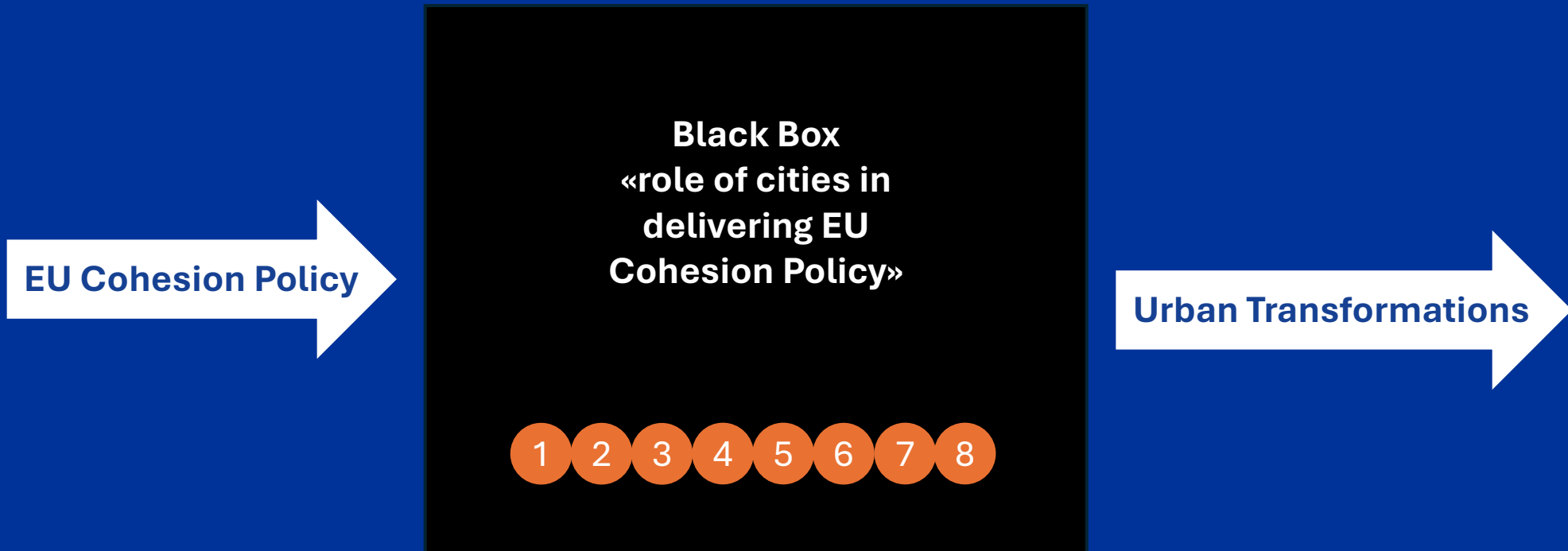
To assess **what can be improved** by **providing evidence** on the outcomes and effectiveness of policy implementation.

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What have we compared in URDICO? What we were looking for?

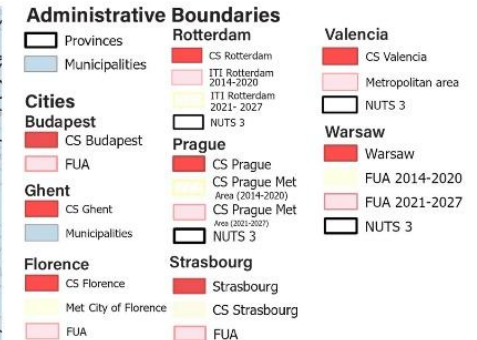
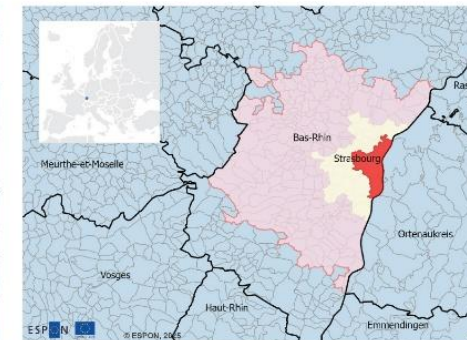
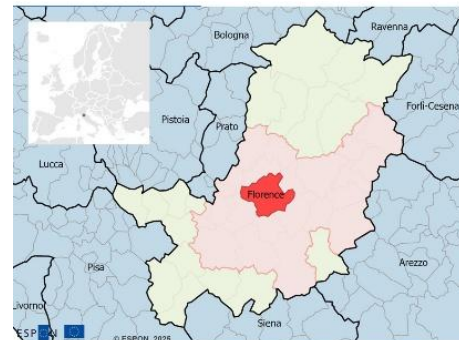
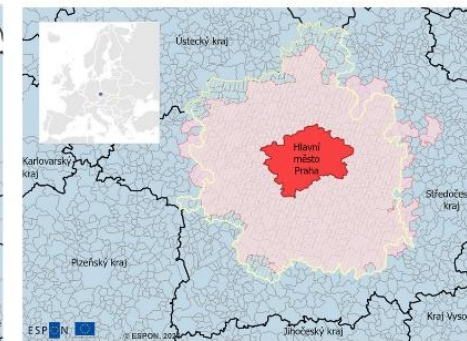
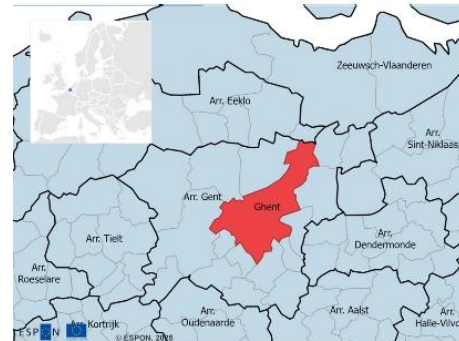
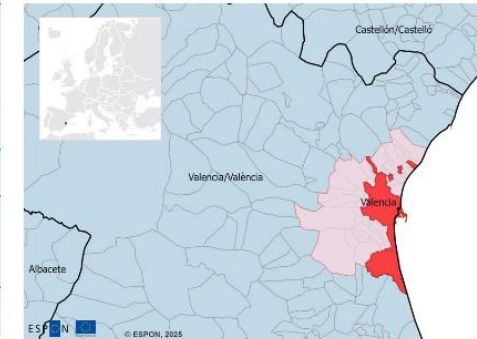
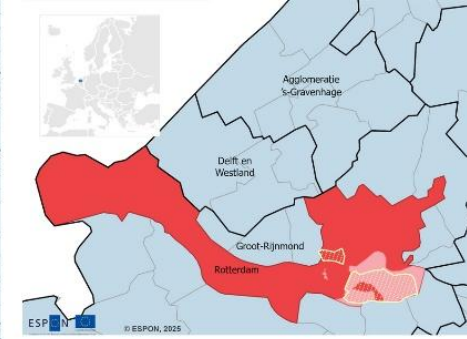
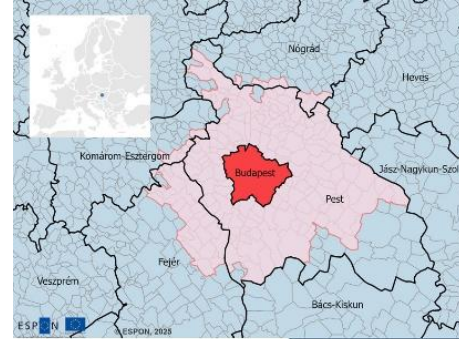


More in detail: which were the research questions?

