

## The recent reforms of Cohesion Policy in Italy: Some considerations and implications

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## **The recent reforms of Cohesion Policy in Italy:** Some considerations and implications<sup>1</sup>

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### **Executive summary**

Cohesion Policy has been the subject of wide debate both within the literature in the field and in the policy arena, and the future of Cohesion Policy (post 2027) is currently under discussion in Brussels. The overarching aim of the policy is to pursue economic development as well as cohesion and equity across the European territory. Since the first reform of the structural funds, the Commission has pushed subnational government to increase their share of responsibilities in the design, management, and monitoring of a larger part of the Cohesion Policy funding. This short paper examines the case of the recent reforms of Cohesion Policy in Italy. It discusses a number of arrangements that have been implemented, concentrating powers and recentralizing Cohesion Policy from regional to national authorities. The analysis of the concentration and recentralization trends in the management of EU Cohesion Policy in Italy is part of a wider discussion regarding the extent to which the crises of recent years have been challenging the balance between the EU, central governments, and regional authorities. The present and future perspectives of the governance of Cohesion Policy represent fertile ground to investigate the existing dynamics, given the fundamental role of the policy in the very definition of EU multilevel governance systems.

**Keywords:** Cohesion Policy, Italy, European Union, centralization, Member States

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## 1. The role of Cohesion Policy in the EU's regionalization

Cohesion Policy played an important role in fostering *regionalism* in the EU. One of the main innovations of the policy, since its first formulation after the European Single Act (1986) and the first reform of the structural funds (1989), was the identification of regions as the main territorial units. Consequently, structural funds were moved from supporting essentially budgetary transfers to a policy that aimed to solve the structural problems of Member States' regions (Brunazzo, 2016). Employing a mixture of thematic and territorial objectives, the European Cohesion Policy *de facto* classified European regions, identifying regions that are 'lagging behind'.

As a side effect, **European Cohesion Policy also had an impact on spaces of regionalism** (Jones and MacLeod, 2004), **reinforcing regional identities and the ongoing processes of decentralization** (Caciagli, 2006). Within the EU debate, decentralization was key to the mitigation of the democratic gap by enhancing deliberative democracy from below, effectively bringing Brussels closer to the citizens (Nicola, 2011). The policy promoted the greater involvement of sub-national authorities in policy-making at European scale and in the European policy arena (Hooge, 1996; Piattoni, 2016). For many regions, Cohesion Policy was one of the first training grounds where they could test their internal capacity, as well as their ability to impact national and European policy processes, either alone or through alliances and networking (Caciagli, 2006). From this viewpoint, **Cohesion Policy contributed to the emergence of the regions and the EU as the main actors** in the European policy arena, also engendering the definition of multilevel governance (Hooghe and Marks, 2003; Piattoni, 2010).

Cohesion Policy has also been crucial for identifying differentiation as a distinctive necessary characteristic of each local development policy. The Barca Report (2009), in particular, called for a rethinking of the policy intervention for local development by reversing the upside-down logic: the local mobilization of the stakeholders through a broad and participated approach became a necessary condition for local development interventions to be effective (Barca et al, 2012).

Cohesion Policy is currently undergoing a process of profound questioning and transformation. The extant literature recognized how, in the aftermath of the drastic fall in public investment, due to the austerity policies implemented after the 2008 financial crisis and the subsequent sovereign debt crisis across Europe, Cohesion Policy has become the major source of finance for public investment for many European countries

(Prota et al., 2020); at the same time, the evolution of the policy is under scrutiny in times of shifting priorities (Molica et al, 2024; Molica 2024).

## 2. Recentralization of Cohesion Policy in Italy

Following the results of the elections of September 2022 in Italy, the new right-wing prime minister, Giorgia Meloni, appointed Raffaele Fitto, a member of the same ‘Fratelli d’Italia’ party, as Minister of European Affairs, Cohesion Policy, and the NRRP on October 22, 2022. On November 10, the competences of the new minister were enlarged to include the ‘South’, which in the original plan was attached to the Ministry for Sea Politics and the South. While responding to the need for coordination, the coexistence in the hands of the same ministry of both the NRRP and the Cohesion Policy prompted an inevitable confrontation between two very different models, since the NRRP is primarily managed centrally by the relevant minister, with a top-down approach that is also due to the need to spend the resources in a very limited amount of time (Kölling and Hernández-Moreno 2023), while Cohesion Policy is based on participation and on the stronger role of regional authorities.

