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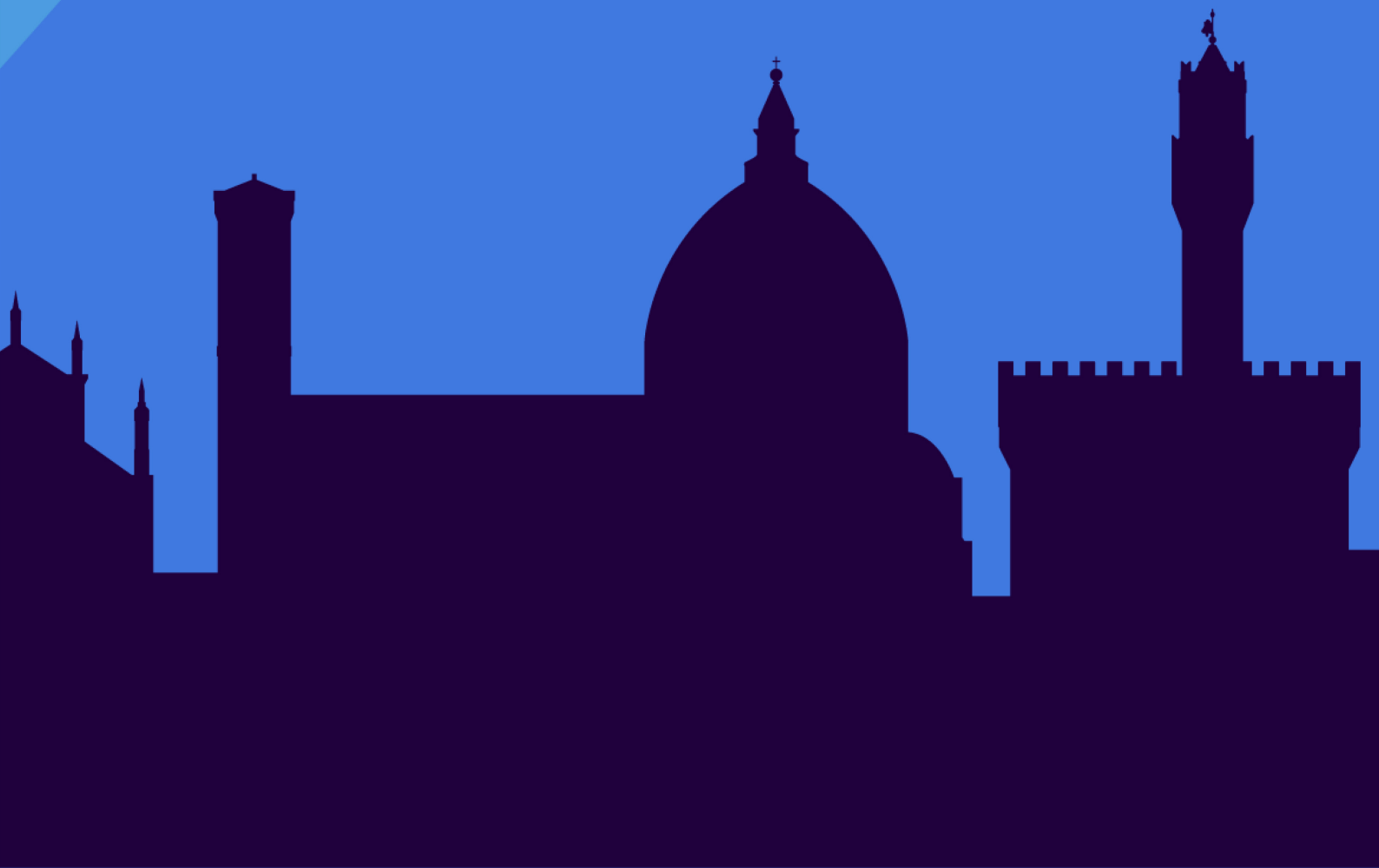
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TARGETED ANALYSIS //

URDICO

Urban Dimension of Cohesion Policy
and other EU Programmes

Annex 4.2_Florence Study Report // January 2026



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This document is a final report.

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The final version of the report will be published as soon as approved.

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Abbreviations

ANCI	National Association of Italian Municipalities
CCP	Circular City Plan
CCC	CCC – Climate City Contract
CLLD	Community-Led Local Development
CP	Cohesion Policy
EAFRD	European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development
EMFAF	European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund
ERDF	European Regional Development Fund
ERP	Public Residential Housing
ERS	Social Housing
ESF	European Social Fund
ESIF	European Structural and Investment Funds
ETC	European Territorial Cooperation
EU	European Union
EUI	European Urban Initiative
FAS	Fund for Underutilised Areas (Italy)
FESR	European Regional Development Fund (Italian acronym)
FSC	Development and Cohesion Fund (Italian acronym)
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
IB	Intermediate Body
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
ITI	Integrated Territorial Investment
ITP	Integrated Territorial Project
JTF	Just Transition Fund
LDS	Local Development Strategy
LEADER	Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l'Économie Rurale
LIFE	EU LIFE Programme
MA	Managing Authority
MASE	Ministry of the Environment and Energy Security (Italy)
METRO	National Programme for Metropolitan Cities (NOP/NP METRO)
MIMS	Ministry of Infrastructure and Sustainable Mobility (Italy)
MIUR	Ministry of Education, University and Research (Italy)
NOP	National Operational Programme
NP	National Programme
NRRP	National Recovery and Resilience Plan (Italy)

PA	Partnership Agreement
PAC	Common Agricultural Policy
PAESC	Sustainable Energy and Climate Action Plan
PIT	Integrated Territorial Project
PIU	Integrated Urban Project
PLUS	METRO Plus (component of NOP METRO Plus and Southern Medium-Sized Cities)
PN	National Programme
PNC	National Complementary Plan
PNCM	National Programme for Metropolitan and Medium-Sized Cities
PNRR	Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza (Italy's NRRP)
PO	Municipal Operational Plan
POC	Municipal Operational Plan
PPR	Regional Landscape Plan
PRG	General Regulatory Plan
PRT	Regional Territorial Plan
PSC	Municipal Structural Plan
PSM	Metropolitan Strategic Plan
PSR	Rural Development Programme
PTM	Metropolitan Territorial Plan
PTR	Regional Territorial Plan
PUI	Integrated Urban Plans
PULS	Sustainable Urban Logistics Plan
SUMP	Sustainable Urban Mobility Plan
PVSA	Green and Open Spaces Plan
RDP	Rural Development Programme
REACT-EU	Recovery Assistance for Cohesion and the Territories of Europe
ROP	Regional Operational Programme
RP	Regional Programme
RRF	Recovery and Resilience Facility (EU)
SCP	Smart City Plan
SNAI	National Strategy for Inner Areas
STAI	Territorial Strategy for Inner Areas

1 Summary

The URDICO case study on the city of Florence explores the urban dimension of Cohesion Policy and EU programmes, focusing on how these instruments are implemented and localised in the Italian context. Florence is the capital of Tuscany and the core municipality of the Metropolitan City of Florence, which encompasses 41 municipalities and around one million inhabitants. While the municipality itself has 370,000 residents, it plays a wider metropolitan role in governance and service provision, reinforced by its status as one of the 14 Italian metropolitan cities included in the PON Metro programme.

Florence's governance structure combines strong municipal leadership with relatively weak institutionalised metropolitan cooperation. The creation of the Metropolitan City under Law 56/2014 gave a strategic planning mandate at the supra-municipal scale, but coordination with the municipality remains largely dependent on political leadership. Within the city, the European Projects and Networking Office ensure alignment between EU resources and local priorities, working across departments to integrate project design, funding acquisition, and policy engagement. A cross-departmental working group of municipal staff further supports coordination, ensuring that European initiatives are not isolated but embedded into different policy fields.

Florence is an Intermediate Body in both the NOP Metro 2014–2020 and the Metro+ and Medium-Sized Cities South 2021–2027 programmes, which has given it direct responsibility for project design and implementation in digital transition, sustainable mobility, social inclusion, and urban regeneration. The city also benefits from the Regional Operational Programme of Tuscany and participates in national recovery instruments such as the NRRP, although it stresses the need for more decentralised governance and clearer recognition of the role of cities.

Alongside these operational responsibilities, Florence has consolidated a strong role in political advocacy. It has played a leading role in Eurocities (holding the Presidency from 2021 to 2023), in the Covenant of Mayors, the Green City Accord, and the 100 Climate-Neutral Cities Mission, and it represents Italian municipalities within ANCI. Through these arenas, Florence consistently calls for greater recognition of cities as strategic actors in Cohesion Policy, urging:

- Empowerment of local and regional authorities through functional and inclusive governance;
- Recognition of cities as active players in Cohesion Policy, including as IBs or Managing Authorities;
- Reinforcement of subsidiarity and flexibility in EU instruments to support place-based approaches.

Despite these advances, challenges persist across multiple governance levels. Locally, the fragmentation of competences between the Municipality and the Metropolitan City undermines the development of coherent cross-sectoral strategies, while chronic shortages of skilled staff and high turnover weaken administrative capacity and erode the institution's accumulated knowledge and experience. Regionally, the Metropolitan City has yet to assume a consistent strategic role, leaving asymmetries in capacity between Florence and surrounding municipalities unaddressed and limiting the institutionalisation of inter-municipal cooperation. At the national level, persistent weaknesses in Italy's multilevel governance system and the excessive centralisation of new instruments such as the NRRP reduce cities' influence in programme design and resource allocation. At the EU level, Florence underlines the risks of "projectification," the fragmentation of funding instruments, and the insufficient integration of successful pilot projects into long-term strategies.

Nevertheless, Florence illustrates how a mid-sized European city can leverage Cohesion Policy not only for project funding but also as a platform for political influence, urban innovation, and multilevel governance. While EU resources represent only a modest share of the municipal budget, their targeted use has been strategically significant, particularly in driving climate transition, social inclusion, and digital transformation. The city's case confirms that Cohesion Policy, when paired with adequate subsidiarity and institutional support, can reinforce local governance capacity and enhance Europe's visibility at the urban scale.

2 Introduction

The city of Florence, capital of Tuscany and one of Italy's most internationally recognised urban centres, represents the territorial focus of this case study. Florence is the core municipality of the Metropolitan City of Florence, an administrative entity created in 2015 that encompasses 41 municipalities and a population of approximately one million inhabitants. While the case study primarily considers the city of Florence itself, its metropolitan dimension is also relevant for understanding the scope of the implementation of Cohesion Policy.

Florence displays a distinctive territorial governance framework, combining strong municipal leadership with a complex network of multilevel interactions. The municipality plays an active role in national and European arenas, often assuming a leading position in transnational and European networks. Within the city administration, governance of European projects and networking activities is institutionalised through the European Projects and Networking Office, which coordinates cross-departmental initiatives and ensures Florence's participation in programmes and partnerships.

Florence's engagement with Cohesion Policy is particularly shaped by its status as one of the 14 Italian metropolitan cities included in the National Operational Programme for Metropolitan Cities (NOP Metro 2014–2020) and subsequently the National Programme Metro+ and Medium-Sized Cities South (2021–2027). This has given Florence the role of an Intermediate Body, directly responsible for programming and implementing significant financial resources in fields such as digital transition, sustainable urban mobility, social inclusion, and urban regeneration. In addition, Florence has benefited from the Regional Operational Programme of Tuscany, which integrates ERDF and ESF+ resources in areas such as ecological transition, innovation, and territorial cohesion. The city's active participation in Recovery and Resilience Plan measures has further reinforced the complementarities between Cohesion Policy and national recovery instruments.

Beyond the direct management of EU structural funds, Florence has also established itself as a prominent actor in European networking and lobbying. As a long-standing member of Eurocities (since 2003), holding the Presidency between 2021 and 2023, the city has played a central role in shaping the European urban agenda, contributing to debates on governance, climate neutrality, culture, and cohesion. Florence is also a signatory of the Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy, a member of the Green City Accord and ICLEI, and one of the nine Italian cities selected for the 100 Climate-Neutral Cities Mission. At the national level, its role within ANCI (*Associazione Nazionale Comuni Italiani*) strengthens the connection between local priorities and national advocacy, reinforcing Florence's position as a reference point in urban governance and Cohesion Policy.

The structure of this report is organised as follows. Section 3 provides a national overview of Cohesion Policy in Italy, focusing on governance mechanisms, funding architecture, and territorial strategies. Section 4 zooms into the urban structure and governance of Cohesion Policy in Florence, analysing institutional arrangements, involvement in programming cycles, and networking activities. Section 5 examines administrative capacity and institutional innovations, including strengths and gaps in the city's governance system. Section 6 discusses the contributions of Cohesion Policy to Florence's long-term urban agendas, while Section 7 analyses the funding schemes and synergies across different EU and national instruments. Section 8 explores the relationship with the Recovery and Resilience Plan, assessing complementarities and overlaps. Finally, Section 9 summarises the main challenges and policy recommendations at local, regional, national, and EU levels.

3 National Overview on Cohesion Policy

Italy represents a paradigmatic case in the implementation of Cohesion Policy (CP) given its pronounced territorial disparities, with the Southern part of the country (commonly referred to as “Mezzogiorno”) lagging significantly behind the Northern one in terms of economic and social development. In these terms, CP represents an unparalleled opportunity to address long-standing structural weaknesses of the country and to promote sustainable urban development; however, its implementation is hindered by persistent administrative and institutional challenges which undermine its full potential. One of the most critical issues is the difficulty in absorbing allocated funds within the given timeframes, a problem often rooted in the complexity of public procurement procedures, a lack of coordination among levels of government, and insufficient technical expertise at the local level. Moreover, the multiplicity of programmes and funding streams can lead to fragmentation and inefficiency. As one of the largest recipients of EU cohesion funding, Italy manages a complex and multi-layered governance system involving national institutions, regional governments, and local municipalities. The overarching framework for the use of EU funds is established through the Partnership Agreement between the Italian government and the European Commission. Within this framework, resources are allocated to National and Regional Operational Programmes, each governed by specific Managing Authorities responsible for planning, execution, and monitoring. The Department for Cohesion Policies and the South (*Dipartimento per le Politiche di Coesione e per il Sud*) – which assumed responsibilities formerly managed by the Agency for Territorial Cohesion (*Agenzia per la Coesione Territoriale*) – coordinates efforts at the central level, while regions and cities play a major role in local implementation. However, when effectively implemented, cohesion projects have demonstrated a capacity to transform urban areas, foster innovation ecosystems, and support vulnerable populations. The current programming period (2021–2027), with its emphasis on the green and digital transitions, presents a renewed opportunity for Italian cities to utilise EU resources for long-term structural transformation. The key lies in improving administrative capacities, streamlining governance mechanisms, and fostering greater collaboration among stakeholders at all levels. Despite the availability of significant financial resources, Italy has long struggled with inefficiencies in absorbing funds, particularly in its southern regions. These difficulties are often attributed to bureaucratic inertia, fragmented responsibilities, insufficient administrative capacity, and delays in project execution. Nonetheless, there are also examples of successful interventions, especially in cities that have developed strategic visions and successfully integrated cohesion funding with other instruments, including the National Recovery and Resilience Plan.

3.1 Governance of Cohesion Policy

In Italy, policies concerning territorial cohesion are grounded in the Constitution, particularly in articles 3, paragraph 2¹, and article 119, paragraph 5², which require special interventions to

¹ Translated from the Constitution: *It is the duty of the Republic to remove obstacles of an economic and social nature that, by effectively limiting the freedom and equality of citizens, prevent the full development of the human person and the effective participation of all workers in the political, economic, and social organisation of the Country.*

² Translated from the Constitution: *To promote economic development, cohesion, and social solidarity, to remove economic and social imbalances, to encourage the effective exercise of individual rights, or to provide for purposes other than the normal exercise of their functions, the State allocates additional resources and makes special interventions in favour of certain Municipalities, Provinces, Metropolitan Cities, and Regions.*

promote harmonious development and to remove economic and social imbalances. CP involves different levels of government and attributes a formal and fundamental role to the economic and social partnership, financing plans, programmes and individual projects owned by central, regional or local administrations. Responsibilities for delivering CP are split vertically between national, regional and local levels, and horizontally across different sectoral institutions. The Department for Cohesion Policies and for the South is the support structure to the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, responsible for the promotion and coordination of cohesion policies and territorial policies for Southern Italy. The Department was established with the Prime Ministerial Decree of 10 November 2023. The latter also identifies the competences of the Department (at Article 24-bis), which include, among others:

- The coordination of the programming and implementation of cohesion policies, with reference to the relevant national and European resources, as well as the integration between cohesion policies and European thematic funds and interventions aimed at the development of the South and territorial rebalancing;
- Coordination with state and regional administrations for the preparation of strategic and financial programming of European and national CP resources, also for the purposes of adopting the guidelines, programming and identification of interventions relating to the use of European cohesion policy funds, complementary resources and the Fund for Development and Cohesion, to be implemented in an integrated manner with European thematic funds;
- Surveillance, strengthened monitoring and evaluation of programmes and interventions financed by European cohesion policy, complementary resources and the Fund for Cohesion Development; collection and processing, in conjunction with the competent administrations, of information and data on the implementation of European and national CP programmes, also for the purpose of adopting measures to accelerate the interventions required pursuant to Article 3, paragraph 3, of Legislative Decree no. 88 of 31 May 2011;
- Support and technical assistance to the administrations managing the programmes financed by European or national CP funds through specific initiatives for the acceleration and implementation of interventions and through the strengthening of administrative capacity;
- Promotion and strengthening of the quality, timeliness, effectiveness and transparency of the programming and implementation of interventions;
- The direct functions of the Management Authority of programmes or specific projects, including experimental ones, as well as the coordination and implementation of the measures within their jurisdiction financed by European thematic funds and the corresponding complementary national measures (DPC, n.d.-a).

Inside the Department, the Unit for Cohesion Policies (*Nucleo per le Politiche di Coesione, NUPC*) operates, replacing and aggregating the competences and functions of the Evaluation and Analysis Unit for Programming (known as NUVAP) and the Verification and Control Unit (known as NUVEC). As established by EU Regulations, each Member State identifies a Managing Authority (MA) for each Programme. In Italy, the MAs are usually identified within the Departments of the different Ministries competent in the matter of the Programme, as concerns National Programmes, or Regions, in the case of Regional Programmes. MAs may also delegate the execution of specific sections of the Programme to one or more intermediate bodies. Finally, the MAs are supported by Certification Authorities (CAs) and Audit Authorities (AAs).

3.2 Financial scheme and coordination of funding efforts

In terms of financing, the shared management between the Member State and the Commission requires that each Programme is supported by a specific quota of national co-financing, which is established in the final decision of the Programme. Given the persistent underdevelopment of its southern regions, Italy's CP has historically operated through a dual structure: EU-funded programmes, which require mandatory national co-financing, alongside national programmes financed through dedicated domestic resources. Both EU and national programmes typically pursue similar cohesion objectives and frequently operate in the same regions ([Celli, Crescenzi, de Blasio, Giua, 2025](#)). The Italian national funds that support the finance of cohesion policies are the Rotating Fund for the Implementation of EU Policies (*Fondo di rotazione per l'attuazione delle politiche comunitarie*) and the Development and Cohesion Fund (*Fondo Sviluppo e Coesione (FSC)*).

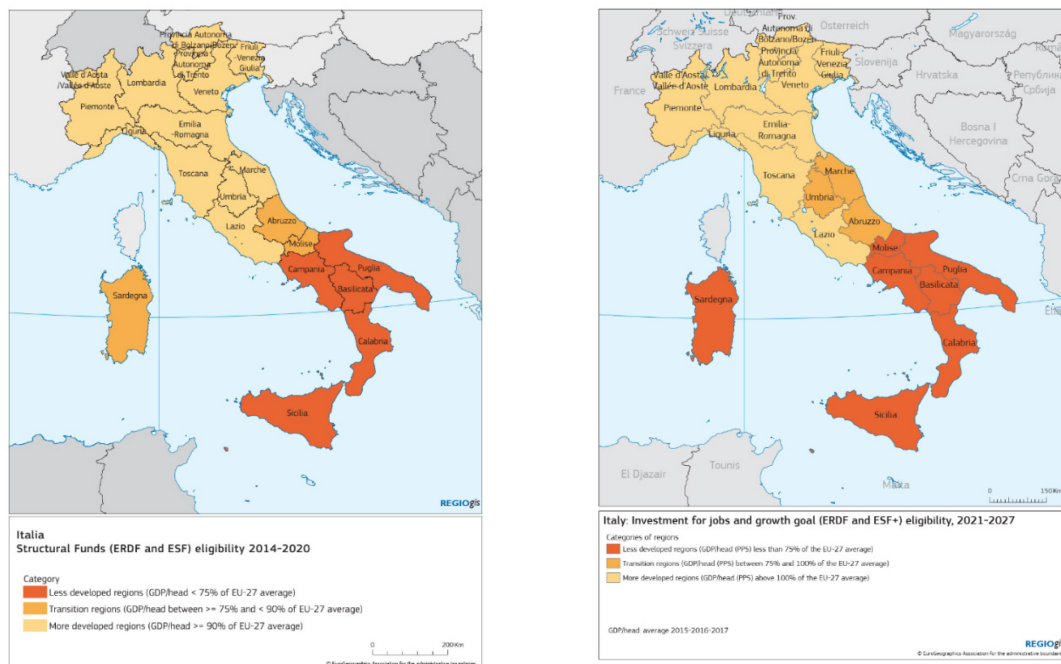
Concerning the first, it was established by Article 5 of Law n. 183 of 1987, and it is managed by the Ministry of Economy and Finance. Its role is to provide the national co-financing quotas for the projects financed by the EU Structural Funds in the target areas, as well as any payments in advance on contributions due from the EU budget. Also, the Fund ensures the smooth collection and processing of data concerning EU financial flows and national financial flows related to them. Since 2011, the Rotating Fund has financed the Cohesion Action Plan (*Piano d'Azione per la Coesione, or PAC*), launched to accelerate the implementation of programmes co-financed by the Structural Funds from 2007 to 2013 and strengthen the effectiveness of these interventions. In the 2014-2020 programming cycle, the experience of the PAC continues in the so-called Complementary Operational Programmes (*Programmi Operativi Complementari (POC)*), financed by a share of the resources of the Rotating Fund, which match the national co-financing of the Operational Programmes. During the 2021-2027 programming period, the resources resulting from the reduction of the co-financing rate for Community Programmes are instead directly programmed within the Cohesion Agreements, an innovative instrument introduced in the current cycle, which represents an essential step in directing development interventions in the territory in a targeted and coordinated manner. Indeed, Cohesion Agreements are signed between the central government and regional administration, and their goal is to guide and monitor development interventions, ensuring their coherence with programming objectives at higher levels and ensuring a clear distribution of responsibilities and financial resources (DPC, n.d.-b). The Development and Cohesion Fund (*Fondo Sviluppo e Coesione (FSC)*), formerly known as Fund for Underutilised Areas (*Fondo per le Aree Sottoutilizzate (FAS)*) was established by Article 4 of the Legislative Decree n. 88 of 2011 and it now replaces the previous funds with similar purposes, which include the additional national financial resources to implement development policies aimed at economic, social and territorial cohesion and the removal of economic and social imbalances in the implementation of Article 119, paragraph 5, of the Constitution. The FSC has a multi-year nature, in line with the temporal articulation of the ESIF programming, ensuring the unity and complementarity of procedures for activating related resources with those envisaged for European funds. Since the 2014-2020 cycle, the Development and Cohesion Plan (*Piano Sviluppo e Coesione (PSC)*) was introduced (Article 44 of Legislative Decree No. 34 of 2019) with the aim of bringing together the resources and simplifying the governance and procedures from the former programming cycles, into a single Plan for each administration involved. A total of 43 Development and Cohesion Plans were identified during the 2014-2020 cycle, replacing the over 900 previous programming tools of the FSC, such as Development Pacts, Regional Implementation Programmes, Service Objectives and Programme Agreements (Open Coesione, n.d.).