- **Comparing the different governance models** that deliver the urban dimension of Cohesion Policy, assessing their effectiveness in supporting public investments in cities.
- **Assessing** – starting from the case studies - **how urban dimension of CP contributes to institutional innovations, stronger administrative capacity and better alignment** at city level and between government levels on urban issues:
- Developing evidence on how the urban dimension of Cohesion Policy **contributes to cities' long-term agendas and localisation of EU priorities** (European Green Deal) and how it can evolve to meet new needs.
- Develop an overview of the **interaction among the urban dimension of CP, other EU funding programmes**, and the EU and national frameworks for public investment (the EU economic governance framework).

Setting the case studies

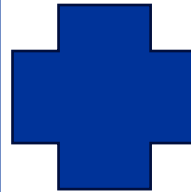
- Extremely different cases (size and geography)
- Different CS scale (in Rotterdam, the ITI is part of the city, in Warsaw and Strasbourg is much bigger)
- Different spatial coverage in relation to 2014-2020 and 2021-2027 programming periods



Methodology

Qualitative approach

- Organization of a brainstorming phase – in-depth discussion with stakeholders and selected observers.
- Activation of 8 “urban labs” to determine a preliminary list of recommendations with stakeholders (co-design).
- Development of 8 case studies (reports) – 1 per case + comparative analysis;
- Selection and organization (by levels: from local to European) and validation of the recommendations through a “double Delphi step”.



Quantitative approach

- Analysis and presentation of data available at the European level (Eurostat, Kohesio, KEEP, and others).
- Analysis and presentation of data collected at the local level (national and local databases and/or newly collected data related to activated EU projects).

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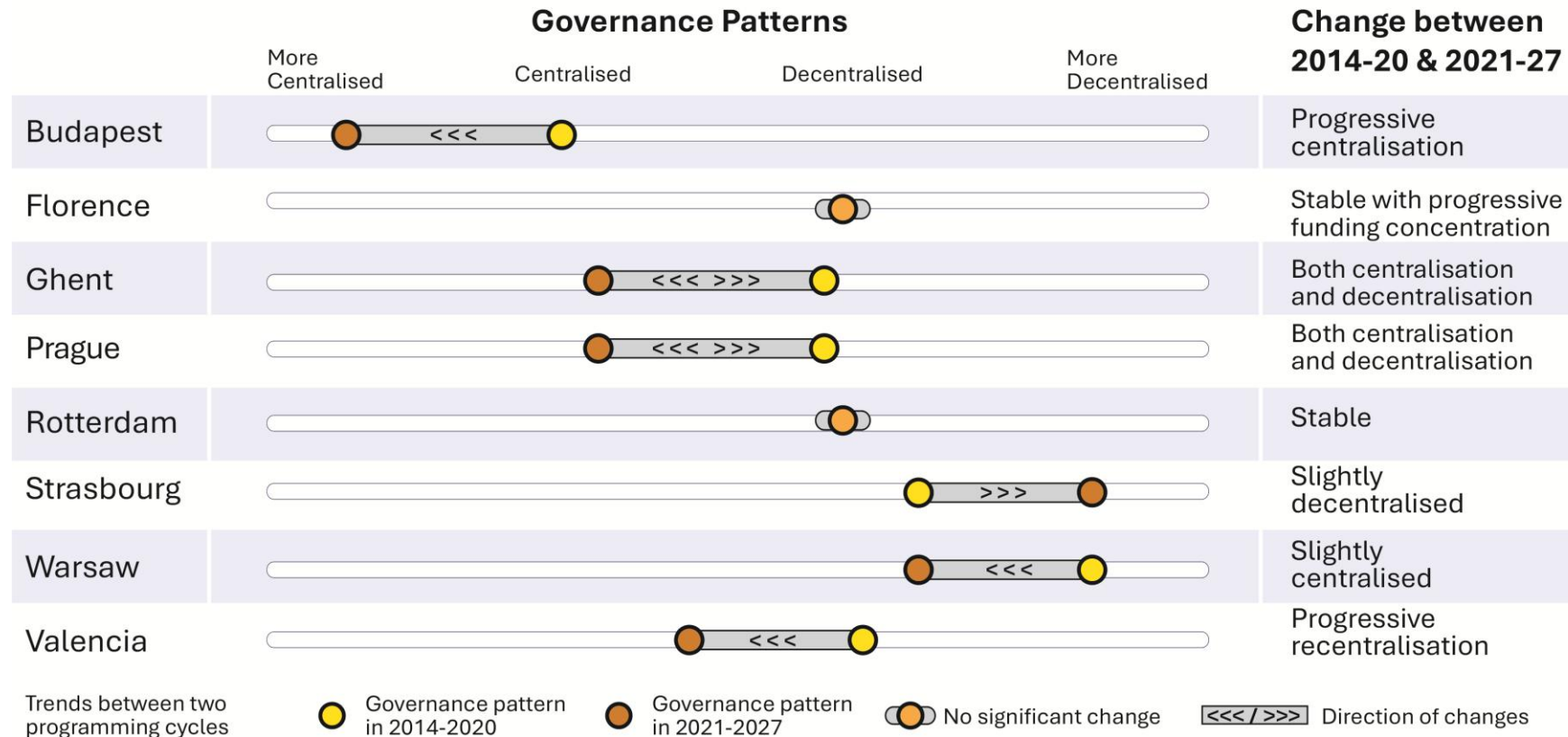


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Project main results and fundings

