



PANORAMA

Focusing on European Regional and Urban Policy

WINTER 2020 / No. 75



Panorama Goes Green and Digital in 2021

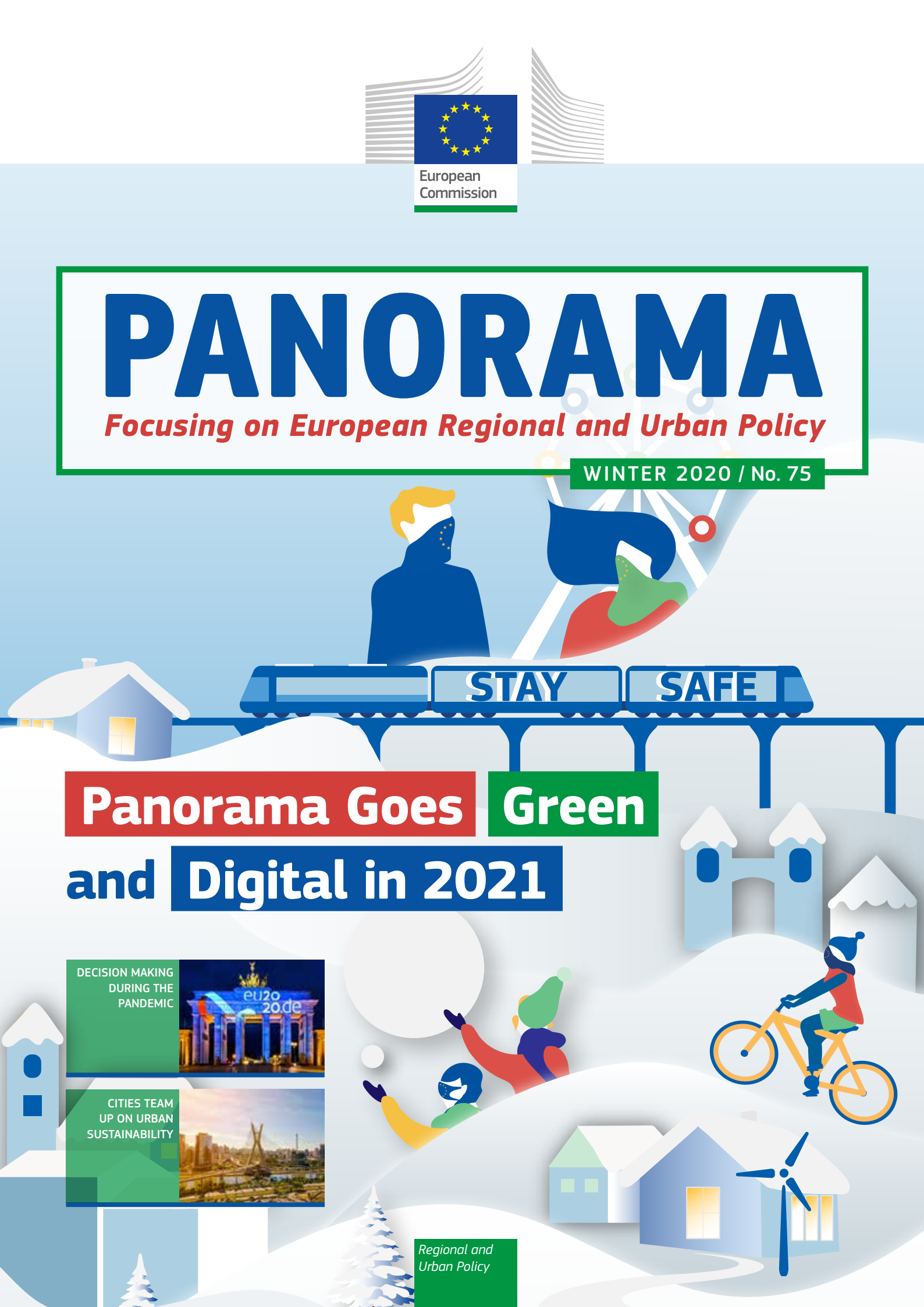
DECISION MAKING
DURING THE
PANDEMIC



CITIES TEAM
UP ON URBAN
SUSTAINABILITY



Regional and
Urban Policy



PANORAMA

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EDITORIAL

This strange and atypical year 2020 is coming to an end at roughly the same time as the present European Commission's team is celebrating one year in office.

When we took office in December 2019, we knew we were facing a year full of challenges, linked in particular to the approval of the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2021-2027, the legal texts relating to the revised Cohesion regulations for the same period, and the creation of the new Just Transition Fund.

I also intended to visit at least one region per country during this first year to intensify the dialogue and listen to local concerns and aspirations.

Reality imposed a very different agenda: in a couple of months, our lives and the lives of all Europeans changed dramatically as the result of the coronavirus pandemic. My thoughts are with those who lost loved ones or suffered from this virus. My gratitude goes to all of you who have continued working and delivering in such difficult circumstances, for your commitment, professionalism and sense of public service.

In the peaks of the sanitary emergencies, as well as in preparations for the recovery, Cohesion Policy, one of the first EU policies, demonstrated its capacity to adapt to the new reality. Its rules were temporarily changed to allow Member States and regions to redirect financial support to where it was most needed, be it in the health sector, unemployment schemes or the working capital of SMEs, in order to minimise the social and health impacts of the pandemic.

The new MFF, as well as the Next Generation EU recovery package, which was specifically designed to combat the effects of the pandemic, were approved, enabling all those involved to very quickly start to redress and reorient our

economies to a greener, more digital and more cohesive future. Symbolically, REACT-EU was the first legislative proposal from the Next Generation EU to be concluded: pioneers in the response and first movers when it comes to negotiations.

This crisis has also shown, once again, the extent to which cohesion is a fundamental pillar of the EU and its capacity to build an ambitious response by supporting countries, regions, workers and companies. We were firefighters at the beginning of the crisis with CRII and CRII+ and we will be engineers of the recovery with REACT-EU and long-term cohesion.

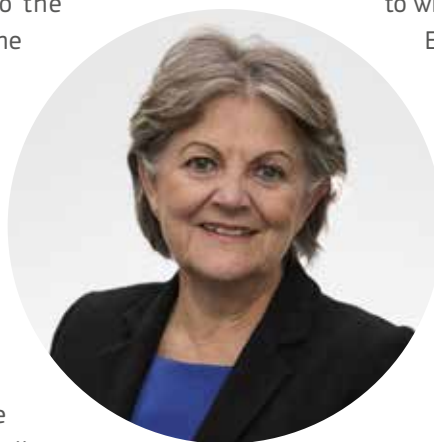
Coming out of this crisis stronger, with modern cohesive economies and leaving no one behind, is my motivation for next year.

Lastly, this 75th issue of *Panorama* is also an opportunity to pay tribute to the large number of contributors who have made it possible since 2000. In this edition, you will find a selection of covers showing the evolution of our policy over these years, culminating in the agreement for the 2021-2027 funding period.

Panorama will mark the arrival of this new policy cycle with a renewed format, offering you contents with more regularity, flexibility and reactivity, especially through videos and interactive graphics. We will let you know about these new features soon. ■

Elisa Ferreira

European Commissioner for Cohesion and Reforms





The final countdown: decision-making in times of a pandemic

On 1 January 2021, the new programming period for EU Cohesion Policy begins. All eyes are now on the German EU Presidency to finalise the legal and financial framework, together with the European Parliament. As if this was not a big enough challenge, the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the dynamics of decision-making and turned the usual work patterns upside down. *Panorama* asked Thomas Pickartz, Alexandra Marquardt and Anna-Lena Zademach-Schwierz from the German Presidency how they dealt with EU negotiations in a new, digital reality and about the final steps in reaching a deal on the Cohesion Policy package.

After two-and-a-half years of negotiations, the Council and Parliament are at the starting blocks to conclude the legislative framework. What is still missing?

Thomas Pickartz (TP): Our objective has always been to reach a political agreement on the whole Cohesion Policy package by the end of the year. After 15 political trilogues and 40 technical meetings with the European Parliament, we are still on track to reach this objective. On 18 November, we sealed a political agreement on the REACT-EU Regulation, a cornerstone of the European Recovery Plan 'Next Generation EU'. Negotiations on the Common Provisions Regulation are also progressing well. Some difficult issues remain, but an agreement with the European Parliament is within reach.

Alexandra Marquardt (AM): The Just Transition Fund, as it came with the Green Deal rather than with the Cohesion package, was always the late-comer among the files. It was one of our first Council mandates under the German Presidency, and Parliament only voted in September. When negotiations started slowly and became difficult, we thought this dossier would go straight to our Portuguese colleagues. But then talks ran more smoothly and, together with the ERDF, which is also progressing well after a bumpy start, we are almost at the finishing line.

Anna-Lena Zademach-Schwierz (AZ): The negotiations on Interreg were pragmatic and result-oriented for a long time, even during the lockdown in spring. However, when the German Presidency came

in, we faced a blockage by the EP because of the difficult budgetary negotiations. It was a challenge to get back to the negotiating table and sometimes felt like walking on eggshells. It was quite the opposite on the ESF+ where we started at cruising speed in July with two technical meetings but faced bigger difficulties during the political talks.

When the German EU Presidency started in July, the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic seemed to be over – until the second wave hit us. How did this change your way of working?

AZ: With Parliament, we continued for some time on the necessary physical or 'hybrid' meetings at the technical level. There was only one awkward occasion





Left: Anna-Lena Zademach-Schwierz; centre: Thomas Pickartz; right: Alexandra Marquardt

when the main negotiator on the other side was in his home office, while many other colleagues were sitting in a big meeting room. But even then we managed to make good progress, as long as there were not too many disturbing noises or beeps in the virtual spaces heard loudly in the meeting room.

TP: In the Council, at first we continued to have physical meetings. Cohesion Policy files were considered a priority due to their link with the MFF and the European Recovery Plan. It was only in November, when the second wave hit Brussels very hard, that the working party started meeting digitally. It worked remarkably well.

AM: The second wave hit us hard, but actually COVID was part of our Presidency from the beginning until the end. There were no side events, no ‘meet-and-greet’ occasions, receptions, exhibitions, concerts or similar happenings. Our attaché trip to Berlin/Brandenburg was also cancelled, which is usually a highlight during each Presidency. So it was quite an extraordinary

time at work, not just with digital meetings and home offices but also in the way the German Presidency could present itself.

Can digital communication – from video conferencing to virtual visits – replace the formats we are used to?

AZ: Over the last months, I have also started to see the advantages of the virtual world during many hours of technical meetings on the different files. It can be much easier to quickly exchange and agree on a position while the microphone is muted, rather than asking for a break in a ‘physical meeting’. However, all that only worked well because we could all sit in one room as a team. Alone at my desk, it is much harder to follow despite various ‘chat’ options.

TP: Digital communication has definitely helped us to keep things running during the crisis. But the personal contact remains very important if you want to find compromises on sensitive issues. The digital format weakens the human factor. If you make a joke in a VC meeting

you cannot hear people laugh as their microphones are muted. It is much more difficult to catch the mood of colleagues in a virtual room than in a real one.

You have an enormous amount of legislative proposals to work on – from REACT-EU to the Interreg Regulation. What has helped you get through your days?

TP: It is true that the workload is immense. It helped very much to share responsibility within our Brussels team, including when it came to chairing the working party and leading the technical negotiations with the European Parliament. As regards the political-level negotiations, our Deputy Director-General and colleagues from Berlin were very committed to travelling from Berlin to Brussels for each and every one of the trilogues – despite the pandemic. This commitment was very encouraging.

