

27 national plans: include the territorial reality!

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A renewed setup of the cooperation within the EU is on the radar that is capable of handling a prospective world order dominated by Trump , Xi and Putin. Europe needs to become stronger and safer to counter this new geopolitical reality.

In this context the European orbit is currently discussing policies and budget for the EU after 2027. The challenges ahead for Europe are expected to have a significant impact on the EU budget in financial terms with increased contributions from Member States and through external EU loans secured by Member States.

The new geopolitical reality, moreover, will most probably result in radical changes both in terms of their distribution over policy areas and the modalities and priorities to be pursued.

An integrated approach to EU policies

The re-elected President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, has organised the responsibilities of the confirmed new College of Commissioners, ensuring a mix of policy responsibilities for each Commissioner.

This explicit aim is to strengthen a horizontal and cooperative approach within the European Commission by involving Commissioners across sector responsibilities.

Indeed, the internal process on defining the future EU policy architecture is already underway. This process and the debates will undoubtedly mirror the known political differences within Member States and standpoints present in different political parties around Europe, also within the services of the Commission.

However, a particularly important issue to follow is the nexus and power sharing between the Commission and Member States. This issue is eternal and likely already in the initial discussions.

27 single national plans

The debate on the future Cohesion Policy after 2027 has already started, where the new Commissioner Raffaele Fitto has the responsibility to propose a modernised Cohesion Policy.

Rumours say that one idea, stemming from the Commissions budget services, is to only have 27 programmes, one for each Member State including a single national plan in the form of a single all-policy document.

The single plan for each Member State should include proposals for reforms and investment within the country covering several sector policy areas, including Fisheries, Cohesion Fund, European Social Fund, Common Agricultural Policy Funds, European Regional and Development Fund, Home Affairs Fund, and Others (e.g. Social Climate Fund).

While this approach offers potential benefits, it also raises significant concerns. To ensure that the implementation of this new policy delivery option delivers coherent and inclusive results for European regions and citizens, it will require a careful and balanced assessment of potentials and risks.

Potential Benefits: Streamlining Policies and Enhancing Integration

The proposed national plans offer an opportunity to enhance the coherence of EU policies. By unifying various funds and reforms into a single document, Member States could achieve greater integration across sectors. This approach could potentially break down silos, encouraging collaboration and mutual support between different policy areas. For example, investments in infrastructure could be aligned with social and environmental objectives, ensuring a holistic approach to sustainable development.

Another major benefit lies in administrative simplification. Managing multiple programmes at the EU and national levels is cumbersome and costly. A single plan could reduce these burdens, streamlining procedures and cutting management costs. Simplification would also make it easier for policymakers to track progress and evaluate outcomes, potentially improving transparency and accountability.

Additionally, aligning all funds and reforms with the EU's broader economic governance framework, such as the European Semester, could strengthen their strategic coherence. This would help ensure that national plans contribute effectively to overarching EU priorities, such as green and digital transitions, social cohesion, and economic resilience.

Potential Risks: Marginalising the Territorial Perspective

The proposed 27 national plans also carry significant risks in terms of overall coherence at EU level, in particular for the territorial dimension of EU policies. One key concern is the potential marginalisation of the sub-national level, especially in non-federal countries. By focusing on national priorities, the plans may overlook the unique needs and opportunities of regions and localities. This could reduce the relevance of EU policies for diverse local contexts and undermine the principle of subsidiarity.

Another key concern is a single plan document that would be structured sector by sector to the detriment of an integrated approach. This would be in contrast to the intentions of the President of the European Commission of having a more integrated and cooperative approach to EU policy making after 2027.

A lack of territorial focus could exacerbate existing inequalities between regions. Without careful design, the single national plans risk widening disparities, leaving rural, peripheral, and economically lagging areas further behind. This could lead to increased “places of discontent,” where dissatisfaction with perceived neglect fuels social and political tensions.