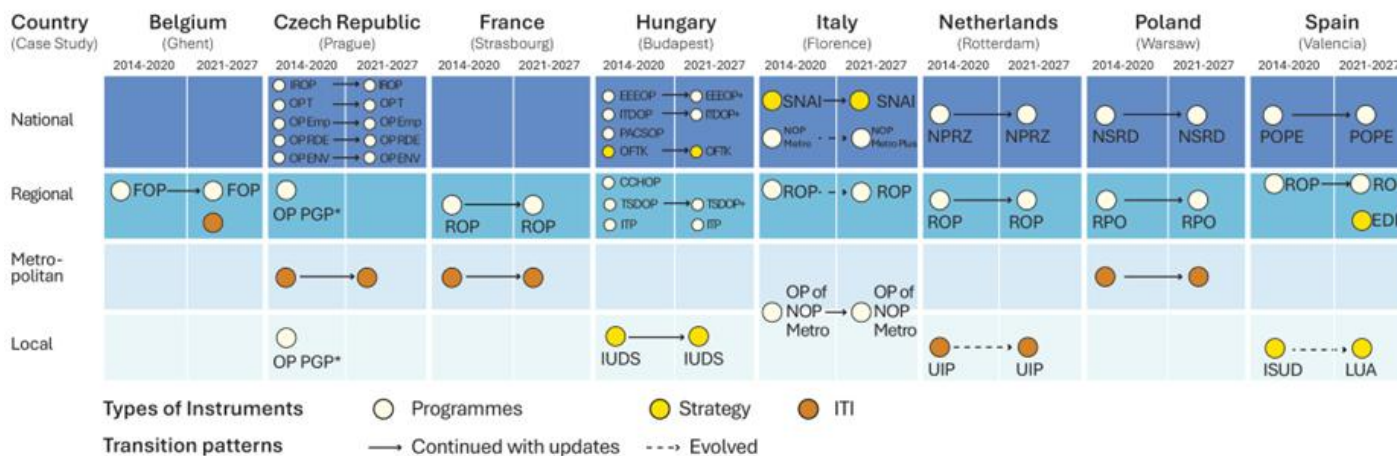
National Overview on Cohesion Policy

Changing governance patterns of national Cohesion Policy: centralisation vs decentralisation

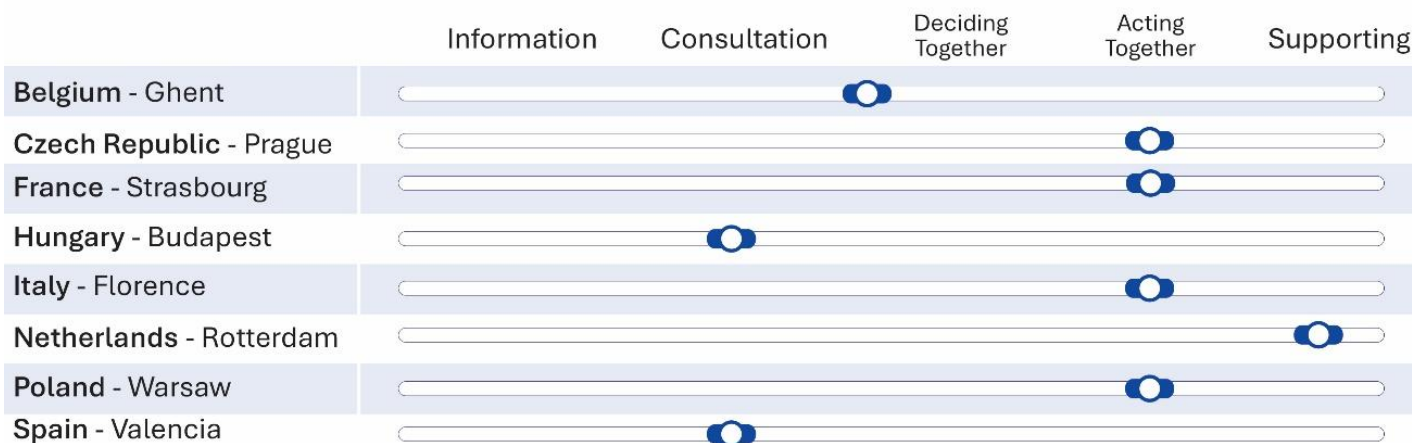


National Overview on Cohesion Policy

Main tools used by countries for the implementation of the Cohesion Policy



Cities' Participation in the EU the Cohesion Policy programming



Urban structure and governance of CP

CS's Involvement in the Cohesion Policy

Case Study	2014–2020 Role	2021–2027 Role	Key Change / Trend
Budapest	Beneficiary of national/regional OPs	Formally a NUTS 2 region, involved in the programming of territorial OP, but largely excluded from funding	Marginalisation due to coordination difficulties with central authorities
Florence	Intermediate Body for NOP Metro; active in EU projects	Continued IB role under Metro Plus; expanded scope	Continuity and institutional strengthening
Ghent	Beneficiary of Flemish ERDF and ESF; separate priority for SUD, decision making role of the city	Having a joint ITI for ERDF; key role in urban innovation, decision making by the MA, only validation role in the ITI	Proactive/innovative use of cohesion funding, thematic limitations, no longer decision making role
Prague	Managing Authority of local OP; ITI leader	Lost OP; retains ITI coordination	Reduced control, pragmatic fund usage
Rotterdam	MA for ERDF; involved in national/EU coordination	MA for ERDF; IB for JTF; strategic leadership	Cross-fund alignment and expanding responsibilities
Strasbourg	IB for ITI (ERDF + ESF); strong local coordination	Maintains delegated role; increased integration	Stability in delegated governance
Valencia	Late/limited beneficiary; low absorption	New coordination unit; ERDF and RRF uptake	Growing capacity, persistent governance gaps
Warsaw	Intermediate Body for ITI; key strategic actor	Strategic leader in metropolitan governance	IB role passed to regional authorities

Administrative capacity and Institutional innovations

Overview of Governance Models and Integration Capacity

Multilevel Governance Structure	Local Institutional Capacity	Role in Cohesion Policy	Spatial Planning Integration
Two-tier municipal + centralised national control	Medium (fragmented by district autonomy)	Weak influence, limited funding access	Limited due to divergence with the national level
National-regional-metropolitan-local	Medium-High (strong municipality, weak metro)	Moderate (good city-level coordination)	Partial, fragmented at metro level
Regional coordination among cities (Joint ITI between Ghent and Antwerp)	Strong (integrated departments, social partners)	Moderate involvement, no decision-making role	Strong, neighbourhood planning
Dual region (developed + transition)	Medium (split between city and region)	Constrained by funding rules	Limited due to region-type divide
Managing Authority role	Strong (dedicated office, MA function)	High capacity, city-led management	Moderate, some thematic overlap
Strong inter-municipal body (EMS) and multilevel governance	High (especially for service delivery)	Secondary role of EU funds	Fragmented, weak alignment with statutory metropolitan planning
Multi-level with regional dominance	Medium (many actors, new EU office)	Improving but still fragmented	Partial, sectoral alignment
Clear national-regional-metro-local chain	Strong at city level, weak metro powers	Well-structured but poorly integrated	Weak spatial linkage, institutional gaps

Administrative capacity and Institutional innovations

Multilevel Governance

National & Regional authorities act as **gatekeepers** because most EU funds are channelled through them.