AM: I can only agree with Thomas. We have a wonderful team! Working days are often tiring and it is a real challenge to have three trilogues a week. But we are always in a good mood, we love to laugh together and we all know that no one team member could be missed in order to achieve all these great results.

AZ: My family was very supportive during this time. Juggling three kids, including occasional home schooling, is not an easy task for two partners with responsible jobs. My 75-year-old Mum did not shy away from travelling to a risk area and getting tested (negative :-)) on her return. All in all, I always had the feeling that my work is appreciated and the effort is worthwhile. With all the support we got from the team in Berlin, the colleagues in the Council





From left to right: Heinz Heitmeier (German Presidency), Elisa Ferreira (Commissioner for Cohesion and Reforms), Pascal Arimont (Rapporteur, EP) and Younous Omarjee (Chair of the Committee on Regional Development, EP) keeping their distance at a meeting of the Cross-border Cooperation trilogue

Secretariat and the Commission, I feel we have made necessary and good progress on these dossiers – to bring all political points to a conclusion during our Presidency.

Any favourite stories from the Cohesion Policy negotiations?

TP: The decisive REACT-EU trilogue took place on the birthday of the co-rapporteur Constanze Krehl (S&D, DE). We brought flowers, had a very successful meeting and some bubbles at the end. Two good reasons to celebrate on one and the same day.

AM: For me, these were very special negotiations. During the last discussions on the Cohesion package, I was working for Constanze Krehl who was also co-rapporteur for the current CPR 2014-2020. Constanze and I survived more than 90 trilogues before the final vote in the Plenary in December 2013. This was a very intense time and I enjoyed working in Parliament

a lot. It is a great experience to be ‘on the other side’ now and to represent the Council. And for me personally it is great to work with ‘my’ former MEP again.

Q: With the EU Presidency moving to Portugal in January 2021, what will you miss most about your time together?

AM: It is enriching to learn from my colleagues’ huge knowledge and experience. And I love our different characters and the way we work together. So mostly I will miss my wonderful colleagues!

AZ: I don’t think I have ever laughed so much on a job in my life – with tears coming into my eyes! We had so much fun over a glass of wine after three trilogues in a row, just getting over all the tension. And since our three birthdays fell in November, we had quite some celebrations, despite the stress of these last six weeks of Presidency. I definitely will miss the warmth and laughter of my colleagues.

TP: Above all, I will miss Alex and Anna-Lena and the great time we had together. Anna-Lena will finish her secondment and return to the Commission at the beginning of next year. Alex will return to Germany at the end of March. It is difficult for me to imagine being alone again. ■



FIND OUT MORE

https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/2021_2027/

<https://www.eu2020.de/eu2020-en>

Co-creating a common identity with online tools

DG REGIO has unveiled its online generator and the brand book. Project beneficiaries can now fulfil the Commission's communication and visibility requirements efficiently with just a few clicks. By sharing their activities and achievements locally, they are helping to shape a European-wide recognition of EU support.

Improving the visibility of Cohesion Policy has become a major priority. Every year, Cohesion funding supports thousands of projects across Europe, embodying the most tangible manifestation of the EU on the ground.

More effective communication of these interventions would help boost awareness of the benefits of the EU to people's lives and improve the public image of the Union. In fact, a number of research studies have found evidence that Cohesion Policy has a positive influence on citizens' attitudes towards the European project.

The regulatory context for Cohesion Policy communication has gradually evolved throughout successive programming periods, from simple publicity requirements to more detailed communication and transparency obligations. The 2014-2020 programming period took a decisive step forward, acknowledging communication as a strategic function of the programmes.

The new provisions for 2021-2027 uphold this approach. They seek to strike a balance between reinforcing the responsibilities of Member States, managing authorities and beneficiaries and lightening the regulatory burden placed upon them.

Sending a message

Most notably, the new programming period comes with a dramatic change of paradigm. Recognising that the current situation with the multitude of different logos is too complex and confusing for citizens, the European Commission



has decided that all programmes will be communicated via the EU emblem only. As such, in addition, the seven funds of the Common Provisions Regulation and programmes, such as Horizon and Creative Europe, will use the funding statement '(Co-)Funded by the European Union' next to the EU emblem. With this clear message, the chosen approach embraces the EU as our strongest brand, and further strengthens it.

Ultimately, successful communication depends on the actual commitment of the authorities and project promoters involved. Rather than a bureaucratic box-ticking exercise, communication should be considered as a central aspect of programme and project implementation.

In order for the managing authorities and project beneficiaries to fulfil the minimum requirements of the communication provisions efficiently, DG REGIO, together with the national experts from the Member States, has worked on a so-called support package communicating Cohesion Policy in 2021-2027.

Sharper visual aids

This package comprises three parts: the [Communicating Cohesion Policy](#) booklet which outlines the best communication practices from the 2014-2020 programming period as inspiration, and a second booklet on [Monitoring and Evaluation of communication actions](#). The two booklets were published in 2019. The last part of the support package concerns branding and has two key elements: ‘an online generator’ and a brand book.

The regulation requires beneficiaries to place a physical billboard, plaque or poster visibly on the project site. Considering the number of EU-supported projects, these publicity elements have the potential to reach Europeans almost everywhere.

However, currently at the European level, a shared visual identity is largely absent leaving space for a cacophony of visual elements: across operational programmes, different EU funds, and between Member States and even regions, all with different visual identities. To harmonise the situation and clarify and strengthen the message of EU support, the online generator will create a European-wide visual identity by allowing all project beneficiaries to customise the required publicity elements using the same template.

The online generator is complemented with a brand book giving tips and tricks on how to make the most of the physical communication elements – for example, through wording and placement. It also provides further details on EU branding for those beneficiaries who may have in-house graphic designers to personalise their communication elements.

Greater simplicity, visibility and transparency are the guiding principles in the approach to communication in the next programming period. In line with this, the generator and the



A standard template for publications ensures visual consistency across communication tools

brand book are an offer, not an obligation, to the managing authorities and project beneficiaries for an audit-proof solution to fulfil the minimum visibility requirements online with just a few clicks! This leaves the beneficiaries with the maximum resources to dedicate to other communication actions, while harmonising the reach towards European citizens.

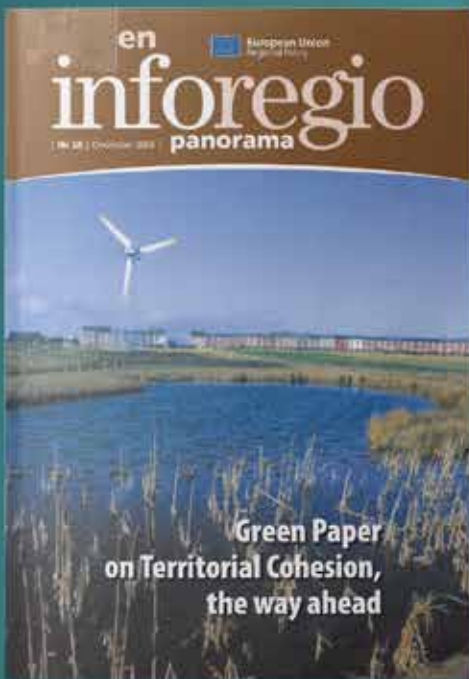
Together with the common funding statement of all EU-supported programmes, the new visual identity is a concrete step towards greater coherence. Strengthening the message of the EU’s achievements is more important than ever. Building on shared values and vision, it is good to be seen – as the European Union!

The online generator will be available during the first half of the 2021 – stay tuned for the direct link! ■

PANORAMA goes back to the future

This is a special issue of *Panorama*, not only because we have reached our 75th edition, but also because it is the final magazine to be published in its current format.

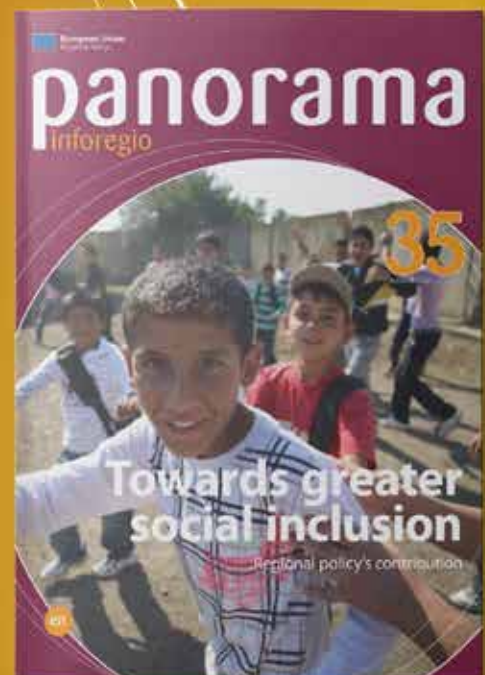
Launched in 2001, *Panorama* has strived to bring awareness and understanding of the EU's regional and urban policy to a wider audience. The magazine has covered a wide variety of topics, ranging from high-profile interviews to technical and financial matters, project reports, human stories and testimonials, all crafted in an accessible and appealing way. It is read by politicians, academics and the general public, either by direct subscription or through distribution to the Europe Direct Information Centres and EU Representations.



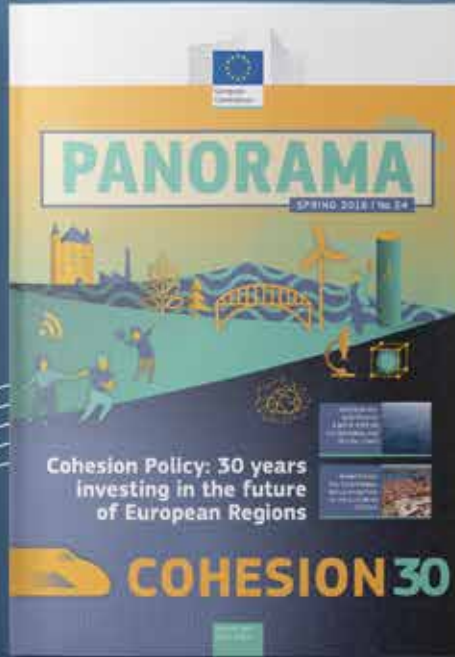
The selection of covers reproduced here gives a flavour of the range of topics covered as well as how the style of the magazine has changed over the past two decades.

And these changes will continue in the future, as *Panorama* moves exclusively to online publishing. In 2021, we will transition from the quarterly PDF format to publishing articles directly on the Inforegio website, with greater regularity, flexibility and reactivity. We will take advantage of the online version to incorporate video and interactive graphics, while the new format will also be more comfortable to view on a variety of digital devices.

As ever, *Panorama* is for and about you, so we would like to hear from you, either in a comment or suggestion, or through a contribution such as a column, report or testimonial. Please contact us at regio-panorama@ec.europa.eu







DATA POINT

Coronavirus Dashboard: EU Cohesion Policy responds to the crisis

The COVID-19 pandemic presents a major challenge to the entire European Union. National, regional and local communities are on the front line in countering the disease and its socio-economic impact. Solidarity and responsibility across our societies and between Member States are key to overcoming this challenge.

In April 2020, the European Commission launched two packages of measures: the [Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative \(CRII\)](#) and the [Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative Plus \(CRII+\)](#) to mobilise EU Cohesion Policy during the coronavirus crisis.

Rather than providing new EU financial resources, the CRII package allows for flexibility in using existing, unspent resources and redirecting them to the greatest need.

Other flexibilities include transferring unallocated EU funding between regions' funds and categories; increasing EU pre-financing to improve cash flow; and an option to raise the EU co-financing rate to 100% for the 2020-21 accounting year.

On 27 May, the CRII/CRII+ initiatives were supplemented with the [REACT-EU package](#), which is currently under negotiation in the Council and European Parliament.