In February 2023, the new ministry published a report concerning the state of the implementation of the EU Cohesion Policy in Italy (Ministero per gli Affari Europei, il Sud, le Politiche di Coesione e il PNRR, 2023). The report highlighted the long-lasting problem of expenditure, namely the slow nature of Cohesion Policy funds in Italy that is usually attributed to a weak public administration. In order to address the limited capacity of the public administration to manage structural funds, the report highlighted in its concluding remarks the need for “rethinking the system of governance of Cohesion Policy, to strengthen effectively and in a timely manner the action of impulse, coordination, and strategic management of the funds” (p. 90, translated by the authors from the Italian version).

Subsequently, three crucial legislative acts were approved over the course of one year (April 2023 – May 2024): Decree 13/2023 (April 2023); Decree 124/2023 (September 2023); and Decree 60/2024 (May 2024). The decrees (in Italian ‘decreti legge’) are acts that emanate directly from the government, skip discussion in parliament, enter into force immediately, and are then converted into law. The use of decrees, instead of the formal process of the approval of new laws, has become increasingly common in Italy in recent decades, as it presents clear advantages in terms of speed, and also denies parliament the opportunity of debate, *de facto* overriding it rather than obtaining its support (Musella, 2012).

The main novelties introduced by the decrees are discussed further below.

**Decree 13/2023 (April 2023):** The first step designed to transform the governance of Cohesion Policy was taken on April 2023, a few months after the new government's election, with the approval of Decree DL 13/2023, which was converted into Law 41/2023, and was dedicated to urgent measures related to the NRRP. The decree included a number of provisions related to the implementation of the NRRP, as well as being designed to simplify and promote the greater effectiveness of the public administration. One of the provisions, related to Cohesion Policy, abolished the Agency for Territorial Cohesion, with all the associated competences moved to the Department for Cohesion Policy, located in the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, that was already responsible for the programming of structural funds. The agency was created in 2014 on the wave of the aforementioned Barca Report (2009), which pushed for stronger and specific national assistance and control over the (place-based) activities conducted by local and regional authorities. Indeed, the agency had an explicit 'place-based' mission that aimed to "facilitate cooperation of institutions and the creation of strategic partnerships" and offered "support to the implementation of EU and national programmes through actions accompanying central and regional administration (..) and local authorities."<sup>2</sup> The decision to close the agency was motivated by the need for stronger coordination between Cohesion Policy and NRRP funds, which, as mentioned previously, are based on a far more centralized and top-down governance model.

**Decree 124/2023 (September 2023):** The so-called 'Decree South', Decree 124/2023, which was converted into Law 162/2023, included urgent measures related to Cohesion Policy and the economy of the Italian Mezzogiorno, and was approved in September 2023. It addressed three main elements: the management of the Development and Cohesion Fund, the governance of the Italian Strategy for Inner Areas, and the Special Economic Zones (SEZ).

The Development and Cohesion Fund (in Italian 'Fondo Sviluppo e Coesione' [FSC]) is the principal national instrument designed to implement the policies for economic, social, and political cohesion, and to remove economic disparities. The fund is complementary to the structural funds and overlaps with the cohesion

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<sup>2</sup> Translated by the authors from the website of the Agency for Territorial Cohesion, <https://www.agenziacoesione.gov.it/lagenzia/obiettivi-e-finalita/mission/#:~:text=L'Agenzia%20promuove%20lo%20sviluppo,la%20capacità%20amministrativa%20delle%20amministr azioni>

programming period; for the 2021-2027 period, it is funded with 75.8 billion Euros: 80% is devoted to the regions of the Mezzogiorno and 20% to the central-northern region.

The Decree 124/2023 has had a significant impact on the functioning and governance of the FSC. In particular, it replaced the PSC with ‘cohesion agreements’ (accordi per la coesione). These must now be signed by the central government and each regional government (in fact, 19 regional governments and the two autonomous provinces of Trento and Bolzano). The contents of the agreement are set by the Minister of Cohesion and the president of each region, with “a proactive role of relevant central administrations” (Decree 124/2023, Art. 1). Each agreement includes an annex with the list of the projects to be funded, along with the procedural targets for each and the annual expenditure schedule of the agreement. According to the decree, there are three cases in which the administration will be subject to a de-commitment of the resources: 1) the lack of entry of project monitoring data into the national monitoring system; 2) the lack of the submission of the semi-annual progress report to the Department for Cohesion Policy; and 3) the lack of achievement of the annual financial targets set for the agreement. The Department for Cohesion Policy of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers decides the reallocation of the financial resources after consulting with the relevant administration.