- In **centralised systems (Budapest and Prague)** the national government controls almost all decisions; while in the case of Warsaw, even though the system is decentralized, Ministry of Funds have a dominating role
- In **multilevel systems, different** bodies mediate access:
 - In Ghent, Florence, and Valencia regional governments are actively take roles for the management of funds. In Ghent the national level has no role.
- Being Managing Authorities creates **exemptions**:
 - In the case of Rotterdam, management of funds depend on the programme

Strasbourg is a unique example of multilevel governance, marked by effective co-funding, delegated responsibilities, and strong coordination

These dynamics also impacts **cities' roles** in the implementation of Cohesion Policy:

- **Strong roles:** Rotterdam and Strasbourg are manager in some funds
- **Moderate roles with being implementers:** Florence, Ghent, Warsaw, Prague
- **Limited Roles:** Budapest,, Valencia

Name of the city	Governance Type	Gatekeeper	City Role
Budapest	Highly centralized, politicised	Central government	Weak implementer
Florence	Constructive but top-down	A connubium between Tuscany Region/Central state	Implementer with growing coordination (Intermediate Body)
Ghent	Regionally devolved, partial co-steering	Flemish Region (VLAIO)	Implementer (co-steering role of ITI)
Prague	Centralized at national level with metropolitan for SUD delivery through the ITI instrument	Central government	MA in city OP in 2014-2020, ITI holder in both periods
Rotterdam	Mixed, programme-dependent	National government (ESF, JTF)	IB/MA in some funds, dependent in others
Strasbourg	State-centred with some exeptions	Regional + National MAs	Delegated fund manager (ITI)
Valencia	Regionalised but fragmented	GVA + Spanish Government	Weak strategic influence
Warsaw	Formally multilevel, functionally centralised	Ministry of Funds	Implementer - ITI

Administrative capacity and Institutional innovations

Good Practices

Cities	Institutional Innovation and Coordination Mechanisms	Participatory and Multilevel Governance	Strategic Planning and Policy Integration	Capacity Building and Support Tools	Financial Innovation and Leverage Models
Budapest	Working Group on monitoring projects funded by the European Union within the City Hall and the Establishment of Housing and Climate Agencies	-	-	-	The establishment of BKM Budapest Public Utilities
Florence	EU Joint Office	PNRR Caffè	PNC and Metro Plus integration	Fund raising and EU program Service	-
Ghent	ERDF contact point	Integrated neighbourhood approach	-	-	Public-private partnerships as a financial lever
Prague	Department for European Funds at the City Hall: ITI management and support to beneficiaries	Integrated plan and decision making concerning the ITI of Prague Metropolitan Area	Integrated Plan for the ITI of Prague Metropolitan Area	-	-
Rotterdam	One-stop shop and the Project Office	Urban Envoy	-	EU Project Offices	Social Impact Fund Rotterdam (SIFR)
Strasbourg	Network of EU funds and One-stop shop	Awareness raising and communication with the 33 member municipalities regarding access to EU funding	-	-	Leverage effect of private projects
Valencia	European Projects Office	-	Urban Agenda and ISUDS	Minerva software	Budget mega-packages and foundations
Warsaw	Department for European Funds	Metropolitan Council & Study Visits	Development Programming Standards	-	Multi-source funding strategy

What is METRO?

METRO is an EU-funded national programme for funding initiatives aimed at enhancing urban development in metropolitan areas and medium-sized cities in southern Italy (from 2021).

Objective: to promote urban development with metropolitan relevance

Local Units involved: 14 Metropolitan Cities for the 2014-2020 (Intermediate Body), 14 + 39 small and medium cities in the south as beneficiary (2021-2027)