Tracking the Cohesion Policy response to COVID-19

Keeping track of the response poses a particular challenge to Cohesion Policy which uses shared management across more than 390 programmes. The original financial and indicator monitoring systems were not designed to track the specific actions currently being taken. On 12 May 2020,

IMPACT OF THE CRII / CRII+ MEASURES

As of 19 November 2020, headline figures on the volume of resources mobilised under the new measures are:

REPROGRAMMING

- › EUR 6.3 billion in EU reallocations for health actions resulting in a net increase of EUR 5.9 billion at EU level;
- › EUR 8.5 billion in EU reallocations in business support resulting in a net increase of EUR 1.9 billion at EU level;
- › EUR 2.7 billion of direct support for people, including workers and vulnerable groups.

(In relation to the 'direct support to people', in some cases the allocations may overlap with the ESF health and enterprise reprogramming.)

FINANCING AND MODIFIED RULES

- › EUR 7.6 billion provided in additional EU pre-financing;
- › 129 Cohesion Policy programmes have opted for 100 % EU co-financing;
- › EUR 3.3 billion has been transferred between funds and/or categories of regions.



“ Pending agreement on the REACT-EU package, Member States are making full use of the flexibilities and liquidities offered by Cohesion Funds to help those most impacted: healthcare workers and hospitals, SMEs, and workers ... While standard cohesion support focuses on long-term investments for regional convergence, the CRII provided emergency response where it was most needed. ”

Elisa Ferreira, Commissioner for Cohesion and Reforms

the Commission services proposed new [financial and output indicators](#) – ‘common’ COVID-19 indicators to be used by national and regional programmes.

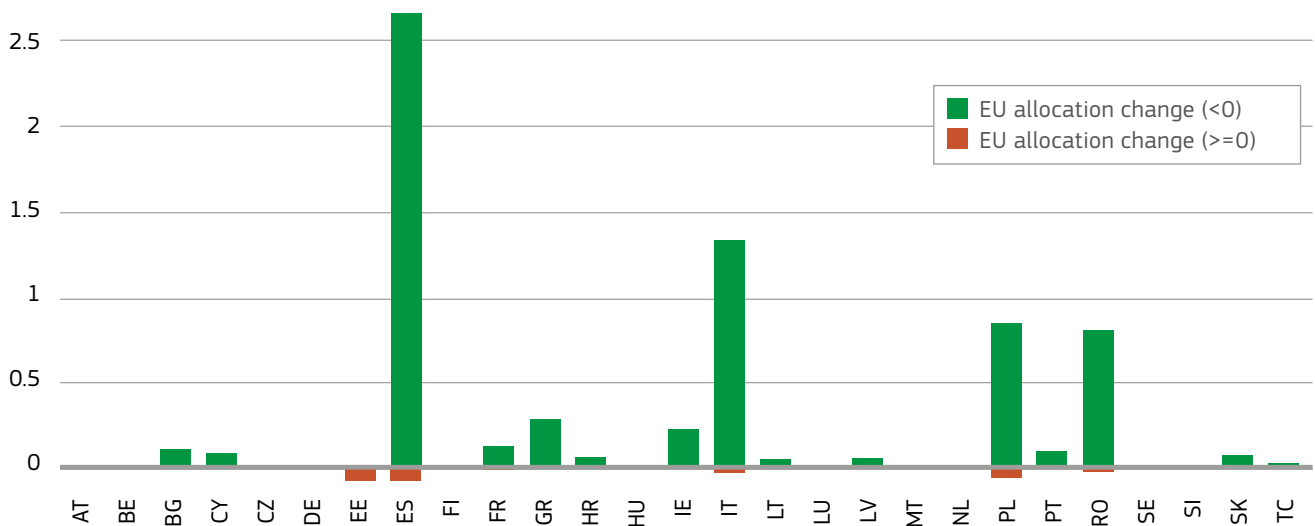
A sharp increase in EU allocations to health

Strategic health investments were originally boosted in the 2014-2020 programmes with more than EUR 10 billion of EU support. The transfers of funds within and across the ERDF and ESF in multiple programmes has led to a net

increase in support to health actions. Following the adoption of the new CRII/CRII+ regulations, programme modifications accelerated as new measures were made eligible for financing, such as the purchase of PPE, medicines, testing, hiring additional health personnel, medical assistance or home care services for vulnerable groups.

More specific data on EU financial support to the COVID-19 health response is provided by those national and regional programmes that have agreed to identify and track financial support in more detail. The Commission is working with these programmes to improve data coverage as the total amount

COVID-19 / CRII – CHANGES IN PLANNED EU SUPPORT TO HEALTHCARE SINCE 1 FEBRUARY 2020 (EUR BILLION)



of EU support for such purposes is likely to be higher. The data will be updated regularly on completion.

Business support has increased

From the outset, support to business was a major investment theme for Cohesion Policy which supported a wide range of actions, predominantly for SMEs. That support ranges from research and innovation, entrepreneurship, energy efficiency, access to finance, digitalisation and more.

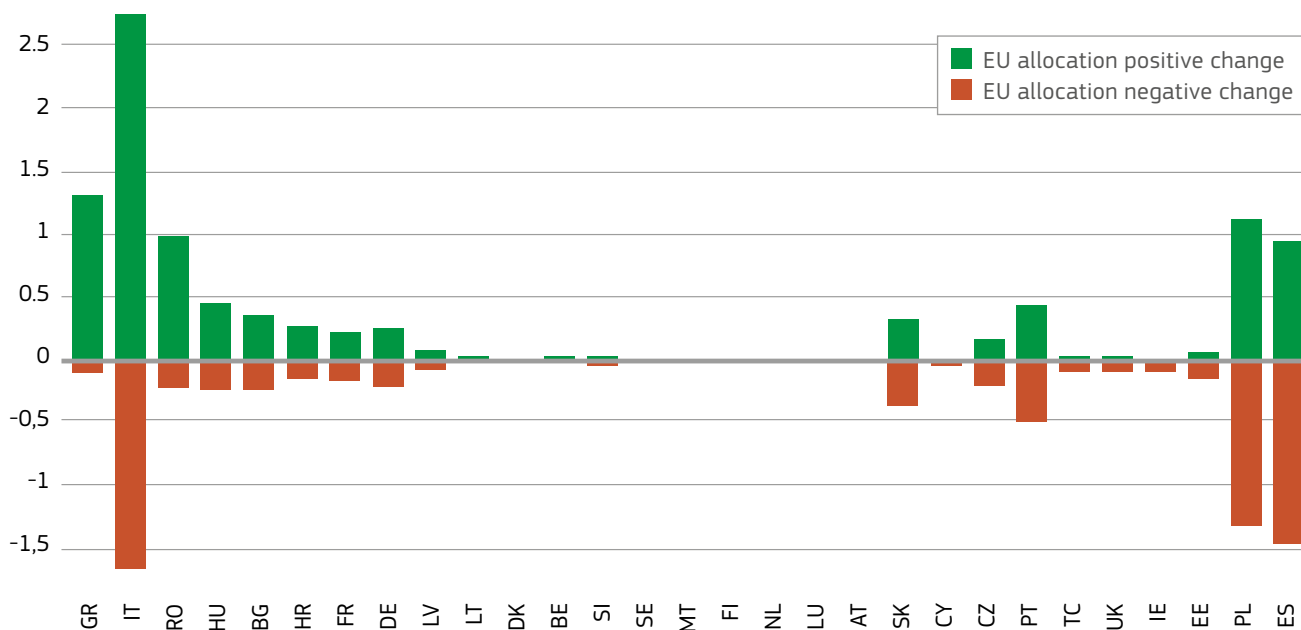
Each country and region has devised its own strategies to best address the coronavirus crisis. This often involves reallocations of funding from one activity with larger unallocated

resources to another with a higher potential to relaunch the economy and defy the crisis. The funding could come from other areas of support or from different priorities within the same field.

Support to people to combat the effects of the pandemic

The coronavirus crisis has had a ripple effect throughout society affecting people in many different ways. The European Social Fund (ESF) has been the primary support to social services, retention of employment, support to vulnerable groups and others.

COVID-19 / CRII – CHANGES IN PLANNED EU SUPPORT TO ENTERPRISE SINCE 1 FEBRUARY 2020 (EUR BILLION)



Do you have an issue you would like discussed in future *Panorama* DATA POINT features?

Is there a dataset you would like us to put on the ESIF Open Data Platform?

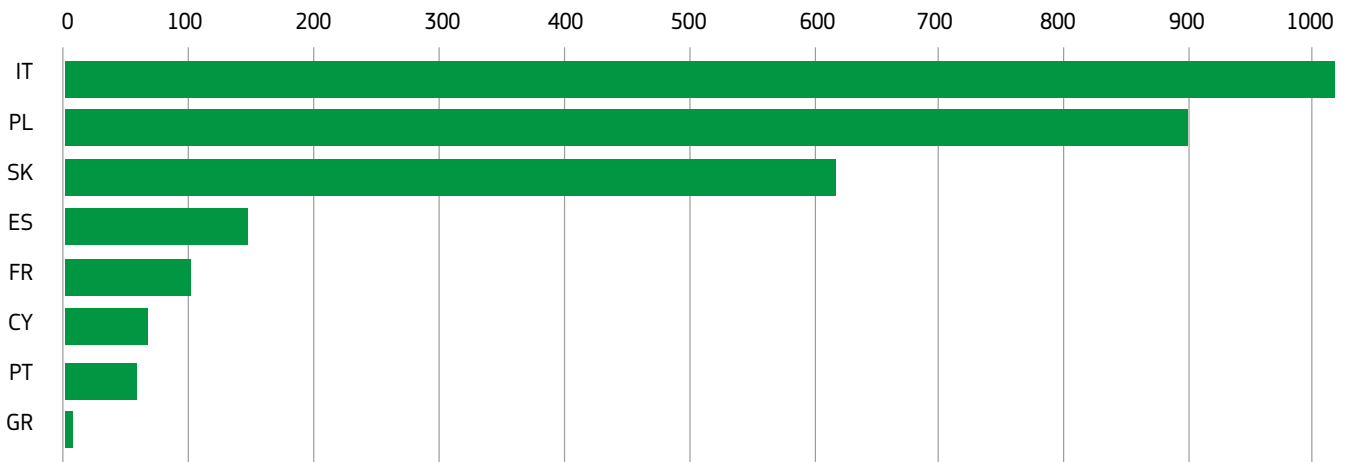
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VALUE OF ESF ACTIONS TO COMBAT THE EFFECTS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC (EUR MILLION)



The figure above shows the amount planned to combat or counteract the effects of the pandemic, e.g. through support to short-time work arrangements, supplementary wage for health care personnel, IT equipment, PPE, and services for vulnerable groups.

Increase in annual pre-financing

This measure in the first CRII package benefited all programmes with EUR 7.6 billion in unrecovered 2019 EU pre-financing and was automatically applied by the Commission. The 2019 annual pre-financing amounts not recovered can be used by the Member States to accelerate expenditure related to the pandemic. This is effectively a front loading of EU funding as the amounts not recovered in 2020 will only be cleared or recovered at the closure of the programming period.

Many programmes have taken up the option of 100 % EU financing

At the request of a country, the expenditure declared in the 2020-2021 accounting exercise could be temporarily financed exclusively by EU resources. This option of 100% European co-financing is one of the most popular measures in the majority of modified programmes.

Some countries have transferred resources between funds

At a country’s request, the resources available for programming for 2020 could be transferred between the ERDF, the ESF and the Cohesion Fund.

