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Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions — The future of Cohesion Policy post-2027

(C/2024/1041)

Co-rapporteurs: Vasco ALVES CORDEIRO (PT/PES), Member of the Parliament of the Autonomous Region of the Azores
Emil BOC (RO/EPP), Mayor of Cluj-Napoca

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS (CoR),

1. notes that territorial disparities and their diverse scope remain across the EU and that they hamper its economic and social prospects if they are not properly tackled, particularly as regional convergence has slowed down and new drivers of inequalities have appeared recently;
2. highlights that, namely, the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change and the war in Ukraine have created new disparities and aggravated existing structural vulnerabilities and differences;
3. recalls that European societies are in the midst of a structural transformation linked to the green and digital transitions, against the backdrop of profound demographic change, which has a profound impact on Europe's territories and people's lives and, if not duly managed, will create new and profound disparities;
4. recalls the considerable impact of climate change on all European regions, which risks generating highly asymmetric impact on living conditions especially in more vulnerable regions; thus, climate change is one of the biggest threats to Europe's cohesion in the future; therefore, underlines the need for cohesion policy to continue supporting climate related spending in the future;
5. stresses that people and places are not equal in the face of such vulnerabilities and structural challenges, and that economic, social and territorial cohesion, supporting the Sustainable Development Goals, remains a fundamental objective and principle of the EU, whose concrete translations into EU policies have to be strengthened in the light of the new EU political agenda;
6. emphasises that Member States and EU institutions should properly take into consideration the cost and risk of non-cohesion when deciding on cohesion policy post-2027; and that the cost of 'no cohesion' would be a fundamental blow to the idea of a stronger and more united Europe, potentially fuelling even further a 'geography of discontent' and disconnecting Europeans from the European Union;
7. underlines that the objective of Article 174 TFEU, which forms the basis of EU cohesion policy, and the specific types of area it refers to should be taken into account more in the next funding period;
8. recalls that under Article 3 TEU, cohesion policy and the internal market go hand in hand as two of the main objectives, policies and instruments of the EU to achieve progress and development at all levels for the peoples of the EU;

9. stresses therefore the need for the 'do no harm to cohesion' principle to apply to all EU policies so that they support the objectives of social, economic and territorial cohesion, as referred to in Article 3 of the TEU and Article 174 TFEU; underlines in that respect the CoR opinion on 'do no harm to cohesion' ⁽¹⁾, insists that promoting cohesion should also be seen as a way to foster a sense of solidarity and mutual support among Member States, which is essential for strengthening the resilience of cities, municipalities and regions and for maintaining peace, stability and security in Europe;

10. considers that the priorities and the corresponding resources for cohesion policy should evolve for the post-2027 period so that there can be no doubt as to its position as a cornerstone of the European project and as the main EU investment tool to achieve economic, social and territorial cohesion in the long term; acknowledges that there is significant need to reconcile the original goals of the policy with the need to address an ever expanding range of priorities;

11. recalls the importance of a stronger gender and youth mainstreaming in cohesion policy and highlights the specific role of both, as they play a major role in society and sustainable economic development and at the same time face difficulties in accessing the labour market, as well as equal pay, public services such as health and childcare;

12. recognises that a comprehensive reform is needed to address both the dilution of the role and identity of cohesion policy and its perceived slow implementation;

13. calls on the European Commission, the Council and the European Parliament to strengthen the role and mission of post-2027 cohesion policy vis-à-vis other EU investment policies and to embed potential complementarities from the outset in order to avoid overlaps which may lead to complexity on the ground; this would in turn generate better coordination among stakeholders involved in cohesion policy and across different EU policies;

14. points out that the scope and objectives of the future cohesion policy should comprehensively mirror the changing nature of disparities and future vulnerabilities as captured by the findings of the 8th and the upcoming 9th cohesion report;

15. points out that new indicators complementing the current one based on GDP should be used to define cohesion policy eligibility. This should be done over a ten year period to allow the trajectories of the regions to be emphasised, including at intra-regional level and to provide a new definition of 'regional disparities', taking into account in particular regions in development traps for the next programming period. Believes that developing a territorial vulnerability scoreboard is crucial in order to start a policy debate on how to use future cohesion policy to respond to such vulnerabilities. Any additional indicators must support EU policy goals and be objective and comparable at regional level;