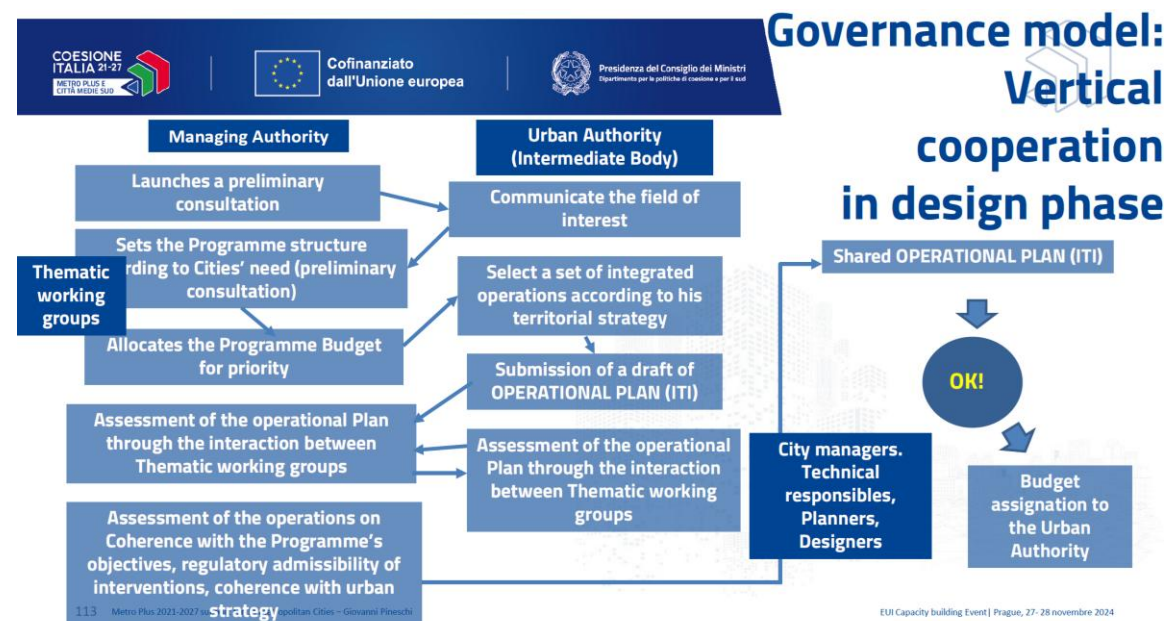
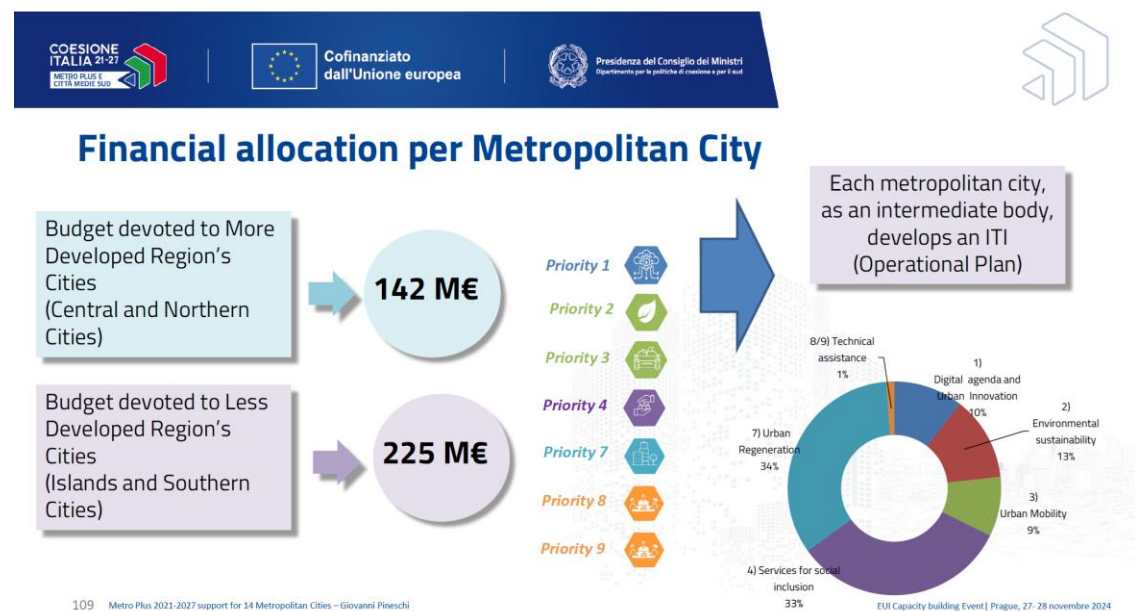
Governance: The Managing Authority remains at the central level, while cities serve as intermediate bodies, «Autorità Urbane», with dedicated resources, functions, and responsibilities.

Method: co-programming and co-responsibility in a multilevel perspective. Cities are agents of transformation, responsible for implementing their own strategies.

Governance Model

Principles: subsidiarity; partnership

Translated into practice: involvement of cities; attribution of an active role (Intermediate Body / Urban Authority); multilevel governance and institutional trust.



What the programme do finance (2021- 2027)?

Policy Objective 1 – A
smarter Europe

Policy Objective 2 - A
greener, low-carbon
Europe;

