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FEEDBACK ON

Call for evidence - Ares(2026)6562391

"Call for Evidence – 10th Report on Economic, Social and Territorial Cohesion, including the outcome of the mid-term review of cohesion policy programmes – Competitive regions for a competitive Union".

Summary This report will assess progress in achieving economic, social and territorial cohesion in the EU. It will examine whether regional disparities have been reduced and how national and EU policies have contributed to the changes. It will identify challenges and opportunities, highlight regional EU priorities and indicate territorial needs. It will also meet the reporting obligation on the outcome of the mid-term review of cohesion policy programmes.

Topic Regional policy

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Studio Legale Internazionale Avv. Simona Putzu welcomes the publication of the European Commission's Call for Evidence concerning the preparation of the Tenth Report on Economic, Social and Territorial Cohesion and the outcome of the Mid-Term Review of Cohesion Policy Programmes.

The initiative represents a crucial opportunity to redefine the strategic orientation of the European Union's cohesion policy beyond 2027. While the document correctly identifies territorial competitiveness, regional disparities and evidence-based policymaking as fundamental objectives, it appears to underestimate several structural dimensions that will increasingly determine the Union's long-term resilience.

The present contribution argues that future cohesion policy cannot be limited to reducing economic disparities alone. Rather, it should evolve into a comprehensive policy framework capable of strengthening the European Social Model, promoting equal opportunities, protecting vulnerable groups and ensuring territorial resilience in the face of demographic, geopolitical, environmental and health-related challenges.

The Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union establishes economic, social and territorial cohesion as one of the Union's constitutional objectives. However, cohesion should no longer be interpreted exclusively through GDP convergence or investment capacity. Modern cohesion must integrate indicators relating to health resilience, quality of public services, social inclusion, demographic sustainability, digital accessibility, gender equality and protection of fundamental rights.

The Call for Evidence correctly recalls Article 175 TFEU and the obligation to prepare the Tenth Cohesion Report, as well as Article 18(6) of Regulation (EU) 2021/1060 concerning the Mid-Term Review of Cohesion Policy Programmes. Nevertheless, the document dedicates limited attention to several policy areas that should instead constitute strategic priorities of the post-2027 programming period, including healthcare, social economy, gender equality, protection of women and children, and integration policies.

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In particular, this Position Paper recommends that the European Commission:

- recognise healthcare systems as strategic infrastructure for territorial competitiveness;
- integrate health resilience indicators into Cohesion Policy performance frameworks;
- reinforce the role of the European Social Fund Plus in combating inequalities;
- promote social economy enterprises as drivers of regional development;
- strengthen measures supporting women's economic empowerment;
- integrate child protection objectives across all cohesion programmes;
- introduce mandatory gender mainstreaming and child rights impact assessments;
- reinforce anti-discrimination mechanisms;
- improve coordination between Cohesion Policy, EU4Health, AMIF and Erasmus+;
- strengthen governance through enhanced transparency, rule of law conditionality and measurable social indicators.

The future Multiannual Financial Framework should therefore reflect a broader understanding of competitiveness, where economic performance and social cohesion reinforce each other rather than competing priorities.

1. INTRODUCTION

Economic, social and territorial cohesion has constituted one of the European Union's fundamental objectives since the adoption of the Single European Act and has progressively acquired constitutional relevance through successive Treaty reforms.

Today, cohesion policy represents the Union's principal investment policy, accounting for nearly one-third of the Multiannual Financial Framework and supporting thousands of regional development projects across all Member States.

The publication of the Call for Evidence marks the beginning of an important institutional reflection on the future direction of cohesion policy after 2027. The

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Commission emphasises that the forthcoming report will provide an evidence-based assessment of regional disparities, evaluate the effectiveness of place-based policies and analyse the implementation of the Mid-Term Review of cohesion programmes.

From a legal perspective, the initiative is firmly grounded in Article 175 TFEU, which requires the Commission to report every three years on progress towards achieving economic, social and territorial cohesion. The report will also fulfil the reporting obligation established under Article 18(6) of Regulation (EU) 2021/1060 concerning the outcome of the Mid-Term Review of Cohesion Policy Programmes.

Studio Legale Internazionale Avv. Simona Putzu considers this consultation an important opportunity to broaden the conceptual foundations of cohesion policy beyond traditional economic indicators.

