

Minutes

Sixth meeting of the group of high-level specialists on the future of Cohesion Policy – Anchoring financial support from the policy in reforms, in the context of European Semester and in synergy with other EU policies

14 September 2023, Brussels

1. Nature of the meeting

The sixth meeting of the group of high-level specialists on the future of Cohesion Policy took place on 14 September 2023. The recording of the public and web streamed session of the meeting is available at https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/policy/how/future-cohesion-policy_en. This session was followed by a non-public discussion between members of the group.

15 members attended the meeting in person.

The Commission services were represented by Peter Berkowitz, Director, Directorate B - Policy, Directorate General for Regional and Urban Policy (DG REGIO), Francisco Barros Castro and Marta Pilati, Commissioner Elisa Ferreira's Cabinet members and Ruth Paserman, Director, Directorate G - Investment, (DG EMPL), accompanied by staff from both DGs.

2. Points discussed

A. Opening remarks

The meeting started with opening remarks from the Chair, Andrés Rodríguez-Pose and from Peter Berkowitz, Director of Directorate B - Policy, Directorate General for Regional and Urban Policy (DG REGIO).

Welcome and introduction by Andrés Rodríguez-Pose

The Group Chair, Andrés Rodríguez-Pose, introduced the meeting topic – ‘Anchoring financial support from the policy in reforms, in the context of European Semester and in synergy with other EU policies’ and thanked Peter Osvald for inviting members to dinner the day before.

The Chair highlighted that Cohesion Policy cannot solve all problems in the European Union if it does not work in synergy with other policies at different levels. Cohesion Policy needs to be developed together with other policies, leading to two questions:

- How can we make Cohesion Policy far more effective and capable of solving EU development issues?
- How can Cohesion Policy become more relevant in synergy with other policies?

The Chair announced presentations by academics Robin Huguenot-Noël and Nicholas Charron as well as by Marina Wes (World Bank) and Cinzia Alcidi (Centre for European Policy Studies).

Opening and welcome by Peter Berkowitz, Director, Directorate B - Policy, Directorate General for Regional and Urban Policy (DG REGIO)

Peter Berkowitz welcomed all participants and thanked them for contributing to the sixth meeting of the group. He also apologised for the Commissioner's absence.

He recalled that Cohesion Policy needs to be contemplated in the context of the EU economic governance, to which it has been increasingly aligned since the start of the 2014-2020 period, becoming in recent decades a key investment pillar of European integration. This alignment increased the effectiveness of spending and reduced the chance of flawed economic policies undermining the effectiveness of supported investments. Simultaneously, if Cohesion Policy is exclusively concerned with addressing regional disparities, it could contribute, as has been highlighted by some economic strands, to undermine the overall growth. There is a broad consensus on priorities for the current and future European economic growth model, including the green and digital transitions, as well as the need to enhance the EU's economic and social resilience. Indeed, the transformation of the EU economies relies on two equally important pillars: investments and reforms. In this context of reflection on the future of the policy in the broader context of the European, economic governance, it has become obvious that, while many regions supported by Cohesion Policy made quick and constant progress, in many others decades-long support has not led to the expected results. This may indicate that Cohesion Policy related investments have not always been rightly oriented, but also that investments without reforms are insufficient.

Key questions are: (1) How should we fit this into the EU governance mechanism? (2) Should there be stronger links?, (3) What sort of reforms make sense?, (4) Should Cohesion Policy investments be more strongly linked with regional growth-enhancing reforms and reforms implementation? And if yes, how —and with what kind of reforms— could it contribute to long-term regional convergence? (5) How should we integrate more place-sensitive policy approaches within the economic integration process? and (6) How to streamline the different funding tools available and ensure better synergies with other EU instruments?

He also suggested that, as regards the final report of the high-level group, it should be short (25-30 pages) and contain 10-15 recommendations. It can be complemented with annexes. The idea of extending the meetings in November and December to two days each was suggested.

B - Academic Inputs

The 'Academic Inputs' session included two presentations, each followed by a discussion.

Robin Huguenot-Noël (Researcher, European University Institute):

'Cash for Reforms' in the EU after the RRF: Can Cohesion benefit?

He articulated his presentation around the following 'provocative' question: 'Cash for reforms in the EU after the RRF: can Cohesion benefit?', stating that while the RRF opens opportunities for the future of Cohesion Policy, to seize them requires further territorialising the EU social agenda. After recalling that there is a long history of conditions in the use of EU structural funds (macro-economic conditionality, structural reform conditionality, ex-ante conditionality), he underlined existing tensions regarding the ultimate need and aims of the policy (with a debate often opposing 'friends of cohesion' and 'friends of better spending').