The centralization of the recent reform depended on a few key aspects. The regions previously had substantial space for manoeuvrability and autonomy at the programming level. Following the 2023 reform, a double re-centralization dynamic occurred, the first of which was the regional level: with the abolishment of the monitoring committees, the drafting of the cohesion agreements now lies in the hands of the regional governments alone, with no compulsory involvement of other local actors and civil society; the latter is left to the single decisions of the regions. At the central level, a new body, the Technical Supervisory Board (Comitato Tecnico di Indirizzo e Vigilanza), chaired by the Department for Cohesion Policy and joined by the Ministry of Finance, the Minister of Infrastructure and Transportation, and representatives of the regional governments, has replaced the various monitoring committees and is responsible for decisions regarding the modification of the agreements.

The second innovation of the decree is related to the governance of the Italian Strategy for Inner Areas, one of the most relevant examples of place-based, participatory development strategies developed for Italian marginal territories since the 2014-2020 programming period (Leonetti and Lucatelli, 2024). The governance of the strategy has been modified with the creation of a steering committee (Cabina di regia) that involves

not only all of the relevant ministries, but also the President of the Conference of Regions and Autonomous Provinces and of the Unions of Provinces, Cities, and Mountain Communities, under the coordination of the Ministry for European Affairs, South, Cohesion Policy, and the NRRP, which also coordinates the framework programme agreements. The conversion to law of the decree added the possibility for regional presidents to be involved in the meetings of the steering committee when they concerned topics of interest. The steering committee has much wider competences with respect to the technical committee, which remains responsible for approving the technical aspects<sup>3</sup> of projects, and has a guiding role, as it is responsible for approving a National Strategic Plan for the strategy, setting areas of intervention and strategic priorities. No similar document was present in the previous governance structure.

The third innovation introduced by the decree concerns the SEZ, which is a tool of economic policy that has been employed widely to encourage local economic development by attracting investment and facilitating business. They are designed to establish a differentiated set of incentives in a delimited area within a set of specific sectors, for instance by introducing specific fiscal incentives and regulations, as well as reducing red tape activities for the businesses concerned. The logic of the SEZ is also often linked to the establishment of specific transport facilities, such as commercial ports in areas next to the sea to establish convenient commercial routes.

Italy introduced the SEZ in 2017 as an instrument for economic development in the southern regions of the Mezzogiorno, to help to reduce the economic disparities with the rest of the country. In total, eight different SEZ were established, two of them ‘inter-regional’ (established in 2019), two in Sicily, and the others in the regions of Abruzzo, Campania, Calabria (2020), and Sardinia (2021). All of the SEZ were designed around a port connected to the Trans-European transportation network, pushing for them to become relevant *hubs* for the Italian Mezzogiorno and with the markets of Northern Europe, exploiting their centrality within the Mediterranean Sea. The aim of the SEZ was to create favourable conditions to encourage economic development in the areas by both incentivizing local firms and encouraging the creation of new businesses, as well as attracting direct foreign investment in the area. The specific instruments involved were fiscal incentives for investment, as well as the simplification and reduction of red tape, to encourage new

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<sup>3</sup> The structure of the new governance is explained in the supporting documents available on the website of the Department of Cohesion Policy, available in Italian at: <https://www.politichecoesione.governo.it/it/politica-di-coesione/strategie-tematiche-e-territoriali/strategie-territoriali/strategia-nazionale-aree-interne-snai/le-aree-interne-2021-2027/organizzazione-e-governance/consultazione-per-il-piano-strategico-nazionale-delle-aree-interne/>

investment and/or to establish new affiliates. The SEZ were established with a bottom-up approach, following the specific request of the regional governments and consulted with the major players regarding the municipalities concerned. Second, the strategic plan of the development of a single SEZ was also to be developed by the regional government with the specific identification of the industry specialization trajectories to be developed.