Likewise, the resources available for 2020 could also be transferred between categories of regions. The most urbanised areas have been most affected by the virus, which necessitates additional investments related to healthcare. ■

MORE INFORMATION

Coronavirus Dashboard

Overview of all [EU Coronavirus measures](#)

Latest news on specific policy responses by country and region for ERDF/Cohesion Fund

Latest news on the specific [ESF policy response](#)

Interreg takes its annual event online

This year's [Interreg Annual Event 2020](#) took place in very particular circumstances, at a time when we are all affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The biggest event on the Interreg calendar brought together the managing authorities and joint secretariats of all the Interreg programmes - including the IPA and ENI CBC – to discuss challenges and opportunities for cooperation with the European Commission.

This year's event was also supposed to mark the celebration of 30 years of Interreg. Not wishing to forget to celebrate our birthday, we have decided to postpone the party until 2021 when we hope to be able to meet up with you again 'in the flesh'.

From 15 to 16 October, Interreg's annual event was held in a strictly digital format, back to back with the #EURegionsWeek. The German EU Council Presidency was also associated with the occasion.

The meeting began in the afternoon of 15 October 2020 with a plenary session in the presence of Elisa Ferreira, Commissioner for Cohesion and Reforms, a representative of the German EU Council Presidency and former Commissioner Potočník. Mr Potočník delivered the keynote speech on 'the role of territorial cooperation in reaching our Green Deal objectives'.

During a Youth Dialogue, which also took place that afternoon, young people acquainted with Interreg and cooperation delivered a manifesto on the future of cooperation.

On 16 October 2020, the focus was on more technical questions around the programming exercise for 2021-2027, in particular on the substance of our future programmes and how to improve coordination and capitalisation. This took the form of seven parallel workshops, each dedicated to a policy objective (including the two Interreg-specific objectives) followed by a plenary session on coordination, organised with the support of Interact.



The European Commission would like to thank all who participated in this year's Interreg Annual Event. While it was very challenging from a technical point of view and, in its virtual format, is no match for meeting people in person, we are delighted that this year's event provided networking opportunities and succeeded in reaching out to the large Interreg community.

Health cross-border cooperation – more important than ever

The [workshop 'Health: Interreg NEXT & IPA CBC in action'](#), which took place during the 18th European Week of Regions and Cities, highlighted the importance of health cooperation in border regions from different angles. Representatives of the IPA CBC Bulgaria-Serbia, ENI CBC Poland-Belarus-Ukraine, the Belgian-French CBC, and CESCO (Central European Service for Cross-border Initiatives) presented successful cross-border health projects and discussed the obstacles and challenges they have faced.

The COVID-19 pandemic showed us that cross-border cooperation in health is not only about creating a better life for people in border regions and increasing cross-border mobility, but that it can even determine patients' life or death decisions and is thus more important than ever.





Health projects in the Interreg IPA CBC Bulgaria-Serbia

Panellists from the European Commission’s DG SANTE, DG NEAR and DG REGIO completed the picture with information about related policy, financial and legislative support. It is clear that EU internal and external borders face different challenges: health systems vary; administrative and legislative rules differ; language and visa regimes can present obstacles; and health professional qualifications may not always be recognised on the other side of the border. But there is a solution: keep working together – keep collaborating!

Second EU Macro-Regional Strategies Week is going virtual!

Under the slogan ‘Rethink, Recover, Reconnect’, the event has three objectives: to Rethink the new way to cooperate and live after the pandemic; to Recover from the socio-economic impact of COVID-19, with the support of MRS; and the need to Reconnect with stakeholders from the four macro-regions to translate into actions on the ground.

The second edition of the EU Macro-Regional Strategies (MRS) Week will take place from 1 to 5 March 2021, following its successful launch earlier this year.

The agenda is built on the [Commission Report](#) and the [Council Conclusions on the second report on the implementation of MRS](#), which:

- › empower all stakeholders to promote better alignment between the MRS and EU funds
- › promote COVID 19 recovery supported by MRS
- › embed process, and
- › support stronger involvement of youth and civil society organisations.

More information on registration will follow soon on our website [Info REGIO](#) or on Twitter [@RegioInterreg](#). ■



Boost for SMEs and cross-border business

Europe's small and medium-sized enterprises form the backbone of the European economy, representing 99 % of all businesses in the EU. However, there is room for improvement, especially among those SMEs operating in border regions.

Together with partners in the EU's border regions, the European Commission is working to promote the internationalisation of SMEs in these areas.

SMEs hold a key position in all sectors of the European economy, adding value to European competitiveness and employment. Even in these challenging times, such as the current pandemic, they have proven to be a robust foundation upon which the European economy is based. However, the borders that slice through Europe often also slice directly through the markets in which SMEs operate.

Stronger business ties

There are many reasons why SMEs are reluctant to operate across borders. To strengthen their cross-border operations, the European Commission provides various opportunities for enterprises to internationalise and do business in these regions.

The recent 'SME Strategy for a sustainable and digital Europe', which was published by the European Commission in March 2020, reflects its wish to internationalise SMEs. This strategy is based upon three pillars: capacity-building and support to their transition to sustainability and digitalisation; reducing regulatory burdens; and improving their access to the markets and financing.



First online study visit, Spain

According to the Commission's Communication: 'European SMEs experience legislation as complex and burdensome, especially due to the different procedures in Member States. These barriers deter many from doing cross-border business and scaling up. If they do, they often use large platforms as intermediaries, leading to uneven levels of bargaining power.'

The Commission, together with national, regional and local governments, chambers of commerce and other partners, is employing various means to improve the cross-border opportunities for SMEs in Europe. Key actions include, among others: appointing a dedicated high-level EU SME envoy; mobilising Member States to share and adopt best practices; and encouraging Member States to implement the single digital gateway in an SME-friendly way.



Taking the initiative

The Interreg Europe project 'INTER VENTURES' is one initiative aiming to improve the internationalisation of SMEs. Partners from five European border regions, located in Hungary/Croatia, Italy, Lithuania, Poland and Spain, are cooperating with the work. All partners and their regions are in various stages of evolving SME ecosystems, ranging from occasional cross-border cooperation to international clustering. Through study visits, exchange of good practices, and interregional meetings – most via virtual and online activities – the partners share their ideas on how to improve SME internationalisation and strengthen regions across Europe. The lessons learned by the partners will be implemented in a policy recommendation and an action plan.



Action planning workshop, INTER VENTURES

INTER VENTURES has been allocated EUR 1 376 708 from the European Regional Development Fund during the implementation period from 1 August 2019 until 31 July 2022, which will probably be extended until the end of 2022. Within this project, the Association of European Border Regions (AEBR/AGEG/ARFE) is supporting the partners by advising on their reports and practices.

'KISS ME' is another Interreg project focusing on SMEs in border regions. It is comparing the approaches of four different border regions in terms of strategies and projects to promote SME involvement across the EU. The partners in the four regions will present their findings which will be used to develop action plans. The results will be disseminated at the European level so that all regions can support their SMEs to work competitively across borders. KISS ME is receiving EUR 977 413 from the European Regional Development Fund, for the period from 1 January 2017 until 30 June 2021.

Looking at the different initiatives announced within current and future EU programmes, the future of SMEs in Europe seems bright. Even in cross-border environments, breaking down barriers for enterprises within Europe could

reach a critical moment if those announcements are properly implemented in border territories, enabling effective collaboration among SMEs in a greener, better-connected and smarter Europe.

Many stakeholders across Europe have already acknowledged the need for better conditions for cooperation across borders and the benefits they can bring, as the success of European enterprises – in all territories – means the success of Europe and Europeans. ■

FIND OUT MORE

Association of European Border Regions (AEBR):
<https://www.aebr.eu/>

b-solutions to cross-border obstacles

B



NL

Since 2017, the Association of European Border Regions (AEBR), a pan-European network of border and cross-border regions, has managed the *b-solutions* initiative. The aim is to enable public bodies and cross-border structures to address systematically legal and administrative border obstacles and access specialised technical support to find solutions.

Conceived by the European Commission's Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy, *b-solutions* has been developed to deepen the effects of the existing mechanisms regulating cross-border cooperation along EU and EFTA countries' internal land borders. It comes in response to the indications included in the 2017 Communication 'Boosting growth and cohesion in EU border regions'.

Despite the successes of the Interreg funding scheme, spanning 30 years, national boundaries still pose many obstacles to the growth of European border regions.

Citizens continue to face problems when crossing borders on public transport because different national rules prevent the establishment of joint infrastructures. Similarly, patients cannot benefit from healthcare services in neighbouring countries due to diverging systems of cost reimbursement, while frontier workers are faced with confusing taxation and social benefits because Member States follow different social security systems.

These are just a few examples of the problems that arise when different administrative and legislative cultures meet at the border. Local, regional or national authorities cannot solve them without optimal identification and the necessary technical expertise.

Consequently, *b-solutions* gives public bodies and cross-border structures the possibility to obtain legal advice from external experts who analyse the obstacles identified and develop tailored solutions to remove them. In so doing, they open up new and effective ways to foster cross-border interactions and, in turn, the overall process of European integration.





Achievements to date

Since early 2018, three different calls for proposals have been launched by the AEBR to identify new obstacles under eight different **thematic areas**: public passenger transport, health and emergency services, multilingualism, employment, institutional cooperation, evidence and data, information services, and e-Government.

Until now, 66 hurdles have been identified across the EU, 43 of which have been analysed over the last two years. They showcased a wide variety of situations in which the administrative or legal nature of the hurdle was not always clear-cut but, instead, a maze with multiple dimensions. Furthermore, the root causes were diverse and involved different legislative and administrative levels, from the European to local.

Notwithstanding the similarities in the hurdles occurring along different borders, there was no off-the-shelf solution to solving them. Therefore, the experts proposed targeted solutions for every case, taking into account the specificities of the border regions involved.

In many cases, they required changes to the legal framework. Tools already at their disposal, such as Interreg and the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation, helped but could not solve challenges caused by the lack of coherence or compatibility between different legal provisions across borders. Often, the Commission's European Cross-Border Mechanism might have offered an immediate solution, had it have been adopted.

Much more information on the analysis of the 43 obstacles is included in the first ***b-solutions* compendium**, developed by the AEBR and DG REGIO and published in July. The publication gives an overview of the initiative, offers a set of political recommendations to policymakers at different levels, and provides a detailed description of the hurdles identified, from which other stakeholders might draw inspiration.

What's next?

The **23 new obstacles** selected in November 2020 further inform about very specific situations arising along several EU borders. In the coming months, experts selected through a **call for expressions of interest** and assigned to the latest cases will develop new strategies to overcome the existing barriers.

However, this is not the 'last stop' for *b-solutions*. A fourth and final call for proposals in January 2021 will select more obstacles. Public bodies and cross-border structures from the EU and neighbouring EFTA countries will have another opportunity to raise concerns about the difficulties they face in their endeavour to cooperate with their neighbours.

Stakeholders in the 'Interreg family' should not miss the chance to experience first-hand how *b-solutions* tackles legal and administrative impediments as this type of methodology could become a useful tool to master the next Interreg 2021-2027.

The fourth call will be launched on the *b-solutions* **website**. At the end of its implementation, a set of new publications addressing both specialised and general audiences will be released in winter 2021/22.

In spite of the unprecedented circumstances of 2020, *b-solutions* and cross-border cooperation will not give up! ■



FIND OUT MORE

<https://www.b-solutionsproject.com/>

2020 EU-SPI grades Europe's social and environmental performance

The 2020 edition of the EU regional Social Progress Index (2020 EU-SPI) was launched on 2 December in preparation for the next Cohesion Policy programming period.