3.3 Geographical coverage and prioritisation of CP

National organisation of CP in Italy follows the EU’s inspired geographical classification criterion which divides Italian regions into two groups: the “South” (Abruzzo, Basilicata Calabria, Campania, Molise, Puglia, Sardinia and Sicily), to which at least 80% of the resources must be allocated, and the “Centre-North” (which includes all the other regions and autonomous provinces). However, for the nature itself of CP, it is important to analyse the individual classification of Italian regions during the programming periods, which have changed over time. Indeed, up to 2000-2006 regions were firstly divided into “Objective 1/Objective 2” regions, which then became “Convergence/Competitiveness” regions in the period 2007-2013. The classification “Less developed regions/Regions in transition/More developed regions,” which is also adopted for the current cycle, was introduced during the 2014-2020 period. However, it is worth noting that a significant shift in the classification was observed in the last two cycles. Between 2014 and 2020, the “Less developed regions” comprised five areas: Basilicata, Calabria, Campania, Puglia, and Sicily. The “Regions in transition” included Abruzzo, Molise, and Sardinia. However, in 2021-2027, Molise and Sardinia were included in the less developed regions, so that there became seven, while Marche and Umbria, which were previously classified as more developed, were now downgraded as in transition.

In terms of resources allocated, in the 2021-2027 cycle, Italy received a greater amount of resources compared to the previous cycle, with 141,4 billion euros compared to 137,2 billion euros. The South, however, was not the category which benefited most from this increase, as it received almost the same amount of resources (101,6 billion in 2021-2027 compared to 101,3 billion in 2014-2020). Indeed, the Centre-North area received more resources than in the past (38.1 billion in 2021-2027 compared to 33.4 billion in 2014-2020).

Figure 3.1
Changes of Italian Regions’ eligibility for structural funds in 2014-2020 (on the left) and 2021-2027 (on the right) programming periods



Source: *Dipartimento per le Politiche di Coesione e per il Sud*, 2014 (left); 2021 (right)

Table 3.1
Structure of 2014-2020 and 2021-2027 Programming Periods

Programming Cycle	2014-2020	2021-2027
Coordinating structure at the national level	Agenzia per la Coesione Territoriale	Dipartimento per le Politiche di Coesione e per il Sud
Total Amount of EU and National resources dedicated to CP	137,2 billion	141,4 billion³
<i>South</i>	101,3 billion	101,6 billion
<i>Centre-North</i>	33,4 billion	38,1 billion
<i>Other</i>	2,4 billion	1,6 billion
Number of Programmes	51	48
<i>National</i>	12	11 (of which 1 for JTF and 1 for EM-FAF)
<i>Regional</i>	39	38
<i>ETC</i>	19 (of which 10 as Managing Authority)	19 (of which 10 as Managing Authority)
Type of Fund		
<i>ERDF</i>	18 Regional Programmes 4 National Programmes 19 ETC	17 Regional Programmes 3 National Programmes 19 ETC
<i>ESF⁴</i>	18 Regional Programmes 3 National Programmes	17 Regional Programmes 1 National Programmes
<i>Multi-fund (ERDF+ESF)</i>	3 Regional Programmes 5 National Programmes	4 Regional Programmes 5 National Programmes
<i>JTF</i>	n.a.	1 National Programme
Classification of Less Developed Regions	Basilicata, Calabria, Campania, Puglia e Sicilia	Basilicata, Calabria, Campania, Molise, Puglia, Sardegna e Sicilia

Source: authors' own elaboration.

³ The total amount indicated includes: 26.3 billion of European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), 14.8 billion of European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), 1 billion of Just Transition Fund (JTF), 0.97 billions of Programmes of European Territorial Cooperation (ETC). While the national funds attached to the EU CP include: 17.8 billion as cofinancing share of ERDF, 13.8 billion as cofinancing share of ESF+, 0.2 billion as cofinancing share of JTF, 0.3 billion as cofinancing share of ETC. The national funds include also: 7.3 of Complementary interventions and programmes (POC), 58,5 billion of Development and Cohesion Fund (FSC) and 0,3 billion of Ordinary resources dedicated to cohesion. Detailed and updated data are available here: [ri-sorse_coesione_2021_2027.xlsx](#)

⁴ In the 2021-2027 the ESF was changed into ESF Plus (ESF+)

3.4 Decentralisation and urban dimension

Since the 2014-2020 programming period, the urban dimension of CP has been strengthened through the introduction of new approaches and instruments, as well as the allocation of resources. Indeed, the idea of Sustainable Urban Development was a concrete goal to achieve set out in the regulatory framework, with article 7, paragraph 1, of the ERDF Regulation (Reg. (EU) 1301/2013) stating that “the ERDF shall support, within operational programmes, sustainable urban development through strategies that set out integrated actions to tackle the economic, environmental, climate, demographic and social challenges affecting urban areas, while taking into account the need to promote urban-rural linkages”. The mean to do so was through the so called “Integrated Territorial Investment”, defined at the article 36, paragraph 1, of the Common Provisions Regulation (Reg. (EU) 1303/2013⁵), an innovative tool for implementing a territorial strategy in an integrated way, drawing funding from different priority axis or OPs. Most importantly, the ERDF Regulation stipulated that a minimum of 5% of the national ERDF envelope had to be allocated for this purpose; this share was increased to 8% for the 2021-2027 cycle. To better understand the implementation of the urban dimension of CP in Italy, it is useful to analyse the innovative tools that have been put in place in the last decade to support the urban development of specific territorial dimensions. For the purpose of this analysis, two instruments will be discussed, namely a national territorial strategy and a National Programme, as they represent innovative approaches to tackling urban challenges.

3.4.1 National Strategy for Inner Areas

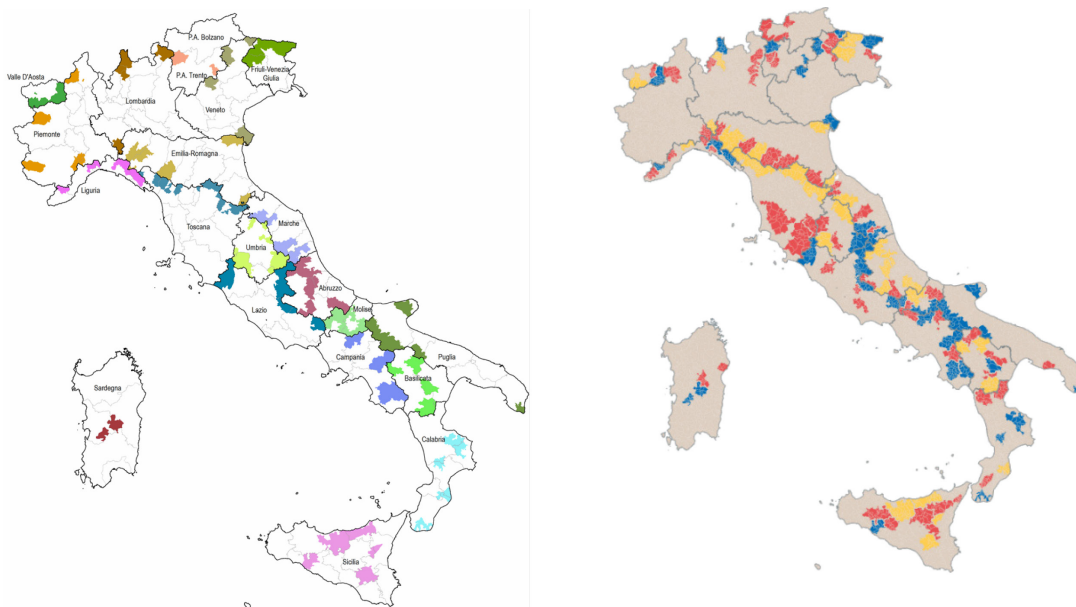
The first, and probably the most distinguished territorial strategy, is the National Strategy for Inner Areas (*Strategia Nazionale per le Aree Interne (SNAI)*). Launched in 2013 by the then Minister for Territorial Cohesion, Fabrizio Barca, the Strategy aims to counteract the marginalisation and demographic decline phenomena which are typical of the internal areas of the country. The ideological approach is based on the place-based concept developed by Barca already in 2009 in the report “An Agenda for a Reformed Cohesion Policy” (which became also famous as “Barca Report”), which became a crucial document influencing the drawing of the 2014-2020 CP, and it still influences the debate nowadays. Broadly speaking, the place-based idea encouraged the development of new methods of multilevel local governance aimed at addressing demographic challenges and responding to the needs of territories, especially in mountainous and rural areas, characterised by significant geographical or demographic disadvantages, such as the distance from urban centres offering services and an increasing depopulation. These areas have been called Internal Areas (IA) since the 2014-2020 cycle and have been mapped at a national level in order to be included in the long-term strategy, the SNAI indeed, which consists of local development interventions and the strengthening of essential services, framed in territorial strategies defined by local coalitions of these areas. The objective of SNAI is twofold: on the one hand, it is to ensure that everyone has full access to the essential rights of citizenship (local public transport, education and social and health services), on the other, to promote economic development and improve the maintenance of the territory itself.

For the 2014-2020 period, the IA selected were 72, including a total of 1,060 municipalities with approximately 2 million inhabitants (2020), cover a territory of approximately 51,000 km² and represent: 13.4% of all Italian municipalities and 26% of the municipalities classified as internal

⁵ “Where an urban development strategy or other territorial strategy, or a territorial pact referred to in Article 12(1) of the ESF Regulation, requires an integrated approach involving investments from the ESF, ERDF or Cohesion Fund under more than one priority axis of one or more operational programmes, actions may be carried out as an integrated territorial investment (an ‘ITI’)” (Article 36, paragraph 1, Regulation (EU) 1303/2013)

areas; 3.4% of the national population and 15.5% of the population resident in the municipalities classified as internal areas; 17% of the entire national surface area and 28.4% of the total surface area of all Italian internal areas.

Figure 3.2
Internal areas boundaries in 2014-2020 (on the left) and in 2021-2027 (on the right) programming periods



Source: Dipartimento per le politiche di coesione e per il sud, n.d - c. (left); and [Fotina, 2023](#) (right)

In the 2021-2027 programming period, new areas have been selected by the Regions, and were included in the Strategy by the Department for Cohesion Policies, giving priority to peripheral and ultraperipheral municipalities and considering, at the same time, demographic, economic, social or environmental indicators that highlight greater critical issues compared to other regional areas, as well as the inclination of the Municipalities to work in the associated form requested. The new project areas for the 2021-2027 include: 56 new Areas, which overall involve 764 Municipalities (data as of 2020), and in which a population of 2,056,139 resides; 37 Areas identified in 2014-2020 which were confirmed without any change in the initial perimeter, involving 549 Municipalities in which a population of 977,279 inhabitants resides; 30 Areas identified in 2014-2020 that have a new perimeter compared to the original configuration following the annexation and/or exclusion of municipalities, including 556 Municipalities with a population of 1,324,220 inhabitants; a Special Project Minor Islands (Progetto Speciale Isole Minori) which involves 35 Municipalities of those Islands, with a total population of 213,093 inhabitants. In total, there are therefore 124 Project Areas, involving 1,904 Municipalities, with 4,570,731 inhabitants.

3.4.2 National Programme Metropolitan and Medium-Sized Cities

In the 2014-2020 cycle, Italy put in place the National Operational Programme *Città Metropolitane*, a unique instrument of its kind in Europe, to promote social innovation and to reinforce the smart city paradigm in Italian metropolitan cities. Run by the former Agency for Territorial Cohesion, which acted as the Managing Authority, the Programme fits into the framework of the National Urban Agenda and the sustainable urban development strategies outlined in the Italian

Partnership Agreement for the 2014-2020, in line with the objectives and strategies of the European Urban Agenda which identifies urban areas as key territories for meeting the challenges of smart, inclusive and sustainable growth of the Europe 2020 Strategy. The focus on cities arises from the recognition of some characteristics of the territorial development model, which sees a growing concentration in urban areas of significant portions of the population and of the production system.

In Italy, the “metropolitan phenomenon” is present both in the North and South of the country, in a markedly polycentric territory that sees some large municipalities as its nerve centres. Concerning this territorial architecture, the institutional redesign process that is taking place at a national level following the approval of Law 56/2014 “Provisions on Metropolitan Cities, Provinces, Unions and Mergers of Municipalities” assumes great importance, which provides for the creation of Metropolitan Cities and relaunches the metropolitan dimension as a scale for planning and managing services that are crucial for development and territorial cohesion ([PON Città Metropolitane, 2014](#)). The Programme interested the 14 Italian metropolitan cities (Turin, Genoa, Milan, Bologna, Venice, Florence, Rome, Bari, Naples, Reggio Calabria, Cagliari, Catania, Messina and Palermo), identified as Urban Authorities (UAs), pursuant to article 7 of Regulation (EU) 1301/2013, and took on the role of Intermediate Bodies (IBs) in accordance with an act of delegation made by the Agency. The Programme was initially implemented through five priorities (called “Axis”) which were i) Metropolitan Digital agenda, ii) Sustainability of public services and urban mobility, iii) Social inclusion services, iv) Infrastructure for social inclusion, and v) Technical Assistance. In terms of financial resources, a total amount of 800 million euros was allocated to the Programme, of which 650,2 drawn on ERDF, and 208,7 on ESF for Axis 3 (Social inclusion services), distributed amongst cities following the national distribution criteria (most of the resources were allocated to metropolitan cities in the South).

A major change to the Programme happened in 2021. Covid-19 pandemic pushed the European Commission to implement the REACT-EU (Recovery Assistance for Cohesion and the Territories of Europe) initiative, through which the EU made available to Member States approximately 47,5 billion euros in additional funding, to be invested in the 2014-2020 CP programming, in order to help overcome the effects of the pandemic crisis and relaunch the economy with a view to greening, digital and social and employment resilience. Following the definition of the Italian quota for REACT-EU resources, the Programme Metropolitan Cities was modified and 1,2 billion euros of financial additional resources were allocated to it through three new axes, supporting investments for green, digital and resilient recovery (Axis 6), financed through the ERDF; social, economic and employment recovery (Axis 7), financed by the ESF; additional support through dedicated technical assistance (Axis 8). Predictably, the Axis 6 was the one which received the most resources overall (920 million) followed by the Axis 4 (309,9 million) and the Axis 3 (239,4 million).

With the intention of providing continuity and strengthening the experience of the strategy implemented in 2014-2020, the Programme was also approved in a renewed form for the 2021-2027 cycle. Entitled “*METRO Plus e Città Medie Sud*” (Metro+ and southern medium-sized cities), the Programme aims to address environmental issues, especially the fight against climate change and the transition to a circular economy, and to promote actions of urban regeneration and response to socio-economic hardship, also through social innovation and the revitalisation of local entrepreneurial structures. It develops in continuity with the NOP Metropolitan Cities 2014-2020, both in relation to the topics of intervention (digital agenda, sustainability, social inclusion) and to the governance model, based on the delegation to the 14 capital municipalities of the metropolitan areas designated as Intermediate Bodies. However, a major innovation was introduced as it was extended, in accordance with the provisions of the PA, to degraded contexts of some medium-sized cities in the less developed regions.

As outlined in the Programme, indeed, the Italian settlement system is very diversified and has a high degree of complexity; in this context, there was a growing recognition of the role played by medium-sized cities in regional economic development and the provision of services at the local and regional level. A significant portion of the Italian population (between 15% and 26%, depending on the size thresholds considered) lives and works in urban contexts of intermediate size. In particular, in the less developed countries, where sometimes the regions have a rather fragile urban structure, some medium-sized cities, even of limited size (under 25,000 inhabitants), play a fundamental role that is similar to that of large cities, in particular with regard to the provision of local services. This is a settlement structure that is crucial for maintaining territorial cohesion, but also fragile due to the tensions induced by the agglomerative tendencies of the strongest urban areas and the consequent increase in territorial imbalances and disparities. ([PN Metro+ e città medie Sud, 2021](#)). The 39 Southern Medium-sized Cities recipients of the funds were selected on the basis of the criteria described in the document “[Methodology for selecting medium cities in Less Developed Regions, intervention contents and co-design process](#)” (*Metodologia di selezione delle città medie RMS, contenuti dell'intervento e percorso di co-progettazione*), and they were included in a supporting path for co-designing the interventions, promoted by the Management Authority. The 39 selected medium cities were: Andria, Avellino, Aversa, Barletta, Battipaglia, Benevento, Brindisi, Caltanissetta, Campobasso, Carbonia, Casal del Principe, Caserta, Castrovillari, Catanzaro, Cava de' Tirreni, Cerignola, Corigliano-Rossano, Crotone, Gela, Iglesias, Lamezia Terme, Lentini, Manfredonia, Marsala, Matera, Mazara del Vallo, Mesagne, Mondragone, Niscemi, Olbia, Porto Torres, Potenza, Salerno, San Severo, Sassari, Taranto, Termoli, Trani, Vittoria. In terms of financial resources, the NP Metro+ received more than 3 billion euros, allocated according to 9 total priorities that reflected the new structure of the Programme, with five priorities specifically dedicated to metropolitan cities, two specifically dedicated to medium-sized cities in the less developed regions, and two priorities dedicated to technical assistance financed respectively by the ERDF and the ESF+. For what concerns the first category, the priorities are: Digital Agenda and Urban Innovation (Priority 1), Environmental Sustainability (Priority 2), Urban Mobility and multimodal sustainability (Priority 3) and Urban Regeneration (Priority 7), all of which financed by the ERDF, and Services for inclusion and social innovation (Priority 4) financed by the ESF+. For what concerns priorities dedicated to medium-sized cities, instead, they are Services for inclusion and social innovation (Priority 5) financed by the ESF+, and Infrastructure for social inclusion (Priority 5) financed by the ERDF. In terms of distribution of the resources, Priority 4 is the one which received the overall highest amount of resources, and more specifically among cities in the more developed regions, while Priority 7 is the one which received the highest allocation in the less developed category.

Table 3.2
Financial Plan and distribution of funds based on development levels

Prior-ity	Fund	Less Developed (EU + National co-financing)	More Developed (EU + National co-financing)	Total
1	ERDF	165.047.620,00 €	171.800.000,00 €	336.847.620,00 €
2	ERDF	208.652.840,00 €	214.900.000,00 €	423.552.840,00 €
3	ERDF	132.625.630,00 €	114.100.000,00 €	246.725.630,00 €
4	ESF+	515.733.333,00 €	326.362.500,00 €	842.095.833,00 €
5	ESF+	246.585.000,00 €	-	246.585.000,00 €

Prior-ity	Fund	Less Developed (EU + National co-financing)	More Developed (EU + National co-financing)	Total
6	ERDF	87.833.334,00 €	-	87.833.334,00 €
7	ERDF	533.590.576,00 €	201.200.000,00 €	734.790.576,00 €
8	ERDF	28.916.667,00 €	18.000.000,00 €	46.916.667,00 €
9	ESF+	26.015.000,00 €	11.137.500,00 €	37.152.500,00 €
Total		1.945.000.000,00 €	1.057.500.000,00 €	3.002.500.000,00 €

Source: [Comitato di Sorveglianza, 2023](#)

Table 3.3
Comparison of SNAI and PNCM in different programming periods

Instrument	National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI)		National Programme Metropolitan and Medium-Sized Cities (PNCM)	
	2014-2020	2021-2027	2014-2020	2021-2027
Coordinating structure at the national level	Technical Committee Internal Areas (<i>Comitato Tecnico Aree Interne</i>) ⁶	Control Room (<i>Cabina di Regia</i>) for the development of Internal Areas ⁷	Agency for Territorial Cohesion	Department for Cohesion Policies and the South
Amount of resources	750.8 million ⁸	228.4 million	1.9 billion	3 billion
Number of target areas	72 (1.060 Municipalities)	124 ⁹ (1.904 Municipalities)	14 Metropolitan Cities	14 Metropolitan Cities and 39 Medium-Sized Cities

⁶ Coordinated by the Department for Cohesion Policies

⁷ Established at the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, chaired by the Minister for European Affairs, the South, Cohesion Policies and the NRRP and composed, in addition to the competent Ministers, by the President of the Conference of Regions and Autonomous Provinces, by the President of the National Association of Italian Municipalities and by the President of the National Union of Municipalities, Communities and Mountain Entities.