Macro-economic conditionality was introduced in the 1994-1999 programme period to comply with the Stability and Growth Pact. Structural reform conditionality was introduced in the 2014-2020 programme period to implement structural and administrative reforms in policy areas subject to country-specific recommendations under the European semester. In the same programme period (2014-2020) ex-ante conditionality was launched to fulfil ex-ante preconditions.

Structural reforms conditionality stem from macroeconomic adjustment pressures, which occurred in the EU during the financial and sovereign debt crisis. At the same time, policy conditionality has proved most effective when designed as positive incentives (rather than negative sanctions), and a close, meaningful thematical link to spending interventions that focus on ex post output or results.

Cohesion Policy and the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) take very different approaches to linking funding and reforms. RRF being ‘the new game in town’, how does it serve Cohesion Policy objectives? The implied mixed bag of governance contains the following risks (based on a comparison in design, submission, assessment, and adoption). On one hand, the RRF is a ‘performance-based’ mechanism with faster delivery. On the other hand, it is a ‘demand-driven’ mechanism that eroded EU priorities. In addition, RRF has centralised governance at the national level, which could lead to a Cohesion Policy budget erosion. The key shortcoming is a lack of territorialisation – relevant examples being Italy (whose NRRP focuses on providing tailored services to job seekers but has not been able to meet the targets yet; hence, the use of funds in Italy may have contributed to reinforce regional divergence) and France (whose NRRP targets tax reliefs for hiring apprentices, meaning that the tax incentives have ended up being mostly taken up in regions where NEETs rate is lowest). Opportunities also exist: the performance-based experimentation on milestones and targets provides a faster delivery, and the European Commission has gained on administrative / policymaking capacity in non-traditional EU areas.

Cohesion Policy can benefit from the cash for reform agenda at three levels:

- at the macro-level by amplifying the policy’s voice, by:1/ Advocating for an EU economic governance fitting cohesion needs (social convergence framework, multiannual national actions plan, Social Investments reforms, Differentiated treatment for public social investment), 2/ Systematisation of local and regional authorities (LRAs) input to EU priorities in Country Reports and RRF (annualising Annex D in the European Semester), further integration of the Committee of the Regions’ input, and 3/ Specification of the policy contribution. A performance-based logic should be introduced in Cohesion Policy. Such an approach implies proposing concrete ways to further territorialise the reform agenda and strengthening the thematic coherence across EU cash for reform tools based on the emerging evidence of Cohesion Policy / RRF coordination.
- at the meso-level by reinforcing coherence across ‘cash for reforms’ tools and
- at the micro-level with improved support, monitoring and impact assessments. This could be reached by pursuing efforts to strengthen the administrative capability to deliver on reforms, by assessing the effectiveness of EU funds via a multiplier system of diagnostic monitoring, and by buttressing the partnership with other EU institutions and DGs of the European Commission to improve the impact of ex-ante assessments.

Key issues discussed

The discussion involved: John Bachtler, Riccardo Crescenzi, Alva Finn, Constanze Krehl, Joaquim Oliveira Martins, Petr Osvald, Sari Rautio, Andrés Rodríguez-Pose, Zornitsa Roussinova and Andreea-Alexandra Scioşteanu.

The connexion between Cohesion Policy and the European semester was meant to deliver more growth, but the lack of productivity persists in the EU: what is missing is a territorial dimension. Hence, one concern was about structural policies that did not lead to increases productivity due to a lack of a territorial dimension. This meant many parts of Europe were cut off from convergence. Also, there is a lack of coordination between EU policies and a need for more complementarities to achieve Cohesion Policy goals.

The distinction between RRF and Cohesion Policy in their purpose and implementation was highlighted several times during the discussion. However, RRF conditionality and flexibility could be introduced into Cohesion Policy. The lack of time when programming NRRPs was discussed, hinting that countries followed different practices. Some centralised it without involving subnational stakeholders while others included considerable participation by subnational tiers of government. The lack of territorial character in the RRF was mentioned as a significant problem for maximising its returns. Other points included the need to make better use of ex-post evaluations, the lack of capacity to spend money allocated to some regions and the need to further differentiate Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs). Finally, better collaboration between statistics and institutions could make policies more effective.