16. stresses that a key feature of cohesion policy is that it is programmed and implemented primarily at subnational level, and targets the regional and local levels, with regions and cities being the main beneficiaries; emphasises that more funding should be available and programmed by regional authorities, regardless of their size, and that weakening subnational authorities, which are closest to the citizens, risks undermining the spirit of the EU and thus the European project;

17. underlines that the importance of cohesion policy goes well beyond its financial support, in that it is also critical, amongst other things, to implement key EU policies such as the European Green Deal, build additional knowledge and capacity within local, regional and national administrations, and reinforce citizens' trust in the EU;

18. emphasises the contribution of cohesion policy to the integration, economic development and capacity building of new and candidate or potential candidate countries of the European Union (including via European Territorial Cooperation (ETC) programmes); this role needs to be upheld in the future cohesion policy, with the vigorous involvement of local and regional authorities (LRAs);

19. points out that, in the event of EU enlargement, average GDP per capita may fall in the EU. Asks therefore the European Commission to carry out a detailed assessment before proposing new regulation for the post-2027 cohesion policy so that it is equipped to continue to support all regions and so that any unfavourable consequence caused by a 'statistical effect' on cohesion policy eligibility can be duly addressed;

⁽¹⁾ CoR opinion 'Do no harm to cohesion' (Rapporteur Michiel Rijsberman, NL/RE) (OJ C 257, 21.7.2023, p. 1).

20. highlights that the adoption of a mission-oriented approach in future cohesion policy, thereby orienting more explicitly the policy toward addressing grand societal challenges (e.g. demographics, climate change) through specific and time-bound targets, could help streamline investment priorities, strengthen the involvement of local communities and reinforce the results-based dimension;

21. highlights that post-27 cohesion policy must address the European Pillar of Social Rights, in particular Article 3 of Chapter I and Article 20 of Chapter III ⁽²⁾; underlines that the policy must also address Article 34(3) (social assistance and housing assistance), Article 35 (health protection) and Article 36 (access to services of general economic interest) of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, which guarantee access to basic social benefits and a level of well-being through the provision of basic public services, in particular in the regions covered by Article 174 TFEU;

General principles

22. stresses that all European regions should remain eligible for funding in the future;

23. strongly advocates that the shared-management model, multi-level governance and the partnership principle remain the guiding principles of cohesion policy post-2027, as referred to in CoR opinion on 'Effectively engaging local and regional authorities in the preparation of the Partnership Agreements and Operational Programmes for the 2021-2027 period' ⁽³⁾, in that the successful implementation of cohesion policy depends critically on the knowledge and involvement of local and regional authorities;

24. stresses furthermore that any future investment policy instrument, including a possible follow-up instrument to the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), should be based on these principles and implemented under shared management in line with the principles of subsidiarity and shared multilevel governance;

25. is convinced that in line with the 'do no harm to cohesion' principle, the Commission should reassess the governance of future centrally-managed programmes to ensure that their impact is more in line with the needs of territories and accounting for their diversity and ensure better access for LRAs to these programmes;

26. recalls that the principle of subsidiarity is one of the main building blocks of the EU project, and should be duly respected in the implementation of funds, especially in relation to the competences of local and regional authorities in accordance with Article 5 TEU;

27. emphasises the need to streamline and align the complex terminology surrounding the policy, which is a key precondition to improve its visibility and ownership in the post-27 period, making it more user-friendly, for the beneficiaries, the managing and audit authorities and EU citizens at large;

28. highlights the importance and potential benefits of developing a more comprehensive approach to measuring the benefits of cohesion policy combining both qualitative and quantitative indicators and going beyond GDP (such as the EU Social Progress Index, the Climate Change Vulnerability Index or household disposable income) both in the design and implementation of cohesion policy-related funds; insists that cohesion policy cannot only be presented in quantitative terms alone such as the absorption rate of funds;

29. points out the need to better communicate at local, regional, national and EU levels, the results of cohesion policy to citizens in light of the multiple benefits which this will bring about, including a positive impact on the trust in EU institutions;

European economic governance and reforms

30. acknowledges the efforts to connect cohesion policy to the European semester process but stresses that there are still concrete challenges, including lack of ownership at regional and local level and an insufficient democratic and participative dimension; moreover, points out that for the connection to be consolidated, the medium-term fiscal adjustment plans envisaged in the proposed reform of European Economic Governance must build on the involvement of regions and cities and should respect the 'do no harm to cohesion' principle;

⁽²⁾ Interinstitutional Proclamation on the European Pillar of Social Rights (OJ C 428, 13.12.2017, p. 10).

