

# URDICO

## Urban Dimension of Cohesion Policy and other EU programmes

### CITY OF GHENT

#### City Description

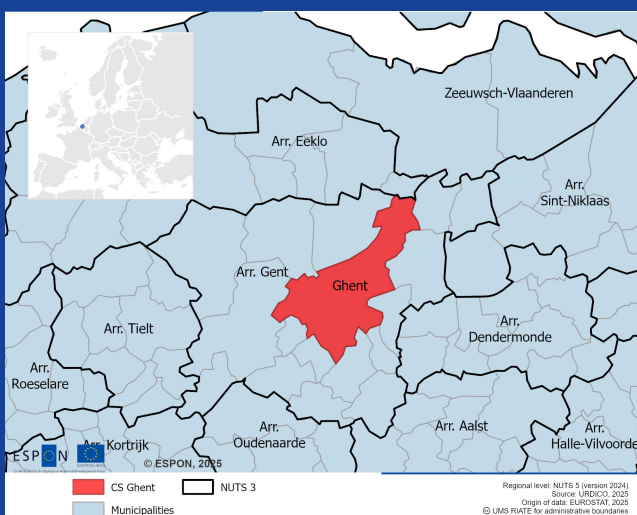
Ghent is the capital of East Flanders in Belgium and the second largest city in the Flemish Region, its population is around 270,000 (in 2024), so it is a medium sized city in the European context. The city is administratively divided into 25 neighbourhoods, ranging from dense historic urban cores to industrial, suburban and peripheral village zones. Ghent does not function within a formal metropolitan governance structure but plays a central role in intermunicipal and cross-border collaborations, notably within the North Sea Port District, the Gentse Kanaalzone and the recently established Reference Region, a larger administrative and functional area used for regional planning and policy coordination.

#### Role in Cohesion Policy delivering

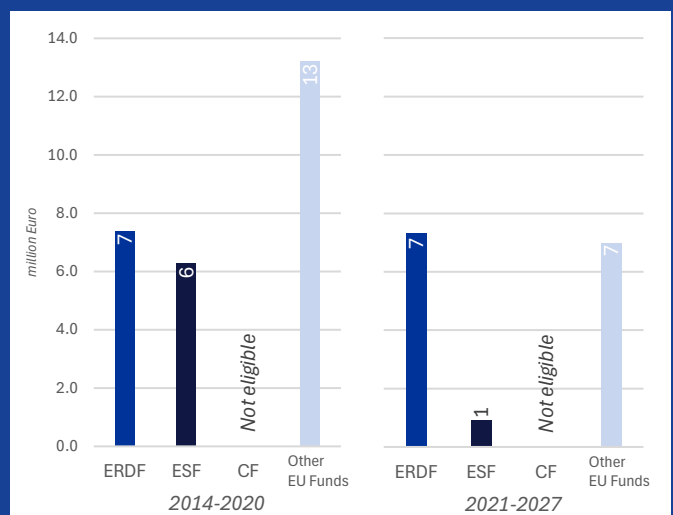
Ghent operates within Belgium's decentralised federal structure and plays a central role in implementing EU Cohesion Policy at the urban level, however, the Managing Authorities are on the regional level. Ghent is known for its strong, neighbourhood-oriented approach to urban development, which bridges spatial and social policy through long-term area-based programmes. This model integrates participatory planning, cross-sectoral coordination, and strategic investment to guide integrated local development over extended timeframes. The city implements its policies through a network of municipal departments, para-municipal agencies and civil society partners.

In relation to EU CP, Ghent is an active and experienced city. It participates in both shared management programmes and direct EU funding streams. The city has a co-steering role within the Joint ITI for Antwerp and Ghent under the 2021–2027 Flemish ERDF programme. During the 2014-2020 period, the city did not apply ITI. As part of the ERDF Flanders programme, there is an urban contact point embedded within the strategic funding team of the City of Ghent, it supports city services and external Ghent-based organisations from application to implementation.

#### Spatial Organisation



#### EU Funds 2014-2020 and 2021-2027



---

## Local

**Discrepancy between the thematic funding priorities set at higher policy levels and the area-based approaches developed by cities** - Thematic and procedural rigidity in EU and regional programming limits Ghent's ability to fully realise integrated, place-based approaches. This disconnect complicates the alignment between local urban strategies and the available funding instruments.

**Difficulties in implementing socially-oriented projects** - Current policy frameworks do not support integrated, place-based approaches, which would be necessary to effectively address societal challenges. ERDF usually gravitates toward innovation and economic-valorisation themes, with less visibility for integrated social-spatial projects. ESF poses an additional challenge due to its unpredictable call cycles.

**Building and sustaining capacity needed to tap Cohesion Policy** - It is demanding, application procedures are often complex and resource-intensive, creating administrative burdens, even for Ghent and especially for surrounding smaller municipalities with limited capacity.

**Predefined ITI priorities are not always aligned with local needs** - Instruments such as ITI, can be experienced as insufficiently responsive to local needs or integrated urban strategies, because of predefined thematic focal points.

**Administrative burden and complexity** - Technical requirements and audit pressures reduce accessibility for smaller or socially focused projects, as the capacity and knowledge on administrative and technical level is often lacking. Application procedures are often complex and resource-intensive, creating administrative burdens. Audit procedures can occasionally feel disproportionate to project size and risk, so they may discourage partnership rather than building trust.

**Financial Burden** - High co-financing requirements strain local budgets, especially for capital-heavy interventions. As a result, promising initiatives may go unrealised due to a lack of accessible funding structures.

**Ghent's limited role in the design phase of CP programmes** - Despite being a frontrunner in urban development and a committed partner in delivering EU goals on the ground, the city has little formal influence over



### Selected Challenges

---

Over the past decade, Ghent has evolved from an occasional beneficiary into a systematic user of EU Cohesion funds. Rather than a loose collection of standalone initiatives, these resources are integrated into long-term neighbourhood renewal agendas that combine public-space upgrades, brownfield recovery, social-inclusion pathways, and climate-adaptation measures. The result is a steadily expanding, multi-fund portfolio that demonstrates how an ambitious medium-sized city can translate its integrated territorial ambitions into reality.



### Main achievements