RRF (centralised) and Cohesion Policy (regional-based) may appear as opposite instruments, advocating for leaving Cohesion Policy outside of the European Semester framework – but RRF and Cohesion Policy do not have to contradict each other, they could work in closer coordination, with a centralised approach (RRF delivery mode) that integrates contributions from sub national levels from the unput stage + at the output stage.

Three suggestions to improve the synergy of RRF with Cohesion Policy were proposed: (1) engage more on macroeconomic governance, (2) territorialise reform instruments and (3) monitor and collaborate more on impact assessments.

Nicholas Charron (Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Gothenburg)

Citizen Attitudes toward EU Regional Policy

The presentation addressed three research questions: (1) What are the determinants and effects of public support for Cohesion Policy, (2) What are citizens' attitudes to redistribution, solidarity and cohesion within the EU and (3) How to better communicate EU Regional Policy?

The starting point is that public awareness is necessary to ensure broad support for Cohesion Policy. The presentation was based on three surveys: Eurobarometer, PERCEIVE, and COHESIFY. According to the surveys, each year about one third of EU citizens claim to have heard of Regional Policy. People with higher education, civic interest/engagement with EU politics and those with cosmopolitan views tend to show more Cohesion Policy awareness. Younger people and women usually show less awareness of the policy. Also, there is a wide geographic variation (82% in Poland, 16% in Denmark) which is strongly correlated with Cohesion Policy expenditure. In Member States with 'less developed' regions, Cohesion Policy

awareness is some 5% higher. ‘Redistribution’, ‘solidarity’, ‘cohesion within the EU are often understood in relation with ‘response to the financial crisis’, particularly in North-West countries.

Most common frameworks of analysis here are: 1/ the utilitarian approach, the ideology (right left and cultural), 2/ the geographic identity, 3/ the institutional assessment / benchmarks, and 4/ the effectiveness and nature of elite cues. Overall, there is a general support for solidarity and redistribution, but it depends somewhat on the way the policy/crisis response is perceived, highlighting a ‘lukewarm’ support among most supporters at the end.

Key enduring dimensions of contestation are here again the geographic identity, the ideology, the trust showed towards institutions, the level of education, and gender. The studies show the relationship between identity and economic solidarity is straightforward and statistically relevant: those with more cosmopolitan or European (vis-a-vis exclusively national) self-identification are more likely to support economic integration in Europe and help for other Member States in times of crises. Also, trust in institutions is a consistent predictor of support for economic integration, as citizens presumably need to have confidence that institutions will spend their money efficiently. Political ideology is statistically relevant (though two surveys find this proxy insignificant). The general pattern is that left and centre-left citizens are most supportive of European fiscal integration and economic solidarity in crisis or otherwise. However, cultural “Green, Alternative, Liberal”- “Traditional, Authoritarian, Nationalism” (GAL-TAN) dimension is more meaningful, with supporters of populist parties—in particular on the far right— being the least solidaristic among those surveyed. For other demographic factors, higher education is positively correlated with higher solidarity. Studies report mixed findings concerning age. About half the studies show that gender is insignificant, while the other half show that women are less supportive of inter-EU redistribution.

This polarisation can be altered in short run, but only in the margins, through elite cues (domestic actors, co-partisans), and through a perception of ‘generosity’ (when and where does my country benefit). There is limited empirical work on this specific aspect, but the closest valid item to assess this comes from the PERCEIVE survey, which correlates ‘opposition to’ and ‘intensity of’ Cohesion Policy. This is also linked with the perception of possible corruption in public institutions. Stronger identification with Europe and more positive attitudes about the EU come with lower EU scepticism.

How then to better communicate about EU cohesion policy? Again, academic literature is limited, but the most effective dissemination seems to come from direct communication, including national media. The data suggest the presence of some communication issues. It is often the case that negative narratives (local corruption, lack of EU oversight / consequences, burdensome red tape, perception of ‘buying love’ rather than engaging genuine investments) dominate vis-à-vis more positive ones. Two problems need to be mentioned: there is often the lowest awareness among the areas of highest contribution. Yet, what are the goals for communication to the public? Should be about absorption, higher policy support, European identity? The communication budget in net donors Member-States is also too low: funding should target more unaware groups.

Three further observations at micro level: a/ perceptions of corruption of EU reduce support (for everything), b/ when both national and EU are perceived as less corrupt, support declines, and c/ if national institutions are perceived as more corrupt, citizens favour more the EU level distribution.