27 national plans would also imply a risk of reinforcing national boundaries, both in terms of image - depicting the total EU map as a patchwork of nations – and implementation, by having plans looking away from national borders instead of across them.

Leading on from this, another significant concern is the potential weakening of territorial cooperation. The shift to national plans might deprioritise cross-border, transnational, and macro-regional collaboration, fostering more inward-looking and nationalistic approaches. Such an outcome would not only fragment the EU's territorial cohesion but also undermine its ability to address shared challenges that transcend borders, such as climate change, mobility, and economic disparities.

Pointers for Consideration: Safeguarding Territorial Cohesion

To balance potentials and risks, it is essential to embed the territorial dimension firmly within the national plans. This requires a commitment to the territorial cohesion objective laid down in the EU Treaty (Art. 3 TEU), and principles outlined in the [Territorial Agenda](#) 2030, ensuring that all reforms and investments consider their impacts on territorial disparities and support opportunities for a balanced development across regions. Therefore, it will be crucial to add a horizontal component in addition to the sectoral ones previewed.

There need to be obligations for Member States and their regions to demonstrate how the proposed sectoral investments and reforms affect their national territory as a whole and its individual parts, how the investments and reforms mutually support each other, and how they contribute together to a balanced development within the Member State.

In other words, the national single plan should include a component based on the territorial reality of the Member State in question, the diversity of opportunities in different regions and places, the challenges of rural and less-developed areas, etc., and which shows that the different investments and reforms actually will bring together a well-coordinated outcome on the ground.

When addressing the Member State's territory and its regions in the single plan, a strong cooperation with neighbouring countries, regions and local authorities as well as relevant sector authorities should be ensured in order that transnational and cross-border challenges and cooperation opportunities are taken on-board. Without this coordination and wider cooperation with close and more distant neighbours, the potential 27 national single plans will risk leaving the EU map as a puzzle of national visions without a coherent European perspective.

The EU would benefit from a strategic territorial reference framework to guide and evaluate the 27 national plans. Such a framework seems essential and could provide a consistent benchmark for assessing how reforms and investments contribute to reducing inequalities and fostering inclusive growth. It would also enable monitoring of progress, ensuring that national plans align with the EU's cohesion objectives.

Furthermore, territorial cooperation must remain a cornerstone of EU policy. While embedding cooperation within national plans is important, it may not be sufficient. Dedicated strategies for cross-border, transnational, and macro-regional collaboration should complement the plans, ensuring that shared challenges and opportunities are addressed effectively.

Finally, involving regional and local stakeholders in the development and implementation of national plans is crucial. Their participation would help tailor policies to the diverse realities of regions and localities, making EU interventions more relevant and impactful on the ground.

Conclusion: A Modernised and Balanced Path Forward

The proposal for 27 national plans offers a promising new opportunity to streamline EU policies and enhance their coherence across sectors. Only by ensuring an integrated, horizontal and cooperative approach, and addressing both the opportunities and risks in the process and in the final proposal, can the EU deliver policies that truly work for all its citizens and territories.

However, its success hinges on preserving the territorial perspective and ensuring that all regions and places benefit from these reforms and investments. Only by embedding territorial principles, fostering cooperation, and involving sub-national stakeholders, can the EU turn this idea of 27 national plans into a driver of cohesion and balanced development.

In the wider, geopolitical context it is more necessary than ever that the EU performs as a unity and establish itself as a major player. Here, a coherent perspective for the EU looking across national boundaries and sectors, taking on board the entire territorial reality in a consistent way, will contribute to coherent, consistent and coordinated policy output for the EU in the new, challenging geopolitical circumstances.

As the College of Commissioners, led by President Ursula von der Leyen and Commissioner Raffaele Fitto, continues discussions on the EU's post-2027 policy framework, it is imperative that they champion the above considerations and include sensitivity for the territorial reality

Follow the full debate about territorial cohesion, the future, Europe, space, places and people on the [spatialforesight blog](#).