The Index aims to measure social progress for each European region to complement traditional measures of economic progress, such as gross domestic product (GDP). Defined in the framework of the 'Beyond GDP' discussion as an alternative to traditional measures with economic indicators, the EU-SPI uses only social and environmental indicators to better reflect societal development.

The 2020 edition follows the overall framework of the global [Social Progress Index](#) which employs 12 components that are further aggregated into three broader dimensions describing basic, intermediate and more subtle aspects of social progress, respectively. The 2020 EU-SPI includes 55 statistical indicators, primarily from Eurostat but also from other sources such as the Gallup World Poll, the European Environmental Agency, the Quality of Government Institute, and the European Institute for Gender Equality.

It is designed to facilitate benchmarking across EU regions on a wide range of criteria, helping policymakers and stakeholders to assess a region's strong and weak points on purely social and environmental aspects. Many of these aspects are at the heart of the investment supported by Cohesion Policy, whether in the area of basic services (health, education, water and waste), access to information and communication technologies, energy efficiency, education and skills, or pollution.

The Index scores are calculated on a 0-100 scale, where 0 means the worst level of social progress and 100 the best. This scale is determined by identifying the best and worst (possible) global performance on each indicator by any region in Europe.

The 2020 results show that social disparities vary greatly across both regions and different aspects of social progress. Nordic countries perform quite well while south-eastern



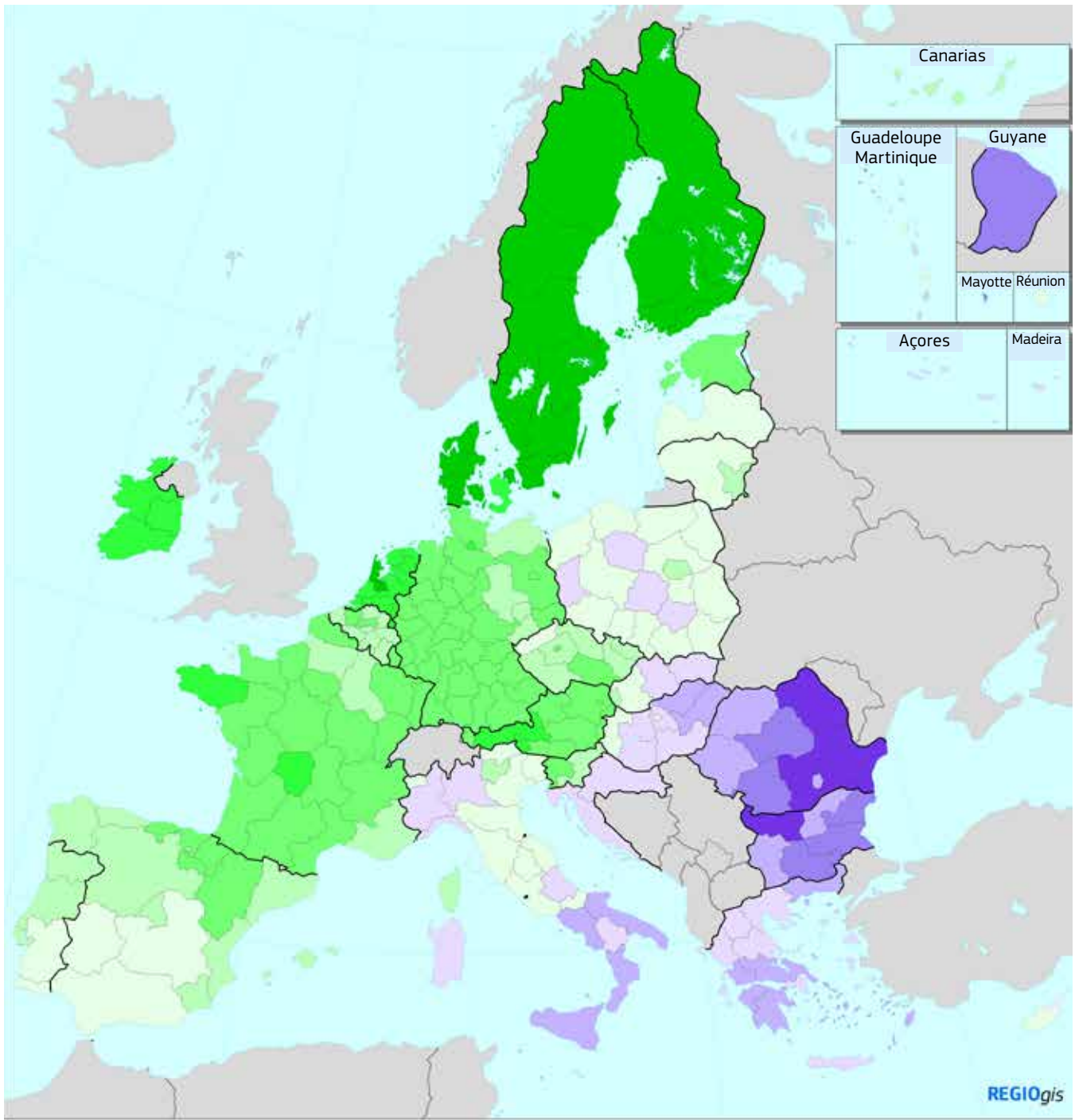
countries lag behind. All top 10 regions are Swedish, Finnish or Danish. The Swedish region of Övre Norrland has the highest level of social progress in the EU (as it did in the first edition of the index in 2016), followed by the region of Helsinki-Uusimaa in Finland and Mellersta Norrland in Sweden.

Results show that, on average, EU regions perform better on basic aspects. Good levels can be achieved in basic components, for example, by investing more in wastewater treatment and social housing. The opportunity dimension reveals greater variation with some regions performing very well and others quite poorly. This dimension includes more subtle aspects of social progress that are harder to improve, such as fighting corruption in public institutions and helping women to enter and remain in the labour market.

The 2020 edition is the result of a careful set of refinements to the indicator set and regional reliability. Several interactive tools are available on the Europa website, including scorecards, maps and customisable bar charts, the methodological paper and the interactive web story on the ESIF Open Data Portal.

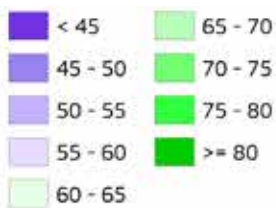


European regional Social Progress index – 2020 EU-SPI



European regional Social Progress index – 2020 EU-SPI

Index



Sources: DG REGIO
 Note: Unit of measurement 0-100 scores



© EuroGeographics Association for the administrative boundaries



Cities in Europe and the Americas team up on urban sustainability

From walkable and bike-friendly avenues once crammed with cars, to farms boosting food security in poor neighbourhoods, collaboration between cities in Europe and the Americas is driving sustainable urban development and facilitating pandemic life. Participants in the International Urban Cooperation programme presented these and other innovative outcomes during the 2020 European Week of Regions and Cities.

Funded by the EU, the International Urban Cooperation (IUC) programme is based on the principle that countries share a common interest in promoting eco-friendly urban development that results in liveable, resource-efficient and people-oriented smart cities.

Since the start of the initiative in 2017, cities across Europe have teamed up with counterparts around the globe – including in North America (IUC-NA), and Latin America and the Caribbean (IUC-LAC), to share knowledge and best practices on sustainable solutions to urban problems. During a session of the European Week of Regions and Cities on 13 October 2020, participants from these parts of the world presented the results of such collaboration – some of which are helping to implement COVID-19 public health protocols and pave the way for a greener post-pandemic way of city living.

‘By acting together, we believe that cities will be able to steer the ship out of the crisis into a brighter future,’ Rudolf Niessler, principal advisor for international relations at DG REGIO, said in opening remarks.

Attended by more than 100 representatives of cities participating in the IUC programme, the session featured two panels – the first on mobility and digital transformation and the second on the circular economy and energy transition.

Mobility

The Argentine capital of Buenos Aires and its Spanish counterpart Madrid worked together closely – often calling each other up for advice in real time – as they transformed major avenues, plagued by mutual problems such as pollution, traffic and waste management, into pedestrian-friendly, liveable spaces.

The results are a win for residents. In Buenos Aires, for example, some 75 % of the city’s Corrientes Avenue, home to many theatres, bookshops, hotels and restaurants, is now car-free, according to Juan Vacas of the Buenos Aires Ministry of Public Space.

This new public space has served the city well during the COVID-19 crisis. Not only has it enabled the creation of a new transitory bike lane, along with walking and cycle paths as alternatives to public transport, but it has also allowed restaurants to seat customers on pavement tables during a ban on indoor dining, Vacas told the session. Also under way are plans to move cultural performances outdoors as the pandemic persists, he added.





Digital transformation

The Italian city of Turin teamed up with a consortium of six Brazilian municipalities, known as Grande ABC, to share know-how in a number of technology-focused areas. These included smart roads and ‘mobility as a service’, or MaaS, which integrates multiple modes of transportation, alongside the ability to book, plan and pay for them on a joint digital platform.

As a result of IUC cooperation, Grande ABC will become the first public consortium in Brazil to centralise the mobility management of a group of municipalities.

Circular economy

With the goal of improving lives in a neighbourhood where 78 % face food insecurity, the Colombian city of Barranquilla is implementing an urban farming pilot project that uses a roadmap developed by the Italian capital.

‘Urban gardens are a great way to move our food system closer to sustainability,’ said Manuel Trujillo of the Barranquilla mayor’s office. ‘Now, with the methodology of Rome, we don’t need to start from zero.’

The pilot includes partners from both the public and private sectors alongside civil society. In its early stages, it also took into careful consideration the community in the farm’s vicinity – migrants from rural areas who have agricultural skills.

The pilot could lead to a bigger city-wide initiative that ‘really enhances our circular economy’, Trujillo said.

Energy transition

Through its partnership with the Latvian capital Riga, the Canadian city of Edmonton changed its perspective on the use of hydrogen to heat homes and power public transport.

‘Our cheap electricity and natural gas have been a very easy alternative for a very long time,’ Maurya Braun of the City of Edmonton told the session. But, thanks to the IUC, that could soon change.

The city’s team took insight on Riga’s use of hydrogen – including how its hybrid trolley buses perform well in colder climates and have a longer range than those powered purely by electricity – back to the Edmonton city administration and advisory board.

‘The result was that we incorporated hydrogen fuel-cell vehicles and are using hydrogen to heat buildings in our second round of technical modelling for Edmonton’s energy transition,’ Braun said. ■

RETHINKING POST-PANDEMIC CITIES

With cities around the world most affected by the COVID-19 crisis and home to more than half of the world’s population, global solutions to guarantee their successful future are now more important than ever.

Thanks to contributions from more than 30 cities in Europe and Latin America collected during the course of seven webinars, ‘**Open Dialogues IUC-LAC**’ provides advice on how urban centres can best navigate the ‘new normal’ going forward.

It outlines both lessons learned during the pandemic and makes recommendations on what to prioritise in years to come. –This includes the need to redesign urban spaces, promote greater use of renewable resources, and reconfigure industries.

Themes addressed include both restarting and rethinking tourism, an important economic engine for many cities. The publication also explores whether the pandemic could lead to a greener urban future and a revamped approach to climate resilience.

http://iuc-la.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/EN_Dialogos_abiertos.pdf

FIND OUT MORE

<http://iuc-la.eu/en/>

Regional policy financial instruments ready to meet EU challenges

fi-compass conference, held online on 1 and 2 December 2020, was dedicated to regional policy financial instruments. The ERDF/CF event attracted over 500 participants from managing authorities, national and regional governments, the European Commission, the European Investment Bank, and public and private financial intermediaries, among others.