⁸ The amount includes the resources allocated to SNAI and “Contributions to municipalities in internal areas”. More info available at: [OpenCoesione - Programmi 2014-2020](#)

⁹ The number include 123 Internal Areas and 1 “Special Project Minor Islands”

Instrument	National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI)		National Programme Metropolitan and Medium-Sized Cities (PNCM)	
Number of inhabitants involved	1.987.759 ¹⁰		4.570.731 ¹¹	
Coordinating structure at the national level	Technical Committee Areas <i>Tecnico</i>	Internal (Comitato <i>Are Interno</i>) ¹³	Control Room (<i>Cabina di Regia</i>) for the development of Internal Areas ¹⁴	Agency for Territorial Cohesion
				Department for Cohesion Policies and the South

Source: authors' own elaboration.

3.5 Cohesion Policy in Tuscany

As previously mentioned, from the current programming cycle, the Centre-North area has benefited from a greater allocation of resources compared to the previous one. An emblematic example is indeed the case of the Tuscany region, which has received 2.3 billion euros (1.2 billion euros for the ERDF, and 1.1 billion euros for the ESF+) for the 2021-2027 Regional Programme (RP), with an increase of 53% (800 million euros) compared to the previous cycle. For what concerns the ERDF resources, the RP is articulated in 4 priorities: research, innovation, digitalisation and competitiveness (47.9% of the resources); ecological transition, resilience and biodiversity (29.9%); sustainable urban mobility (10.4%); territorial cohesion and integrated local development (8.3%), supported by the technical assistance priority (3,5%). The strategy of the RP is strongly linked to the Smart Specialisation Strategy “[Toscana S3](#)”, the research and innovation strategy that, since 2014, Regions and Member States have been called upon to adopt in the implementation of the innovation policies co-financed with CP funds. As regards the ERDF RP, it is strictly intertwined with the ESF+ RP, particularly for what concerns the implementation of regional territorial strategies, sustainable urban development and internal areas, as well as for what concerns interventions aiming at improving Tuscany's capacity for innovation. The ESF+ RP for 2021-2027 benefits of an increase of 48% of the resources allocated (350 million more than 2014-2020), articulated in 4 priorities: employment (18.8% of the resources); education and training (23.7%); social inclusion (37.6%); youth employment (15.9%), supported by technical assistance (4%).¹⁵

As regards the urban dimension of CP in Tuscany, since the 2014-2020 cycle, the Region has successfully followed the provisions of the Regulations, supporting sustainable urban development

¹⁰ [elenco-comuni_rientranti-nelle-aree-interne_01012020.xlsx](#)

¹¹ [Dipartimento per le politiche di coesione e per il sud - Le Aree Interne 2021-2027](#)

¹² [Microsoft Word - Dossier_CM_gennaio 2023.docx](#)

¹³ Coordinated by the Department for Cohesion Policies

¹⁴ Established at the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, chaired by the Minister for European Affairs, the South, Cohesion Policies and the NRRP and composed, in addition to the competent Ministers, by the President of the Conference of Regions and Autonomous Provinces, by the President of the National Association of Italian Municipalities and by the President of the National Union of Municipalities, Communities and Mountain Entities.

¹⁵ All the information concerning the RP are available at [Fondi europei Fesr e Fse+ in Toscana - Regione Toscana](#)

through integrated strategies. Even more, in 2014-2020 the Region established a dedicated priority “Urban Axis”, whose main driver was represented by social inclusion and cohesion with specific Thematic Objectives: (a) support for social assistance services aimed at the weaker sections of the population and for socio-educational care services for early childhood, as well as for interventions for the functional recovery and reuse of buildings for the purposes of social inclusion and employment support with particular attention to youth employment (TO9); (b) the promotion of eco-efficiency and the reduction of energy consumption in public buildings and in public lighting networks, together with interventions for the increase of sustainable mobility (TO4). These sustainable urban development strategies were implemented through the so-called Urban Innovation Projects (*Progetti di Innovazione Urbana or PIU*) – urban regeneration projects aimed at making neighbourhoods more liveable and attractive, socially and economically more lively, also with interventions for the renovation of public building assets.

The Regional Operational Programme in 2014-2020 financed 9 PIU, to which were allocated more than 42 million euros, composed of a coordinated and integrated set of actions aimed at addressing social, economic and environmental problems in the urban context. As regards the 2021-2027 cycle, the RP has Priority 4, which is dedicated to territorial cohesion and integrated local development, financed through ERDF, whose Specific Objective is “*to promote integrated and inclusive social, economic and environmental development, culture, natural heritage, sustainable tourism and security in urban areas*”. This objective is in line with the regional territorial governance which has given priority to a functional view of the territorial system, defining urban areas beyond the municipal administrative perimeter. (*RP Toscana ERDF 2021.2027*). In Tuscany, urban settlements are concentrated in the central-northern part, especially in the metropolitan systems of Florence-Prato-Pistoia and Livorno-Pisa-Lucca axes. Outside these areas, urban settlements characterise Florence-Arezzo, Florence-Siena and the coastal areas. The challenge of territorial cohesion in Tuscany involves enhancing the service system of medium-sized cities and improving their urban functionality and connections with surrounding areas. Furthermore, the challenge of internal areas, where more than a quarter of the regional population resides in a territory equal to more than two thirds of the total, is crucial for the Region due to their development potential. These areas, indeed, face low population density, negative demographic trends, an aging population, more difficult morphological conditions and widespread problems of hydrogeological safety, stemming from the phenomenon of agricultural activities. That is why, in continuity with the SNAI 2014-2020, the Region has intensified its effort towards these territories in the *framework of the SNAI 2021-2027*, integrating and coordinating sectoral policies and different funding, to enhance synergies and maximise results. As a result, to the three pilot areas already interested in 2014-2020 Strategy (Casentino – Valtiberina; Garfagnana – Lunigiana – Media Valle del Serchio – Appennino Pistoiese; Valdarno – Valdisieve – Mugello – Val Bisenzio), three new areas were identified (Amiata Grossetana – Amiata Val d’Orcia – Colline del Fiora; Alta Valdera – Alta Val di Cecina – Colline Metallifere – Val di Merse; Valdichiana Senese).

Figure 3.3
Tuscany Internal Areas Strategy 2021-2027



Source: [Regione Toscana, 2024](#)

4 Urban structure and governance of Cohesion Policy

4.1 Spatial boundaries and administrative configuration

As of 1st January 2025, the City of Florence has a resident population of 362,353 inhabitants, accounting for approximately 36.6% of the total population of the wider metropolitan area (ISTAT, 2025). Florence is characterised by a remarkably high population density, with 3,541 inhabitants per square kilometre, significantly exceeding the density of the surrounding municipalities. The urban footprint of the city is substantial, with 56% of its territory dedicated to settlements and infrastructures, reflecting its historical and contemporary role as a highly urbanised centre.

Florence's demographic profile reveals structural challenges, notably a marked ageing of the population and a negative natural growth rate. The city exhibits one of the oldest population structures in Italy, with a high proportion of residents aged 65 and over, while youth cohorts continue to decline. This demographic stagnation mirrors broader trends observed in many Italian cities but is particularly pronounced in Florence, where housing costs, limited availability of affordable housing, and structural constraints on urban expansion increasingly offset urban attractiveness.

Geographically, Florence is located within the Arno valley, a low-lying plain surrounded by hills, which has historically shaped its urban form and constrained its spatial growth. The territory of the city is predominantly urban, but it also includes significant green areas, such as the Cascine Park, Boboli Gardens, and the hills of Arcetri and Fiesole, which contribute to the city's landscape and cultural heritage.

From a functional perspective, Florence plays a pivotal role as the core of the broader socio-economic system of Central Tuscany. The city's economic influence extends beyond its administrative boundaries, particularly along the Florence–Prato–Pistoia axis, where intense commuting flows and economic interdependencies reveal a polycentric and non-hierarchical urban system. Recent studies (Burgalassi et al., 2015) have demonstrated that the official delineation of Functional Urban Areas (FUAs) tends to underestimate the true extent of functional integration, as evidenced by commuting matrices and settlement patterns that extend into neighbouring provinces.

Florence serves as the main economic, cultural, and service hub of the region. It concentrates key functions such as higher education (notably the University of Florence), cultural industries, tourism, and advanced services, which contribute to its high GDP per capita compared to the surrounding areas. However, as highlighted by Agnoletti (2015), this economic centrality also generates spatial disparities, with the city exhibiting higher economic performance and employment opportunities relative to its hinterland, where peripherality and lower accessibility remain persistent challenges.

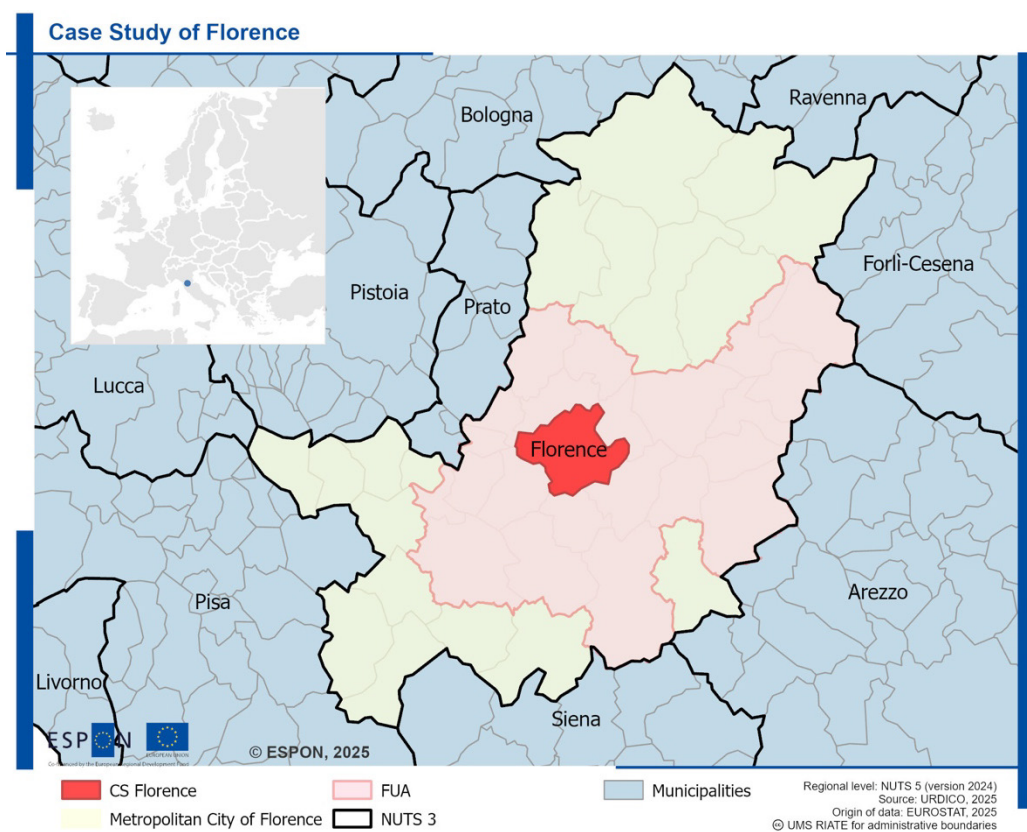
Since the establishment of the Metropolitan City of Florence in 2015, the mismatch between administrative boundaries and functional realities has been increasingly evident. While the Metropolitan City provides a formal institutional framework, the socio-economic dynamics that shape Florence's urban system are far more extensive, encompassing cross-border flows of people, goods, and services that transcend municipal and provincial boundaries. This persistent disjunction continues to pose significant challenges for coordinated territorial governance, as noted by De Luca (2016).

Table 4.1
Spatial boundary of Florence’s case study

2014-2020		2021-2027	
Level	LAU(s)	Level	LAU(s)
Florence	LAU 2	Does not change	LAU 2
Metropolitan City of Florence ¹⁶	NUTS 3	Does not change	NUTS 3

Source: author’s own elaboration

Map 4.1
Spatial boundaries of Florence, Italy



Source: author’s own elaboration

¹⁶ The Metropolitan City of Florence is a territorial body of vast area whose territory coincides with that of the pre-existing province. Established on April 8, 2014, it has been operational since January 1, 2015. It is composed of 41 municipalities.

Table 4.2
Administrative configuration and responsibilities in Italy

Level	NUTS	Responsibility
National Level	NUTS ₁	Exclusive competences in landscape matters, guidance in relevant sectors such as environment, energy, transport infrastructure. National laws, decrees, sectoral plans, general guidelines on landscape, energy, infrastructure. Centralised management of national interest sectors, guidance, and regulation for specific territories. National Landscape Plan, infrastructure laws, environmental and transport management plans.
Regional	NUTS ₂	Autonomous legislation on urban planning, approval of municipal, provincial, and metropolitan plans, drafting of territorial plans (PTR, PPR). Regional territorial plans (PTR), regional landscape plans (PPR), approval of plans for municipalities, provinces, and metropolitan cities. Regional legislative autonomy, plan approval, drafting of territorial plans focusing on landscape and environment. Regional Territorial Plan (PTR), Regional Landscape Plan (PPR), regional sectoral plans.
Metropolitan (and provincial)	NUTS ₃	Territorial planning functions in metropolitan cities, three-year strategic planning. General territorial planning, metropolitan strategic planning. Coordination and planning of metropolitan territory, management of infrastructure and services. Metropolitan Strategic Plan, Metropolitan Territorial Plan.
Local	LAU	Drafting and implementation of local urban planning, three-year public works plans. Municipal urban planning plans, implementation urban planning plans, three-year public works plans. Urban area planning and management, urban regeneration and revitalisation, management of local public works.

Source: author's own elaboration

Historically, the competence in urban planning and territorial planning has been assigned to the State, which has played the role of regulator and planner, managing activities and functions that mainly fall into three areas: legislative functions, which include general regulations on the principles, tools, and procedures for drafting urban plans, as well as specific regulations related to relevant territorial aspects such as natural areas, landscape, and transportation; planning functions, which involve the preparation of plans and programmes for the territorial organisation at different scales; and finally, administrative functions, which include the evaluation and approval of plans prepared by other levels of government. Over time, in many European countries, including Italy, these functions have been progressively transferred to the regional level. In Italy, the decentralisation of urban planning competences occurred in several phases, with the most significant change occurring in the 1970s, with the creation of regions with ordinary statute. This process can be divided into three key moments: from the unification of Italy to the 1970s, when the State was the sole entity responsible for legislating on urban planning and managing municipal planning; from the 1970s to 2001, when many legislative, planning, and administrative competences were transferred to the regions; and finally, the post-2001 phase, with further transfer of competences to the regions and increasing harmonisation with European regulations.

The reform of Title V of the Constitution in 2001 further modified the distribution of competences between different levels of government, introducing concepts borrowed from EU law, such as the principle of subsidiarity, which establishes that higher levels of government intervene only if lower levels are unable to adequately resolve local issues, and the notion of territorial governance, which implies a concurrent legislation between the State and the Regions, with the State defining the fundamental principles and the regions having full legislative and regulatory autonomy. At the

national level, the State retains exclusive competences in the field of landscape protection and maintains guiding functions in areas such as the environment, energy, and transportation infrastructure. At the regional level, regions hold most of the competences in urban and territorial matters, legislating autonomously and approving plans prepared by municipalities, provinces, and metropolitan cities, in addition to drafting territorial plans such as the Regional Territorial Plan (PTR) and the Regional Landscape Plan (PPR). The Delrio Law (56/2014) introduced Metropolitan Cities, assigning them specific territorial planning and strategic programming functions with the goal of coordinating the development and management of infrastructure and services at the metropolitan level. At the European level, while the European Union does not have direct competences in territorial planning, it influences territorial policies through instruments such as directives in the environmental, energy, and waste management sectors, as well as through structural funds, cooperation programmes between regions and cities, and regional development strategies that promote innovation and the strengthening of infrastructure of common interest.

In this framework of territorial governance evolution, it is also important to consider territorial development programmes and institutional scales, which reflect an integrated approach to planning and development of different areas of the territory, aiming to address specific local needs within a national and European context.

At the national level, National Operational Programmes (NOP) are key instruments for financing and managing projects in priority sectors such as the environment, energy, and internal areas. These programmes, primarily supported by European funds, aim to stimulate economic development and social cohesion by encouraging initiatives that respond to the specific needs of different regions. National strategies, such as those in energy or for the enhancement of internal areas, provide long-term orientations that seek to address the challenges of specific geographical zones, such as energy transition or the promotion of sustainable tourism.

At the regional level, Regional Operational Programmes (POR) develop policies that are specific to each region, responding to particular challenges and maximising the use of available resources. Alongside the POR, sectoral regional strategies and programmes, such as those dedicated to tourism, infrastructure, or the environment, play a fundamental role in managing territorial resources and promoting key sectors for local development. These tools are crucial for ensuring the proper integration of European and national policies at the territorial level.

At the municipal level, the Italian constitutional framework formally guarantees local autonomy by Articles 5 and 114, which establish decentralisation as a fundamental principle and recognise municipalities, together with other territorial entities, as constituent units of the Republic. In principle, this places all levels of government on an equal footing, but in practice, municipalities have a much narrower scope of power. Unlike regions, they lack legislative authority and instead carry out administrative responsibilities, both their own and those delegated, under the principles of subsidiarity, differentiation, and proportionality. Their “fundamental functions” are determined by national law, and their internal organisation must comply with rules defined at the central level, such as electoral systems and governing bodies.

From an urban planning perspective, municipalities are responsible for adopting a local binding plan (*piano urbanistico generale*) as mandated by national law 1150 of 1942 and each regional law. The quality and number of local plans vary from region to region. In contrast, the effective responsibility at the local level remains unchanged: each municipality is in charge of controlling land use at the local level.

4.2 Governance of Cohesion Policy in Florence

Understanding the governance structure of CP and spatial planning in Italy requires an analysis across multiple levels of government. The configuration of actors in the Florence metropolitan area reveals a complex multi-level system that reflects Italy's institutional architecture, with distinct but often overlapping responsibilities across national, regional, metropolitan, and local levels.

At the national level, the Presidency of the Council of Ministers now holds overall responsibility for the governance of Cohesion Policy, following the suppression of the Agency for Territorial Cohesion in 2023 (see section number 3). This Agency previously supported the implementation of national and EU programmes through technical assistance, monitoring, and quality assurance. Its dissolution has led to a centralisation of functions within the Presidency, raising concerns about the future capacity for decentralised technical support.

National Ministries, including the Ministry of Infrastructure and Transport (MIMS), the Ministry of the Environment and Energy Security (MASE), and the Ministry of Education and Research (MIUR), are responsible for sectoral policies and manage National Operational Programmes (NOPs). These ministries define strategic priorities and regulatory frameworks, which often have spatial implications, even though they do not directly manage spatial planning.

At the regional level, the Tuscany Region plays a dual role. It manages the Regional Programmes (RP ERDF and ESF+), distributing cohesion funds and providing guidelines for implementation. It also holds full responsibility for regional spatial planning, including the Regional Landscape Plan and the Regional Spatial Plan. Coordination between these two domains is formalised but not always operationally integrated, depending on political will and technical capacity.

The Metropolitan City of Florence occupies an intermediate position but remains institutionally weak. Although it is formally tasked with spatial strategic coordination among municipalities in its area, it does not consistently perform a role in managing or supporting cohesion policies. The Metropolitan Strategic Plan exists as a tool for spatial and strategic alignment but is not always connected to funding strategies or implementation mechanisms.

At the local level, the Municipality of Florence is a key player. The General Directorate oversees both spatial planning and project development under the CP. Within this framework, a notable institutional innovation is the creation of an interdepartmental office for EU project design, commonly known as the “EU Project Joint Office”. Established in 2012, this structure supports all municipal departments in accessing and managing cohesion and national funding.

This Interdepartmental office acts as a cross-cutting coordination mechanism, operating through thematic working groups (e.g., mobility, environment, digital innovation). It is not a stand-alone department but rather a horizontal structure integrated into the municipal administration. Its main functions include methodological support, project development, partner coordination, and internal capacity building. The Interdepartmental office is particularly active in managing NOP Metro and Metro Plus projects, and more recently in coordinating NRRP initiatives.

Integration between CP and spatial planning at the local level is enhanced by this structure. The Interdepartmental office ensures that EU-funded projects align with the city's broader strategic planning documents, such as the Structural Plan and Urban Operational Plan. It also facilitates coordination with other municipalities in the metropolitan area, although this support is not yet institutionalised.

Other municipalities in the metro area are also involved in cohesion-related projects but with uneven administrative capacities. Smaller municipalities often rely informally on the expertise and technical structures of Florence, as the Metropolitan City has yet to provide a stable support

framework. This asymmetry contributes to territorial disparities in the ability to access and manage cohesion resources.

The governance of CP and spatial planning in the Florence metropolitan area is characterised by a complex interplay of national, regional, metropolitan, and local actors. While Florence has made significant progress in building internal coordination capacity, especially through its interdepartmental Interdepartmental office, the system as a whole suffers from fragmentation, weak multi-level coordination, and unequal capacity among municipalities.