⁽³⁾ OJ C 61, 4.2.2022, p. 15.

31. calls for the discontinuation of the macroeconomic conditionality in the post-2027 period because the link between the EU economic governance framework and cohesion policy must not be based on a punitive approach holding European Structural and Investment (and other EU funding programmes) Funds hostage to national decisions;

32. acknowledges that development-enhancing reforms, recommended in the European Semester process, can contribute to a significant extent to improving investment conditions, and is of the opinion that post-2027 future cohesion policy cannot disregard this fact;

33. reminds that the pandemic, the climate emergency and the current geopolitical context have confirmed the need to work towards a renewed Economic Governance Framework, including the Stability and Growth Pact, and to introduce a golden rule for cohesion policy investments, including the co-financing of EU Structural and Investment Funds;

34. emphasises that stronger legal guarantees will be needed under the post-2027 budgetary framework to ensure that the application of the rule of law conditionality does not affect local and regional beneficiaries of the funds; any suspensions of funding, which would affect local and regional authorities not responsible for the breaches of the rule of law by their national governments, should be opposed;

Legal architecture and budgetary aspects

35. stresses that the overall budget of cohesion policy in the post-2027 period should be at least equivalent to the 2021-2027 one (including the recovery assistance for cohesion and the territories of Europe (REACT-EU) top-up) in real terms, while the European Territorial Cooperation component should be increased compared to the current programming period, and represent no less than 8 % of the total amount, to especially reinforce the cross-border cooperation component given the need to boost cooperation across borders after it suffered a slowdown related to COVID restrictions and the Russian aggression against Ukraine. Given the specific nature of European Territorial Cooperation programmes, the Commission could look into whether more flexible provisions can benefit the successful implementation of projects in the territories;

36. vehemently opposes any attempt to centralise EU policies which are currently implemented under shared management;

37. advocates that cohesion policy should operate under the aegis of a single strategic framework defining the main scope and goals for the post-2027 period; this 'European partnership pact' should build on previous initiatives, such as the Common Strategic Framework, ensure coherence and directionality in the implementation of the policy, including through concrete targets, with guarantees regarding the participation of local and regional authorities as part of the 'European partnership pact';

38. demands that such a 'European partnership pact' should encompass all shared management funds as well as new instruments under hybrid forms of management, such as the Social Climate Fund; and expects further harmonisation of fund-specific rules;

39. calls for simplification of the overall funding architecture because the presence of multiple funds directly or indirectly intended for cohesion, including initiatives implemented directly by the European Commission, at times with overlapping priorities and different delivery mechanisms, may impede delivery of cohesion policy; draws attention to the fact that this fragmentation of funds and procedures has negative effects both in the short and the long term. In the short run, it creates additional bureaucracy and increased administrative burden for managing and audit authorities and beneficiaries already overstretched as well as overlaps and duplications between the funds;

40. stresses that in the medium term, this fragmentation and redundancy can harm core principles of cohesion policy such as multi-level governance and the place-based approach: in fact, the resulting complexity and obstacles may lead to pressure to centralise the management of the funds and dilute their territorial focus for efficiency purposes. In the long term, the identity, core values and mission of cohesion policy can be also affected;

41. calls for the restoration, under the Common Provisions Regulation (*) (CPR), of the future fund of the Common Agricultural Policy supporting agricultural rural development (currently the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development — EAFRD); such a fund should be managed regionally or with decisive regional participation, placing greater emphasis than before on structural policy measures in sparsely populated areas;

42. considering the structural challenges linked to the dual green and digital transformation and their uneven impact on EU regions, is convinced that the principles underpinning the idea of a just transition should guide the next programming period of cohesion policy funds; points out in that respect that the Just Transition Fund (JTF) could be embedded in the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) or the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) as a top-up allocation, on condition that it does not lose its specificity and features, as its priorities largely overlap with the two funds;

