

ESPON



Co-funded by
the European Union
Interreg

TARGETED ANALYSIS //

URDICO

Urban Dimension of Cohesion Policy
and other EU Programmes

Annex 4.3 - Ghent Study Report // January 2026



This Targeted Analysis is conducted within the framework of the ESPON 2030 Cooperation Programme, partly financed by the European Regional Development Fund.

The ESPON EGTC is the Single Beneficiary of the ESPON 2030 Cooperation Programme. The Single Operation within the programme is implemented by the ESPON EGTC and co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund, the EU Member States and the Partner States, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland.

This delivery does not necessarily reflect the opinions of members of the ESPON 2030 Monitoring Committee.

Coordination:

Piera Petruzzi, Nicolas Rossignol, ESPON EGTC, Luxembourg

Outreach:

Nikos Lampropoulous and Silvia Pierik, ESPON EGTC, Luxembourg

Authors

Tim Devos, Annelies Staessen (University of Ghent)

Administrative and Technical Support

Erblin Berisha, Cemre Betul Ay, Donato Casavola, Giancarlo Cotella, Elisa Vitale Brovarone (Politecnico di Torino); Iván Tosics, Olga Müller (MRI); Judit Kálmán (MRI, Corvinus University of Budapest); Joaquin Farinós Dasí, Carmen Zornoza Gallego, Saul Aliaga Sanfederico (University of Valencia), Lorenzo Genna and Martin Gauk (ESPON EGTC Luxembourg)

Advisory group

Heidi Tency (Municipality of Ghent)

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank all interviewees and participants of the Urban Laboratories for sharing their views, expertise, time, and effort.

Information on ESPON and its projects can be found at www.espon.eu.

The website provides the possibility to download and examine the most recent documents produced by finalised and ongoing ESPON projects.

ISBN: 978-2-919839-42-1

© ESPON 2030

Published in February 2026

Layout and graphic design by BGRAPHIC, Denmark

Printing, reproduction or quotation is authorised provided the source is acknowledged and a copy is forwarded to the ESPON EGTC in Luxembourg.

Contact: info@espon.eu

ESPON



**Co-funded by
the European Union**
Interreg

TARGETED ANALYSIS //

URDICO

Urban Dimension of Cohesion Policy
and other EU programmes

Annex 4.3 - Ghent Study Report // January 2026

Disclaimer

This document is a final report.

The information contained herein is subject to change and does not commit the ESPON EGTC and the countries participating in the ESPON 2030 Cooperation Programme.

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

Table of contents

Abbreviations.....	8
1 Summary.....	9
2 Introduction.....	10
3 National Overview on Cohesion Policy.....	12
4 Urban structure and governance of Cohesion Policy.....	16
4.1 Spatial boundaries and administrative configuration	16
4.2 Governance of Cohesion Policy in Ghent.....	19
4.3 Ghent involvement in Cohesion Policy.....	22
4.3.1 2014-2020 programming period.....	22
4.3.2 2021-2027 programming period.....	23
4.3.3 Main differences.....	25
4.4 Networking and lobbying activity	27
5 Administrative capacity and Institutional innovations.....	30
5.1 Administrative capacity and management gaps.....	30
5.2 Multilevel governance.....	31
5.3 Financial constraints and technical complexity	32
5.4 Innovations and good practices.....	33
5.5 Added value of negative experiences	34
6 Cohesion Policy contributions to city long-term agendas	36
6.1 Main development instruments.....	37
6.2 Localisation of Cohesion Policy.....	39
6.3 Key investment areas.....	41
7 Funding schemes and synergies	42
7.1 Funding schemes	42
7.1.1 Nationally or regionally distributed EU funds.....	42
7.1.2 Other relevant EU funds and programmes	43
7.1.3 Other funding alternatives.....	44
7.2 Funding coordination mechanism.....	44
8 Recovery and Resilience Plan.....	46
8.1 The Governance of Recovery and Resilience Plan.....	46
8.2 Coherence with Recovery and Resilience Plan.....	47
8.3 Recovery and Resilience Fund.....	47
9 Challenges and Policy Recommendations.....	48
9.1 Local Level	48
9.1.1 Challenges	48
9.1.2 Policy recommendations.....	49
9.2 Regional Level.....	50
9.2.1 Challenges	50
9.2.2 Policy recommendations.....	50
9.3 National Level	51
9.3.1 Challenges	51
9.3.2 Policy recommendations.....	51
9.4 EU Level.....	51
9.4.1 Challenges	51
9.4.2 Policy recommendations.....	51
10 Conclusion.....	53