The European Union is currently facing multiple structural transitions that profoundly affect territorial development:

- demographic ageing;
- declining birth rates;
- increasing migration flows;
- healthcare inequalities;
- digital transformation;
- climate adaptation;
- geopolitical instability;
- growing regional disparities;
- labour market transformation driven by artificial intelligence.

These challenges require cohesion policy to become an integrated governance instrument capable of simultaneously promoting economic competitiveness, social justice and territorial resilience.

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2. GENERAL LEGAL ASSESSMENT OF THE CALL FOR EVIDENCE

The Call for Evidence correctly identifies the legal framework governing the preparation of the Tenth Cohesion Report.

Its primary objective is to provide evidence regarding territorial disparities while evaluating the effectiveness of place-based investments financed through:

- ERDF;
- ESF+;
- Cohesion Fund;
- Just Transition Fund.

The Commission also intends to assess the implementation of the 2025 Mid-Term Review and the reallocations introduced through Regulations (EU) 2025/1913 and 2025/1914.

Although this institutional framework is appropriate, the legal analysis underpinning the consultation appears relatively narrow.

The document focuses primarily on economic convergence, investment performance and regional competitiveness, while devoting comparatively limited attention to the Union's constitutional commitment to social rights and equality.

Article 3(3) TEU expressly provides that the Union shall promote:

- social justice;
- social protection;
- equality between women and men;
- solidarity between generations;
- protection of children's rights.

Similarly, Articles 8, 9 and 10 TFEU establish horizontal obligations requiring all Union policies to integrate:

- gender equality;

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- social protection;
- anti-discrimination.

These provisions are not merely political aspirations but legally binding principles that must inform the design, implementation and evaluation of cohesion policy.

Consequently, future Cohesion Reports should systematically assess:

- access to healthcare;
- educational inequalities;
- gender pay gaps;
- child poverty;
- social exclusion;
- accessibility for persons with disabilities;
- demographic decline;
- quality of public services.

Failure to include these indicators risks producing an incomplete assessment of territorial cohesion.

Furthermore, Article 174 TFEU requires the Union to pay particular attention to regions suffering from severe demographic handicaps, islands, mountainous regions and rural territories.

However, demographic decline should now be interpreted more broadly, encompassing:

- healthcare accessibility;
- shortage of medical professionals;
- ageing populations;
- declining fertility;
- youth emigration;
- digital exclusion.

These interconnected challenges directly affect regional competitiveness and therefore deserve greater prominence within future Cohesion Reports.

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3. CRITICAL OBSERVATIONS ON THE MID-TERM REVIEW OF COHESION POLICY

The Call for Evidence highlights that the Mid-Term Review introduced greater flexibility by allowing Member States to revise programmes and reallocate approximately 15% of programme resources towards emerging political priorities.

This flexibility constitutes a positive development.

Nevertheless, several critical issues deserve closer attention.

First, programme amendments remain largely driven by financial absorption rather than measurable social impact.

The evaluation methodology should evolve from expenditure-based performance towards outcome-oriented governance.

Future monitoring should include indicators relating to:

- reduction of territorial health inequalities;
- reduction of child poverty;
- women's labour market participation;
- social inclusion of migrants;
- accessibility of healthcare services;
- resilience of regional healthcare systems;
- quality of public administration;
- citizens' trust in institutions.

Second, the Mid-Term Review pays insufficient attention to healthcare investment.

The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that regional resilience depends heavily upon healthcare capacity.

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Hospitals, primary healthcare centres, digital health infrastructure and healthcare workforce should therefore be recognised as strategic territorial infrastructure comparable to transport, energy and digital networks.

Third, greater coherence is required between Cohesion Policy and other Union instruments.

Current programming often generates overlaps between:

- Cohesion Policy;
- EU4Health;
- Horizon Europe;
- AMIF;
- Erasmus+;
- Digital Europe Programme.

A stronger integrated governance framework would improve efficiency while reducing administrative fragmentation.

4. HEALTH AS A STRATEGIC PRIORITY FOR THE POST-2027 COHESION POLICY

4.1 From Economic Cohesion to Health Cohesion

While the Call for Evidence rightly focuses on regional competitiveness and territorial disparities, it pays only limited attention to one of the most significant determinants of territorial resilience: the quality, accessibility and sustainability of healthcare systems.

The COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally transformed the European understanding of cohesion. It demonstrated that regional competitiveness cannot be measured solely through GDP growth, employment rates or productivity indicators. Instead, resilient healthcare systems have become an essential component of economic stability, labour market performance and social cohesion.

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The future architecture of Cohesion Policy should therefore formally recognise **Health Cohesion** as a fourth operational dimension complementing economic, social and territorial cohesion.

This concept should encompass:

- equal access to healthcare services;
- reduction of regional health inequalities;
- healthcare workforce availability;
- digital health infrastructure;
- preparedness for future public health emergencies;
- prevention-oriented healthcare policies;
- mental health services;
- long-term care systems.

Such an approach would be fully consistent with Article 168 TFEU, which requires a high level of human health protection in all Union policies.

Moreover, Article 9 TFEU establishes that, in defining and implementing its policies and activities, the Union shall take into account requirements linked to the protection of human health and the guarantee of adequate social protection.

Consequently, future Cohesion Reports should include dedicated indicators measuring territorial disparities in healthcare accessibility and quality.

4.2 Strengthening the Link between Cohesion Policy and the European Health Union

The European Health Union has progressively expanded the Union's capacity to respond to cross-border health threats through enhanced cooperation, reinforced agencies and common preparedness mechanisms.

However, cohesion policy remains only partially integrated with these developments.

The next programming period should establish a stronger institutional connection between:

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- Cohesion Policy;
- EU4Health Programme;
- European Health Data Space;
- Horizon Europe Cluster "Health";
- Digital Europe Programme;
- Civil Protection Mechanism.

Rather than operating independently, these financial instruments should support integrated regional health investment strategies.

For example, ERDF investments in hospital infrastructure should be coordinated with EU4Health funding for healthcare workforce development and digital innovation.

Similarly, ESF+ interventions supporting healthcare professionals should complement investments financed through regional operational programmes.

Such coordination would maximise the impact of Union expenditure while reducing duplication of administrative procedures.

4.3 Health Infrastructure as Strategic Territorial Infrastructure

Traditional cohesion policy has generally prioritised transport, energy and digital infrastructure.

Although these investments remain essential, healthcare infrastructure should now be recognised as equally strategic.

Modern hospitals, community healthcare centres, telemedicine platforms and integrated emergency services contribute directly to:

- regional productivity;
- labour market participation;
- demographic resilience;
- business attractiveness;
- investment capacity;
- quality of life.

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The absence of adequate healthcare services accelerates depopulation, discourages private investment and increases territorial inequalities.

Accordingly, the post-2027 regulatory framework should explicitly identify healthcare infrastructure among the strategic investment priorities eligible for enhanced Union support.

4.4 Addressing Territorial Health Inequalities

One of the principal shortcomings of the current cohesion framework lies in the absence of systematic monitoring of regional health disparities.

Significant inequalities continue to exist across Member States and within regions concerning:

- life expectancy;
- access to specialised healthcare;
- cancer screening;
- maternal healthcare;
- mental health services;
- waiting times;
- healthcare workforce density;
- rural healthcare accessibility.

These disparities undermine the objective of territorial cohesion.

The future Cohesion Report should therefore include a dedicated chapter analysing territorial health inequalities through harmonised indicators developed in cooperation with Eurostat, the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) and the European Health Data Space governance framework.

4.5 Demographic Transition and Long-Term Care

Demographic ageing constitutes one of the most significant structural challenges facing European regions.

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The decline in birth rates, increasing life expectancy and growing demand for long-term care services require cohesion policy to move beyond traditional infrastructure investment.

Greater financial support should be allocated to:

- integrated long-term care systems;
- community-based services;
- healthy ageing programmes;
- active ageing strategies;
- healthcare workforce retention;
- digital care solutions;
- informal carers.

Such investments should be recognised as productive social investments rather than merely welfare expenditure.

5. SOCIAL ECONOMY AS A DRIVER OF TERRITORIAL DEVELOPMENT

5.1 Recognising the Strategic Role of the Social Economy

The Call for Evidence focuses primarily on economic competitiveness but does not sufficiently recognise the contribution of the social economy to regional development.

This represents an important omission.

Across the European Union, social enterprises, cooperatives, mutual societies, associations and foundations provide essential services that strengthen territorial resilience, particularly in rural and disadvantaged regions.

The Social Economy Action Plan adopted by the European Commission has already acknowledged the strategic importance of this sector.

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Future cohesion policy should therefore integrate social economy objectives across all major Funds.