43. underlines that many other industrial sectors have to implement transition pathways to remain consistent with the Green Deal legislation and calls therefore on the Commission to verify whether the scope of the JTF allocation needs to be revised to include other activities in transition such as those related to the transformation of the most strategic, energy and greenhouse gas-intensive as well as labour-intensive industries (including those related to the transformation of the automotive industry); recalls that additional priority areas should lead to additional funding;

44. given that climate change and the digital transition will lead to uneven impacts, whereby the most vulnerable areas and weakest sections of society can be more adversely affected, there is an urgent need to increase and accelerate investment in climate adaptation, biodiversity and resilience and digitalisation within the future cohesion policy;

45. considers that programmes should enjoy, in the event of an unexpected crisis, flexibility in relation to co-financing rates as budgetary constraints, as seen in the recent crises, can affect the capacity of national or sub-national authorities to co-fund programmes irrespective of their level of development; underlines, nonetheless, the importance of co-financing to ensure greater impact, additionality and ownership on the ground as well as synergies and spill-over effects between cohesion policy and local and regional policies;

46. calls for establishment of a comprehensive mechanism for the use of funds in the event of exceptional or unforeseen circumstances by means of guiding provisions on its scope, funding availability, governance and application; such a mechanism, building on Article 20 of the current regulation, should prevent the need for successive and targeted revisions of the legislation in the face of negative shocks, as occurred several times in the 2014-2020 period;

47. calls for establishment of significantly higher levels of pre-financing, at no less than 13 % in the first implementing year, to allow for a quicker kick-off of programmes and enable programmes to partially advance finance beneficiaries, thereby making the funds more accessible for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and other beneficiaries with limited liquidity. Pre-financing is an important factor in removing financial barriers to the implementation of projects by beneficiaries;

Governance, delivery and territorial aspects

48. opposes the worrying trend towards re-nationalisation that cohesion policy is experiencing and calls for steps to set out more legal guarantees in the post-2027 framework to ensure greater decentralisation and full involvement of local and regional authorities in decision-making;

49. notes that shared management has proven effective and that there is no clear evidence that national governance is more effective than a decentralised or multi-level one; is of the opinion that cohesion policy post-2027 should provide regulatory incentives to set up regional programmes and local strategies;

50. calls for establishment of a dedicated enabling condition on the partnership principle which would entail the adoption of national plans with clear commitments as to the involvement of local and regional authorities in the design and implementation of cohesion policy; invites the European Commission to report to the CoR on an annual basis about the fulfilment of this condition;

(*) Regulation (EU) 2021/1060 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2021 laying down common provisions on the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund Plus, the Cohesion Fund, the Just Transition Fund and the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund and financial rules for those and for the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, the Internal Security Fund and the Instrument for Financial Support for Border Management and Visa Policy (OJ L 231, 30.6.2021, p. 159).

51. highlights that the principles of partnership and multi-level governance are central to cohesion policy as they ensure that decision-making processes involve all relevant stakeholders, including regional and local authorities, civil society organisations, and private sector actors; notes that these concerted efforts should be guided by specific good governance principles of accountability, transparency and participation of stakeholders;

52. highlights that, in order to tackle the inconsistent and often unsatisfactory application of the partnership principle, the European code of conduct on partnership ⁽⁵⁾ should be updated and embedded in the post-2027 CPR;

53. points out that cohesion policy was the first investment area of the budget where elements of performance budgeting were introduced; stresses that the uptake of simplified cost options and financing not linked to costs should be encouraged in future cohesion policy through a mix of regulatory requirements and incentives so as to achieve more simplification;

54. insists on the importance of territorial and place-based approaches of cohesion policy to allow its intervention in relevant functional areas and particularly to develop cooperation between rural and urban areas;

55. points out that development is more difficult in the regions referred to in Article 174 TFEU and Article 349 TFEU. Urges the European Commission to aggregate statistical data and include a specific section on the regions referred to in Article 174 TFEU and Article 349 TFEU in its future reports on economic, social and territorial cohesion;