Finanziato
dall'Unione europea

DOTAZIONE FINANZIARIA

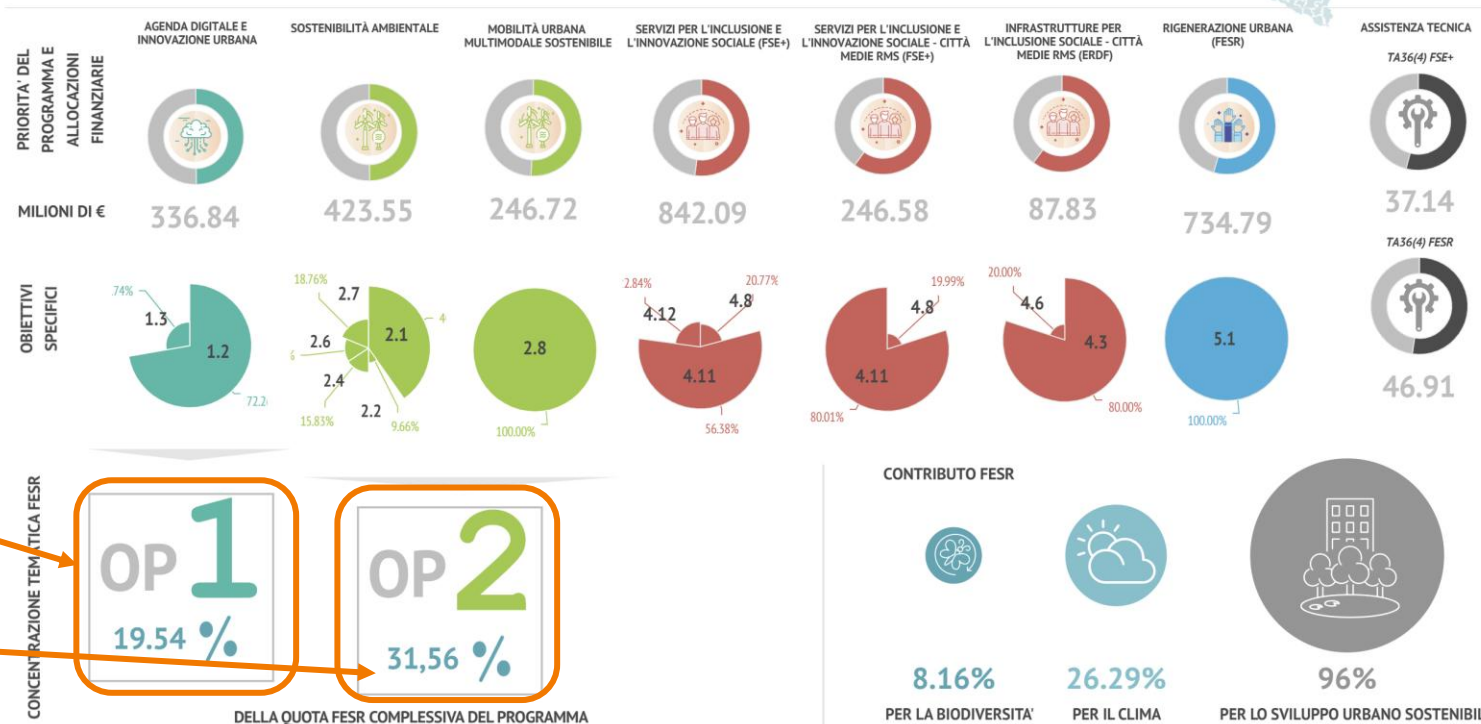
3.002 Mio €

DI CUI

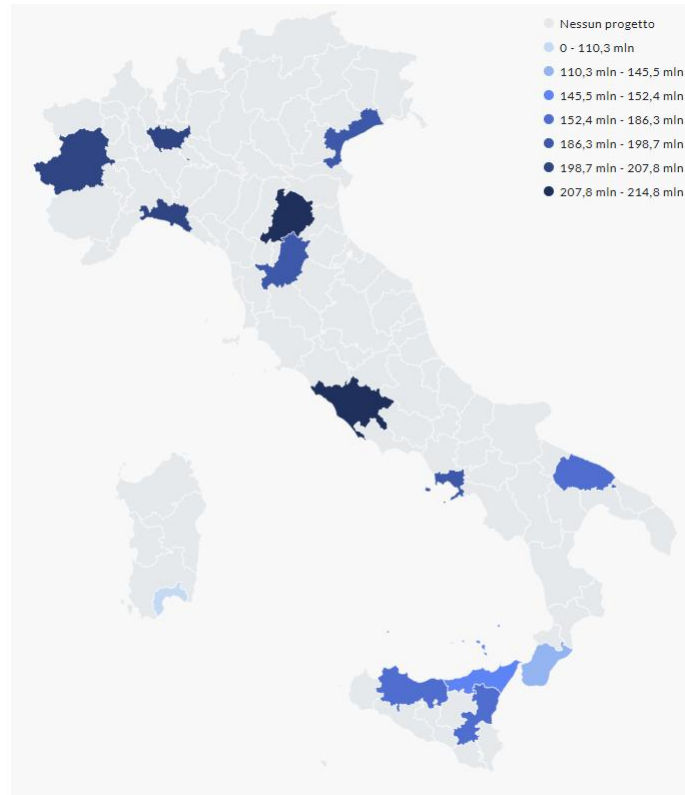
1.590 Mio €
FINANZIAMENTO EUROPEO (FESR/FSE+)

1.412 Mio €
COFINANZIAMENTO NAZIONALE

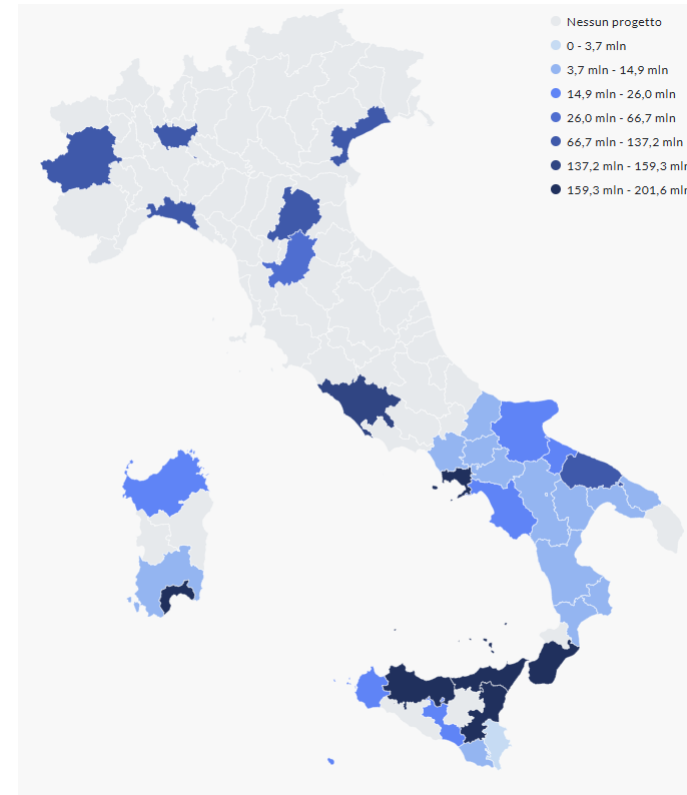
Fonte dati: Il Programma approvato dicembre 2022



2014-2021



2021-2027



Many advantages, few disadvantages

Advantages

- ❑ An explicit city and metropolitan dimension.
- ❑ Shared responsibility and institutional trust: cities have been involved in the implementation of Cohesion Policy since its conceptualisation, within a proactive and cooperative environment.
- ❑ The combination of ERDF and ESF funding (multi-funding approach).
- ❑ Flexibility in the implementation of tailored, place-based strategies, in line with national and EU strategic frameworks.

Disadvantages

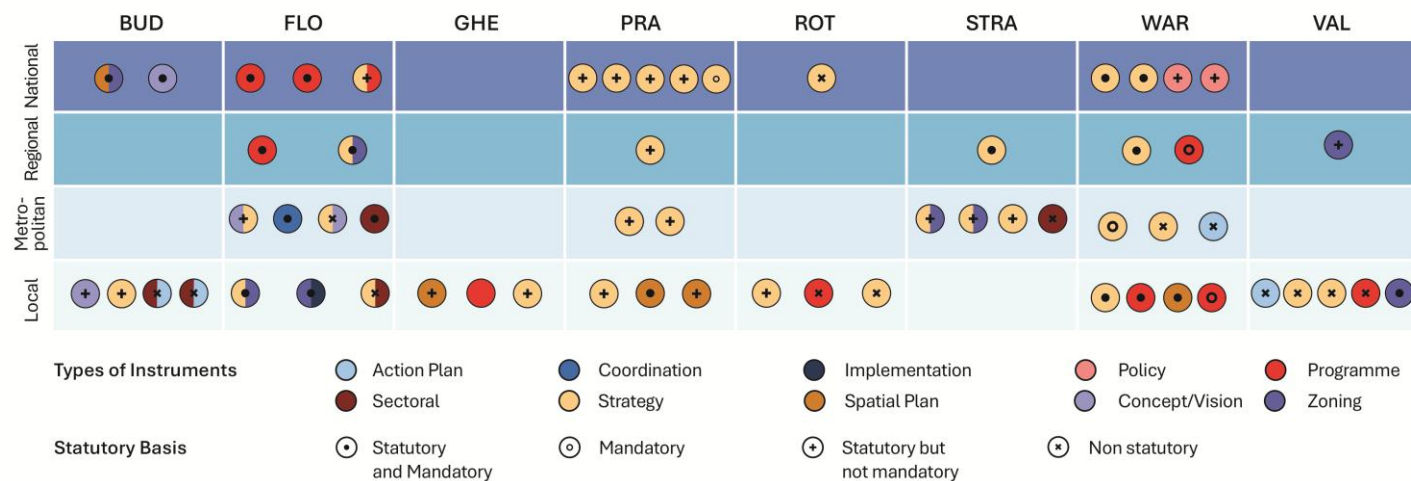
- ❑ Institutional metropolitan areas do not always coincide with effective “functional areas.”