5.2 Social Enterprises and Public Services

Social enterprises increasingly contribute to:

- healthcare;
- social inclusion;
- elderly care;
- disability services;
- education;
- vocational training;
- labour market integration.

They often operate where conventional market mechanisms fail to ensure adequate service provision.

Consequently, Cohesion Policy should facilitate their access to:

- ERDF financing;
- ESF+ resources;
- InvestEU guarantees;
- financial instruments supporting social innovation.

Specific technical assistance should also be provided to strengthen administrative capacity among smaller social economy organisations.

5.3 Measuring Social Impact

Current programme evaluation focuses predominantly on financial absorption and quantitative outputs.

Future monitoring frameworks should instead incorporate social impact indicators capable of measuring:

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- reduction of inequalities;
- improvement of quality of life;
- community resilience;
- social innovation;
- citizen participation;
- inclusion of vulnerable groups.

The development of common European methodologies for measuring social impact would improve accountability and enhance the strategic orientation of cohesion investments.

6. INTEGRATION, MIGRATION AND SOCIAL INCLUSION

6.1 Migration as a Territorial Development Opportunity

Migration is frequently perceived exclusively as a security or border management issue.

However, from a cohesion perspective, migration also represents a demographic, economic and territorial opportunity.

Several European regions experiencing population decline depend increasingly upon migration to sustain labour markets, public services and economic activity.

Future cohesion policy should therefore strengthen the integration dimension of regional development strategies.

6.2 Integrated Local Policies

Successful integration requires coordinated investments in:

- housing;
- healthcare;
- education;

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- vocational training;
- language acquisition;
- labour market access;
- digital inclusion.

These measures should be financed through stronger coordination between ESF+, ERDF and the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF).

Integrated Territorial Investments (ITIs) could provide an appropriate governance framework for implementing such strategies at local level.

6.3 Protecting Vulnerable Migrants

Special attention should be devoted to vulnerable categories, including:

- unaccompanied minors;
- women exposed to gender-based violence;
- victims of trafficking;
- persons with disabilities;
- elderly migrants.

Cohesion programmes should systematically incorporate safeguards ensuring equal access to public services and effective enjoyment of fundamental rights.

7. EQUALITY, NON-DISCRIMINATION AND GENDER MAINSTREAMING AS HORIZONTAL PRIORITIES

7.1 From Formal Equality to Substantive Equality

The Call for Evidence emphasises competitiveness and territorial development but does not explicitly identify equality and non-discrimination as central evaluation criteria for the future of Cohesion Policy. This omission risks overlooking a constitutional dimension of the European Union.

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Articles 2 and 3 TEU establish equality, human dignity, respect for human rights and solidarity as foundational values of the Union. These principles are reinforced by Articles 8, 9 and 10 TFEU, which require that gender equality, social inclusion and the fight against discrimination be integrated into all Union policies.

Future cohesion policy should therefore move beyond compliance-oriented approaches and adopt **substantive equality** as a measurable policy objective.

The Commission should require that every programme financed under the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) and the Cohesion Fund includes:

- gender equality objectives;
- equality indicators;
- anti-discrimination measures;
- monitoring mechanisms for vulnerable groups.

This horizontal integration would strengthen the coherence between Cohesion Policy and the European Pillar of Social Rights.

7.2 Gender Mainstreaming in the Post-2027 Programming Period

Gender equality should not be treated as a standalone thematic priority but as a cross-cutting principle applicable to all investments.

Future regulations governing cohesion policy should require Managing Authorities to conduct **Gender Impact Assessments** before approving major programmes and projects.

Such assessments should evaluate the likely impact of investments on:

- women's labour market participation;
- equal pay;
- access to healthcare;
- access to education;
- digital inclusion;

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- entrepreneurship;
- rural women's economic participation.

The Commission should also develop common European indicators capable of measuring the gender impact of cohesion investments.

8. PROTECTION OF WOMEN AND CHILDREN AS A STRATEGIC DIMENSION OF COHESION

8.1 Protecting Women Against Violence

The adoption of Directive (EU) 2024/1385 on combating violence against women and domestic violence represents a significant step towards strengthening fundamental rights within the European Union.

However, legislative protection alone is insufficient.

Regional disparities continue to affect:

- availability of shelters;
- specialised support services;
- psychological assistance;
- legal aid;
- access to healthcare;
- rehabilitation programmes.