Recommendations for improvement should involve: improving governance and transparency (i.e., by outsourcing communication to the civil society), enhancing oversight/ auditing of EU fund expenditures via reforms (i.e., by harmonizing evaluation design, centralising / translating results of auditing EU funds, strengthening early detection and exclusion system), and harmonising methods at EU level, to also expand the positive messaging. Improving Cohesion Policy communication could include more direct communication in developed areas, stronger positive stories for the region as a whole and more focus on funds being spent competently and with integrity.

Key issues discussed

The discussion following the presentation involved: John Bachtler, Riccardo Crescenzi, Aleksandra Dulkiewicz, Alva Finn, Karl-Heinz Lambertz, Petr Osvald, Sari Rautio, Andrés Rodríguez-Pose, Andreea-Alexandra Scioşteanu and Helga Trüpel.

The first issue was the need for harmonised communication of Cohesion Policy at EU level. It was highlighted that, while awareness about Cohesion Policy is relatively low, it is much higher than for other EU policies.

Secondly, the importance of ‘more personal’ or locally adjusted communication was stressed. Cohesion Policy is implemented by regional and local authorities: communication should then also be their responsibility. Change in philosophy and standardisation of communication should not exclude local advertisement, to overcome this perception of saturation, and reach out to a broader audience. Moreover, engaging more with civil society would also help simplify the message, which still too often is perceived as too complex.

There is a clear need to develop a communication strategy for Cohesion Policy. The communication strategy for ‘Next Generation EU’ is a good example for future Cohesion Policy communication strategies. More successful communication strategies for ‘Next Generation EU’ have allowed to present as a fully-fledged brand, combining standardisation / harmonization and local dissemination.

The negative perception of Cohesion Policy as ineffective and inefficient needs to be addressed. In addition, the reliability of surveys was raised due to changes in wording and the use of jargon. Also, the need for further clarification of awareness, support and impact was mentioned, as was the importance of mobilising civil society to increase visibility for Cohesion Policy.

At the end of the discussion, four recommendations to improve Cohesion Policy were identified: (1) avoid the use of excessive jargon in general communication (i.e., ‘Cohesion’ to be replaced by ‘EU funds’); (2) allocate funds to allow more local communication; (3) emphasise the transparency and integrity of the funds in communications; and (4) send a clear message about how the funds help dealing with corruption.

C - Institutional Input

The public session also included presentations by the World Bank and the Centre for European Policy Studies, followed by discussions.

Marina Wes (World Bank, World Bank Director for the European Union) Anchoring financing in results and reforms — Key takeaways from the World Bank experience

Complementing investments with reforms can institutionalise a shift in mindset to support EU development goals. Identifying needed reforms and aligning visions on programme results helps achieve development goals.

As the World Bank (WB) has gradually moved to more result-based financing, one of the benefits of the move towards results-based financing is an increasing tendency to shift the dialogue from inputs and compliance to results. Leveraging funds and building coalitions around results serves as a platform to mobilise inter-ministerial and develop the support of partners. This shift at the WB was translated through:

- Project support (investment project financing): the WB supports specific investment operations, disburses against specific expenditures that support the operation, funds for specific expenditures;
- Policy support (Development policy financing): the WB supports policy and institutional actions (to entice subnational reforms), disburses against policy and institutional actions, with non-earmarked funds for general budget support;
- Programme support (Program for results): the WB supports governments programmes or subprogrammes, disburses up to achievements of results according to indicators, finances a defined program of expenditures,

all of them represent a pathway for linking investments to reforms at the subnational level.

To illustrate this shift, different instruments were presented: IPF (Investment Project Financing), DPF (Development Policy Financing) and PforR (Programme for Results). 41% of the WB's urban sector financing goes to operations with performance based fiscal transfers to local governments (Urban Performance Grants, UPGs). 14 out of 18 are PforR, as this is naturally an objective of UPGs to support improved intergovernmental fiscal transfers, as well as improved infrastructure and service delivery. These operations incentivise improved municipal services, infrastructure, and governance reforms. There are minimum conditions for subnational government units to compete for Results Based Financing (an additional mechanism to incentivise reforms).