Table 4.3
Governance of Cohesion Policy in Florence

Name of the actor	Level	Responsibility	
		Cohesion Policy	Spatial Planning
Presidency of the Council of Ministers	National	Overall coordination of Cohesion Policy; allocation of resources; supervision after the suppression of the Agency for Territorial Cohesion	No direct responsibility
Agency for Territorial Cohesion (suppressed in 2023)	National	Provided technical support, monitoring, and guidance to implementing bodies (now transferred)	None
Relevant Ministries (e.g., MIMS, MASE, MIUR)	National	Management of National Operational Programmes (NOPs); definition of implementation rules and sectoral priorities	Indirect, through regulatory and financial frameworks
Tuscany Region	Regional	Management of Regional Operational Programmes (ROP ERDF and ESF+); support to local authorities; definition of regional implementation guidelines	Main responsibility for regional spatial planning (Landscape Plan, Regional Spatial Plan)
Metropolitan City of Florence	Metropolitan	Strategic coordination among municipalities in the metro area; potential (but still weak) support role in territorial project planning	Drafting of the Metropolitan Strategic Plan; partial coordination of inter-municipal spatial planning
Municipality of Florence – General Directorate	Local	Political and administrative oversight of EU and national funded project planning	Overall coordination of urban and infrastructure planning
Municipality of Florence – EU Project Joint Office	Local	Project design, application, management, and reporting for cohesion funds (NOP Metro, NRRP, ROPs, etc.); technical and methodological support internally	Integration of funded projects with sectoral urban planning; contributes to strategic and spatial consistency

Name of the actor	Level	Responsibility	
		Cohesion Policy	Spatial Planning
Municipalities of the Metropolitan Area	Local	Occasional participation in cohesion projects, with highly uneven technical capacity; reliance on support from the main city	Regular local spatial planning

Source: author's own elaboration

4.3 Florence's involvement in Cohesion Policy

This section explores the actual participation of the City of Florence in delivering the CP (ERDF, ESF+, Cohesion Funds) for the 2014-2020 and 2021-2027 periods. The aim is to explore the role of city administration in delivering the urban dimensions of the CP (direct vs. intermediate) in the two programming periods.

4.3.1 2014-2020 programming period

The main role of the city of Florence in delivering the CP is related to the NOP Metro, the National Operational Programme for Metropolitan Cities. In 2014-2020, the City of Florence acted as an Intermediate body for the NOP METRO, aiming to address in a coordinated way all the territorial and organisational challenges faced in urban contexts. Although the NOP METRO targeted metropolitan development, the National Agency for Territorial Cohesion was the Managing and Certifying Authority responsible for implementing and managing the Operational Program, and the 14 capital municipalities of the metropolitan cities are the Intermediate Bodies that managed the programme locally. NOP Metro has the same strategy for the 14 Italian metropolitan cities, including Florence, but each city was responsible for defining its own Operational Plan. This plan contains both the list of actions and the involved actors for each project/intervention, and the expected impact through indicators. The resources of the NOP Metro, allocated at the local level through the Municipality of Florence as the capital city of the Metropolitan City acting as Intermediate body, were meant to finance projects which have a metropolitan perspective/interest/reuse. However, following the rules of the Programme, a distinction should be made between material and immaterial projects. Material interventions were concentrated in the City of Florence, while immaterial ones were more targeted to the metropolitan dimension.

Concerning the NOP METRO, in the case of Florence, the organisational and operating model of the Intermediate Body provided for a “control room” that is convened whenever there is a need and, in any case, indicatively every semester, to ensure the correct execution of the Program, the Operational Plan and the compliance with the objectives and deadlines for the implementation of interventions. This control room, coordinated and directed by the City Manager, is also composed by the Director of the Mayor's Office as supervisor with regard to the coherence of the actions and interventions with the strategic political direction of the Mayor. It was also the natural place for meetings with the Metropolitan City, as a natural consequence of the collaboration activities already underway, also through working meetings established for the drafting of the Metropolitan Strategic Plan and for common and co-created projects already in the planning and implementation phase as the traffic supervisor. The relations with the Metropolitan City (represented by the City Manager or his delegate) were thus maintained in a stable and continuous manner and the proactive collaboration between the parties was also realised thanks to co-created projects, when concretely and operationally feasible.

Although the city of Florence serves as an intermediate body of the NOP Metro, it undoubtedly has the most power to direct CP funding to its territory. Additionally, the city benefits from direct funds. These programmes – primarily Horizon, LIFE and Interreg – are not intended for broad territorial development, but are crucial for fostering excellence in innovation, ambitious environmental action and complex transnational collaboration. Accessing these funds requires a high degree of specialised expertise, international networks and administrative capacity to navigate the demanding application and management processes.

Table 4.4
Florence’s engagement in delivering Cohesion Policy 2014-2020

Document	Level	Phase			Role		
		Program- ming	Managing	Implement- ing	Managing Authority	Interme- diate Body	Benefi- ciary
NOP METRO	National	X				X	
Horizon Eu- rope	EU			X			X
Life	EU			X			X
Interreg	various ¹⁷			X			X

Source: authors’ own elaboration

4.3.2 2021-2027 programming period

The NOP Metro “Plus” 2021-2027, with a financial value of 3 billion euros, is developed in continuity with the NOP Metro 2014-2020, both about the original themes (digital agenda/sustainability / social inclusion), and towards the governance model, based on the delegation to the 14 capital municipalities as Intermediate Bodies. The Programme evolves towards challenging areas of intervention closely related to urban development with actions relating to the following themes: urban regeneration, combating socio-economic and housing hardship in the suburbs, "green" mobility, inclusion and social innovation, access to employment, environmental and circular economy interventions, energy saving of buildings and infrastructures, innovative offer of digital services, promotion of social development also through culture, natural heritage, sustainable tourism and security.

According to the [Piano Operativo della Città di Firenze](#), the document that details the city’s selection of projects, Florence benefits from the PN METRO+ of around euro 150 million that are directly managed by the city to finance projects in the field of: Digital agenda and urban innovation (15 millions); environmental sustainability (25.3 millions); Sustainable multimodal urban mobility (24.2 millions); services for inclusion and social innovation (46.6); Urban Regeneration (35.8 millions) and technical assistance (2.4 millions).

¹⁷ Florence has participated to different Interreg programmes at various levels (cross-border, transnational and interregional).

Table 4.5
Florence's engagement in delivering the Cohesion Policy 2021-2027

Document	Level	Phase			Role		
		Pro-gram-ming	Manag-ing	Implem-ent-ing	Manag-ing Authority	Interme-diate Body	Benefi-ciary
NOP Metro Plus	National	X				X	
Horizon Europe	EU			X			X
Life	EU			X			X
Interreg	EU						

Source: author's own elaboration

4.3.3 Main differences

Both in 2014-2020 and in 2021-2027, the municipality of Florence acts for the NOP Metro as “Urban Authority”. The Urban Authority is the intermediate body which receives funding and manages it according to a participatory process that involves both other institutions and main local stakeholders (such as third sector operators, private actors, etc.). Started as a pilot sharing process, due to other in-place project activities (like the participation to Integrated Sustainable Development Plans in the frame of regional funding programmes/ Sustainable Urban Development Strategy that brought to create a common office) and the participation to European Networks as Eurocities and Metrex, in the framework of the NOP Metro Programme this process of interaction has become more structured. Therefore, as regards the governance structure and the operational programmes, there are no significant changes to highlight between the 2014-2020 and the 2021-2027 programming period.

As regards the thematic priorities, there is a general continuity between the two periods, with some slight differences in project's areas of intervention in the period 2021-2027, also following a dialogue between the city of Florence and the metropolitan city. The new programming has incorporated the feedback of the metropolitan municipalities and partly updated its priorities with those that are better aligned with local needs.

On the other hand, some issues did not find adequate answers either in 2014-2020 or in 2021-2027. Among these, in particular, the issue of social housing stands out, which despite the enormous importance and critical issues currently encountered in the local as well as national scene, has not found great possibilities for support through EU funding.

Two other key sectors that were and are not sufficiently addressed by EU funding schemes are: Roads and bridges, on which emerges the absence of EU funding for infrastructure maintenance, despite its strategic importance for mobility; Seismic retrofitting, which is dealt with only in the NRRP, but overlooked and ignored in cohesion policy's funding opportunities.

4.4 Networking and lobbying activity

Participating in different arenas helps cities to be more influential and gain competitive advantages when it comes to benefiting from the EU Cohesion Policy. Florence's strategic

engagement in international, European, and national networks demonstrates a proactive approach to urban diplomacy, multilevel governance, and policy advocacy. The city's involvement in transnational networks is not only a means of policy learning and benchmarking but also a deliberate strategy of political agency and soft power, reinforcing its position as a mid-sized European city with global outreach.

Florence's approach to networking and lobbying is deeply institutionalised within the municipal governance framework. A dedicated Interdepartmental office, consisting of four staff members and a manager, is responsible for monitoring European opportunities, supporting other municipal departments, and ensuring Florence's active participation in various networks and projects. While these activities are not supported by dedicated full-time staff exclusively for networking, the office integrates project design, funding acquisition, and policy engagement, working across departments and thematic areas. The commitment to networking is therefore embedded into the city's broader governance and planning structures, despite limited resources.

Florence's participation in Eurocities—as a long-standing member since 2003—has been particularly significant, progressively increasing the city's political visibility and influence within the EU urban agenda. Florence held the Vice-Presidency of Eurocities from 2018 to 2021 and the Presidency from 2021 to 2023 and currently serves as Vice-Chair of the Culture Forum and Chair of the Working Group on Governance and Cohesion Policy. This positioning has enabled Florence to shape discussions on key issues such as sustainable urban development, SDGs, climate action, and digital transitions, contributing to policy papers, action plans, and advocacy efforts.

At the national level, Florence plays a prominent role within ANCI (*Associazione Nazionale Comuni Italiani*), the official representation body of Italian municipalities. Thanks to its metropolitan role and strong capacity for innovation, Florence contributes actively to ANCI's activities, bringing forward experiences and best practices that strengthen the representation of Italian cities in national and European policymaking. This engagement ensures a stronger alignment between local initiatives, national advocacy, and European funding opportunities, positioning Florence as a reference point within the Italian municipal landscape.

The city's engagement in other European and international networks further illustrates its strategic and multi-scalar networking approach. Florence is an active member of the World Tourism Cities Federation, focusing on global tourism governance; Major Cities of Europe, with a focus on digital innovation and knowledge exchange (hosting the annual conference in 2016); and the EU Urban Agenda Cultural Partnership, where Florence plays a coordinating role, mobilising cross-sectoral expertise and drafting policy documents and action plans.

Florence's environmental commitments are reflected in its early adhesion to the Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy (signed in 2010, renewed in 2020, and formalised through the approval of the Sustainable Energy and Climate Action Plan, or PAESC, in 2023), as well as its membership in the Green City Accord (since 2021) and ICLEI (Local Governments for Sustainability) (since 2016). The city is also one of the nine Italian cities selected for the 100 Climate-Neutral Cities Mission, having obtained the Climate City Contract label in 2023. At the national level, Florence participates in the Let's Go network, an informal coordination platform among the Italian Mission Cities to foster dialogue with national authorities and facilitate the implementation of the Climate-Neutral Cities objectives.

Florence's engagement extends to emerging arenas such as the Pact of Free Cities, where the city participates as a political observer, and to initiatives like the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact, although specific roles and activities in these contexts remain more exploratory and loosely defined.

Crucially, Florence's internal governance model supports and sustains its participation in these arenas. The Working group on European Projects, established in 2010, brings together around 20

municipal staff from different departments in thematic working groups (such as environment, mobility, digitalisation, and housing). This structure enables cross-departmental collaboration, information sharing, and joint action on European projects, ensuring that networking is not an isolated activity but an integrated part of urban governance.

While Florence demonstrates a strong commitment to networking, challenges persist. The absence of a formalised multi-level governance structure with the Metropolitan City and the Tuscany Region limits the city's ability to align strategies and share resources effectively. Collaboration with the Metropolitan City remains largely informal, despite the Mayor of Florence holding both positions. Furthermore, staff turnover, the lack of human resources fully dedicated to networking, and fragmented data management systems hinder the city's capacity to monitor progress, evaluate impacts, and optimise participation in transnational initiatives.

Nevertheless, Florence's overall engagement across multiple networks reflects an ambitious and coherent strategy: the city uses transnational arenas not only to exchange knowledge but also to shape European and global urban agendas, advocate for local interests, and promote innovative solutions for climate action, cultural heritage, digital transformation, and sustainable urban development. Florence's experience exemplifies how a mid-sized European city can build influence, secure funding opportunities, and strengthen its governance capacity by actively participating in diverse and strategically selected networks.

Table 4.6
Networking and lobbying activity of Florence

Name of the network	Level	Topic	Role	Additional comment
Eurocities	EU	Urban Development, Governance, Culture, Sustainability	Political Leadership and Coordination	The Municipality of Florence joined Eurocities in 2003. Since 2015, it has been part of the Executive Committee. Florence served as Vice President (2018–2021) and President (2021–2023). It currently holds the position of Vice-Chair of the Culture Forum and Chair of the Working Group on Governance and Cohesion Policy. Florence also participates in the Environment, Economic Development, Mobility, Knowledge Society Forums, and Working Groups on Metropolitan Cities, Urban Agenda, and SDGs.
World Tourism Cities Federation	International	Tourism	Full Member	Florence joined in 2017 to strengthen international cooperation in tourism governance, promote cultural heritage, and participate in knowledge exchange platforms.
Major Cities of Europe	EU	Digital Innovation, ICT, e-Governance	Full Member	Florence joined in 2014 and hosted the annual conference in 2016, highlighting its commitment to digital transition, smart city strategies, and innovation ecosystems.

Name of the network	Level	Topic	Role	Additional comment
Covenant of Mayors for Climate & Energy	International	Climate Action, Energy, Sustainability	Full Member	Florence signed the Covenant in 2010, re-affirmed its commitment in 2020, and adopted the Sustainable Energy and Climate Action Plan (PAESC) in 2023, aligning with EU targets for carbon neutrality and climate resilience.
EU Urban Agenda – Cultural Partnership	EU	Culture, Cultural Heritage	Coordinator	Florence coordinates the Cultural Partnership within the EU Urban Agenda, leading interdisciplinary teams, contributing to exploratory studies, drafting guiding documents, and shaping the Action Plan. This reflects its leadership in European cultural policy networks.
Green City Accord	EU	Environment, Urban Sustainability	Full Member	Florence joined the Green City Accord in June 2021, reinforcing its long-term commitment to environmental quality, air pollution reduction, and climate neutrality goals.
Milan Urban Food Policy Pact	International	Food Governance, Urban Food Systems	Observer / Participating City	Florence participates as a signatory city, although specific roles in the network remain exploratory. Engagement reflects the city's interest in sustainable food systems and urban-rural linkages.
World Tourism Cities Federation	International	Tourism	Full Member	Florence joined in 2017 to strengthen international cooperation in tourism governance, promote cultural heritage, and participate in knowledge exchange platforms.
ANCI – Association of Italian Municipalities	National	Governance	Full Member	The Municipality of Florence, thanks to its metropolitan role and strong capacity for innovation, contributes within ANCI as a key actor, bringing forward experiences and best practices that strengthen the representation of municipalities at national and European level.

Source: author's own elaboration

Figure 4
Networking mapping of Florence, Italy

Networks Levels

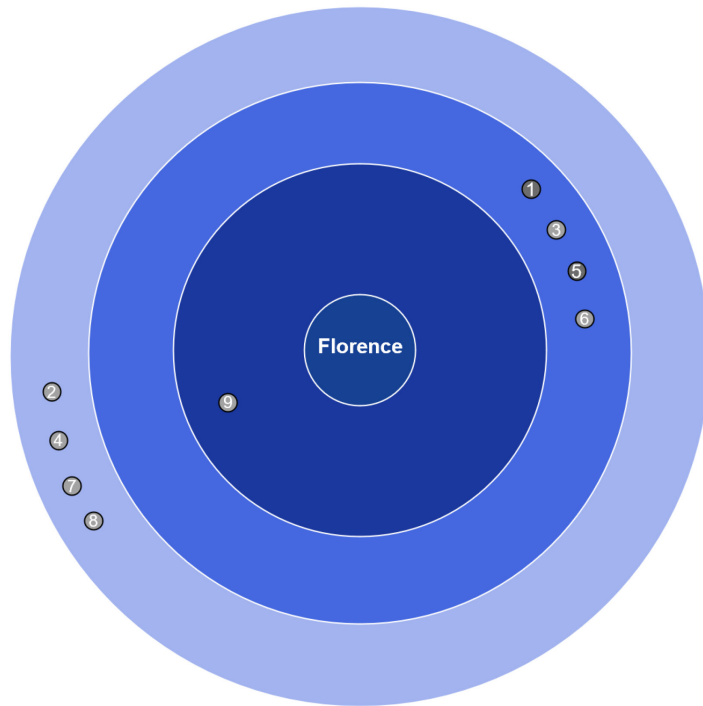
- National Level
- European level
- International Level

Role within the Network

- Observer
- Full member
- Coordinating role
- Political responsibility

Name of Network

- ① Eurocities
- ② World Tourism Cities Federation
- ③ Major Cities of Europe
- ④ Covenant of Mayors for Climate & Energy
- ⑤ EU Urban Agenda – Cultural Partnership
- ⑥ Green City Accord
- ⑦ Milan Urban Food Policy Pact
- ⑧ World Tourism Cities Federation
- ⑨ ANCI



Source: authors' own elaboration

5 Administrative capacity and Institutional innovations

Effective implementation of the EU CP at the urban level depends not only on the availability of financial resources but also on the administrative capacity and institutional arrangements that cities put in place to manage complex programmes and projects. This chapter examines how the City of Florence has addressed the key institutional, organisational, and governance challenges associated with EU fund management, with a particular focus on administrative capacity, multilevel governance, financial constraints, and institutional innovations. Drawing on both quantitative data and qualitative insights from interviews and documentary analysis, the chapter explores the main barriers that have affected Florence's ability to leverage EU resources for urban development fully. These include human resource limitations, regulatory complexity, and challenges in inter-institutional coordination. At the same time, the chapter highlights the city's proactive efforts to overcome these constraints through organisational restructuring, capacity-building initiatives, and the introduction of innovative governance mechanisms. Special attention is given to the role of the Tuscany Region as the Managing Authority, the dynamics of multilevel governance, and the financial and technical hurdles encountered in project design and implementation. Finally, the chapter presents a series of institutional innovations and lessons learned from past negative experiences, offering valuable insights for other urban contexts facing similar challenges.

5.1 Administrative capacity and management gaps

The experience of the City of Florence in implementing the EU CP reflects both the typical challenges faced by many Italian urban authorities and the city's proactive efforts to strengthen its administrative capacity over time. While capacity gaps and procedural hurdles persist, Florence has demonstrated a clear commitment to enhancing its internal organisation, professional skills, and project management tools to improve the delivery of EU-funded investments. Florence's involvement in CP programmes has required the municipality to manage complex administrative, financial, and procedural tasks. As with many other Italian cities, the municipality has occasionally experienced resource and staffing constraints, especially in departments directly responsible for EU project design, implementation, and reporting. The main difficulties relate to the limited availability of dedicated personnel with specific expertise in EU fund management, a situation partly linked to national restrictions on public sector hiring and budgetary limitations. Nonetheless, Florence has mitigated these constraints by reorganising internal structures, reallocating resources, and promoting interdepartmental coordination to ensure that the necessary skills are concentrated where most needed. Dedicated units and coordination mechanisms have been progressively developed to address administrative and capacity challenges, improving compliance with EU procedures and enabling a more strategic integration of projects within urban development initiatives. Staff training and capacity-building initiatives have also been implemented, allowing municipal officers to strengthen their knowledge of EU regulations and procedures progressively. These efforts, while still ongoing, have contributed to reducing knowledge gaps and improving internal project management capacity. While progress has been made at the municipal level, Florence's experience also highlights some structural and systemic barriers that affect the broader EU investment framework for cities in Italy. A first challenge concerns the complexity of administrative procedures and technical regulations, which often require a high level of specialisation and continuous adaptation to regulatory updates. A second issue relates to the multi-layered governance structure that characterises the Italian CP framework. The need to coordinate with multiple actors, including

regional Managing Authorities and national ministries, sometimes leads to procedural delays and administrative overlaps. Nonetheless, Florence has developed positive working relationships with many of these institutions, which have facilitated smoother implementation in several instances. Another barrier is linked to the limited flexibility in staffing and budgeting at the local level, which occasionally constrains the city's ability to mobilise resources quickly, especially for large or multi-annual projects. However, the municipality has shown institutional resilience and adaptability, often finding pragmatic solutions to meet co-financing requirements and manage complex administrative demands. Finally, while communication with higher-level authorities can still be improved, recent experiences suggest a gradual enhancement in cooperation, particularly in the context of new EU programming periods where cities like Florence are gaining more recognition as key actors in urban development policy.

5.2 Multilevel governance

A well-functioning multilevel governance system is essential for the effective delivery of the EU CP. The case of Florence illustrates both the opportunities and challenges associated with coordinating policy design and implementation across different tiers of government. Over recent years, the city has made tangible efforts to strengthen vertical and horizontal cooperation mechanisms, while also facing persistent barriers related to institutional fragmentation and procedural complexity. Multi-tier coordination in the implementation of CP in Italy remains uneven. The Italian system is heavily influenced by a regionalised governance structure, where Managing Authorities play a central role in programming and allocating resources. National ministries set the regulatory and strategic frameworks, while cities and local governments are primarily responsible for project implementation. In this context, Florence has developed increasingly structured interactions with the Tuscany Region, which serves as the Managing Authority for several operational programmes relevant to the city. Communication channels have improved over time, and Florence has built working relationships that facilitate coordination on project implementation and monitoring. Nevertheless, the city's involvement in the upstream phases of CP—such as strategic programming and project selection—remains limited, often constrained by regulatory frameworks and decision-making hierarchies. Although national, regional, and local actors are formally involved in the CP cycle, the extent and quality of their participation vary across stages. For Florence, collaboration with the Tuscany Region has improved, particularly in the operational management of ongoing projects. However, early involvement in the strategic design of programmes and funding priorities has been modest. Other relevant stakeholders, such as civil society organisations, universities, and the private sector, are generally involved at the project level but not systematically engaged in higher-level governance discussions. At the metropolitan level, cooperation with the Metropolitan City of Florence has strengthened, especially for projects related to sustainable mobility and environmental resilience. The Tuscany Region performs a decisive gatekeeping role in the delivery of CP in Florence. As the Managing Authority, the Region is responsible for project approval, resource allocation, and compliance monitoring for ERDF and ESF-funded programmes. This role grants the Region considerable discretion in shaping investment priorities and selecting projects, often limiting the scope for bottom-up initiatives from cities. The relationship between Florence and the Tuscany Region can be described as generally constructive but marked by procedural complexity. Institutional dialogue has improved, with clearer communication channels and more regular consultation processes. The city administration has also taken steps to facilitate coordination, especially during the implementation and monitoring phases of EU-funded projects. However, the administrative workload associated with project approval, reporting, and compliance remains high. Municipal officers often navigate complex procedures and face challenges in meeting technical requirements. While the Region provides technical support, delays in decision-making and limited flexibility remain common concerns.