The decree has transformed the structure and governance of the SEZ. First, the eight inter-regional and regional SEZ have been merged into one single South SEZ, which includes all the eight Italian southern regions; in fact, the new SEZ includes the entire Italian Mezzogiorno territory, a total of 2,551 municipalities. Second, the governance is now located under the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, tasked with developing the new strategy of the SEZ, along with coordination and monitoring.<sup>4</sup> The executive branch of the South SEZ is a new body called the “Mission structure” (Struttura di Missione), which is also located at the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, under the coordination of the Ministry for the South, Cohesion Policy, and the NRRP. This structure is responsible for the administration, implementation, and monitoring of the activities foreseen in the strategic plan, which is the other relevant novelty of the South SEZ. The plan will identify the development policy of the SEZ, identifying for the various regions the new sectors and those to be improved, as well as the investment required, including that for industrial restructuring. The plan is prepared by the Struttura di Missione.<sup>5</sup>

### **Decree 60/2024 (April 2024)**

In April 2024, a decree that reformed Cohesion Policy in Italy was approved, and was converted into Law 95/2024. The purpose was to modify the governance of Cohesion Policy, in order to “ensure a coordinated program between the different levels of government and their complementarity with the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP)” (Decree 60/2024, Art. 1). The most relevant provisions in terms of governance were the following: 1) the introduction of a steering committee, 2) the identification of the strategic sectors for Cohesion Policy, and 3) the connection between Cohesion Policy and the STEP.

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<sup>4</sup> The *Cabina di Regia* is coordinated by the Ministry for the South, Cohesion Policy, and the NRRP, and includes many different ministries, including the Ministry for Regional Affairs, the Presidents of the Regions, and the President of the Italian Association of Municipalities.

<sup>5</sup> In terms of the instruments, these include a number of simplified procedures designed to reduce the time required for the administrative authorizations, namely ensuring that there is less red tape, and ensuring tax credits for investments.



The steering committee is based on the body that, before the reform, operated as a place of dialogue and exchange concerning the national Development and Cohesion Fund, which was based on Law 190/2014. The renovated steering committee not only includes general representatives of the ministries and regions, but also explicitly includes representatives from the political level, enlarging the composition to include the presidents of regions and autonomous provinces, as well as presidents of associations of provinces and municipalities. Moreover, the steering committee has the role of coordinating the interventions implemented at the local level with those implemented at the central level, funded by the Cohesion Policy. It is interesting to note that these functions were already responsible for the monitoring committee of the partnership agreement, which includes among its members representatives of the European Commission and the socio-economic partnership. The steering committee therefore offers an entirely national and entirely governmental body for the discussion of progress in the implementation of Cohesion Policy. Moreover, the committee promotes the coordination between the interventions funded by Cohesion Policy, those funded by the NRRP, and those funded by the Development Cohesion Fund. Finally, it identifies the priorities of the STEP to receive co-funding from the resources of Cohesion Policy.

The second relevant provision of the decree is the identification of strategic sectors to be targeted as the primary intervention fields of Cohesion Policy in Italy. The decree identifies hydric resource management, infrastructures to contain hydrogeological risk, garbage, transport and sustainable mobility, energy, and support for the competitiveness of the business sector. All levels of government, including the ministries, regions, and autonomous provinces, are required to identify their own set of primary interventions for each of these strategic sectors. Among the 11 criteria to be followed for identifying these interventions are 1) the presence of strong complementarities with the FSC and with the NRRP, 2) the overcoming of territorial disparities, and 3) consistency with the South SEZ strategy.

The third important provision is that concerned with the implementation of the STEP. The STEP is the Commission's most important attempt to mobilize investment in the strategic sectors that will reduce the Member States' dependency on foreign key technology, thus improving the strategic autonomy of the EU.<sup>6</sup> The law establishes that both the national and the regional programmes of Cohesion Policy 2021-2027 can be amended to sustain investment in the areas of intervention identified by the STEP.

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<sup>6</sup> The STEP was established by the EU in 2024 to support European industry and to boost business investment in critical technologies in Europe. The aim of the STEP is to raise and steer funding across 11 EU programmes to three target investment areas: digital technologies and deep-tech innovation, clean and resource efficient technologies, and biotechnologies.

### 3. Discussion and Conclusions

The analysis presented above evidences the clear process of (re)centralization in Cohesion Policy governance in Italy with the aim of ensuring a stronger coordination between different funds, in particular between Cohesion Policy and the NRRP, as well as industrial policy. The decrees analysed above were officially aimed at increasing the efficiency of the policy and the absorption capacity of cohesion funds; however, de facto, **they promoted a recentralization of the governance of cohesion policy.** The reasons can be various. Although the declared aim of the government was to better coordinate cohesion policy with the NRRP and industrial policy, it should also be considered that cohesion policy, aimed at fighting disparities across the EU, represents a significant and stable amount of resources, and is thus potentially attractive for covering new needs such as competitiveness or large technological projects (IPCEI) and defence, as it is emerging in the current debate in Brussels. Such reprogramming of the policy could be achieved more effectively with a centralized management.