Instruments Used by Cities Across Cohesion Policy Programming Periods (2014–2020 vs 2021–2027)

City	Main Instruments in the 2014-2020 Programming Period	Main Instruments in the 2021-2027 Programming Period
Budapest	IUDS, SUMP, SECAP	IUDS, SUMP, SECAP
Florence	SNAI, NOP Metro (ERDF), ITP (ERDF), SUMP, PULS	SNAI, NOP Metro+ (ERDF), ITP (ERDF), Metropolitan Agenda 2030, SUMP, PULS
Ghent	No formal ITI, Municipal level frameworks	Joint ITI with Antwerp, Municipal level frameworks
Prague	OP Prague – Growth Pole, ITI	Metropolitan ITI
Rotterdam	NPRZ, ITI (ERDF + ESF)	NPRZ, ITI (ERDF)
Strasbourg	Multi-annual Investment Plan, ITI	Multi-annual Investment Plan, ITI
Valencia	ISUDS	EDIL, Valencia 2030 Urban Strategy, Missions Valencia 2030 Program
Warsaw	ZIT Warsaw FUA (ERDF+ESF), #Warszawa2030, SECAP (ERDF), Urban Regeneration Programmes (ERDF + ESF), Smart City (Horizon Europe, ERDF)	, ZIT Warsaw FUA (ERDF+ESF), #Warszawa2030, Strategy2040+ SUMP (ERDF), SECAP (ERDF), Urban Regeneration Programmes (ERDF + ESF), Smart City (Horizon Europe, ERDF), Climate Neutral City (Horizon Europe + ERDF)

Cohesion Policy contributions to city long-term agendas

Density of Development Instruments



EU challenges addressed (14-20 and 21-27)

In a nutshell

Most commonly addressed goals:

Greener & Low-Carbon Development (TO4, TO5, TO6; PO2) and Place-Based Multilevel Administration (TO11; PO5)

Least targeted objectives:

Mobility and ICT Connectivity (TO7; PO3) and Innovation and Smart Economic Transition (TO1, TO2, TO3; PO1).

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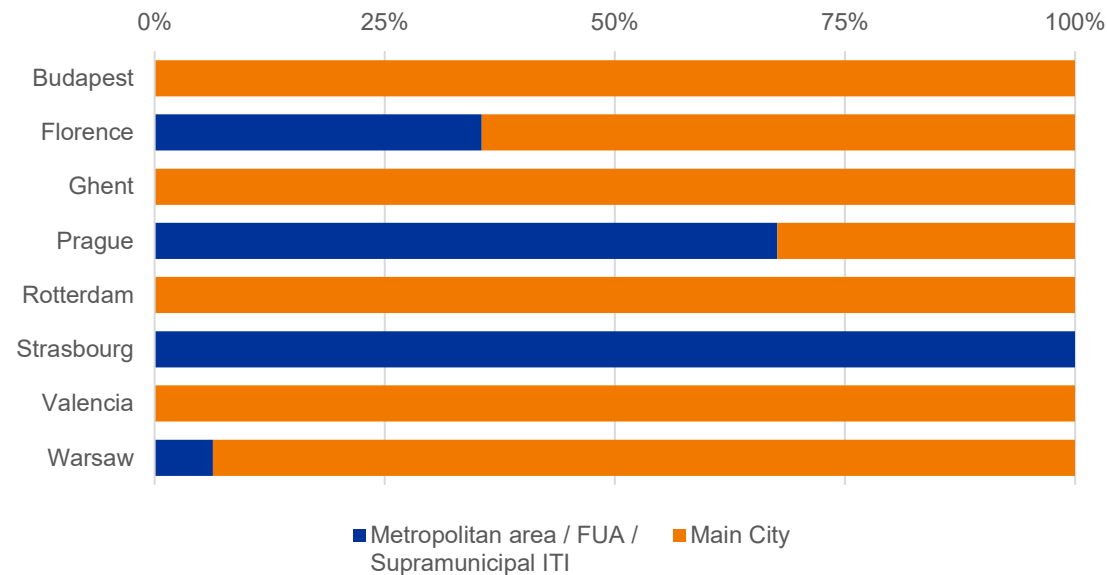
What about funding?

Per capita EU funding with CS local authorities and their entities as beneficiaries during 2014-2020 and 2021-2027 (in EUR)

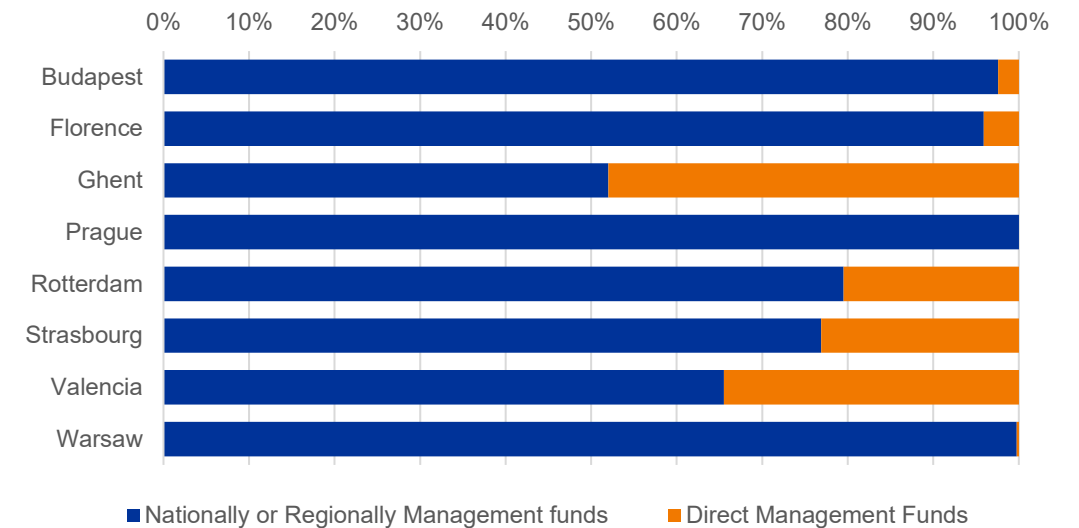
Programming Period	2014-2020					2021-2027					
Fund or programme	ERDF	ESF	CF	Other ¹	Total	ERDF	ESF	CF	Other ¹	Total (excluding RRF)	RRF
Budapest	16.6	1.2	421	7.8 ⁶	447 ⁶	3.7	⁵	71.1	5.0	79.8	0
Florence	205	22	²	16.9 ⁶	244 ⁶	210	24.4	²	5.3	239	1,946
Ghent	29.3	25	²	52.6	107	27.7	3.5	²	26.4	57.6	⁷
Prague	132	71.8	40.9	⁴	244.6	17.5	58.6	126	⁴	202	⁷
Rotterdam	4.8	123	²	23.3	151	6.4	26.8	²	17.5	50.7	⁷
Strasbourg	16.4	9.1	²	7.6	33.1	19.2	9.8	²	8.8	37.8	⁷
Valencia	34.7	³	²	12.8 ⁶	47.5 ⁶	³	³	²	5.5 ⁶	⁶	123
Warsaw	56.8	49.3	897	2.2	1,005	23.3	1.6	282	1.4	308	77.7