5.3 Financial constraints and technical complexity

The experience of the City of Florence in accessing and managing EU funds under the CP highlights a series of financial and technical challenges that are common to many Italian cities but also present case-specific characteristics. Florence has demonstrated a relatively good capacity to mobilise resources compared to other Italian cities of similar size. Between 2014 and 2020, the city managed projects funded through the ERDF and ESF, with a total allocation of approximately EUR 32.5 million. However, this amount remains modest relative to the overall resources managed by the Tuscany Region. When analysed per capita, the level of EU funds directly accessible to the city is relatively limited (see section 7). One of the barriers mentioned by the interviewers concerns the requirement for co-financing. The city's capacity to provide the necessary co-financing has been constrained by limited municipal budget flexibility and competing financial demands. Municipal officers reported that matching funds often required difficult internal budget reallocations. Although Florence has generally met co-financing obligations, this has sometimes resulted in project delays and reduced intervention scale. To overcome co-financing difficulties, the municipality has explored alternative approaches, including in-kind contributions and the strategic combination of different funding sources. However, the scope for such financial engineering remains limited given the strict eligibility rules associated with CP funding. Beyond financial constraints, regulatory complexity has emerged as a recurring challenge. The city administration has had to navigate a detailed and evolving regulatory framework. Critical technical issues include procurement procedures and financial reporting, both subject to multiple layers of regulation. The administrative workload associated with monitoring, auditing, and financial certification processes remains significant. In response, Florence has invested in staff training, the establishment of dedicated project management units, and the adoption of digital tools for financial reporting and monitoring. Nevertheless, further support from regional and national authorities remains essential, especially in simplifying procedures and providing more straightforward guidelines.

5.4 Innovations and good practices

To overcome institutional barriers, cities sometimes act as innovative hubs. This section explores if the ongoing analysis highlights how Florence has launched a series of local initiatives while also benefiting from national programmes and measures such as the National Complementary Plan (PNC) (see good practice 1), the National Operational Programme Metropolitan Cities 2014-2020 (NOP Metro), and the National Programme Metro Plus and Medium-Sized Cities South 2021-2027 (NP Metro Plus) (see good practice 2). These national tools have provided resources and strategic guidelines, offering an essential framework for sustainable urban development, ecological transition, digitalisation, and social inclusion. Florence has successfully overcome several institutional barriers related to management through an innovative approach that can serve as a model for other Italian and European cities.

The city has introduced several innovative initiatives to foster the effective implementation of the cohesion policy. Among these are the creation of a transversal "Office for European Project Design and Fund Research" (see good practice 3), which provides methodological and technical coordination without direct operational involvement, and the establishment of an internal Working group, organised into thematic working groups that encourage integrated communication across departments and multidisciplinary collaboration. Additionally, Florence launched the "NRRP Caffé," a series of weekly coordination meetings involving the Municipality, the Metropolitan City, and affiliated companies to share challenges and find standard operational solutions, overcoming traditional organisational fragmentation (see good practice 4).

These innovations, combined with the strategies and resources provided by the PNC, NOP Metro, and NP Metro Plus, have yielded concrete results, including significant improvements in the management of European funds, enhanced administrative capacity, and better integration of policies at the local level. The transversal coordination model and the practice of continuous, participatory dialogue have accelerated decision-making processes and increased intervention effectiveness, ensuring consistent alignment with national and European strategies.

The positive outcomes have been capitalised on by disseminating these practices within the administrative machinery, helping to optimise the Municipality of Florence's participation in cohesion policy. Specifically, the experience demonstrated that creating dedicated coordination structures and regular moments of engagement are essential tools to improve transparency, efficiency, and the quality of programme design and management.

This experience offers important lessons for other Italian and European cities. Firstly, it highlights the importance of overcoming bureaucratic silos through participatory and integrated governance models. Secondly, it shows how constant and structured dialogue among institutional actors can foster rapid, shared solutions, increasing the efficiency of public spending. Finally, Florence's model is replicable in various territorial contexts thanks to its flexibility and adaptability, contributing to improved overall management of CP at the European level.

In conclusion, Florence's initiatives, supported and integrated by national innovations such as the PNC, NOP Metro, and NP Metro Plus, represent a concrete example of how organisational and procedural innovation can underpin the success of cohesion policy. Their wider dissemination could strengthen cities' capacity to manage European resources, improving governance, transparency, and the impact of investments on local territories.

Table 5.1
Main innovations implemented at the local level

Name of innovation	Objective (barriers to overcome)	Innovative actions	Results	Additional comment
National Complementary Plan (PNC)	Improve investment governance and overcome inefficiencies in public administration	Introduced performance-based funding with clear milestones, sanctions, and rewards	Enhanced accountability, faster implementation, and better resource allocation	The model is scalable and offers valuable lessons for EU CP reform
National Operational Programme for Metropolitan Cities 2014–2020 (NOP Metro) and Metro Plus and Southern Medium-sized Cities 2021–2027 (PN Metro Plus)	Strengthen urban governance and local capacity to manage EU funds effectively	Delegation of operational and financial responsibility to capital municipality as Intermediate Bodies	Improved local ownership, effective implementation of urban strategies, and increased administrative capacity	The model is replicable in other national contexts to enhance decentralised CP delivery
EU Project Joint Office	Overcome organisational fragmentation and improve internal coordination and sharing information and skill	Created a transversal office with thematic working groups and dedicated office coordination	Increased integration, effective communication, and improved management of EU funds	Replicable and scalable model that enhances project design and CP impact

Name of innovation	Objective (barriers to overcome)	Innovative actions	Results	Additional comment
NRRP Caffè	Overcome internal silo attitude and improve cross-entity coordination	Weekly open meetings involving Municipality departments, Metropolitan City actors	Faster problem-solving and better alignment on NRRP projects	Replicable model enhancing collaboration and programme management efficiency

Source: author's own elaboration

GOOD PRACTICE N.1**National Complementary Plan (PNC)**

A notable good practice implemented in Italy is the National Complementary Plan (PNC), which enhances and supports the National Recovery and Resilience Plan through an additional allocation of €30.6 billion in national resources. This strategic intervention focuses particularly on improving the governance of public investments, reforming the public administration, and ensuring the effective implementation of complex projects at both central and local levels. The PNC complements the European funding under the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) and significantly contributes to all six missions of the NRRP, with special emphasis on digital transition, environmental sustainability, and infrastructure development.

What makes the PNC a good practice is its innovative implementation mechanism, which is based on clear targets, defined timelines, and quarterly monitoring systems. Each investment is tied to specific milestones and targets, with provisions for sanctions—such as funding withdrawal—in cases of non-compliance, and reward mechanisms for administrations that demonstrate effective resource utilisation. This results-oriented approach has improved both the efficiency and accountability of public spending, while also enhancing transparency throughout the process.

One of the key lessons learned is the importance of a well-structured responsibility framework in managing public funds, as well as the value of integrated programming that aligns national and EU resources. The experience of the PNC shows that a model combining incentives and sanctions can drive meaningful changes in how public administrations operate and in the overall culture of performance.

This practice provides valuable insights for other national governments as well. The PNC model is highly scalable across different national contexts, particularly in countries seeking to strengthen the implementation capacity of their public sector and improve the impact of EU-funded or nationally funded programmes. By adopting similar performance-based financing frameworks, other governments can foster more effective investment governance, better resource allocation, and increased trust in public institutions. The key to scalability lies in adapting the PNC's core principles—such as target-based planning, strict monitoring, and outcome-oriented incentives—to local institutional capacities and legal frameworks.

Finally, the PNC can make a significant contribution to improving the EU CP by promoting better integration between EU and national funds and by encouraging performance-based funding models. Its approach may serve as a reference for reforming EU funding allocation processes, placing greater emphasis on tangible results and the administrative capacity of the entities involved.

Source: author's own elaboration

GOOD PRACTICE N.2**NOP METRO and NP METRO PLUS**

The National Operational Programme for Metropolitan Cities 2014–2020 (NOP Metro) represents a good practice for promoting sustainable urban development in Italian metropolitan areas. Unique in the European programming landscape, the programme aligns national and European strategic priorities—particularly those of the Europe 2020 Strategy—through an innovative governance model that empowers cities to directly manage resources and interventions.

NOP Metro addresses key urban challenges, focusing on digital transition, sustainable urban mobility, efficiency of public and environmental services, social inclusion, and local innovation. It directly impacts citizens' quality of life, placing local needs at the core of urban policy design.

What makes this initiative a good practice is its decentralised governance model, where Urban Authorities (the 14 metropolitan city capitals) act as Intermediate Bodies, assuming full responsibility for programming, implementing, and monitoring interventions through a formal delegation from the Managing Authority. This approach has significantly strengthened local administrative capacity and encouraged greater territorial ownership of cohesion policies.

With a total budget exceeding €892 million—€588 million from European funds (ERDF and ESF) and €304 million in national co-financing—the programme has demonstrated the effectiveness of place-based, needs-driven planning. Among the key lessons learned are the importance of integrated programming, coherence between territorial strategies and operational tools, and the value of local autonomy in managing public investment.

The success of NOP Metro laid the foundation for the subsequent National Programme “Metro Plus and Southern Medium-sized Cities 2021–2027 (PN Metro Plus)”. This new programme, initially under the responsibility of the Agency for Territorial Cohesion and later managed by the Department for Cohesion Policies and the South within the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, reinforces and extends the NOP Metro framework. It focuses on climate change mitigation, urban regeneration, the circular economy, and social and economic revitalisation, especially in vulnerable urban areas.

The approach of NOP Metro is highly scalable in other national contexts across Europe, particularly where there is a desire to strengthen urban governance and promote decentralised implementation of CP. Its use of locally defined territorial strategies and Integrated Territorial Investments (ITIs) offers a replicable model for effective and targeted urban transformation.

Finally, this good practice contributes to improving the EU CP by promoting participatory governance, integrated territorial planning, and responsible allocation of resources. NOP Metro and PN Metro Plus demonstrate how cities can play a leading role in delivering EU objectives, ensuring stronger impact, territorial relevance, and inclusive growth.

Source: author's own elaboration

GOOD PRACTICE N.4**EU Project Joint Office**

The EU Project Joint Office of the Municipality of Florence, is an interdepartmental office primarily dedicated to the integrated and coordinated governance of projects financed through European and national programmes, with a specific focus on funding opportunities management and European project design. This approach aims to overcome traditional organisational barriers between offices, improving internal communication and the effectiveness in implementing programmes such as NOP Metro, Metro Plus, and the Recovery and Resilience Plan. This experience represents a good practice because it establishes a dedicated and transversal structure that provides methodological and technical support to various departments without overlapping operational activities. The organisation into thematic working groups with designated coordinators fosters integrated work and continuous information sharing, making the design and management of European funds more efficient. Furthermore, the ability to coordinate proposals between the Municipality and the Metropolitan City and align them with ministerial guidelines demonstrates effective institutional synergy.

Among the main lessons learned is the importance of stable and regular coordination among the different actors involved, which helps to overcome silos and work integrally on projects. It is also clear that maintaining a high level of engagement among members is crucial, as well as ensuring continuity despite staff turnover and limited dedicated human resources. Specialisation and team stability are key factors for success. Other cities can learn from this model the necessity of creating dedicated internal structures with coordination and technical support functions, organised transversally and thematically to improve the efficiency of participation in European programmes. This system facilitates the collection and integration of ideas and projects from different entities, promoting more coherent and strategic action. This good practice is highly replicable at the national level, as many local administrations face similar issues of organisational fragmentation and lack of coordination in European project design processes. Establishing a dedicated office or task force with methodological and technical expertise can be easily adapted to different contexts, provided there is strong leadership and adequate resources. Moreover, the practice is scalable across the national territory, as it can be implemented both in large cities and in medium-sized entities, adjusting the team's composition and organisation according to needs and available resources. Finally, this good practice can help improve the EU CP by promoting a more effective and strategic use of community funds. By fostering effective internal coordination and greater integration between entities, it supports higher quality and more coherent project design aligned with European priorities, thus increasing the impact and quality of interventions at the local level.

Source: author's own elaboration

GOOD PRACTICE N.4**NRRP Caffè**

The “NRRP Caffè” represents an effective innovation in internal coordination within public administrations, centered around weekly meetings involving dozens of participants from the Municipality, the Metropolitan City, affiliated companies and stakeholders. This open and recurring format fosters direct and constant dialogue among various institutional actors, allowing for the rapid sharing of emerging issues and the joint identification of practical solutions in an agile manner. The approach aims to break down traditional bureaucratic silos by promoting horizontal communication and continuous collaboration, improving the timeliness and quality of decisions—crucial given the complexity and urgency of managing projects linked to the National Recovery and Resilience Plan. Furthermore, the weekly frequency of the meetings establishes a structured communication habit, reducing response times and ensuring constant alignment among all stakeholders. This practice can be considered a good practice because it enables flexible and participatory coordination that integrates diverse skills and knowledge to jointly address the operational challenges of the NRRP. The main lessons learned emphasize the importance of setting regular moments for meeting and discussion to guarantee transparency, inclusion, and speed in managing complex projects. Other cities can learn from this model by adopting similar coordination formats to enhance the effectiveness of managing European and national funds. The methodology is replicable in other territorial contexts that require better integration among different entities and can be easily adapted according to local size and specific needs. Finally, adopting a method like the “NRRP Caffè” can contribute to improving the EU CP, as it fosters a more coordinated, inclusive, and dynamic management of programmes, increasing responsiveness and efficiency in the use of funds—key elements for the success of European investments on the ground.

Source: author's own elaboration

5.5 Added value of negative experiences

The implementation of the CP in Florence has not been without difficulties, but these challenges have often provided important learning opportunities for institutional improvement. Among the most significant experiences from which the city has learned is the management of EU-funded urban development projects during the 2014–2020 programming period. While these programmes offered opportunities for Florence to engage in integrated urban initiatives, their implementation also revealed several critical weaknesses. Limited decision-making autonomy, procedural complexity, and delays in project approval and fund disbursement posed major obstacles. Moreover, the alignment between funding priorities and the city’s own strategic urban agenda was not always optimal, which limited the overall coherence and impact of some interventions. These difficulties prompted the municipality to introduce targeted internal reforms aimed at improving administrative coordination and strengthening project management capacity. Florence recognised the importance of earlier engagement with regional and national authorities to ensure more active participation in programming and funding negotiations. Another key area of learning emerged from internal coordination challenges. In the early stages of the programming period, the absence of a dedicated structure for EU project management had contributed to fragmented responsibilities and communication gaps between departments. In response, the city established a transversal office for European project design and promoted the development of thematic working groups to enhance interdepartmental cooperation and policy integration. Project pipeline management was also identified as a point of weakness. Florence experienced initial difficulties in preparing a sufficient number of mature, ready-to-implement projects, which contributed to implementation delays and reduced absorption capacity. In response, the city invested in more effective project planning tools and adopted a strategic approach to pipeline development. Overall, these experiences have contributed to strengthening Florence’s administrative capacity, improving coordination mechanisms, and enhancing the city’s ability to manage EU funds more effectively in successive programming cycles.

Table 5.2
Added value of negative experiences in Florence

Name of the Initiative	Topic	Objective	What went wrong	What the city learnt
EU Funded Urban Projects 2014–2020	Multilevel governance and EU fund management	Implement integrated urban projects	Limited decision-making power; procedural complexity; delays in approvals and payments; misalignment with local priorities	Strengthened coordination with the Region; improved administrative structures; increased engagement in programming phases
Internal Coordination for EU Projects	Administrative organisation	Strengthen internal coordination for EU projects	Fragmented responsibilities; limited communication between the various actors/levels	Establishment of a transversal office for EU project design; creation of thematic working groups (in the case of Florence municipality).
Project Pipeline Development	Project readiness	Ensure timely implementation of EU projects	Insufficient number of ready-to-implement projects; delays in fund absorption	Investment in project pipeline planning tools; strategic project preparation

Source: author's own elaboration.

6 Cohesion Policy contributions to city long-term agendas

6.1 Main development instruments

Florence, being one of the 14 metropolitan cities in Italy, is a key beneficiary of European CP, utilizing it with a complex but coordinated system of instruments at various levels. These instruments guide the city's development, and their implementation takes place through a multilevel governance system, where the city's vision and goals guide the prioritisation and selection of projects, which are then funded via operational programmes. Implementation involves project co-financing and coordination between managing authorities, local administration, and various stakeholders, depending on the instrument and its focus. The City of Florence has instruments at four different levels that are functioning in a complex but coordinated way.

Firstly, on the National Level, National Operational Programmes can be investigated under two different sections. Firstly, it functions at the national level by prioritising public administration in the country through strengthening public administration with measures set at the national level to achieve smart, sustainable, and inclusive growth (ESPON, 2021). And the second National Operational Programme for Metropolitan Cities (NOP Metro) aims to foster sustainable development in Italy's metropolitan areas by addressing territorial and organisational challenges within urban contexts. Funded by the European Union through the European Regional Development Fund and the European Social Fund, the main focuses of NOPs align with European Union priorities and national goals. During the previous programming period, the focus was on digitalisation, mobility, energy efficiency, and social inclusion. For the 2021–2027 period, the priorities have been broadened to include service delivery, social and economic recovery, and green and resilient development, particularly in response to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Metropolitan cities carry out the implementation of NOP Metro through approved Operational Plans, and projects are selected by local managing authority and executed by public or public-private bodies ([Comune di Firenze, n.d.](#)).

A second important strategy at the national level is the National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI), which is a governmental institution for supporting rural development in the areas that have a significant distance from centres through enhancing service provision. Inner areas typically have low population and building density, often found in small rural and mountainous towns. To address this, SNAI aims to strengthen urban services, particularly in health, education, and mobility, in these areas. In the Tuscany region, the strategy area includes 19 municipalities, with 15 of them in the Metropolitan City of Florence and 4 in the Province of Prato, impacting a total population of approximately 159,000 people (ESPON, 2021). SNAI is implemented through place-based strategies co-designed with local communities, and funded via a combination of national, regional and EU resources. Local Action Plans are developed and formally approved before being financed and activated ([Agenzia per la Coesione Territoriale, n.d.](#)).

At the regional level, there are several programmes that support each other's implementation. Firstly, the Regional Operational Programme (ROP) is an instrument financed by ERDF and supports the integration of EU strategies into regional agendas by promoting smart, sustainable, and inclusive growth for economic, social, and territorial cohesion. ROP aims to promote research, innovation and smart growth, and building competences and skills for many specialisation; sustainability and ecological transition through energy efficiency, climate change adaptation, integrating circular economy; strengthening regional infrastructures by enhancing digital connectivity and

promoting sustainable urban mobility; and reinforcing local development and territorial cohesion to promote the economic and social development of the region; preserving and promoting natural and cultural heritage, and supporting urban development. For the 2021-2027 programming period, RP highlights the importance of sustainability, territorial inclusion, and cohesion. The Tuscany Region manages implementation of RP through funding calls, and local and regional actors submit project proposals, they are evaluated and funded based on their alignment with RP's thematic axes, as well as regional strategies ([Regione Toscana, 2022](#)).

The Tuscany Rural Development Plan, funded by the EAFRD and supported by SNAI, has 6 priorities for enhancing agricultural and forestry activities, focusing on knowledge transfer and innovation, promoting trade and enhancing risk management, promoting a resource-efficient and low-carbon economy, and enhancing social inclusion, poverty reduction and economic development in rural areas. And the LEADER initiative was started under the RRDPs to promote bottom-up approaches in rural development through Community-Led Local Development projects. These projects require the establishment of Local Action Groups (LAGs), which operate on the basis of Local Development Strategies (LDS). The LDS set out the project's objectives, priorities, and budget, and are often financed through the EAFRD, ERDF, or ESF. In Tuscany, there are 7 LAGs, and 30 projects have been funded by SNAI. LAGs manage implementation through participatory processes and project selection procedures defined in each LDS ([Rural Pact, n.d.](#)).

In the same way, Integrated Territorial Projects (ITPs) are also developed to address specific environmental conditions at the local level to support and maintain agricultural activities. In Tuscany, ITPs are implemented through two main frameworks: the *Progetti Integrati Territoriali* (PIT), funded under the 2014-2020 Rural Development Programme (PSR), and the *Strategie Territoriali delle Aree Interne* (STAI), supported by the 2021-2027 Regional ERDF Programme (PR FESR). While PITs primarily address rural development, environmental sustainability, and climate adaptation, STAI strategies focus on revitalising internal and marginal areas through integrated, place-based development. The Florence area is part of the STAI strategy "Valdarno e Valdisieve – Mugello – Val Bisenzio," which supports mountain and Apennine municipalities in addressing depopulation, improving service accessibility, and promoting resilient local economies. These strategies are implemented by aggregating public and private actors into cooperative governance structures that co-design, propose, and carry out integrated projects. Funding is allocated through the regional ROP and EAFRD, based on territorial strategies submitted to the region (ESPON, 2021).