The fact that the process of re-centralization has involved Cohesion Policy is particularly relevant, as Cohesion Policy is quintessential to the bottom-up approach and place-based logic in policy making, as well as being a crucial framework of multilevel governance. It is possibly the most important policy area in which regional governments interact directly with the EU, and vice versa, bypassing the national level. Many Italian Regions have indeed protested against recent attempts of recentralization; one of the most resonant cases was that of the Campania Region, which brought to the Constitutional Court the reform that involved the Development and Cohesion Fund, as discussed above.<sup>7</sup>

Our evidence is consistent with the return of the State, which has happened gradually since the financial and economic crisis and has increased in the subsequent years. A renewed role for the nation is also emerging within the EU framework, in which the policy thinking and the policy agenda has been changing swiftly and remarkably. The strict and orthodox rules of internal competition policies, coupled with international trade liberalization and multilateralism, have paved the way to a revamping of state aid, industrial policy, and anti-dumping policies in order to foster the strategic autonomy of the EU (Schmitz and Seidl, 2023). **A central implication of this is the greater role played by the national governments.**

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<sup>7</sup> For a comment, see: <https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/politiche-coesione-bivio-centralizzazione-e-approccio-basso-AGP57OOB>

The implementation of the Next Generation EU has advanced in the same direction. The national plans have been designed and managed at the level of national government, with a top-down approach. Moreover, the NRRP, funded by the Next Generation EU, proposes the introduction of innovative mechanisms in areas that were already under discussion within the framework of Cohesion Policy, for example in terms of performance-oriented evaluation. This paper evidences how, in the case of Italy, the governance of Cohesion Policy has been linked to the governance of the NRRP. **Hence, the discussion concerning the future of Cohesion Policy inevitably also revolves around the NRRP model.**

Another key implication is whether the funding of cohesion policy can be directed towards objectives of industrial policy. The overlapping and possible combinations between industrial policy and cohesion policy need further scrutiny. However, the trade-off here would be between the objective of social cohesion and that of strategic autonomy. This will probably represent a key issue on which the economic policy agenda of the next programming period will need to find a new point of equilibrium. At this stage a possible outcome is a *marriage of convenience* between cohesion policy (that is, regional policy) and industrial policy. What would allow lagging regions not to be crowded out from the rise of industrial policy is a sort of *regionalization* of the latter. This would justify employing financial resources from cohesion policy in industrial policy (including expenditures on defence), to the extent that the benefits are not limited to the more advanced territories of the EU.

The process of centralization discussed in this short paper is not happening only at national scale and the example of Italy is rather to be framed in a wider context. While a number of documents were published in the last years calling for the protection of the partnership principle and of a place-based and “decentralized” cohesion policy (European Commission, 2024), different priorities and approaches are also widespread, in particular within the new European Commission, which began its work on December 2024, with Raffaele Fitto being responsible for cohesion policy and reforms. Although we have to wait until July 2025 for the publication of the official proposals for post 2027, preliminary documents (European Commission 2025a, 2025b) emphasize emerging priorities to be covered with cohesion policy, namely industrial policy and defence. A discussion is also open on a recentralization process (namely, the adoption of national envelopes of funding instead of regional programmes<sup>8</sup>), which is in fact functional to addressing those emerging

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<sup>8</sup> See Demidov and Schwab, 2025.

priorities. As a reaction, the regions have recently restated the centrality of the place-based approach against any attempt to centralised cohesion policy.<sup>9</sup>

In conclusion, a new governance model in local development strategies is expected to emerge that differs in terms of both those in place in the 1960s and the 1970s, as well as that which emerged from the re-scaling process begun in the 1980s. The new centrality of the national governments will be located in a context of greater competition with the lower levels of government, on the one hand. On the other hand, national governments will also need to negotiate their autonomy within the EU governance context, an ability that was virtually absent before the 1990s. To the extent that the process of integration in the EU will keep moving away from an inter-governmental organization towards a supranational organization, with a greater role given to the European Commission and the Parliament, it is less likely that there will be a re-establishment of the fully-fledged nation state model of economic policy. We are more likely to observe a more central role for the nation states that is conditioned and hinged upon the multi-level governance model of the EU, requiring national governments to enter into a permanent negotiation with their supranational commitments to the EU and their internal devolution arrangements.

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<sup>9</sup> See here: <https://cor.europa.eu/en/news/regional-leaders-and-evp-fitto-commit-shape-renewed-place-based-cohesion-policy-fight-territorial>

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