56. argues that dealing with the urban/rural divide (which is particularly pronounced in some EU Member States where rural areas have been slow to benefit from the regions' overall economic development) is extremely important to achieve cohesion at EU level; calls for a greater role for local and regional authorities as well as other stakeholders in addressing this divide;

57. stresses the importance of safeguarding the identity and specificity of European rural communities and making sure development implies the opportunity for rural communities to benefit in the same manner as urban ones from cohesion policy;

58. highlights that urban development needs to be addressed at the level of urban functional areas, taking into consideration broader spatial units than the cities themselves, given the fact that very often these territories function in an integrated manner, facing similar challenges;

59. highlights the need for a strong urban and metropolitan dimension within the post-2027 cohesion policy as referred to in CoR opinion on metropolitan regions ⁽⁶⁾. While urban and metropolitan areas are essential drivers of growth and just transition, they encounter distinct challenges that need to be effectively addressed through cohesion policy, such as social disparities in population, lack of affordable housing, accessible health care, achieving sustainable urban mobility, air pollution, the impacts of climate change or the integration of migrants;

60. insists on developing and amplifying the use of territorial instruments such as community-led local development (CLLD) and integrated territorial investments (ITIs), where possible, in European Structural and Investment Funds, as they have proven to be very effective in tailoring interventions to particular local and regional circumstances. A part of the funds should be earmarked to develop this territorial approach in rural areas through CLLD for non-agricultural rural development to complement actions supported under the LEADER approach. This will also be a fundamental way to address the geography of discontent. Decisions on the implementation of territorial instruments should be taken by regional authorities;

⁽⁵⁾ <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/93c4192d-aa07-43f6-b78e-f1d236b54cb8>.

⁽⁶⁾ Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions — The challenges of metropolitan regions and their position in the future Cohesion Policy post-2020 (OJ C 79, 10.3.2020, p. 8).

61. recalls the key role of cohesion policy in supporting territories beset by severe and permanent natural or demographic handicaps, such as outermost regions and northernmost regions which have very low population density, and islands, cross-border and mountain regions, as mentioned in the CoR opinions on 'Enhancing Cohesion Policy support for regions with geographic and demographic handicaps (art 174 TFEU)' ⁽⁷⁾; 'The EU response to the demographic challenge' ⁽⁸⁾; and 'Putting people first, securing sustainable and inclusive growth, unlocking the potential of the EU's outermost regions' ⁽⁹⁾;

62. underlines that, as regards regions with structural handicaps as spelled out in Article 174 of the TFEU, the objective of territorial cohesion is binding for all other European policies, in particular the European Green Deal and the digital strategy;

63. stresses that the specific challenges inherent in outermost regions should also be given particular attention as per Article 349 TFEU, and that for these regions the issues of territorial accessibility, transport and connectivity are closely intertwined and should be dealt in tandem with cohesion policy objectives;

Programming, flexibility and simplification

64. highlights that regulatory stability and predictability is essential for a fast and effective delivery and calls on the Commission to design the post-2027 framework in a more flexible way to make sure that the start of implementation can be guaranteed to kick start on 1 January 2028, thus averting the need to adopt multiple legislative revisions during the programming period and advocates that, also in this context, flexibility and simplification are key;

65. requests the Commission to explore the legal and operational benefits of adopting a separate regulation on management and control applicable across periods as a way to reduce the legislative confusion and programming delays experienced at the onset of the present and past cycles, whilst speeding up the delivery of EU structural and investment funds in the process;

66. notes that the rules for re-orienting funds should be made more flexible, for instance by considering the creation of a dedicated axis in order for local and regional authorities to address emerging priorities; stresses that this will not erode the multi-annual orientation of the policy but will help best adapt to the fast-changing nature of our times;

67. underlines that thematic concentration and mainstreaming requirements are paramount to maximise the impact of the policy in the areas where it is most needed but they can generate disproportionate constraints and administrative burden on programmes. Also stresses that the implementation on the ground should be tailored to the needs, potentials and development challenges of each region;

68. asks the Commission to launch a wide-ranging consultation and assessment of simplification measures undertaken since the 1990s, including in comparison to alternative delivery models (e.g. RRF), and report by the end of 2024 on viable options for post-2027; is of the opinion that this assessment should cover multiple dimensions of the policy ranging from de-commitment rules to audit;

69. stresses that a further simplification of rules and procedures is key to attract more potential beneficiaries, which would in turn improve the quality and geographical distribution of projects, as studies indicate entities with no prior experience in managing EU resources are far less likely to participate in funding calls ⁽¹⁰⁾; calls on the Commission to further investigate what are the main barriers to funding access;

70. acknowledges that the number of audits has been reduced currently, but the content of the audits has been made more complex, with the addition of new elements such as enabling conditions;

⁽⁷⁾ COTER-VII-022, Rapporteur: Marie-Antoinette Maupertuis (OJ C 79, 2.3.2023, p. 36).