The Regional Territorial Plan (PRT) is the main regional planning instrument of Tuscany, combining spatial planning with landscape protection. Its primary goal is to guide sustainable territorial development by identifying structural features of the region, such as ecological systems, rural patterns, and urban networks, and ensuring their long-term preservation and enhancement. The plan is jointly developed by the Tuscany Region and the Ministry of Culture, and while it is not directly EU-funded, it operates within the broader framework of EU cohesion and environmental goals. Implementation takes place through coordination with municipal planning tools, which are required to align with the PIT's guidelines, especially in landscape-sensitive areas. This ensures that local policies are consistent with regional and national planning standards, while also supporting wider objectives like environmental sustainability and quality of life ([Regione Toscana, 2025](#)).

At the metropolitan level, the Strategic Metropolitan Plan "Metropolitan Renaissance 2030" outlines a long-term vision for the Florence Metropolitan area with three main directions: improving accessibility and territorial cohesion; supporting innovation in manufacturing, networking, recycling, and tourism sectors; and expanding green areas and ecosystem services to enhance well-being. It is implemented through coordination among municipalities, sectoral plans, project calls and alignments with EU funds ([Città Metropolitana di Firenze, 2018a](#)).

Territorial Metropolitan Plan (PTM) serves as a spatial planning instrument that aims to promote urban regeneration while limiting land consumption; upgrading functional and productive areas; and enhancing the landscape while improving territorial accessibility. PTM is implemented through zoning provisions, compatibility with EU-funded projects, and coordination with municipal plans ([Città Metropolitana di Firenze, 2018b](#)).

The Metropolitan Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development was developed to localise the UN 2030 Agenda within the Florence metropolitan context. It includes ten goals, ranging from inclusive cultural heritage and mobility to equitable education, climate adaptation, housing, and the promotion of circular economy models. Despite the fact that it is an advisory guideline, it is implemented by mainstreaming its objectives into other plans and programmes, and by monitoring progress via SDG indicators ([Città Metropolitana di Firenze, 2022](#)).

Moreover, on the metropolitan level, there are two sectoral plans that play a direct role in spatial implementation: the Sustainable Mobility Plan (PUMS) and the Sustainable Urban Logistics Plan (PULS). The PUMS promotes public transport, cycling, and walking, aiming to reduce private vehicle use and related emissions while improving accessibility and social equity. It also aligns land use and climate goals through integrated transport planning and supports digitalisation through data-driven mobility governance ([Città Metropolitana di Firenze, 2019](#)). And PULS complements the PUMS by focusing on freight and last-mile logistics. It aims to optimise delivery systems, promote low-emission vehicles, reduce the spatial impacts of logistics, and integrate freight planning into wider urban frameworks ([Città Metropolitana di Firenze, 2025](#)). Implementation of both documents funded through mobility and projects co-funded by EU, national, and regional resources.

And at the local level, Florence's urban development is guided by a layered set of municipal planning instruments, each serves a specific purpose within the broader governance framework and supports various dimensions of CP implementation, aligning with the programmes and plans mentioned before. As the primary instrument for the municipal general regulatory plan, Municipal Structural (PS) and Operational (PO) Plans are the key documents for the city's development. The PS is the city's long-term strategic spatial planning tool, defining the general vision for land use, infrastructure, environmental protection, and social objectives over a 20-year horizon. It outlines urban growth boundaries, environmental constraints, and key public priorities. Complementing this, the PO functions on a shorter time frame and has a more regulatory character, assigning land uses, development rights, and design parameters across the municipal territory. It is the key zoning document that makes the structural vision legally operable. Implementation of these two instruments is operationalised through administrative acts, building permits, and zoning regulations, which guide all public and private development and must be consistent with regional and national frameworks ([Città di Firenze, 2025a](#); [2025b](#)). In addition to these core documents, several sectoral and thematic instruments complement the implementation of the structural and operational plans, reinforcing their alignment with EU objectives. These include the Green Plan, which enhances the role of urban green infrastructure and nature-based solutions in climate adaptation and environmental quality; the Circular City Plan, focusing on waste reduction, recycling, and circular economy principles; the Smart City Plan, aimed at digital transition and technological innovation; and the Sustainable Energy and Climate Action Plan (PAESC), which frames Florence's commitments under the Covenant of Mayors. More recently, Florence has also formalised its role within the EU Mission for 100 Climate-Neutral Cities through the adoption of a Climate City Contract (2023), which sets out a roadmap to achieve climate neutrality by 2030, integrating municipal priorities with EU targets and national support mechanisms.

The implementation of these instruments relies on their integration into the wider municipal and metropolitan planning framework and is supported through a mix of EU, national, regional, and local funding sources. Together, they demonstrate how Florence combines statutory planning

tools with voluntary and mission-oriented strategies to advance sustainability, resilience, and cohesion objectives at the local level.

Table 6.1
Main instruments at national, regional and local level

Instrument	Level ¹⁸	Type (1) ¹⁹	Type (2) ²⁰	Type (3) ²¹	Main Goals	Actors Involved
National Operational Programme (NOP) Governance	National	Programme	Statutory	Binding for public authorities	Steering the implementation of CP	Ministries, national agencies, regions, and municipalities
National Operational Programme METRO Florence	National	Programme	Statutory	Binding for public authorities	Enabling sustainable urban development	Metropolitan City of Florence, Managing Authority, EU, and national coordinators
SNAI – Mugello – Val di Sieve – Val di Bizensio	National (Strategy) / Local (Project area)	Strategy / Programme	Non-statutory	Binding for public authorities	Promoting development and enhancing service provision in inner areas	Municipalities, national coordination unit, Tuscany
Regional Operational Programme (ROP)	Regional	Programme	Statutory	Binding for public authorities	Address regional needs under CP	Tuscany Region, municipalities, public and private beneficiaries
Tuscany Rural Development Programme (RDP)	Regional	Programme	Statutory	Binding for public authorities	Supporting rural development	Tuscany Region, local governments, agricultural associations, and farmers
Regional Territorial Plan (PRT)	Regional	Strategy	Statutory	Binding for public authorities	Defining the territorial structure of Tuscany; guide spatial development; protect landscape and heritage	Region of Tuscany (Direzione Urbanistica), municipalities, provinces, Ministry of Culture, citizens (consultation)

¹⁸ National, regional, metropolitan, municipal

¹⁹ Strategy, programme, zoning, vision, sectoral (specify what sector) etc.

²⁰ Statutory and mandatory Vs statutory but non mandatory Vs non statutory

²¹ Non-binding, binding for public authorities, binding for all subjects

Instrument	Level ¹⁸	Type (1) ¹⁹	Type (2) ²⁰	Type (3) ²¹	Main Goals	Actors Involved
Integrated Territorial Projects (ITP)	Regional	Programme	Statutory	Binding for public authorities	Delivering place-based strategies at sub-regional level	Tuscany Region, municipalities, local stakeholders
Local Development Programmes (CLLD-LAGs)	Regional	Programme	Non-statutory	Non-binding (but binding in the implementation process)	Supporting local rural development led by local actors and community-based organisations	LAGs, Tuscany Region, civil society
Strategic Metropolitan Plan (PSM)	Metropolitan	Vision / Strategy	Statutory but not mandatory	Non-binding	Defining long-term vision for sustainable metropolitan development	Metropolitan City of Florence, municipalities, social partners
Territorial Metropolitan Plan (PTM)	Metropolitan	Coordination	Statutory	Binding for all subjects	Regulating spatial planning, infrastructure and land use across the metropolitan area	Metropolitan City of Florence, planning offices, municipalities
Metropolitan Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development	Metropolitan	Strategy / Vision	Non-statutory	Non-binding	Localizing UN Sustainable Development Goals in metropolitan policies and actions	Metropolitan City of Florence, municipalities, academia, civil society
Sustainable Mobility Plan (PUMS)	Metropolitan	Sectoral	Statutory	Binding for public authorities	Achieving sustainable, multimodal transport systems and reducing emissions	Metropolitan City of Florence, transport authorities
Sustainable Urban Logistics Plan (PULS)	Metropolitan	Sectoral	Non-Statutory	Binding for public authorities	Optimizing logistics systems for sustainability through reducing emissions and congestion; promoting low-impact delivery models	Metropolitan City of Florence, City of Florence, logistics operators, transport authorities, PN METRO Managing Authority, local businesses
Municipal Structural Plan	Municipal	Strategy / Zoning	Statutory	Binding for public authorities	Guiding development logic of cohesion-funded projects	Municipality of Florence, City Council, Citizens, Local Stakeholders

Instrument	Level ¹⁸	Type (1) ¹⁹	Type (2) ²⁰	Type (3) ²¹	Main Goals	Actors Involved
Municipal Operative Plan	Municipal	Zoning / Implementation	Statutory	Binding for all subject	Determining physical feasibility of cohesion-funded interventions	Managing Authority, National Authorities, Municipality of Florence, Social Partners
Action Plan for Sustainable Energy and Climate (PAESC)	Municipal	Strategy / Sectoral	Non-statutory	Binding for public authorities (under the Covenant of Mayors)	Achieving climate neutrality by 2030 through energy transition and resilience	City of Florence, Covenant of Mayors Office, utilities, local actors
Green and Open Spaces Plan (PVSA)	Municipal	Sectoral / Strategic	Non-statutory	Non-binding (but binding in CP-funded implementation)	Protecting, expanding, and connecting urban green and open spaces for nature protection while supporting equality in access to nature	City of Florence, project partners, local associations, and citizens
Circular City Plan (CCP) <i>Piano Firenze Città Circolare</i>	Municipal	Strategy	Non-statutory	Non-binding	Advancing the circular economy and sustainable waste management	City of Florence, Alia Servizi Ambientali, local businesses
Smart City Plan (SCP)	Municipal	Strategy	Non-statutory	Non-binding	Promoting digital innovation, smart services, and open governance	City of Florence, ICT providers, universities, civil society
100 Climate-Neutral Cities Mission / Climate City Contract	EU/ Municipal	Programme/ Contract	Non-statutory	Politically binding	Achieving climate neutrality by 2030; aligning local action with EU Mission framework	City of Florence, EU Commission, Mission Platform, national authorities
Green Plan	Municipal	Strategy / Sectoral	Non-statutory	Non-binding	Enhancing urban green infrastructure, nature-based solutions, climate adaptation	City of Florence, local stakeholders, civil society

Source: authors' own elaboration

6.2 Localisation of Cohesion Policy

Instruments from different governance levels shape Florence's urban development, each focusing on different topics, and the influence of CP on these instruments is inevitable. However, considering the presence of three different EU programming periods, the instruments have also evolved over time, especially during the COVID period, which had a notable impact on city governance. In this section, the last two programming periods will be discussed, with a focus on how national, regional, and local instruments are related. While some of the national and regional instruments have continued to reflect strong influence from CP, new documents have also been introduced to strengthen the integration of EU priorities into the local agenda. For instance, in the second programming period (2014–2020), there was a high level of correlation between the NOP, ROP, and the CP's Thematic Objectives.

The strong connection between instruments like the ITP, CLLD, and RDP highlights their close alignment with CP principles, though their compatibility with EU priorities is often partial due to their strong focus on rural development. Even when these instruments are directly funded through EU resources, they primarily respond to specific local needs rather than overarching EU-wide objectives. As a result, their priorities tend to concentrate on TO4 (low-carbon economy), TO6 (environment and resource efficiency), and TO9 (social inclusion). Place-based programmes such as CLLD reflect this dynamic particularly well—they are partially aligned with CP but remain strongly rooted in local contexts. Similarly, instruments like SNAI and PRT also demonstrate limited coherence with the broader set of EU priorities. While they contribute to goals such as TO6 and TO9, they tend to leave out others, especially those related to digitalisation or SME competitiveness, due to their rural and community-oriented scope. When it comes to the spatialisation of the Thematic Objectives, instruments like PRT, PTM (Territorial Metropolitan Plan), PUMS (Sustainable Urban Mobility Plan), and PO (Operational Programme) help institutionalise this alignment by embedding EU objectives into land use, environmental, and accessibility policies.

In general, during the 2014–2020 programming period, many of the instruments used showed strong alignment with key Thematic Objectives, especially with TO1 – Research and innovation, TO4 – Low-carbon economy, TO6 – Environment and resource efficiency, TO9 Social Inclusion and TO11 Urban development.

Table 6.2
Coherence with the Cohesion Thematic Objectives 2014-2020

Tool	Cohesion Thematic Objectives 2014-2020 ²²										
	TO1	TO2	TO3	TO4	TO5	TO6	TO7	TO8	TO9	TO10	TO11
NOP	Yes	Partial	Yes	Yes	Yes	Partial	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
SNAI	No	No	No	Partial	Partial	Partial	No	Yes	Yes	Partial	Partial

²² In the period 2014–2020, the cohesion policy had identified 11 Thematic Objectives: 1. Strengthening research, technological development and innovation; 2. Enhancing access to, and use and quality of, information and communication technologies; 3. Enhancing the competitiveness of SMEs; 4. Supporting the shift towards a low-carbon economy; 5. Promoting climate change adaptation, risk prevention and management; 6. Preserving and protecting the environment and promoting resource efficiency; 7. Promoting sustainable transport and improving network infrastructures; 8. Promoting sustainable and quality employment and supporting labour mobility; 9. Promoting social inclusion, combating poverty and any discrimination; 10. Investing in education, training and lifelong learning and 11. Improving the efficiency of public administration.

Tool	Cohesion Thematic Objectives 2014-2020 ²²										
	TO1	TO2	TO3	TO4	TO5	TO6	TO7	TO8	TO9	TO10	TO11
ROP	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
RDP	Partial	No	Partial	Yes	Partial	Partial	No	Yes	Yes	No	Partial
PRT	No	No	No	Partial	Yes	Yes	Partial	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
ITP	Partial	No	Partial	Yes	Partial	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	Partial
CLLD	Partial	No	Yes	Partial	Partial	Partial	No	Yes	Yes	No	Partial
PSM	Yes	Partial	Partial	Yes	Partial	Yes	Yes	Yes	Partial	Yes	Yes
PTM	Yes	No	Partial	Yes	Partial	Yes	Yes	Partial	Partial	Yes	Yes
Agenda 2030	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
PUMS	Yes	Yes	Partial	Yes	Partial	Partial	Yes	Partial	Partial	Yes	Yes
PULS	No	No	Partial	Yes	Partial	Yes	Yes	Partial	Partial	Yes	Yes
PS	Yes	Partial	Partial	Yes	Partial	Yes	Yes	Partial	Partial	Yes	Yes
PO	Yes	Partial	Partial	Yes	Partial	Yes	Yes	Partial	Partial	Yes	Yes
PAESC	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Partial	Partial	Yes	Yes
PVSA	No	No	No	Partial	Yes	Yes	No	Partial	Partial	Yes	Yes
CCP	Partial	No	Yes	Yes	Partial	Yes	No	Partial	Partial	Yes	Yes
SCP	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
GP	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
CCC	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Source: authors' own elaboration

In the second programming period (2021–2027), most of the planning and development instruments used in Florence and the Tuscany Region show strong to moderate coherence with the five main CP Objectives (POs). These objectives have a clear influence on how different strategic, sectoral, and spatial tools are designed and implemented across various governance levels.

Several key instruments, like the ROP FESR Toscana, NOP Metro, Agenda 2030, PSM, and SCP, are well aligned with all five POs. They either directly reflect CP priorities or are structured to support projects funded through ERDF, ESF+, or national programmes. The focus areas, such as innovation, energy transition, inclusive services, and local urban development, closely match the goals of PO1, PO2, PO4, and PO5.

Other tools like PTM, PS, PO, PAESC, PUMS, and PULS are also broadly aligned, but their connection with PO4 (a more social Europe) is often weaker. This is mainly because these instruments are more spatial in nature, and social issues like access to healthcare, employment, or labour market reform tend to be addressed through other national or regional policies rather than through urban or spatial plans themselves.

On the other hand, instruments such as the RDP, SNAI, and CLLD have a much narrower focus. They mainly support PO2, PO4, and PO5, as they are rooted in rural or community-led development. Their priorities are more about agriculture, the environment, social inclusion, and participatory governance. As a result, they're not strongly aligned with goals related to innovation or infrastructure (PO1 and PO3).

Lastly, landscape and environmental instruments like the Green and Open Spaces Plan (PVSA) and the Circular City Plan (CCP) are strongly connected to PO2 and PO5, especially in terms of sustainability and improving the quality of local urban areas. However, their relevance to innovation and connectivity objectives (PO1 and PO3) is quite limited.

In general, this programming period, as for 2025, is most focused on the objectives PO2 – A Greener, Low-Carbon Europe, PO5 – A Europe Closer to Citizens, and PO4 – A More Social Europe.

Table 6.3
Coherence with the Cohesion Policy Objectives 2021-2027

Tool	Cohesion Policy Objectives 2021-2027 ²³				
	PO 1	PO 2	PO 3	PO 4	PO 5
NOP	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
SNAI	No	Partial	No	Yes	Yes
ROP	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
RDP	Partial	Yes	No	Yes	Partial
PRT	No	Yes	Partial	No	Yes
ITP	Partial	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
CLLD	Partial	Partial	No	Yes	Yes
PSM	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
PTM	Yes	Yes	Yes	Partial	Yes
Agenda 2030	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
PUMS	Yes	Yes	Yes	Partial	Yes
PULS	Partial	Yes	Yes	Partial	Yes
PS	Yes	Yes	Yes	Partial	Yes
PO	Yes	Yes	Yes	Partial	Yes
PAESC	Partial	Yes	Partial	Yes	Yes
PVSA	No	Yes	No	Partial	Yes
CCP	Partial	Yes	No	Partial	Yes
SCP	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
GP	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
CCC	Yes	Yes	Yes	Partial	Yes

²³ In the period 2021-2027, the cohesion policy has five policy objectives (POs) for the ERDF, the European Social Fund+ and the Cohesion Fund: (i) A smarter Europe – innovative and smart economic transformation (PO1); (ii) A greener, low-carbon Europe (PO2); (iii) A more connected Europe – mobility and regional ICT connectivity (PO3); (iv) A more social Europe – implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights (PO4) and (v) A Europe closer to citizens – sustainable and integrated development of urban, rural and coastal areas through local initiatives (PO5).

Source: authors' own elaboration

In conclusion, while the level of alignment with CP priorities varies across instruments and programming periods, the overall picture reflects a growing coherence and strategic integration in Florence and the Tuscany Region. While in the first discussed programming period, 2014–2020, the focus was on research and innovation, environment and resource efficiency, and social inclusion; in the second one, the primary focus included low carbon development and participatory government through local initiatives. Notably, even though there is no single document fully dedicated to social inclusion, housing, or education, these themes are not absent, they are instead integrated into broader strategic frameworks or supported indirectly through instruments like CLLD, SNAI, and Agenda 2030. As a result, Florence's urban and regional development continues to evolve in a way that is increasingly shaped by both European strategic objectives and local territorial needs.

6.3 Key investment areas

Florence and the broader Tuscany Region provide a compelling case of how local and regional development strategies have been influenced and are actively contributing to the European CP. Throughout the 2014–2020 and 2021–2027 programming periods, a wide array of municipal, metropolitan, regional, and national instruments have targeted investment in line with EU strategic goals, particularly those defined under the Thematic Objectives and later, Policy Objectives. These investments reflect a clear intention not only to access European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF), but also to structurally align planning with principles of sustainability, inclusion, innovation, and territorial cohesion. And the key investment areas that have been integrated into the frameworks can be listed as following:

- **Smart and Innovative Growth (TO1, PO1).** Several instruments strongly support investments in research, innovation, and digital transformation. The Smart City Plan (2015) initiated Florence's trajectory toward digital governance and open data, laying the groundwork for the data-driven governance and integrated service platforms. This orientation continues through targeted funding for digital services, cybersecurity, and AI-enhanced public administration. The ROP and NOP Metro further reinforce these investments with dedicated axes for innovation ecosystems, smart mobility, and startup support. The PO integrates digital infrastructure into land-use planning, while the PSM promotes innovation in logistics, manufacturing, and tourism. These areas directly contribute to the "Smarter Europe" vision under PO1.
- **Green Transition and Climate Resilience (TO4–TO6, PO2).** Environmental sustainability and climate action represent a core cross-cutting theme. The PAESC commits Florence to climate neutrality by 2030 and serves as the strategic basis for energy retrofitting and renewable energy community development, all funded in part through ERDF and national green transition funds. Similarly, the Green and Open Spaces Plan (PVSA) advances nature-based solutions, biodiversity corridors, and urban greening as investment priorities, aligning strongly with TO6 and PO2. The CCP guides investments in smart waste management and circular economy infrastructure, including smart containers and reuse centres. At the regional scale, the ROP and PRT promote environmental resource efficiency and landscape preservation, ensuring that funded interventions respect natural constraints and contribute to ecological balance.
- **Sustainable Mobility and Urban Accessibility (TO7, PO3).** The PUMS and the PULS play a central role in connecting EU transport and decarbonisation goals with local

planning. These instruments guide investment towards improvements in public transport, cycling and pedestrian infrastructure, low-emission zones, and electrified freight corridors. Funded through a combination of ERDF, national mobility funds, and PN METRO Plus, these plans reflect TO7 (sustainable transport) and PO3 (connected Europe). Their successful implementation also relies on the Operative Plan's zoning support for transport hubs and intermodal connections.

- **Social Inclusion, Services and Housing (TO8–TO9, PO4).** Florence's planning framework places growing emphasis on inclusive and equitable urban development. The SNAI strategy and CLLD mechanisms have enabled targeted interventions in peripheral and rural municipalities, focusing on education, healthcare access, and local economic activation. The PAESC, Agenda 2030, and PSM each incorporate social cohesion, with a focus on reducing housing precarity, enhancing public service delivery, and improving the quality of life in underserved areas. The PS and PO incorporate social equity through planning instruments such as the "15-minute city" model, gender-inclusive public space design, and mandates for social housing quotas in new developments. These investment priorities align with TO9 and PO4, reinforcing the social dimension of the EU's urban agenda.
- **Territorial Cohesion and Place-Based Development (TO10–TO11, PO5).** A defining strength of Florence and Tuscany's policy architecture is the strong coherence with TO11 (sustainable urban development) and PO5 (Europe closer to citizens). Most programmes and plans are explicitly designed around place-based logic, prioritising integrated and participatory approaches. The PRT sets territorial rules that shape all downstream planning, including landscape compatibility and polycentric development strategies. The SNAI, RDP, ITP and CLLD support rural and marginal areas through context-specific investments in green infrastructure, tourism, and resilience. These instruments promote urban-rural linkages and cohesion, aligning with the spatial justice principles at the heart of EU policy.