Opening the event, a message from the Commissioner for Cohesion and Reforms, Elisa Ferreira, set the tone by stressing the unique opportunity provided in the upcoming programming period by combining a reinforced Cohesion Policy with the new Next Generation instruments, which will support reforms and investments on an unprecedented scale.

The EU budget for the coming years will almost double, to some EUR 1.8 trillion. However, this unique opportunity is also a major responsibility, not only to achieve an effective recovery, but also to build back better, to invest wisely in a greener, more digital, more competitive economy while, at the same time, ensuring no region is left behind. The Commissioner sounded a note of caution, emphasising that financial resources available to Member States will be unprecedented – as are the investment and reform needs – and maybe even greater. Therefore, we will need strong coordination between all EU funding sources plus more financial instruments.

The Commissioner pointed to the new Regulations providing more options and greater flexibility for Cohesion Policy financial instruments, enabling all stakeholders to enjoy the benefits: cost-effectiveness, project quality, leverage and delivery. To accomplish this, we must prove that the role of financial instruments is not to support banks or financial institutions but to support investments in the real economy, in cohesion.

These messages were echoed in the intervention by DG REGIO's Deputy Director-General, Normunds Popen, who stressed the importance of financial instruments for Cohesion Policy, citing examples of successful FIs. He also emphasised the need to explore their potential in the urban sector, a key policy objective in the new period. Financial instruments have a clear role in supporting investment in the urban environment.

The event also featured an intervention by Ms Lilyana Pavlova, vice-president of the EIB, who expressed the Bank's commitment to continue and enhance its support for Cohesion Policy through its lending, mandate management and advisory activities.

The online conference was partly structured in a modular format to enable participants to join the sessions that reflected their specific interests. Financial instruments, which include loans, guarantees, equity and quasi-equity, will remain an important delivery mechanism for regional and urban policy resources in the 2021-2027 programming period.

“ Today, we set the course for the next decade, we set the course for the new cohesion programmes, we set the course for recovery, we set the course for a new and greener future. We must focus on how to rise to the challenges, how to maximise investment and how to create stronger and more competitive regions. Financial instruments will play a key role, so this conference could not be more timely. ”

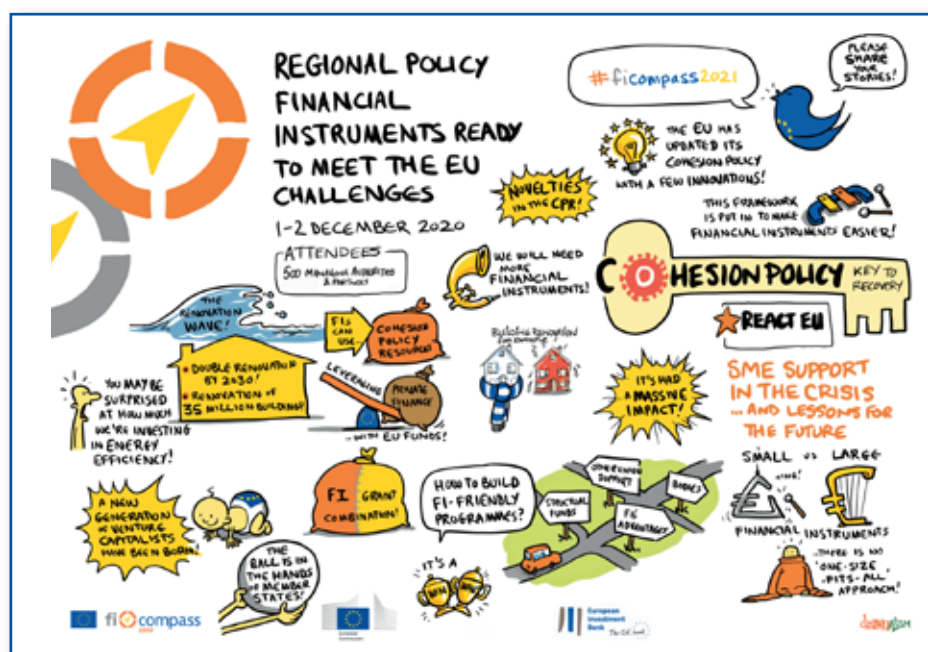
Elisa Ferreira, European Commissioner for Cohesion and Reforms



With this year's title 'Regional policy financial instruments ready to meet the EU challenges', the event covered several key horizontal topics relating to the implementation of financial instruments:

- An information session on the proposed new CPR and other key regulations. The proposed CPR introduces several innovations aimed at simplifying and improving synergies between the different EU policy tools.
- A session with DG ENER and DG REGIO experts on financing the EU Renovation Wave through financial instruments combined with grants. A refurbished and improved building stock in the EU will help pave the way for a decarbonised and clean energy system. Renovation of both public and private buildings is essential in this context and has been singled out in the European Green Deal as key to driving energy efficiency in the sector. Financial instruments, combined with grants, play a vital role in mobilising the finance needed in Member States.
- DG REGIO and the EIB presented ways for Member States to prepare financial-instrument-friendly programmes.
- On the second day, a session was dedicated to the InvestEU Programme. Presentations and a panel discussion provided information on the state of play of the InvestEU MS Compartment; the products and policy priorities under the SME and RID policy windows (DG GROW and DG RTD presented the latest developments); the scope for demarcation between the MS and EU compartments; and the view of two Member States, Poland and Finland, on setting up an MS Compartment.
- Parallel sessions covered financial instruments in key sectors in the new Multiannual Financial Framework: SME financing and energy efficiency.

Once again, the large number of participants showed how much interest there is in financial instruments and how keen stakeholders are to learn about them.



The European Commission (DG REGIO, DG AGRI, DG EMPL and DG MARE) in partnership with the EIB established the fi-compass platform to offer advisory services on financial instruments under the European Structural and Investment Funds. It is designed to support managing authorities and other stakeholders by providing practical know-how and learning tools, including face-to-face training seminars and other events with ample networking opportunities.

Presentations from the event will be available at [fi-compass](https://www.fi-compass.eu). For other questions related to the event presentations, the new proposed CPR, and the InvestEU Programme, please contact: REGIO-B3-FINANCIAL-INSTRUMENTS@ec.europa.eu ■



fi-compass

FIND OUT MORE

<https://www.fi-compass.eu/video/comboination-financial-instruments-and-grant>
<https://www.fi-compass.eu/video/energy-efficiency-housing>

18th EUROPEAN WEEK of REGIONS and CITIES



Annual showcase for cities and regions reaches new heights online

Despite the many uncertainties due to COVID-19, the 18th European Week of Regions and Cities once again exceeded its record attendance figures. This online edition welcomed some 12 000 participants and around 500 virtual sessions, as well as featuring a virtual exhibition.

Spread over three weeks, each dedicated to a thematic cluster, the event unfolded around the motto 'Restart. Europe.Together'.

The first week was dedicated to [Empowering Citizens](#) with working sessions on topics ranging from e-democracy, co-creation in public services, entrepreneurship and many more.

The second week, which focused on [Cohesion and Cooperation](#), saw the highest number of working sessions plus all the political highlights.

The third week, dedicated to a '[Green Europe](#)', was kicked off by the opening of Green Week, organised by DG Environment. The programme explored the Green Europe theme with working sessions on topics such as localising the Green Deal, energy efficiency and biodiversity.

This year's novelty, the [Live&Replay](#) platform, hosted recordings of all the sessions which enabled an even larger attendance at the event.



Margaritis Schinas, Vice-President of the European Commission was the main speaker in the first episode of the mini documentary 'Together we have built Europe'

The event started with the mini documentary 'Together, we have built Europe', a series of seven episodes presenting the evolution of the EU and the birth of Cohesion Policy and its impact on building the Union. After each broadcast, two speakers (a former EU representative and a young EU citizen) discussed the episode online.



THE EUROPEAN AWARDS FOR INNOVATIVE PROJECTS



ESA BIC

TAKE THE COOL
FOOD CHALLENGE

E-SCHOOLS



SHICC

ENERGY
@SCHOOLTIME IS NOW
FOR CHANGE

Regiostars 2020: Award ceremony

Citizens' Dialogue

'Inspiring', 'enlightening', 'rewarding', were words used by young participants in the Citizens' Dialogue to describe the session, which took place on 12 October 2020. An inter-generational debate was held between young people and Commissioner for Cohesion and Reforms, Elisa Ferreira, on how Cohesion Policy affects the younger generation.

REGIOSTARS Awards ceremony

Since 2008, the best EU Cohesion Policy projects have been selected for the REGIOSTARS Awards every year by an impartial jury. This year; the categories were Smart Growth: Industrial transition for a smart Europe, Sustainable Growth: Circular Economy for a Green Europe, Inclusive Growth: Skills & Education for a digital Europe, Urban Development: Citizens engagement for cohesive European Cities, and 30 Years of Interreg: Youth empowerment for cooperation across borders, as the topic of the year. The public also had their say by voting for the Public Choice Award.

The 2020 edition registered the highest numbers of entries ever – 206 – showing 'the growing value of this competition which puts EU Cohesion Policy best practices in the spotlight and rewards committed project beneficiaries for their excellent implementation of EU funding on the ground', according to Commissioner Ferreira.

Announced by the Commissioner for Economy, Paolo Gentiloni, the winner of the Smart Growth category was 'ESA BIC', from Centro Region in Portugal. The Sustainable Growth award, announced by the Commissioner for Environment and Oceans, Virginijus Sinkevičius, went to 'Take the Cool Food Challenge',



Elisa Ferreira (front left) joined the Citizens' Dialogue with young journalism students and participants in the 'At the School of Open Cohesion' programme

from the Interreg France (Channel) programme. The winner of the Inclusive Growth category, awarded by the Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights, Nicolas Schmit, was 'E-SCHOOLS', in Croatia. For the Urban Development category, the European Commission Vice-President for Values and Transparency, Věra Jourová, announced the winning project: 'SHICC - Sustainable Housing for Inclusive and Cohesive Cities', financed by the Interreg North-West Europe programme. Winner of the topic of the year award, the '30 Years of Interreg', as announced by the Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth, Mariya Gabriel, was 'ENERGY@SCHOOL', financed by Interreg Central Europe. Finally, the Public Choice Award, announced by the European Commission Chief Spokesperson Eric Mamer, with 8 300 votes, was the 'Time is now for change' project from the Interreg Lithuania-Poland programme.



Anastasia Lopez (Austria) and Francisco Sezinando (Portugal) accept their awards for the Megalizzi-Niedzielski prize for aspiring journalists

The media programme

Despite the pandemic, several journalists made the effort to attend the programme in person in Brussels. The event was covered in 733 reports all over the EU and beyond.

For the second year since Antonio and Bartosz's tragic passing in Strasbourg, a prize in their name was awarded to two of Europe's most promising young journalists. The Commissioner for Cohesion and Reforms, Elisa Ferreira, announced Anastasia Lopez from Austria and Francisco Sezinando from Portugal as the winners of the 2020 Megalizzi-Niedzielski prize, both having done an amazing job so far on their path as journalists.

Live&Replay

This edition of the 18th European Week of Regions and Cities has also been remarkable for its [Live&Replay platform](#), enabling all participants and those who are still interested to watch the recordings of all sessions. The platform will remain live for one year. ■

We are now starting preparations for the next edition of this annual event which will take place from 11-14 October 2021 (save the date!). Thanks to the feedback from the attendees, the 2021 edition will revolve around four themes: green, cohesion, citizens and digital. **We look forward to welcoming you all again next year!**

YOUTH4REGIONS MEDIA PROGRAMME

Here is another article submitted by a young journalist who participated in the YOUTH4REGIONS blogging competition.

The Youth4Regions media programme supports the development of the next generation of journalists specialised in regional policy. It encourages these young Europeans to communicate on EU-funded projects.