⁽⁸⁾ SEDEC-VI-008, Rapporteur: Juan Vicente Herrera Campo (OJ C 17, 18.1.2017, p. 40).

⁽⁹⁾ COTER-VII-023, Rapporteur: Pedro de Faria e Castro (OJ C 157, 3.5.2023, p. 18).

⁽¹⁰⁾ Marques Santos, A. and Conte, A., *Regional participation to Research and Innovation programmes under Next Generation EU: The Portuguese case* — JRC Working Papers on Territorial Modelling and Analysis 07/2023, European Commission, 2023, JRC134274.

71. emphasises that the application of the proportionality principle should be further expanded in the post-2027 period in relation to the size of programmes and single operations;

Territorial cooperation and innovation-driven territorial transformation

72. acknowledges the importance of supporting innovation-driven territorial transformation as a fundamental element of the future cohesion policy, with respect also to supporting innovations in industrial, craft and agricultural geographical indications in order to support their survival as a part of European identity;

73. stresses that funding programmes should be tailored to the specific needs and priorities of each region. This may involve providing tailored support and training to help regions develop the necessary expertise to implement innovation-driven strategies. It is also important to streamline administrative procedures and ensure that funding and resources are provided in a transparent and accountable manner in line with good governance principles and subsidiarity. Finally, it is essential to engage stakeholders and communicate the potential benefits of innovation-driven territorial transformation, in order to create a supportive environment for change;

74. emphasises that Smart Specialisation Strategies have played an important role in promoting regional innovation and competitiveness, and calls on the Commission to assess how the scope and operational aspects of these frameworks could be revamped in the post-2027 period drawing on the experience of the Partnerships for Regional Innovation, in view of ensuring more directionality, coordination, cooperation and local capacities;

75. calls for transnational and interregional cooperation to be strengthened too, in order to support the sharing of best practices as well as cooperation between local and regional authorities across the EU; in this regard, welcomes the fact that Interreg Europe and URBACT have also been opened up to candidate countries;

76. advocates continuing and strengthening the ESPON programme in order to continue helping local and regional authorities identify new challenges and new potential and devise successful development policies in the future;

77. recalls that 30 % of the European population lives in border regions and that European Territorial Cooperation represents the essence of European added value;

78. underlines that the post-2027 cohesion policy framework should further incentivise mainstream programmes to invest in territorial cooperation projects, including via enabling minimum earmarking and the creation of a dedicated axis; in this regard, suggests that a percentage of the funds of the main ERDF regional programmes could be used to implement Smart Specialisation Strategies in the framework of interregional projects in order to reinforce industrial value chains and to address the issue of the middle income trap regions and those stuck in development traps;

79. notes that European Territorial Cooperation programmes are closely linked to the objectives of the cohesion policy and they provide a unique framework for interregional, cross-border, and transnational cooperation, which can help to address common challenges, foster partnerships and promote economic development, social cohesion and environmental sustainability; given that macro-regional strategies improve the complementarity of different political strategies and programmes and coordinate actions to achieve the objectives set and implemented at different levels of governance, supports the creation of new macro-regional strategies, in particular bottom-up initiatives;

80. recognises that cross-border regions, including regions located at the EU's external borders, often face specific challenges related to administrative and legal barriers, and the European Territorial Cooperation programmes help to overcome these challenges by providing funding and support for joint projects and initiatives; in this regard, reiterates its support for the potential European Cross-Border Mechanism; stresses the need to increase funding for ETC programmes in the context of other countries aspiring to membership.

Brussels, 29 November 2023.

The President
of the European Committee of the Regions
Vasco ALVES CORDEIRO