Cohesion Policy should therefore explicitly support investments aimed at strengthening regional protection systems for women exposed to violence.

Eligible investments should include:

- integrated support centres;
- digital reporting mechanisms;
- specialised healthcare services;

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- multidisciplinary protection networks;
- professional training for police, judiciary and healthcare personnel.

Reducing territorial inequalities in protection services would directly contribute to economic participation, social inclusion and territorial resilience.

8.2 Child Protection and Equal Opportunities

Child poverty remains one of the principal social challenges affecting territorial cohesion.

Future Cohesion Reports should therefore incorporate indicators measuring:

- early childhood education accessibility;
- child healthcare;
- nutrition;
- digital inclusion;
- educational attainment;
- social exclusion.

Particular attention should be devoted to children living in:

- rural areas;
- outermost regions;
- islands;
- disadvantaged urban neighbourhoods.

The implementation of the European Child Guarantee should become an integral component of future Cohesion Policy.

8.3 Demographic Sustainability

Many European regions experience declining birth rates combined with ageing populations and youth emigration.

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These demographic trends undermine economic competitiveness, labour market sustainability and social cohesion.

Future cohesion investments should therefore support:

- family policies;
- affordable childcare;
- reproductive healthcare;
- youth employment;
- affordable housing;
- work-life balance;
- accessible public services.

Demographic sustainability should become one of the principal indicators of territorial resilience.

9. GOVERNANCE, RULE OF LAW AND ADMINISTRATIVE CAPACITY

The effectiveness of Cohesion Policy depends not only on financial resources but also on the quality of governance.

Future Cohesion Reports should therefore devote greater attention to:

- administrative capacity;
- transparency;
- accountability;
- anti-corruption mechanisms;
- public procurement quality;
- judicial effectiveness.

The Commission should further strengthen links between Cohesion Policy and respect for the rule of law.

Efficient public administration remains one of the strongest determinants of successful programme implementation.

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Technical assistance should increasingly focus on:

- digitalisation of Managing Authorities;
- simplification of procedures;
- reduction of administrative burdens;
- capacity building;
- evidence-based policymaking.

10. RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION

Studio Legale Internazionale Avv. Simona Putzu respectfully submits the following recommendations.

The future post-2027 Cohesion Policy should:

1. recognise healthcare systems as strategic territorial infrastructure;
2. introduce a dedicated Health Cohesion dimension;
3. establish common European health resilience indicators;
4. strengthen investments in mental health;
5. improve healthcare accessibility in rural regions;
6. reinforce the integration between Cohesion Policy and EU4Health;
7. strengthen the role of the social economy;
8. support social enterprises through simplified financing;
9. promote integrated migration policies;
10. improve protection of vulnerable migrants;
11. introduce mandatory Gender Impact Assessments;
12. mainstream equality objectives across all Funds;
13. strengthen women's economic participation;
14. support regional protection systems against gender-based violence;
15. integrate child protection objectives into programme evaluation;
16. strengthen demographic resilience measures;
17. improve governance indicators;
18. simplify administrative procedures;
19. reinforce rule of law conditionality;

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20.adopt multidimensional indicators of territorial cohesion that combine economic, social, health and demographic factors.

11. CONCLUSIONS

The forthcoming Tenth Report on Economic, Social and Territorial Cohesion represents more than a periodic reporting exercise required by Article 175 TFEU.

It constitutes a strategic opportunity to redefine the meaning of cohesion within an increasingly complex European Union.

Economic competitiveness cannot be dissociated from social inclusion, healthcare resilience, demographic sustainability or respect for fundamental rights.

The next generation of cohesion policy should therefore embrace a broader concept of competitiveness, recognising that resilient societies generate resilient economies.

Future cohesion investments should promote not only regional growth but also equal opportunities, accessible healthcare, high-quality public services, gender equality, protection of children, integration of migrants and sustainable demographic development.

Only through such an integrated approach will the European Union be able to fulfil the constitutional objective of economic, social and territorial cohesion while reinforcing citizens' trust in the European project.

Studio Legale Internazionale Avv. Simona Putzu reiterates its support for the Commission's initiative and encourages the adoption of a post-2027 Cohesion Policy that is fully aligned with the values enshrined in the Treaties, the Charter of Fundamental Rights and the European Pillar of Social Rights.

Rome, 22.07.2026

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