1. This category includes only, Horizon, Interreg, LIFE and Urban Initiatives (UIA and EUI) projects
2. These countries are not eligible to CF
3. Valencia's experts have not been able to collect data for these funds, and the CS Stakeholders have not provided their own data.
4. CS Stakeholders focus the efforts of the project only in ESIF funding
5. None of the CS beneficiaries have signed any grant contract for this fund/programme
6. Data is incomplete because not all projects have data for the CS EU funding. Real value must be bigger because budget data is not complete.
7. Data not available at local level (only national databases) nor at beneficiaries' level (joint values for territories)

Number of projects funded within the metropolitan/functional area or supramunicipal ITI boundaries compared with those within the main city boundaries



Difference between projects funded with directly managed or shared managed funds and programmes (CS EU FUNDING)



Recovery and Resilience Plan

Case Study	RRF Planning Involvement (Yes/No/partial)	Implementation Role (Direct/Indirect)	Notes
Budapest	No	Indirect	Governance is highly centralised, EU funds blocked
Florence	Partial	Direct	Coordinated governance, evolving priorities
Ghent	No	Indirect	RRF had a negligible impact at local level
Prague	Partial	Indirect	Duality with Cohesion Policy delivery, more emphasis on innovative projects
Rotterdam	Partial	Indirect	High absorption, low innovation, limited added value
Strasbourg	Partial	Indirect	RRF merged with national funds, low visibility
Valencia	No	Direct	Complex procedures, potential for local innovation
Warsaw	Partial	Indirect	Centralized system, evolving priorities

The RRF has demonstrated the potential to act as a powerful catalyst for urban transformation in contexts where governance mechanisms enabled local authorities to play an active and strategic role. However, its implementation has been uneven, with clear disparities in both financial intensity and governance inclusiveness. The comparative evidence points to the emergence of distinct patterns, considering the planning involvement and implementation role

Planning involvement:

- Partial involvement in RRF planning (see the cases of Florence, Prague, Rotterdam, Strasbourg and Warsaw)
- No involvement (Budapest, Ghent and Valencia)

Implementation:

- Direct involvement (Florence and Valencia)
- Indirect involvement (Budapest, Ghent, Prague, Rotterdam, Strasbourg and Warsaw)

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Main findings and policy recommendations

Conclusion/Findings highlight

- **Centralisation vs decentralisation:** Rotterdam, Florence, Strasbourg, Prague and Warsaw illustrate how decentralised governance empowers cities such as Managing Authorities or Intermediate Bodies. Ghent, show partial co-decision. By contrast, Budapest, though involved in planning the territorial OP, has no MA or IB functions; there is no ITI in Hungary, so the city's role remains limited, and implementation is hindered.
- **Evolving instruments:** ITI is a key innovation. When well-embedded (Warsaw, Prague, Ghent, Strasbourg), they support territorial integration. National instruments such as Italy's NOP Metro or Spain's ISUDS/EDIL highlight the potential of tailored tools to anchor EU funds into urban strategies.
- **Administrative capacity:** Success hinges on cities' ability to manage complexity. Rotterdam and Strasbourg showcase professionalised offices and dedicated EU units. Florence has built internal expertise despite national hiring constraints. In contrast, Valencia, with overstretched staff and fragmented governance, faces metropolitan coordination gaps; Warsaw faces the same; and Budapest's capacity remains underutilised due to administrative and policy constraints.
- **Institutional innovations:** Cities are experimenting with dedicated project offices, interdepartmental coordination, and partnerships. Negative experiences (e.g., failed calls, delayed funds) often lead to institutional learning, highlighting the role of "policy feedback" in improving governance.
- **Synergies and tensions with RRF:** The RRF's rapid rollout revealed asymmetries. Florence and Valencia aligned RRF with urban agendas; Warsaw and Prague faced marginalisation, while Budapest was practically excluded, because RRF funds are blocked for Hungary (due to the Rule of Law procedure). Most cities complained about being sidelined in the centralised RRF frameworks.

Implications for Future Cohesion Policy

While the EU acknowledges cities as drivers of territorial cohesion and transitions, governance systems often prevent them from shaping priorities or securing resources. This undermines the effectiveness of Cohesion Policy, as place-based strategies require local ownership.

Key implications include:

- **Cities** must be treated not only as implementers but as strategic partners in programming and monitoring.
- **Urban governance** should shift from fragmented consultation to structured co-decision mechanisms.
- **Cohesion Policy** should foster stable, predictable urban envelopes, ensuring cities' access regardless of national politics.
- **Administrative capacity-building is as important as funding**: without skilled staff and supportive structures, opportunities remain underused.
- **Synergies** across EU funds (ERDF, ESF+, CF, and JTF) must be reinforced, avoiding duplication and fragmentation.

What to keep in mind

- Cohesion policy **is not just about funding**; it is about governance, roles, and delivery mechanisms.
- The effectiveness of cohesion policy depends not only on the amount of funding, **but on how resources are designed and implemented**.
- Territorial **dimension is central** to the successful implementation of cohesion policy.
- Cities play a **strategic role** in delivering EU funding mechanisms and **translating them into local impact**.
- Cities should be recognised not merely as implementers, but as **active co-designers** of cohesion policy.

Interesting research topics (for students' assignment):

- Explore how small cities (with fewer than 50,000 inhabitants) have participated, and continue to participate, in Cohesion Policy.
- Examine the institutional innovations they have introduced to adapt to EU funding structures and implementation mechanisms.
- Assess the strategic importance of EU funds for small and micro municipalities.

A vibrant, abstract illustration of a village scene composed of various colored geometric shapes like triangles, squares, and rectangles. The houses are in shades of red, orange, yellow, pink, blue, and green, set against a blue background with a light blue sky.

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