It is all about the European people

October 2020: For me, this month was packed, juggling university assignments and freelance projects, hectic meetings filtered by screens and lonely walks along the beach.

But, globally, the world was not so slowly sliding into the grip of the virus, again, painting regions in red, in a colour-blind way. Yet, I made it to Brussels and to the Youth4Regions Media Programme 2020. More than 20 young journalists from all over Europe and beyond were there as members of the press to cover the 18th European Week of Regions and Cities.

I could talk about the learning outcomes of this experience, the galvanisation of getting first-hand inputs about the future of European journalism straight from the media outlets that I consume daily, or the thrill of exploring mobile journalism, getting out of my writing comfort zone.

I could talk about the feeling of being at the epicentre of the decision-making machine I've wanted to work for the longest before transitioning to journalism. Or about how being there, witnessing the openness of high-rank politicians



Marta is a European and Italian digital journalist covering social issues, human rights and the environment. Currently a Mundus Journalism student specialising in war and conflict between Denmark and the UK, she found out about

Youth4Regions through the good old word-of-mouth and thought it would be a great opportunity to experiment with journalism and the European identity.

actively listening to youth representatives, while seeing the modesty in proposing to the media professionals an alliance to make Europe green, digital and cohesive gave me hope and strengthened my previous commitment to pan-European solidarity.





Commissioner Elisa Ferreira with the two award winners (on her left), Commission officials and the other finalists for the Megalizzi-Niedzielski prize for aspiring journalists

I could talk about the surprise of being shortlisted for the Megalizzi-Niedzielski prize or the all-encompassing awkwardness of sitting on a stage being praised for my work, while I am used to being behind the camera and I am overly modest by nature.

Instead, this is going to be about people. Meeting different people than those you live with in 'corona times' is such a nourishing experience. Walks around the EU buildings, although socially distanced, were no longer lonely – and, for obvious reasons, were not by the sea! But the extra value of these human connections lies in the uniqueness of the participants. Talented, committed, open. So many cultural, academic, professional backgrounds, yet all with the same objective: to make good journalism that fights populism and misinformation and provides facts, solutions and hope. Although I am used to living in an international environment, what a group of diverse – although a little too 'white' – people gathered together in a room can do never ceases to amaze me.

Ranging from teenagers to people in their late twenties, we had the chance to exchange professional and personal experiences, views of the world and on the impact of the EU in our own regions. What genuinely struck me the most though was the

fervent desire to support each other, be it through proof-reading a piece or helping with the filming of an interview, 'so that you can focus on the questions'.

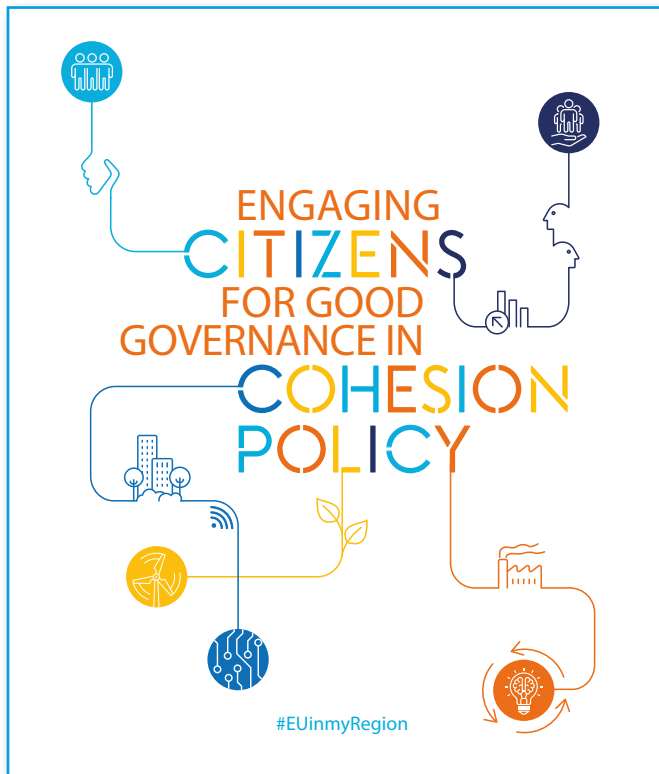
This is a metaphor, a metarepresentation of the European dream itself. Working together, despite of and thanks to our differences.

I left with the desire to come back, with the drive to enhance cross-border collaborations with the faces that became familiar in a little less than a week, and with the certainty that if the EU managed to make us feel close and connected as humans in such crazy times, it will pass even bigger tests. Beyond the institution and the set of values, the EU is (for) real people. That's all that matters at the end of the day. ■

Marta Silvia Viganò

*Alumna of the 2020 Youth4Regions programme
for aspiring journalists*

Cohesion Policy: working closely for and with the citizens



Ever since its foundation, EU Cohesion Policy has been working for the people, ensuring that decisions are taken as closely as possible to citizens by encoding partnership in its DNA.

It has contributed massively to bridging inequalities in opportunities, territories and living conditions. It has invested in making the economy more dynamic and competitive, creating quality jobs, providing quality education and training for young people, boosting mobility and accessibility, protecting the

environment, and improving the living conditions in our cities and communities. With such a background, it is only natural that it is also the policy closest to all EU citizens.

To date, Cohesion Policy has experienced several good examples of the active participation of citizens, local communities and civil society. The locally led development strategies (CLLD), integrated territorial investments in cities, Urban Innovative Actions and Interreg cross-border cooperation have all shown how investments in local development link up with the interests and desires of the people befitting from them.

On a larger scale, macro-regional strategies and partnerships under the Urban Agenda for the EU are experimenting successfully with various ways of participatory governance.

Innovation is also a powerful driver of participation. The European Structural and Investment Funds Open Data Platform has made Cohesion Policy the most transparent investment policy in modern times, showing both implementation and results. The use of open data has paved the way to initiatives in active civic monitoring.

Through the so-called Integrity Pacts, civil society organisations ensure that public spending in EU-funded projects is reputable and reliable, increasing both trust in public procurement and the quality of its outcomes. Similarly, the At the School of Open Cohesion pilot promoted active participation by school students in making sure that the projects in their home city or territory are really delivering the intended results. In 2021-2027, access to information will facilitate participation.



Strengthening ties

Genuine and meaningful engagement of citizens in Cohesion Policy represents a paradigm shift. Public institutions opening themselves up to citizen participation have nothing to fear. On the contrary, they can only benefit from a renewed and strengthened relationship with those to whom they are accountable.

At the same time, by taking part in the important decisions regarding their future, citizens will feel more empowered and responsible. This is a classical win-win, resulting in improved governance – i.e. a trusted administration proactively creating opportunities for stakeholders to participate, greater capacity building and learning, and more social cohesion underpinned by strong ownership.

This is why at a high-level conference in February this year, Elisa Ferreira, Commissioner for Cohesion and Reforms, sent a strong message to all Member States and regions: 'It is now time to make Cohesion Policy work with people'. The trend is irreversible and we have moved one step forward by promoting a series of initiatives which are already taking place, supporting and inspiring both managing authorities and civil society organisations to make citizens not only beneficiaries but participants, problem-solvers and decision-makers, too.

However, co-creation is only effective when it becomes a continuous feature and standard behaviour. The possibility to shape a region is both an advantage and a big responsibility and citizens should find it useful.

Investment in our future

Much is at stake in the next few years. We have to make sure that EU investments from the new long-term EU budget and Next Generation EU support the recovery of the European economy after the coronavirus pandemic and

make the green and digital transitions happen. They will help to build a more resilient society based on solidarity and shared objectives.

To ensure that no one is left behind, the Just Transition will have to rely on a genuine and effective partnership not only with the economic forces in the regions affected, but will also necessitate a convincing buy-in by the local people, especially the young ones who will bear the fruits of the process.

The Conference on the Future of Europe, a pan-European exercise in participatory and deliberative democracy, will only benefit from integrating the experience Cohesion Policy and its actors have gained while continuing to gain by promoting citizen engagement. The close partnership between EU institutions, Member States, regions and municipalities represent a natural framework for the forthcoming debate.

Leading by example, stimulating the debate, sharing experience and highlighting the benefits of working with people will be the best contributions to the conference objectives. Cohesion Policy is a wide platform for engaging EU citizens on building the necessary capacities and developing public investment instruments for the future of Europe. ■

FIND OUT MORE

https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/conferences/citizens_good_governance



Green behaviour is already out there so what are you waiting for?

Fifteen young social media influencers went on a journey to meet the people behind groundbreaking green regional projects and to raise awareness among young Europeans as to how the EU is leading efforts to tackle the climate crisis.

The journeys took place from October to December 2020 as part of the Green Trip campaign, initiated by the European Commission's Directorate for Regional and Urban Policy. The goal was to present environmental action to young Europeans as an adventure and to communicate the EU Green Deal in a light and engaging manner. The trip focused on personal encounters with people either involved in or benefitting from current projects promoting a low-carbon economy and fighting climate change.

Operating under the creative concept 'Ding Dong! Ready for the green challenge?', the Green Trip targeted young Europeans aged 16 to 24, in five countries: Belgium, Germany,

Greece, Lithuania and Portugal. In each country, three local influencers travelled – either virtually or physically – on thematic routes through their home territory.

Micro-influencers tell their stories

Considering the target audience, generation Z, influencer communication on social media was identified as the most effective way to achieve the campaign objectives. Coming across as authentic is important, so the selected local influencers had started to promote a sustainable lifestyle among their social media followers before the trip.

Each influencer has around 50 000 followers and is recognised as a so-called micro-influencer. They tend to have a better engagement rate and greater mutual trust and credibility among their followers and have been chosen for their storytelling abilities, because telling a story is how it works.



The journeys

Ding-Dong is the sound of someone ringing the doorbell, which is exactly what the influencers did during their #DingDongEU journey. During their trip, they rang at the door of a variety of inspiring projects and talked to green changemakers in the fields of mobility, food, housing, nature conservation, and production chains. The themes were based on the EU Green Deal's main policy areas and translated into actionable and accessible concepts for young EU citizens.

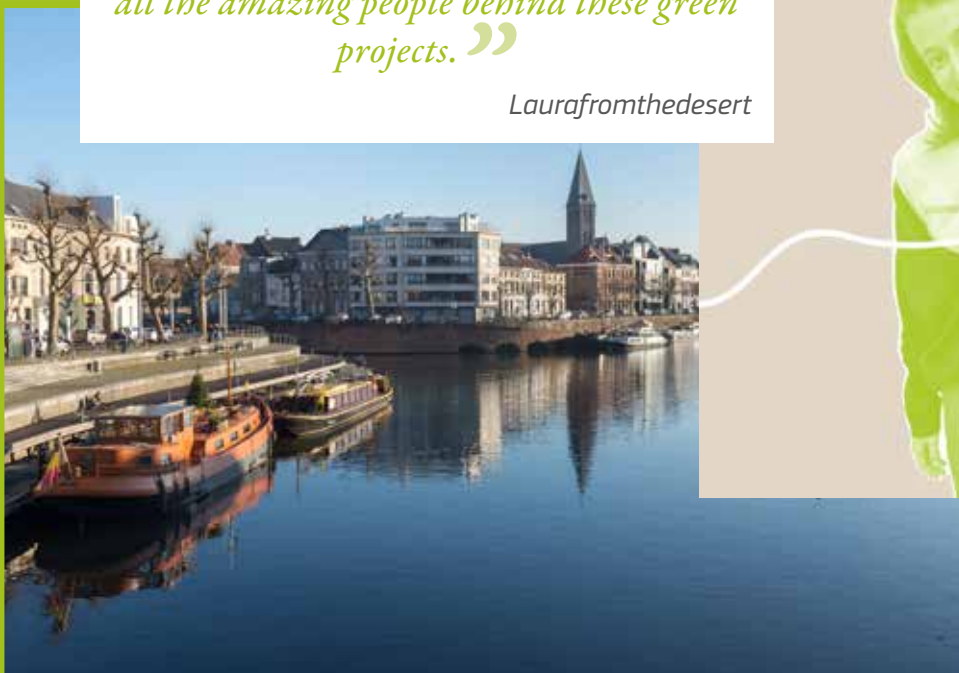


Altogether, over 70 initiatives were visited. In stunning national parks, the influencers were able to capture the work being done to preserve ecological services that maintain biodiversity and protect cities from floods. They also met business owners committed to sustainable and fair fashion, and others who upcycle a whole range of discarded objects.