Moreover, coherence between the plans and localisation of the policies has been a cross-cutting mechanism for all instruments. What enables these targeted investments to align with CP priorities is not only the thematic content of the plans but also their structural positioning. Instruments like the ROP and NOP METRO Plus require project alignment with strategic documents, thus driving policy localisation. Similarly, regional and metropolitan planning laws in Tuscany require conformity with higher-level objectives, including those embedded in EU strategies. Public consultation processes, especially for the PS and PO adopted in 2023–2025, further reinforce the legitimacy and localisation of these investment priorities.

Across both programming periods, Florence and Tuscany have progressively expanded and diversified their investment areas in a way that mirrors the evolution of EU CP from sectoral growth to cross-cutting sustainability and inclusion. Through a multi-level planning structure and coherent project pipelines, the region successfully localises CP objectives and delivers tangible outcomes in innovation, resilience, mobility, social cohesion, and territorial justice.

7 Funding schemes and synergies

7.1 Funding schemes

The objective of this section is to investigate the funding schemes that have been used by the city in order to achieve local goals. More specifically, this section focuses on the following funding schemes: EU shared management funds (7.1.1); EU direct management funds (7.1.2). In addition, it examines other key EU funding sources (7.1.3).

Both the City of Florence and the Metropolitan City of Florence utilise a mix of EU funding streams, which can be broadly categorised into shared management funds, direct management funds, and other significant funding alternatives like the Next Generation EU initiative.

7.1.1 Nationally or regionally distributed EU funds

Nationally or regionally distributed EU funds, primarily the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the European Social Fund (ESF), represent the most significant and consistently accessed sources of CP funding for the entire Florence territory.

For the City of Florence alone, a total of 123 projects were activated using these funds in the 2014-2020 period (70 via ESF and 53 via ERDF), with a total budget of €22.5 million. These projects primarily targeted objectives related to social inclusion, employment, education, and strengthening the competitiveness of SMEs. When looking at the other municipalities within the metropolitan boundaries, their reliance on these funds is even more pronounced. They have activated 335 projects (221 via ESF and 114 via ERDF) with a combined eligible budget of over €47.6 million, focused on similar goals. This demonstrates that while the core city is a major beneficiary, these regional and national programmes are the primary lifeline for socio-economic development in the surrounding towns.

In contrast, the Metropolitan City of Florence as an administrative body has not been a direct beneficiary of any shared management funds, reflecting its role as a strategic coordinator rather than a direct implementer of these specific programmes.

Overall, shared management funds account for 84% of the total traditional cohesion funding across the entire territory (€71.3 million). This underscores the foundational role of the ERDF and ESF in supporting local and regional development. However, a significant challenge arises from the data for the 2021-2027 programming period, which is currently incomplete, making a direct comparison between the two periods difficult.

Beyond ERDF and ESF, Florence has played a pivotal role in the National Operational Programme for Metropolitan Cities (NOP Metro). In the 2014-2020 period, the city was allocated an initial endowment of €40.4 million, later supplemented by an additional €80 million from REACT-EU, for a total of more than €120 million. Within this framework, Florence implemented 55 projects, including 26 financed through REACT-EU, mostly in areas such as digital transition, sustainable urban mobility, and social innovation. Most of these projects are now completed or close to completion.

In the 2021-2027 period, Florence is again included in the successor programme, the National Programme Metro+ and Medium-Sized Cities South. The city's Operational Plan foresees a total allocation of approximately €149.3 million, supporting 33 projects (although their implementation status remains difficult to assess at this early stage). These projects cover areas such as green transition, digitalisation, social inclusion, and resilience, consolidating Florence's role as an Intermediate Body in the governance of EU funds and reinforcing its strategic position in Cohesion Policy.

Taken together, the reliance on ERDF, ESF, and NOP Metro demonstrates how shared management funds remain central to Florence's development trajectory. They not only finance targeted interventions but also strengthen the city's administrative capacity and multilevel governance role within Cohesion Policy.

7.1.2 Other relevant EU funds and programmes

In addition to shared funds, the City of Florence strategically pursues direct management funds, which are awarded competitively and managed directly by the European Commission. These programmes – primarily Horizon, LIFE and Interreg – are not intended for broad territorial development, but are crucial for fostering excellence in innovation, ambitious environmental action and complex transnational collaboration. Accessing these funds requires a high degree of specialised expertise, international networks and administrative capacity to navigate the demanding application and management processes.

The data for the 2014-2020 period reveals a stark territorial disparity in the ability to secure these funds. The City of Florence is the undisputed leader, having activated 17 projects with a total eligible budget of €12.9 million. The Horizon programme, focused on cutting-edge research and innovation, is its most significant source, providing €6.7 million across 10 projects. This success is indicative of the city's robust administrative infrastructure and its strong ties with research institutions like the University of Florence. In dramatic contrast, the other municipalities have attracted no direct funding whatsoever. This points to a profound capacity gap, suggesting that smaller administrations lack the specialised resources, personnel and international partnerships necessary to compete for these funds. The Metropolitan City's minimal engagement (two projects worth €0.3 million) further reinforces the fact that this high-level capacity is concentrated almost exclusively within the core city.

In total, direct management funds represent only 16% of the traditional cohesion funding for the territory. This highlights their strategic but niche role, leveraged almost exclusively by the region's most capable actor to pursue highly specialised, EU-aligned goals that go beyond the scope of regional operational programmes.

Like for the shared management funds, a significant challenge arises from the data for the 2021-2027 programming period, which is currently incomplete, making a direct comparison between the two periods difficult.

7.1.3 Funding coordination mechanism

To attempt to coordinate the various funding opportunities (EU, national, regional, etc.), the city of Florence has set up a "EU Project Joint Office" (active since 2012), with a transversal coordination function, and a "management and control system" (Si.Ge.Co) for the NOP Metro, with the function of a "shadow structure" of internal control.

However, it persists a lack of a structured framework of multilevel governance between the State, the Region, the Metropolitan City and the Municipality, with, in some cases, an unclear division of roles and operational overlaps.

No significant differences emerge between the 2014-2020 and the 2021-2027.

8 Recovery and Resilience Plan

8.1 The Governance of Recovery and Resilience Plan

The governance of Italy's National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) represents a complex and multifaceted structure designed to ensure the successful completion of projects within the stipulated timelines. Initially established under the Draghi government through Decree-Law 77/2021, the governance framework for the NRRP has undergone several modifications, most notably by the Meloni government, which introduced changes via Decree-Laws 13/2023 and 19/2024. These changes reflect the evolving needs and challenges faced by the plan's implementation, aiming for greater efficiency and clarity in the roles of various actors involved.

The development of the NRRP was shaped by a collaborative effort involving multiple actors, ranging from national government bodies to local authorities, all of whom play crucial roles in the effective execution of the plan. The plan was first approved by the Council of the European Union on July 13, 2021, with Italy receiving a substantial allocation of €191.5 billion, the highest among all EU member states. The allocation consisted of €122.6 billion in loans and €68.9 billion in grants. The NRRP is structured around six key missions, addressing diverse areas from ecological transition to digital transformation, with at least 40% of resources allocated to the southern regions of Italy.

At the national level, several governance bodies were established to oversee the implementation of the NRRP. These bodies are integral in ensuring that the plan's objectives are met and that the timeline for their completion is adhered to. Among the most prominent governance bodies are:

- *Cabina di Regia* (Steering Committee): This body is chaired by the Prime Minister and consists of various ministers and undersecretaries. It plays a critical role in providing guidance on NRRP implementation and monitoring project progress. It also resolves institutional and political conflicts that may arise.
- *Autorità Politica Delegata* (Delegated Political Authority): Introduced in 2022, this figure leads the coordination of the NRRP and is responsible for proposing solutions to critical issues and activating substitute powers when necessary.
- *Struttura di Missione* (Mission Structure): This structure, established in 2023, supports the Delegated Political Authority and coordinates communication with the European Commission. It also monitors NRRP implementation and proposes modifications when needed.

In addition to these central bodies, other institutions such as the *Ispettorato Generale per il NRRP* (General Inspectorate for the NRRP) and the *Ufficio di Audit* (Audit Office) ensure the financial and regulatory compliance of the NRRP's execution, focusing on transparency and the quality of monitoring data.

Cities play a crucial yet complex role in the planning and execution of the NRRP. As part of the governance framework, regional and local authorities, including municipalities, provinces, and regions, are designated as implementers of many of the plan's interventions. They are responsible for the practical realisation of numerous projects, particularly those related to local infrastructure, digital innovation, and green transition. This decentralisation of responsibilities highlights the importance of local actors in ensuring the NRRP's success at the grassroots level.

To guarantee that these local actors meet the established deadlines, the Meloni government introduced new measures such as the creation of coordination committees within prefectures. These

committees are tasked with defining “action plans” for the effective implementation of the NRRP at the provincial level, under the supervision of the local prefect. These action plans are then submitted to the Mission Structure and the General Inspectorate, which can recommend the activation of substitute powers if necessary.

Additionally, the structure of the NRRP emphasises the importance of supporting and empowering local administrations to implement the plan. In 2024, the government introduced new provisions through Decree-Law 19/2024 to simplify administrative procedures and enhance the capacity of local authorities to manage NRRP-related projects. The law also provided for the reinforcement of administrative support for local authorities to ensure smooth implementation.

The NRRP has evolved over time, with the Meloni government introducing significant changes in 2023 and 2024. The revised plan includes the addition of Mission 7, dedicated to the REPowerEU initiative, which focuses on energy resilience, green transition, and digital competitiveness. With a stronger focus on climate goals, the reprogramming of the NRRP has increased the allocation for climate-related investments to 39% of the total resources. This reorganisation also increased the number of objectives and milestones to be reached, with more than 600 targets now integrated into the timeline for completion by 2026.

In response to the financial complexities and challenges, the government has also sought to streamline the process by introducing further adjustments, such as the “*Accordi per l’innovazione*” (Agreements for Innovation) and corrections to various misstatements within the original plan.

The governance structure of the NRRP reflects a strong commitment from the Italian government to ensure effective coordination between various levels of government, institutions, and other stakeholders. While the central government holds the primary responsibility for guiding and overseeing the plan’s execution, local governments and municipalities are key to the practical implementation of many projects, particularly in addressing local needs. The introduction of measures to strengthen local governance and simplify administrative processes is a crucial step in ensuring that the NRRP delivers its intended outcomes within the set timeframe. These measures, combined with the continued oversight of national bodies, aim to provide Italy with a robust framework for recovery and resilience, addressing both immediate challenges and long-term structural changes.

Table 8.1
The Governance of Recovery and Resilience Plan in Italy

Name of the actor	Level	Responsibility
<i>Cabina di Regia</i>	National	Oversee the implementation of the NRRP, provide policy guidelines, and monitor progress.
<i>Autorità Politica Delegata in materia di NRRP</i>	National	Lead the coordination structure for the NRRP, propose solutions for critical issues, and potentially activate substitute powers.
<i>Struttura di Missione NRRP</i>	National	Provide support to the delegated authority, maintain relations with the European Commission, and monitor the execution of the plan.
<i>Unità per la razionalizzazione e il miglioramento della regolazione</i>	National	Coordinate the development of proposals to amend dysfunctional regulations and promote regulatory experimentation.

Name of the actor	Level	Responsibility
<i>Ispettorato Generale per il NRRP</i>	National	Coordinate operational implementation, monitoring, management of the Next Generation EU fund, and financial flows.
<i>Ufficio di Audit del NRRP</i>	National	Independently audits NRRP implementation, ensures data quality, and promotes transparency and participation.
Ministries (various)	National	Each ministry responsible for specific interventions under the NRRP, managing, monitoring, reporting, and controlling relevant actions.
<i>Cabina di Regia</i>	National	Oversee the implementation of the NRRP, provide policy guidelines, and monitor progress.
Regional Authorities	Regional	Implement the NRRP interventions at the regional level, ensuring coordination with local and national actors.
Prefectures (<i>Cabina di coordinamento</i>)	Subregional (Provincial)	Define and monitor action plans for NRRP implementation at the provincial level, reporting to the national mission structure.
Municipalities	Local	Participate in the implementation of specific projects, with the possibility of receiving support or sanctions from higher levels.

Source: author's own elaboration

8.2 Coherence with the Recovery and Resilience Plan

The National Recovery and Resilience Plan represent a strategic and ambitious response to the economic, social, and environmental challenges facing the country, aimed at modernisation and resilience. In Florence, as in other metropolitan cities in Italy, the plan is implemented through a series of development instruments that align perfectly with the NRRP missions, contributing to the achievement of sustainability, social inclusion, innovation, and ecological transition goals. The various instruments adopted by the city are integrated into a multilayered governance system involving national, regional, and local authorities, and address various areas of intervention across the metropolitan territory.

The National Operational Programme Metro Florence is one of the main instruments for promoting digitalisation and innovation, directly responding to the NRRP's objectives of enhancing the country's competitiveness. This programme focuses on the sustainable development of metropolitan areas, with particular attention to digitalisation of urban infrastructure, mobility, and energy efficiency. These aspects align with the NRRP's objectives to modernise infrastructure and promote competitiveness through innovation. Additionally, the Strategic Metropolitan Plan "Metropolitan Renaissance 2030" aims to improve accessibility and territorial cohesion, also supporting innovation in key sectors such as manufacturing, networking, and tourism, thus addressing the same mission of competitive and innovative development.

Mission 2, which focuses on the ecological transition, finds strong alignment with the Regional Operational Programme (ROP), which promotes sustainability, climate adaptation, energy efficiency, and the circular economy. The ROP integrates European priorities in the environmental

sector and promotes territorial development interventions that respond to the growing need for environmental protection and ecological resilience. In addition, Florence's Sustainable Energy and Climate Action Plan (PAESC) aligns perfectly with this mission, aiming for climate neutrality by 2030 and contributing to the ecological transition objectives set by the national plan. Furthermore, the Tuscany Rural Development Plan (RDP), which includes sustainable agricultural practices and resource efficiency, directly supports the ecological transition, addressing the circular economy and resource efficiency.

Planning instruments such as the Sustainable Mobility Plan (PUMS) and the Metropolitan Territorial Plan (PTM) play a crucial role in promoting integrated, low-impact mobility. These plans not only respond to the need to reduce CO₂ emissions and improve urban accessibility but also to regenerate and optimise existing infrastructure. PUMS, in particular, promotes public transport and cycling in line with the sustainability objectives of the NRRP, while PTM integrates territorial planning to improve accessibility and optimise urban land use. These interventions are complemented by Integrated Territorial Projects (ITP), which address local environmental challenges and promote sustainability at the peripheral and rural levels, also improving mobility and energy infrastructure resilience. ITP aligns with the priorities of the NRRP, contributing to the ecological transition and sustainable mobility.

Education and research are also at the heart of the actions outlined in the NRRP, with objectives aimed at strengthening innovation capacity and educational quality. The Tuscany Rural Development Plan (RDP), while primarily focused on agricultural and rural development, plays a crucial role in promoting innovation and knowledge transfer, objectives that align with Mission 4 of the NRRP. RDP indirectly contributes to education and training, particularly through initiatives that foster innovation in agricultural techniques and resource management.

Mission 5, dedicated to cohesion and inclusion, finds its main instrument in the National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI), which addresses territorial disparities by improving services in rural and peripheral areas, including those in the Florence Metropolitan Area. SNAI focuses on improving urban services such as healthcare, education, and mobility in more isolated areas, thus aligning with the social cohesion objectives of the NRRP. The mission of inclusion and cohesion is also reflected in the actions of the Tuscany Rural Development Plan, which addresses poverty and promotes economic development in rural areas. Furthermore, the RDP contributes to social and territorial cohesion by improving access to economic and social opportunities in less developed areas of the region.

Regarding Mission 6, focused on strengthening the healthcare system, the Tuscany Rural Development Plan (RDP) plays a key role in improving healthcare services in rural areas, indirectly contributing to the achievement of public health improvement goals. The integration of climate change adaptation strategies into local and metropolitan plans also supports the resilience of the healthcare system against climate-related emergencies.

Finally, Mission 7, focused on energy security and the transition to a more sustainable energy system, finds its main instrument in Integrated Territorial Projects (ITP). These projects, which address local environmental challenges, promote energy efficiency and sustainable agriculture. In Tuscany, ITP are essential for adapting to climate change and promoting resilient local economies, thus contributing to the achievement of the objectives of Mission 7.

The development instruments in Florence are closely aligned with the missions of the NRRP, significantly contributing to the achievement of sustainability, innovation, social inclusion, and ecological transition goals. The city's multilayered governance system, which integrates national, regional, and local policies, provides a solid foundation for implementing the recovery and resilience plan, ensuring positive impacts across various fronts. However, to further enhance the visibility of

the connection between instruments and missions, it would be useful to add specific indicators for each instrument in the table to more accurately monitor progress toward achieving the NRRP's objectives.

Table 8.2
Coherence with the Recovery and Resilience Plan

Tool	Recovery and Resilience Plan Missions						
	Mission 1 - Digitalisation, Innovation, Competitiveness, Culture, and Tourism	Mission 2 - Green Revolution and Ecological Transition	Mission 3 - Infrastructure for Sustainable Mobility	Mission 4 - Education and Research	Mission 5 - Cohesion and Inclusion	Mission 6 - Health	Mission 7 - REPowerEU
National Operational Programme (NOP) Metro, Florence	X	X					
Regional Operational Programme (ROP)		X	X		X		
Sustainable Mobility Plan (PUMS)			X				
Tuscany Rural Development Plan (RDP)		X		X	X	X	
National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI)					X		
Integrated Territorial Projects (ITP)		X	X				X

Tool	Recovery and Resilience Plan Missions						
	Mission 1 - Digitalisation, Innovation, Competitiveness, Culture, and Tourism	Mission 2 - Green Revolution and Ecological Transition	Mission 3 - Infrastructure for Sustainable Mobility	Mission 4 - Education and Research	Mission 5 - Cohesion and Inclusion	Mission 6 - Health	Mission 7 - REPowerEU
Strategic Metropolitan Plan ("Metropolitan Renaissance 2030")	X	X	X		X		
Metropolitan Territorial Plan (PTM)		X	X				
Metropolitan Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Action Plan for Sustainable Energy and Climate (PAESC)		X	X			X	
Circular City Plan (CCP)	X	X	X				
Green and Open Spaces Plan (PVSA)	X	X					
Smart City Plan (SCP)	X			X			

Source: authors' own elaboration

8.3 Recovery and Resilience Fund

The City of Florence and its wider metropolitan area have been among the primary beneficiaries of Italy's National Recovery and Resilience Plan, implemented through the European Union's

Recovery and Resilience Facility. The scale and territorial articulation of these investments are unprecedented in the region's recent history, profoundly transforming local public investment strategies and enabling structural interventions that had long remained aspirational under traditional funding frameworks.

A total of 286 projects has been selected and financed across the Metropolitan City of Florence, mobilising over €1.3 billion in public funding. These resources are distributed across multiple institutional levels and actors, reflecting a broad territorial and thematic reach. The City of Florence alone has secured 55 funded projects with a total of €770.7 million in direct financing from RRF and an overall €1.1 billion in activated resources when additional co-financing is included. These projects span across strategic areas such as urban regeneration, infrastructure development, education, digital transformation, sustainable mobility, and social inclusion.

Table 8.3
Overview of the projects from RRF

Authority	Number of Projects ²⁴	Public Funding Mobilised (€)	Notes
City of Florence	55	€770.7 million (RRF) €1.1 billion (with co-financing)	Includes major projects such as tramway expansion (€500.5M), Franchi stadium and Campo di Marte redevelopment (€140M), sustainable transport, education, digitalisation, and social inclusion.
Metropolitan City of Florence (as coordinator)	10	€227.8 million	Includes two Urban Integrated Plans (€71.6M and €95.88M), secondary schools (€21.2M), urban greenery (€2.1M), and cycling corridors (€1.1M).
Other municipalities and actors in the Metropolitan Area	221	€226.2 million (131.2M + 95M)	Includes local projects in education, energy, green transition, and 7 projects by public utilities and cultural institutions (Publiacqua, Alia, Teatro del Maggio, etc.).
TOTAL (Metropolitan Area of Florence)	286	Over €1.3 billion	The RRF investment volume is over 15 times greater than traditional EU funds received by the area in previous programming cycles (€84.6M).

Source: authors' own elaboration.

Among the most significant interventions are the tramway system expansions, financed with €500.5 million for three new lines (3.2.1 Libertà–Bagno a Ripoli, 4.2 Piagge–Campi Bisenzio, and the Line 2 Variant Alternative to the Historic Centre – VACS). The redevelopment of the Artemio Franchi stadium and the Campo di Marte district is another flagship project, valued at approximately €85 million, combining cultural heritage preservation and urban regeneration. Investments in zero-emission public transport include the acquisition of 68 electric or hydrogen buses and the development of related charging infrastructure, for a total of €49.8 million. Cycling

²⁴ Some projects have been transferred to National funds - National Complementary Plan (PNC)

infrastructure has also been expanded, with over 9 km of new cycle lanes realised through €4.8 million in NRRP funds.

The city also directed significant resources to educational infrastructure, including the construction of the new Calvino school (€8.4 million), redevelopment of school canteens (€1.5 million), and creation of 377 new early childhood education places across 14 kindergartens and nurseries (€14.9 million). Complementing these efforts are investments in digital public services through the PA Digitale 2026 programme (€7.2 million) and cybersecurity measures (€2 million). In the social domain, projects worth over €5.2 million target vulnerable groups, including children, non-self-sufficient elderly people, the homeless, and individuals with disabilities, through interventions such as Housing First and the Villaggio Montedomini for independent living.