The key factors for these instruments to be effectively disbursed are: 1/ that they support inclusion and are effectively disbursed, 2/ anchoring reforms using evidence and analytics including at regional level, in order to best identify both horizontal and vertical reforms, applied judiciously where appropriate, 3/ providing hands-on implementation support and technical assistance. The shift to the results-based approach relies also on government buy-in and a mindset shift to accountability based on results. Performance management and assessment, complemented by evaluation / verification, is also crucial. Finally, building coalitions and partnerships of stakeholders are key to identify regional reforms – and bringing these priorities into the dialogue around the European Semester.

Key issues discussed

The discussion involved: Peter Berkowitz, Riccardo Crescenzi, Joaquim Oliveira Martins, Petr Osvald, Sari Rautio, Andrés Rodríguez-Pose, Zornitsa Roussinova and Helga Trüpel.

The discussion started with how to reform Cohesion Policy to further involve different stakeholders working more closely together. The importance of the regional nature of Cohesion Policy was highlighted. At the same time, some features of the RRF performance-based approach could also be used for Cohesion Policy (at regional level).

Mindset shift builds on trust: it is important to integrate this when discussing Cohesion Policy and subnational approaches. The regional nature of Cohesion Policy is not negotiable, but it appears that the mechanisms developed so far to support the subnational levels are not necessarily sufficient and/or developed enough (not so much for the stronger actors, more problematic for the weakest regions), and could be replicated for further areas (i.e., green transition). Mindset shift and trust are critical and take time: institutions need to evolve as well. One open question remains the results of such approach on administrative capacity, where results are not easily measurable. Question of trust on institutions is also to be taken into consideration. It is important to shift towards a results-based design, where output and outcomes are also strengthening the implementation (where capacity building is intrinsic and attributable to the operation). In addition, partnerships (also in financing) are critical with a broad range of stakeholders, emphasising the importance of not favouring some interest groups.

Three recommendations to improve Cohesion Policy were identified: (1) results-based financing can lead to more sustainable outcomes, (2) encourage partnerships with actors from all sectors and (3) programme design should include in-depth analytics.

Cinzia Alcidi (CEPS, Director of Research)

Cinzia Alcidi dedicated her presentation to the nature of the RRF. RRF was a response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Proposal preparation and approval were extremely fast due to very high uncertainty driven by the pandemic and extreme economic and social conditions. The RRF is an incredible natural experiment for EU public finances (and more broadly for the EU).

The RRF links funding to achieving milestones and targets. National Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRPs) are performance-based contracts agreed ex-ante between Member States and the Commission, translated into implementing decisions adopted by the Council.

The RRF is associated with a strong centralisation of authority and decision-making within national governments. Contrary to Cohesion Policy funds, RRF is under direct management and Member States are the final beneficiaries. Centralisation is reinforced by the performance-based approach. Despite clear centralisation, there are differences in governance for national RRP, which affect the efficiency of the RRF. One point of interest is the cross-country differences in the degree of involvement of sub-national authorities in the drafting and implementation of the plans, which affects the efficiency of the plans, in particular the investments (ex: in Spain).

RRF is not a silver bullet template for the future of Cohesion Policy, but it is crucial to learn from it. The emphasis on performance and the link between investment and reforms are not new and are likely to stay. Since most reforms are based on CSR, so are due in any case, or are linked to proposed investment (to make it effective) conditionality should be 'constructive' and incentives to implement reforms high (payment). The performance-based approach RRF requires monitoring and assessment, which can involve heavy burdens. In practice the RRF Regulation does not require results, but 'measures of progress towards the achievement of a reform or an investment'. This limits assessments of milestones, targets and successful

implementation of reforms and investments. Finally, the lack of territorial dimension in the RRF represents an important limitation.

Key issues discussed

The discussion involved: Joaquim Oliveira Martins, Ruth Paserman, Andrés Rodríguez-Pose and Zornitsa Roussinova.

The first issue raised was about GDP conditionality that is not part of RRF, but is part of Structural Funds. There was also a discussion on the comparison between the Common Agricultural Policy and RRF. Some of the talk veered towards the clear distinction between Eastern and South European regions in the way they are financed (RRF or Cohesion Policy). Also noted was that some results from the RRF (e.g., contribution to reforms) are still to be seen.

At the end of the discussion, three recommendations to improve the Cohesion Policy were identified: (1) need to learn from RRF to improve Cohesion Policy and make it more efficient and more relevant for people, (2) spending for RRF and Cohesion Policy needs to go together, (3) coherence and alignment between policies is needed to achieve overarching EU objectives.