In the field of food production, consumption and waste, the influencers visited state-of-the-art urban farming facilities, a research centre developing plant-based alternatives to meat, and a food redistribution centre tackling food waste.

“ I feel so energised and carry so much positive energy with me from meeting all the amazing people behind these green projects. ”

Laurafromthedesert



A profile card for Laura from Belgium. It features a green-tinted photo of a woman with long dark hair, smiling. To the right of her photo is a white circle containing a red map of Belgium. Above the photo is the 'DING DONG' logo in a stylized, bubbly font. Below the photo, the text reads 'BELGIUM LAURA @laurafromthedesert'.



“ On this trip, I learned a million things on how to protect the environment and a dozen things I never would have learned otherwise. ”

Angelo_stavr

Finally, yet equally important, several projects showed that developing environmentally friendly alternatives can also be socially inclusive.

To truly engage with the audience, and to create a can-do attitude, each influencer's journey culminated in organising a 'big green challenge' closely related to the final EU-funded project and the theme of the trip. Along the way, the influencers also took on several mini challenges proposed by their followers, ranging from creating an original recipe with leftovers in the fridge to collecting rubbish in a park. The results were posted on Instagram. The first Portuguese influencer, Catarina, was challenged to build her own compost station – in just a couple of hours, her video had received around 10000 views.





What's next? Your turn!

While the journeys are over, the campaign will continue to showcase the EU's commitment to a greener continent by repackaging influencers' experiences on social media. As demonstrated by the challenges taken up by the European projects, on the one hand, and the influencers and their followers, on the other, everyone can contribute to a more sustainable future. So, by using the hashtag #DingDongEU on Instagram, you can challenge yourself, as well as your friends, family members, or anyone else to adopt environmentally friendly habits.

The change begins now: how can Christmas be made more sustainable, and what is your green new year's resolution? ■

FIND OUT MORE

[@EUinmyregion](https://dingdong-challenge.campaign.europa.eu/en)

Disclaimer: The influencer journeys took place from late October to early December 2020. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic prevented many influencers from physically taking their green journeys. Throughout the campaign, the health situation was monitored closely, and green trips were swiftly switched to digital when necessary.

PROJECTS

HEALTH AND WELFARE INNOVATION PARTNERSHIPS IN DENMARK

**TOTAL INVESTMENT
EUR 4 832 215**

**EU CONTRIBUTION
EUR 2 416 110**

The Health Technology Services Programme in Denmark's North Jutland region brings private and public-sector organisations together to create new healthcare and welfare products and services. The aim is to improve patient care and reduce the strain on healthcare workers and welfare providers.

Entrepreneurs, businesses and knowledge institutions are being matched up through the programme to develop solutions that meet the needs of both healthcare and social services providers and can be brought to market. To date, 28 projects have resulted from the initiative, developing innovations that range from technology which improves the care experience for patients to labour-saving hospital equipment.

The programme is administered by Life Science Innovation North Denmark. The goal of this Aalborg-based partnership of the North Jutland Region and municipalities, businesses and Danish higher-education and research institutions is to strengthen health and welfare innovation and business development.

Potential collaboration partners meet in open workshops where they share needs, ideas and results. Matched public and private organisations approach the programme with ideas for healthcare and welfare technology or services, which it assesses for funding according to local needs and the market potential of the innovation. Projects then develop, test and implement their solutions.

Products for markets

Currently, around 60 companies are working with research institutions through the Health Technology Services Programme, with 32 being funded to develop new products for the market.

Among these are a system to help doctors to choose the right antibiotic therapy for patients, a digital platform that analyses images of skin surfaces, a system to store hospital patients' personal belongings safely, and robot-assisted technology to take some of the heavy lifting out of performing ultrasounds.

One highlight is a digital diary system that helps Parkinson's disease patients and their carers to manage their treatment. The system includes an app in which patients log their symptoms and medication intake and a digital watch that records activity and sleep patterns. Together, these provide detailed information that healthcare professionals can use to optimise treatment plans.

In addition to care-enhancing innovations, the programme, which runs until 2021, has generated 15 jobs from the 12 projects completed to date. Participating companies have allocated more resources to innovation in healthcare technology, increased turnover and have more possibilities for exports. ■

FIND OUT MORE

<http://www.lifescienceinnovation.dk/>

PROJECTS

MARKET REDISTRIBUTES UNSOLD PRODUCE TO THE VULNERABLE

TOTAL INVESTMENT
EUR 551 779

EU CONTRIBUTION
EUR 469 012

A food market in Greece's second-largest city has cooked up a system for distributing fresh fruit and vegetables that would otherwise go to waste. The food is shared with vulnerable social groups and individuals living below the poverty line.

Many fruits and vegetables which are safe and nutritious to eat can prove difficult to sell due to their appearance, which some might find unappealing. This can be a particular problem for market traders selling fresh produce.

Thessaloniki's central market spotted an opportunity to redistribute these unsold products. It teamed up with several partners, including Bulgaria's municipality of Borino, to launch a cross-border project known as Social Plate.

Between April 2018 and January 2020, the project received 470 tonnes of fruit and vegetables from market traders. Under the supervision of a quality control manager, the products were separated into those suitable for consumption and those that were not. Of the food received, 324 tonnes were recovered and given to those in need.

Volunteers repackaged the produce and sent it to local social organisations for redistribution, as fresh or cooked food, to vulnerable groups such as the homeless, unemployed and refugees. Seventy organisations participated in the redistribution, including NGOs, community-run grocery stores, food banks and church kitchens.

The project also sought to promote better management of organic leftovers and recycle any packaging. A further objective involved training which was provided for 30 young NGO employees.

Launching social enterprises

A project coordinator was hired to oversee the activities and two young volunteers participated as part of the Interreg Volunteer Youth programme. The actions were publicised throughout Thessaloniki, the wider region and Bulgaria in an effort to get the general public involved in ways of reducing food waste.

Funding ended in December 2019 but the project's legacy lives on through a non-profit social enterprise which has been established in Greece to continue the activities. While across the border in Bulgaria, it is hoped that the business will be franchised so that Social Plate's recipe for success can be replicated there, too. ■

FIND OUT MORE

<https://www.socialplate.eu/>

PROJECTS

INFORMATION DRIVES ENERGY TRANSITION IN LUXEMBOURG

**TOTAL INVESTMENT
EUR 2 602 769**

**EU CONTRIBUTION
EUR 1 041 108**

Cooperation between a national sustainable energy network and local authorities is helping consumers in Luxembourg to make their homes more energy efficient, switch to renewables and choose greener transport, reducing greenhouse gas emissions and saving money.

The 'Infopoints myenergy goes digital' project, funded by the European Regional Development Fund, shares the latest details on financial aid for energy-reducing home renovations or construction. It also raises awareness of how to save energy at home, renewable energy options, and the costs and climate impact of different types of transport.

The project is a partnership between local municipalities and the Luxembourg network for the sustainable energy transition – myenergy – which encompasses key national ministries along with trade, craft, architectural and engineering associations and local authority representatives.

All these organisations have information that is useful for citizens planning a renovation, construction or transport purchase. The project has developed an app, online content and digital tools that simplify access to this data, backed up by personalised support from specialist advisors in municipalities.

Green and digital support

One focus of the project is the significant amount of aid that Luxembourg's national and local authorities provide to include energy-saving features or renewable energy technology in renovated or new buildings. The Myrenovation

mobile app quickly simulates how much support is available for the planned work and guides applicants through the funding request process. Additional advice in the app covers prefinancing, retrofitting for sustainable energy use and sustainable mobility.

For web access to information, Infopoints myenergy goes digital has created the Myenergy website and a content platform for municipalities. The website includes details on energy saving at home, along with neutral data on energy sources and modes of transport to help citizens to reduce emissions, save energy and cut their overall heating, power and travel costs.

Financial aid calculators are also available on the website, along with tools to simplify management of a project, such as forms to book an appointment with an energy advisor, reports, a renovation checklist and data-monitoring tools.

Additional possibilities to digitalise myenergy services are being investigated to support climate-friendly choices. Meanwhile, the project is encouraging a wider shift to a lower-carbon economy as it drives work for people active in sustainable construction, energy and transport while enhancing energy expertise among municipal staff. ■

FIND OUT MORE

<https://www.myenergy.lu/>

PROJECTS

SUSTAINABLE MUSEUM MAKEOVER IN MALTA

TOTAL INVESTMENT
EUR 9 147 872

EU CONTRIBUTION
EUR 7 318 298

An historic building in Valetta, the capital of Malta, has been retrofitted to provide a zero-net-energy home for the country's national art collection, thanks to the European Regional Development Fund. Renovations save energy and water, while giving a 21st-century purpose to an item of unique cultural heritage.

Sympathetic adaptation of the 16th century Auberge d'Italie has improved the use of space so that the listed building can house the new Mużew Nazzjonali tal-Arti, or Malta National Community Art Museum, (MUŻA).

Modern additions ensure that visitors can appreciate the artworks in energy-efficient comfort. Secondary double glazing preserves the original windows while increasing insulation. An insulation layer added to the roof provides further protection against heat loss. The roof also houses photovoltaic panels to generate clean, renewable energy for the building's operation and lighting.

Intelligent systems in the interior ensure further energy savings. A building management system monitors heating and air-conditioning, which it adapts according to the number of people detected by sensors installed throughout the building. Daylight is supplemented by LED lamps controlled by a central computer that also adjusts the intensity of light in rooms to how much activity dedicated sensors detect.

Preserving resources

The technology is designed to operate in harmony with original features of the historical site in order to reduce the environmental footprint of the museum.

Its thick limestone walls keep the museum cool in summer and warm in winter, reducing the need for artificial heating and cooling. A large central courtyard, which is used as a space in its own right, provides natural light and ventilation to galleries housed in the surrounding rooms. Rain collected in the original water cisterns is directed to the museum toilets, saving precious water in the island state. Finally, the reuse of an historical building saves materials that would otherwise be used for constructing a new building.

Specialists from different disciplines, such as art historians and engineers, collaborated on the renovation, producing a modern, low-carbon museum that respects and shares local culture both nationally and internationally.

The building has been recognised by art critics and architects as an example of good practice in retrofitting and has proved popular with art lovers. In the year following the official opening of the renovated building in December 2018, over 5 000 people visited MUŻA. ■

FIND OUT MORE

<https://heritagemalta.org>

AGENDA

28-29 JANUARY

Belgrade (RS)

5th EUSAIR Forum

1-5 MARCH

Online

Macro-Regional Strategies Week

17-18 JUNE

Porto (PT)

9th Evaluation Conference on EU Cohesion Policy

11-14 OCTOBER

Brussels (BE)

European Week of Regions and Cities

10-11 DECEMBER

Marseille (FR)

Alpine Forum

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