The Metropolitan City of Florence, in its coordinating role, was entrusted with the implementation of 10 strategic projects, receiving approximately €227.8 million in total funding. Among these, the two Urban Integrated Plans (PUI) stand out: the first, focused on sports and wellbeing, involves 7 municipalities and mobilises €71.6 million, while the second, targeting culture and social inclusion, covers 11 municipalities with a budget of €95.88 million (including co-financing). Additional metropolitan projects include investments in secondary schools (€21.2 million), urban greenery enhancement (€2.1 million), and the Florence segments of the Verona–Florence “Ciclovía del Sole” cycling corridor (€1.1 million). The city has also contributed to the PINQuA programme (National Innovative Programme for Housing Quality), with €33 million invested across 33 actions coordinated by 17 implementing bodies.

The remaining 221 projects were carried out by other municipalities in the metropolitan area, benefiting from €131.2 million to improve education infrastructure, green transition efforts, energy efficiency, and social services. In parallel, seven additional projects by public utilities and cultural organisations (e.g., Publiacqua, Alia, Teatro del Maggio Musicale Fiorentino) attracted €95 million in financing. Notable examples include €87.5 million for water infrastructure modernisation, including smart metering, and circular economy projects such as textile recycling hubs and sludge drying facilities. Cultural institutions also received support for energy retrofitting and accessibility enhancements, including works at Teatro Puccini, Museo del Novecento, and Palazzo Vecchio.

The impact of the RRF becomes particularly evident when contrasted with conventional European Union funding mechanisms. Over the past programming cycles, the combined value of EU funds such as ERDF, ESF, LIFE, Interreg, and Horizon Europe in the metropolitan area of Florence has amounted to approximately €84.6 million. In comparison, the RRF alone has injected over fifteen times that amount, testifying to its transformative role as a policy and investment catalyst.

9 Challenges and Policy Recommendations

9.1 Local Level

9.1.1 Challenges

At the local level, the governance structure of Florence reveals a set of entrenched challenges that hinder the effective design and implementation of EU-funded interventions. One of the most evident issues concerns the fragmented and asymmetrical distribution of competences between the Municipality and the Metropolitan City. While the Municipality plays a strategic and integrated role in key policy areas such as social inclusion, housing, and ecological transition, the Metropolitan City retains more limited and sectoral responsibilities, particularly in the domains of road infrastructure and school buildings. This imbalance makes it difficult to articulate coherent, cross-sectoral urban strategies—an essential prerequisite for the success of CP.

Another major barrier is the chronic shortage of skilled human resources. Like many Italian local authorities, the Municipality of Florence faces substantial difficulties in recruiting and retaining personnel with the expertise required to manage complex, multi-year EU-funded projects. This skills gap is exacerbated by rigid national constraints on public employment and competition from the private sector, where working conditions are often more attractive. The high turnover of administrative staff also erodes institutional memory and undermines the continuity of project design and delivery, reducing the administration's capacity to learn from past experiences and to implement complex urban agendas.

In addition, while the city's strategic objectives often align thematically with EU policy priorities—such as climate action, sustainable mobility, and cultural heritage—the practical integration of EU projects into long-term municipal strategies remains limited. This phenomenon, often described as “projectification,” results in innovative yet isolated interventions that are not sufficiently embedded in overarching policy frameworks. As a result, many promising initiatives fail to scale or generate sustained systemic change.

The local governance challenge is further compounded by unequal capacities across the wider metropolitan area. While the city of Florence may have comparatively higher administrative capacity, smaller municipalities within the metropolitan zone often lack the technical means to access and manage EU funding. Although informal collaborations have occurred in the past—such as during the 2006–2013 programming period—these initiatives were not institutionalised or structurally supported. Furthermore, a significant disconnection remains between those who formally manage the funds (often municipal departments) and the ultimate beneficiaries—citizens and local communities. This weakens the participatory and transformative potential of EU interventions.

9.1.2 Policy recommendations

PR1 - Establish an inter-institutional task force between the Municipality and the Metropolitan City of Florence to coordinate strategic planning and overcome the fragmentation of responsibilities. This task force should act as a permanent coordination body with the aim of:

- Facilitate integration across policy sectors (e.g., mobility, social inclusion, etc).
- Address the functional imbalance between the two levels of government.
- Ensure structural alignment between EU-funded projects and long-term urban strategies at both levels.

PR2 - Strengthen and scale up existing administrative units and practices that have demonstrated effectiveness in managing EU-funded projects, with a focus on human capital development and institutional continuity. In particular:

- Invest in targeted recruitment and retention strategies to attract and keep skilled professionals.
- Introduce mechanisms to preserve institutional memory and ensure knowledge transfer despite staff turnover.
- Prioritise operational stability over constant reinvention, adapting successful models to current needs.

PR3 - Institutionalise cooperative mechanisms within the metropolitan area and leverage transnational networks to boost capacity, visibility, and funding opportunities. This includes:

- Creating formal, resourced frameworks for collaboration among municipalities, primarily to support those with lower administrative capacity.
- Engaging consistently in European urban networks to share best practices and shape the policy agenda.
- Promoting participatory governance models that link EU projects more directly to local communities and beneficiaries, thereby enhancing impact and ownership.

9.2 Regional Level

9.2.1 Challenges

At the regional level, the implementation of CP is hampered by an ambiguous institutional architecture, particularly regarding the role and function of Metropolitan Cities. In the case of Florence, the Metropolitan City has not yet developed a clearly defined strategic or operational profile. This institutional uncertainty translates into difficulties in setting targets, defining indicators, and delineating appropriate territorial scopes within cohesion programmes. Such ambiguity weakens policy coherence and limits the city-region's ability to implement effective, multilevel strategies.

Although Florence has engaged in inter-municipal cooperation with neighbouring municipalities such as Campi Bisenzio and Scandicci, these experiences have not matured into stable governance models. Instead, they remain isolated and contingent on specific programming cycles or political windows. There is a clear need to institutionalise these forms of collaboration, ensuring robust structures to back them for technical assistance, knowledge exchange, and capacity-building across the metropolitan territory.

Asymmetries in administrative capacity between the city of Florence and the surrounding municipalities further complicate regional governance. Smaller towns often lack the resources or expertise to navigate complex EU procedures, leading to a concentration of funding and strategic opportunities in the hands of the metropolitan core. Despite the potential of the Metropolitan City to act as a coordinating body, it has yet to assume a consistent role in providing strategic guidance or technical support across the metropolitan area. This uneven distribution of capacity threatens to deepen territorial inequalities, in stark contrast to the cohesion objectives promoted at both national and European levels.

9.2.2 Policy recommendations

PR1 - Allocate CP resources based on functional urban dynamics and actual interdependencies within the metropolitan area, rather than on rigid administrative boundaries. Given the current institutional ambiguity surrounding the role of the Metropolitan City:

- Funding decisions should reflect real patterns of mobility, service use, and economic activity.
- Functional criteria can help identify shared priorities across municipalities, even when formal governance frameworks are weak.
- This approach would enhance the relevance and effectiveness of regional programming, especially in contexts where administrative borders do not align with urban realities.

PR2 - Strengthen and formalise inter-municipal collaborations - particularly among smaller municipalities - through incentives, technical support, and recognition within regional cohesion programmes. In practice:

- Institutionalise existing cooperative arrangements to go beyond short-term political cycles.
- Support small municipalities to work collectively through consortia or associations, so they can jointly access funding and develop integrated strategies.
- Provide dedicated resources for capacity building and technical assistance to address administrative asymmetries.

PR3 - Apply the subsidiarity principle in a structured and equitable way, empowering local actors, especially in smaller municipalities, while positioning the regional level as a facilitator rather than a central authority. This means:

- Avoid concentrating decision-making and resource allocation solely within regional institutions or the metropolitan core.
- Clarify and operationalise the coordinating role of the region, enabling it to support rather than dominate local entities.
- Ensure that subsidiarity is matched with appropriate tools for coordination, monitoring, and capacity-sharing across the metropolitan area.

9.3 National Level

9.3.1 Challenges

At the national level, one of the most pressing challenges lies in the persistent weakness of Italy's multilevel governance architecture. Although the legal and policy frameworks may appear coherent on paper, their implementation is often undermined by institutional inertia, overlapping mandates, and poorly defined responsibilities—especially in the aftermath of the constitutional reforms under Title V²⁵. Rather than reinforcing strategic coordination, EU funding is frequently used

²⁵ The reform of Title V of the Italian Constitution, approved in 2001, redefined the distribution of legislative and administrative powers between the State, Regions, and local authorities. It expanded regional autonomy, introduced the principle of subsidiarity, and strengthened the role of local governments in policy areas such as health, education, and territorial development.

to compensate for systemic deficiencies in national governance. This leads to fragmented implementation, operational inefficiencies, and a lack of integrated planning across governmental tiers.

Another recurring issue is the misalignment between national policy priorities and the actual needs of urban areas. In sectors such as public housing (ERP), seismic safety, and infrastructure, national frameworks tend to adopt top-down approaches that are insufficiently responsive to the differentiated challenges faced by cities. Regulatory inconsistencies—such as those between ERP and social housing (ERS) regulations—further constrain the ability of local governments to respond flexibly and effectively.

A further limitation lies in the national monitoring and reporting systems, which have proven inadequate in terms of transparency, interoperability, and strategic usability. Municipalities often struggle to use these platforms as tools for coordination, learning, or performance assessment. The failure to establish open and integrated monitoring systems undermines accountability and the potential for adaptive management.

Finally, the fragmentation and complexity of the national funding landscape—encompassing the NRRP, React-EU, the National Complementary Fund (PNC), national budgetary lines, and EU instruments such as the European Urban Initiative (EUI)—place a heavy burden on local administrations. The absence of harmonised guidance, combined with rigid co-financing requirements and shifting eligibility criteria, discourages innovation and responsiveness, especially for small-scale or experimental projects. In many cases, transformative ideas are abandoned not because of a lack of ambition, but due to procedural barriers that stifle local initiative.

9.3.2 Policy recommendations

PR1 - Reaffirm and institutionalise the governance logic of NOP METRO+ as a structural model for effective multilevel coordination, not an exception. To address the persistent fragmentation and inertia in Italy's multilevel system:

- Embed the Intermediate Body model in national programming as a permanent feature, not a time-limited experiment.
- Clearly define and legally secure the distribution of roles and responsibilities across government tiers, especially in areas where mandates currently overlap or are ambiguous.
- Use CP not as a compensatory tool for weak governance, but as a lever to strengthen strategic coordination across levels.

PR2 - Replicate and expand the NOP METRO model across national funding programmes to enable cities to act as coordinating actors and unlock synergies between funding streams. In light of the complexity and fragmentation of the current funding landscape:

- Develop a unified, replicable governance methodology that enables cities to manage portions of different programmes (e.g., RRF, NCP, EUI) as Intermediate Bodies.
- Simplify access procedures, align eligibility criteria, and provide clear national guidance to reduce the administrative burden on local governments.
- Create cross-fund synergies by enabling more flexible and bundled financing for integrated urban strategies, particularly those involving housing, mobility, and resilience.

PR3 - Establish permanent, institutionalised multi-level governance platforms that involve national, regional, and urban actors in the co-design of operational programmes and strategic funding priorities. This is essential to overcome misalignment and poor responsiveness:

- Introduce structured “tripartite dialogue tables” to facilitate ongoing negotiation of policy goals, resource allocation, and implementation tools.
- Ensure that urban needs - especially in complex sectors like ERP/social housing and infrastructure - are reflected in national programmes from the outset.
- Link participatory design with interoperable and transparent monitoring systems, enabling shared accountability and adaptive management across levels.

9.4 EU Level

9.4.1 Challenges

At the European level, the experience of Florence suggests both opportunities and critical shortcomings in the governance and design of CP. On the positive side, there is strong thematic alignment between EU priorities—such as the Green Deal, digital transition, and social cohesion—and the strategic goals of many cities. This alignment has enabled access to funding and has reinforced the legitimacy of local action within a broader European framework.

However, thematic convergence alone is not enough to ensure structural transformation. The current architecture of CP tends to promote isolated, project-based interventions rather than integrated strategies embedded in long-term planning. The lack of mechanisms to institutionalise successful project outcomes means that even innovative and well-designed initiatives often fail to deliver systemic change. The prevalence of short funding cycles further exacerbates this fragmentation, encouraging municipalities to pursue disconnected projects without a clear pathway for consolidation or scale-up.

Moreover, despite various instruments supporting urban development at the EU level, there is a persistent lack of synergy among programmes. The coexistence of diverse funding streams with different eligibility rules, reporting requirements, and strategic objectives creates an opaque and confusing environment for local actors. Rather than enabling coordinated development, this institutional complexity often overwhelms potential beneficiaries and limits the effectiveness of EU investments.

Another critical issue is the limited engagement of citizens and local stakeholders in EU-funded processes. While cities are often the formal implementers of CP, the ultimate beneficiaries—residents and local communities—are not always meaningfully involved. This disconnect diminishes the participatory potential of EU interventions, weakens public trust, and reduces the visibility and ownership of project outcomes.

These challenges suggest the need for deeper reflection on how EU policies and instruments are designed and implemented. Greater simplification, alignment, and localisation of funding frameworks, combined with stronger mechanisms for participation and institutional learning, would significantly enhance the impact and legitimacy of CP across urban territories.

9.4.2 Policy recommendations

PR1 - Operationalise subsidiarity through EU rules and incentives that favour integrated, city-led strategies over isolated projects. More specifically:

- Prioritise integrated territorial strategies (no single projects) in allocations and performance frameworks, with multi-year portfolios that stretch beyond a single call and include scale-up/after-care budgets.
- Introduce “portfolio” selection and reporting (one strategy = one portfolio with multiple actions) to curb projectivisation and reduce administrative load.
- Ring-fence resources for institutionalisation and scaling of proven pilots (e.g., funding lines dedicated to replication, maintenance, and mainstreaming).

PR2 - Elevate cities to co-design partners in CP priority-setting and programme governance. More specifically:

- Require formal urban co-design mechanisms in programme preparation (e.g., structured urban consultations, co-drafted urban chapters, and seats for cities in monitoring committees).
- Create Urban Compacts between the Commission, Member States, and city networks that translate EU priorities into place-based urban outcomes.
- Incentivise evidence-based urban needs assessments to align national priorities with diverse city realities.

PR3 - Make citizen and stakeholder participation a structural and measurable requirement across CP processes. More specifically:

- Introduce mandatory participation standards for EU-funded strategies, ensuring structured consultations and co-design with residents and local stakeholders.
- Require multi-level participation plans as part of strategy selection, with evidence of how community inputs shape priorities and actions.
- Ring-fence resources to build local participation capacity, including facilitation, outreach, and inclusive digital tools.

- Embed participation quality indicators in monitoring frameworks (e.g., representativeness, traceability of inputs, demonstrated adaptation of actions).
- Establish permanent feedback mechanisms through transparent reporting, independent reviews, and periodic citizen forums.

PR4 - Build flexible “menus” and adaptive pathways inside Sustainable Urban Development instruments. More specifically:

- Modular objectives (core + optional city-specific modules) and adaptive milestones that can be revised mid-stream based on monitoring evidence.
- Simplified options (standard unit costs/lump sums) and proportional controls for smaller municipalities and experimental actions.
- Integrated, multi-fund calls with harmonised rules across funds to allow blending and sequencing (e.g., small pilots → scale-up → long-term).

PR5 - Establish an EU-level pathway for qualified cities to act as (co-) Managing Authorities or delegated bodies across relevant programmes. More specifically:

- Set EU criteria and a transparent accreditation process (capacity, governance, audit systems) enabling eligible cities to assume MA/IB roles beyond a single programme.
- Pilot “City MA” schemes in selected Member States with technical assistance, then open to broader uptake next cycle.
- The delegation of performance and cooperation duties, including support to smaller municipalities within functional urban areas.

PR6 - Make affordable, quality, and climate-ready housing a core EU Cohesion priority with integrated, multi-fund support.

- Dedicated priority with cross-fund eligibility for the whole housing pathway: planning, land policy, construction/renovation (including seismic upgrades), social services integration, and long-term maintenance.
- Clarify and align regulatory definitions and eligibility to reduce contradictions that currently constrain local action.
- Outcome-linked incentives (e.g., renovated units delivered, energy-poverty reduction, social mix) and community participation requirements in project design and monitoring.

10 Conclusion

The Florence case study demonstrates how a medium-sized European city with strong cultural and administrative traditions can use EU Cohesion Policy not only as a source of funding but as a framework for institutional learning and strategic governance. Florence's experience exemplifies the opportunities and limitations of integrating European resources into local policymaking within Italy's complex multilevel governance architecture.

EU Funds as Catalysts for Integrated Urban Strategies

In Florence, EU Cohesion Policy has played a pivotal role in steering urban transformation, despite representing a relatively modest share of the city's total investment capacity. Acting as an Intermediate Body in both the NOP METRO 2014–2020 and the current METRO+ and Medium-Sized Cities South 2021–2027 Programme, the city has implemented projects advancing the digital transition, sustainable mobility, social inclusion, and urban regeneration. These programmes have helped align Florence's development trajectory with the EU's overarching objectives of green, digital, and just transitions. More than their financial value, EU resources have provided a strategic framework that strengthens cross-departmental cooperation and encourages innovation in urban governance. The challenge ahead is to secure continuity beyond individual projects, ensuring that the impact of Cohesion Policy becomes structurally embedded in long-term municipal strategies.

Organisational Innovation and the Challenge of Administrative Continuity

Florence's experience highlights how governance innovation can mitigate limited administrative resources. The creation of the EU Project Joint Office (an interdepartmental office) in 2012 marked a turning point in improving coordination and overcoming bureaucratic compartmentalisation. By supporting all departments in the design, management, and reporting of EU and national projects, the office has enhanced coherence and visibility of European action within the city administration. Nonetheless, chronic shortages of qualified staff, recruitment constraints, and high turnover continue to undermine the municipality's ability to sustain long-term institutional capacity. These challenges risk eroding the institution's accumulated knowledge, experience, and procedural expertise built up over time. Florence's approach, based on interdepartmental working groups, targeted training, and internal networking, shows that sustained investment in human capital and knowledge transfer is fundamental to the effective delivery of complex European programmes.

Balancing Local Autonomy and Multilevel Coordination

The governance of Cohesion Policy in Florence reflects both the strengths and fragilities of Italy's decentralised system. Responsibilities are distributed among national ministries, the Region of Tuscany, the Metropolitan City, and the Municipality. While this structure embodies the principle of subsidiarity established with the 2001 reform of Title V of the Italian Constitution, in practice it often results in overlapping competences, procedural delays, and uneven administrative capacity. The Region of Tuscany plays a central role as Managing Authority for regional ERDF and ESF+ programmes, but coordination between regional and local levels remains largely formal rather than strategic. Meanwhile, the Metropolitan City of Florence, though endowed with planning responsibilities, has yet to establish itself as a fully operational governance layer. Strengthening cooperation between the municipality, the region, and metropolitan authorities through stable joint planning mechanisms would improve coherence, reduce redundancy, and enhance the effectiveness of EU-funded interventions.

European Engagement and Transnational Influence

Florence has positioned itself as an active European actor, using transnational networking to amplify its voice and strengthen its policy influence. Its leadership within Eurocities (holding the Presidency from 2021 to 2023), as well as participation in initiatives such as the Covenant of Mayors, the Green City Accord, and the 100 Climate-Neutral Cities Mission, demonstrate the city's commitment to European integration and climate leadership. These networks have allowed Florence to shape European debates on urban governance, sustainability, and inclusion, while also enhancing its capacity to attract funding and exchange knowledge. However, the benefits of such engagement are constrained by limited staff and resources dedicated to international affairs. Institutionalising European relations within the city's administrative framework, possibly at the

metropolitan scale, would consolidate these achievements and ensure that networking translates into enduring policy innovation.

Key Insights for Future Policy and Governance Design

The Florence case yields lessons for the future of Cohesion Policy and multilevel governance. First, it underscores that cities of medium size can be pivotal laboratories for governance reform, using EU instruments to foster coordination, experimentation, and administrative upgrading. Second, sustained institutional capacity, not just funding, is indispensable. Human resources, training, and mechanisms for preserving institutional knowledge must be treated as strategic investments. Third, effective urban governance requires robust metropolitan coordination, ensuring that the benefits of Cohesion Policy extend beyond city boundaries and strengthen territorial equity. Finally, Florence's experience confirms the importance of embedding cities as full partners in the design, management, and monitoring of EU programmes. Empowering local governments within multilevel structures would enhance policy coherence and responsiveness, bringing European objectives closer to citizens.

In conclusion, Florence exemplifies how EU Cohesion Policy can function as an engine of administrative modernisation and cross-sectoral governance innovation. When adequately supported by institutional stability, skilled personnel, and cooperative governance, such policies can move beyond project implementation to deliver durable transformation, reinforcing both local capacity and Europe's visibility at the urban scale.

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Interviews & interactive sessions

Interview 1 – Director General, Municipality of Florence & Metropolitan City of Florence, 22 May 2025

Interview 2 – Head of International Activities and Investment Attraction Sector – Tuscany Region, 23 May 2025

Interview 3 - Municipality of Florence – Special Office for Housing and Housing, Research Funding and PON Metro Service, 29 May 2025

Interview 4 – Municipality of Florence, Urban Planning Department, Municipality of Florence, 06 June 2025

Interview 5 – Municipality of Florence, Urban Planning Department, Municipality of Florence, 06 June 2025

Interactive Session 1 - Hearing Florence, 3 February 2025

Interactive Session 2 – Policy lab Florence (9 participants), 5 June 2025

Interactive Session 3 - Hearing Florence, 27 August 2025

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