E - Key discussion points of the internal session

The internal session evolved as an open discussion addressing (a) further issues concerning synergies of policies and performance-based financing, (b) proposals for key messages in the final report of the group, and (c) procedures and steps to draft the final report.

Cohesion Policy must find synergies with other policies to achieve its own goals and, in turn, help other policies reach their objectives. For example, the green transition will fail if its benefits are concentrated in the most dynamic regions, so coherent and aligned policies are fundamental.

Bringing together performance-based approaches and the territorial dimension implies decentralisation and multilevel governance. Involving sub-national players helps define place-based needs and actions. It also contributes to ownership and capacity building. It does not always mean that the funding (decision) is decentralised.

The discussion of possible key messages on the future of Cohesion Policy concentrated mainly on how to improve synergies between policies and how to address enlargement.

3. Conclusions/recommendations/opinions

Cohesion Policy co-exists with a multitude of other policies at all levels. All these policies have their own aims, means, governance and delivery mechanisms as well as communication channels. Policies may even appear contradictory. Nevertheless, despite all these differences, all public policies aim at increasing economic dynamism and resilience as well as citizens' well-being and quality of life.

The different ways they do so are visible, especially with Cohesion Policy and the RRF. While Cohesion Policy strongly focuses on the territorial dimension, multilevel governance, and compliance, RRF emphasises national management and performance-based financing.

Overall, public policies are not delivering to their full potential on citizens' expectations. In the EU, economic, innovation and productivity growth are not matching expectations.

This can be explained through several reasons, first of them being likely the lack of territorial dimension. Many policies lack a territorial dimension. They are spatially blind, or aspatial. Nevertheless, all policies have spatial implications. Often aspatial policies mainly benefit thriving and more developed places. Ignoring territorial implications of policies can fuel local player and citizen disengagement with policy making and democratic structures. This increases the risks of discontent, people feeling left behind and Euroscepticism. There is hence a clear need to invest in places lagging and falling behind.

Still, Cohesion Policy has achieved its own goals. We need to make sure we are aligned with the RRF and need to help other policies to achieve their goals. Effectiveness of RRF is lacking from a territorialisation approach. Transition will fail if not regionalised. Better coordination is needed at all levels of policy making, especially horizontal policy coordination. At the EU level this includes coordination between Cohesion Policy, RRF and Agricultural / Rural Development Policy. Better coordination means combining investments and reforms to deliver better results together than separately.

Policies need to apply a performance-based approach. Cohesion Policy – and a wide range of other national and EU policies – focus on means, inputs (including absorption) and compliance. The focus needs to shift to delivering policy aims. Shifting to a performance-based model would increase policy coordination, good public spending, and the credibility of public institutions, as well as reducing the risk of 'wasting' public money.

We also need more support to capacity building, to consult more broadly: allowing participation creates a feeling of ownership. This does not mean that everything should be decentralised, but very often, what we need is technical assistance to ensure the most efficient combination of investments with reforms, on the path to better results.

4. Next steps

The group has four more meetings scheduled up to January 2024, each with an established agenda. All information about these meetings will be published on the group web page: https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/policy/how/future-cohesion-policy_en

Next meetings

Seventh meeting	10 October 2023	Increasing policy effectiveness through renewed conditionality mechanisms
Eighth meeting	13-14 November 2023	Revisiting the delivery mode
Ninth meeting	14-15 December 2023	Enhancing the policy capacity to respond to sudden shocks and crises
Tenth meeting	23 January 2024	Discussion on the final report

List of participants

Speakers:

- Berkowitz, Peter – Director, Directorate B - Policy, Directorate General for Regional and Urban Policy (DG REGIO)
- Charron, Nicholas – Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Gothenburg
- Huguenot-Noël, Robin – Researcher & PhD candidate, European University Institute
- Wes, Marina – Country Director for the European Union, World Bank
- Badiani-Magnusson, Reena – The World Bank
- Alcidi, Cinzia – Director of Research, Centre for European Policy Studies

Members of the high-level group:

In person:

- Andor, László
- Bachtler, John
- Berès, Pervenche
- Crescenzi, Riccardo
- Dulkiwicz, Aleksandra
- Finn, Alva
- Krehl, Constanze
- Lambertz, Karl-Heinz
- Oliveira Martins, Joaquim
- Osvald, Petr
- Rautio, Sari
- Rodríguez-Pose, Andrés
- Roussinova, Zornitsa
- Scioşteanu, Andreea-Alexandra
- Trüpel, Helga