List of maps, figures, charts and tables

List of maps

Map 4.1	Spatial boundaries of Ghent, Belgium.....	18
---------	---	----

List of figures

Figure 4.1	Networking mapping of Ghent, Belgium.....	29
------------	---	----

List of tables

Table 4.1	Spatial boundary of Ghent' case study.....	18
Table 4.2	Administrative configuration and responsibilities in Belgium.....	18
Table 4.3	Governance of Cohesion Policy in Ghent	20
Table 4.4	Ghent's engagement in delivering cohesion policy 2014-2020.....	23
Table 4.5	Ghent engagement in delivering Cohesion Policy 2021-2027	24
Table 5.2	Added value of negative experiences in Ghent.....	35
Table 6.1	Main instruments at national, regional and local level.....	39
Table 6.2	Coherence with the Cohesion Thematic Objectives 2014-2020.....	40
Table 6.3	Coherence with the Cohesion Policy Objectives 2021-2027	40
Table 8.1	The Governance of Recovery and Resilience Plan in Belgium	46

List of boxes

List of studies

Urban ERDF Contact Point	34
Integrated Neighborhood Approach (INA).....	34
Public-Private Partnerships as a Lever	34

Abbreviations

CEF	Connecting Europe Facility
CP	Cohesion Policy
EMFAF	European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund
ERDF	European Regional Development Fund
ESF	European Social Fund
ESF+	European Social Fund Plus
ESIF	European Structural and Investment Fund
ETC	European Territorial Cooperation
EU	European Union
EUI	European Urban Initiative
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
IB	Intermediate Body
ICLEI	Local Governments for Sustainability
ITI	Integrated Territorial Investment
JTF	Just Transition Fund
LIFE	EU LIFE Programme
MA	Managing Authority
PA	Partnership Agreement
PHV	Plan for Recovery and Resilience
RRF	Recovery and Resilience Facility
UIA	Urban Innovation Action
SME	Small and Medium Enterprise
SUD	Sustainable Urban Development
VDAB	Flemish Employment Service
VLAIO	Flemish Agency for Innovation and Entrepreneurship

1 Summary

Ghent is a mid-sized city in the Flemish region of Belgium, home to around 270,000 residents and covering 157 km². It is administratively divided into 25 neighborhoods, ranging from dense urban cores to suburban and peripheral village zones. These include, among others, Gent, Sint-Amandsberg, Dampoort, Ledeborg, Gentbrugge, Zwijnaarde, Mariakerke, and Oostakker. The city operates within Belgium's decentralised federal structure and plays a central role in implementing EU Cohesion Policy at the urban level. Particular to Ghent is a strong neighbourhood-oriented approach to urban renewal (*stedelijke vernieuwing*), which combines social and physical objectives. This integrated method emphasizes participatory planning and long-term investment, leading to strategic frameworks such as the *wijkstructuurschetsen* (neighbourhood structure sketches), which guide area-based development over time.

Main Challenges

- **Top-Down Funding Logic:** Thematic and procedural rigidity in EU and regional programming limits Ghent's ability to fully realize integrated, place-based approaches.
- **Fragmented Funding Streams:** Weak to almost no coordination between ERDF and ESF+ hinders the implementation of cross-sectoral projects.
- **Financial Burden:** High co-financing requirements strain local budgets, especially for capital-heavy interventions.
- **Administrative Complexity:** Technical requirements and audit pressures reduce accessibility for smaller or socially focused projects, as the capacity and knowledge on administrative and technical level is often lacking.

(Main) Policy Recommendations

- **Indicators:** Develop indicators tailored to urban contexts (or offer a menu of options and/or allow cities to propose their own). This should be paired with an enforcement and monitoring framework in which city involvement is essential.
- (EU level, operational programmes; anchor in regulations and consult cities in programme development)
- **Governance:** Increase trust in cities, allow them to work area-based, and give them autonomy and budgets. This would lead to a more integrated approach to urban challenges aligned with the New Urban Agenda (each city defining its own themes). (Regional + EU level; institutionalise in EU regulations)
- **RRF model:** Cities should be involved in the design of programmes tailored to their needs, and there should be a follow-up process on their input and concrete involvement during the implementation phase. Avoid cities suffering consequences when member states or regions fail to meet targets.
- **Urban contact point:** Sustaining urban contact points for ERDF is crucial. Promote synergies with ESF by providing funding to set up an ESF urban contact point as well.
- **Functional and metropolitan areas:** Clarify what exactly is defined as a functional /metropolitan urban area and how these concepts should be applied, what does it mean for application in cross-border contexts and collaborations (e.g. North Sea Port District).

2 Introduction

This case study focuses on the city of Ghent (Stad Gent), the capital of East Flanders in Belgium and the second largest city in the Flemish Region. With a population of approximately 270,000 and a surface area of 157 km², Ghent is a mid-sized urban centre situated in the Dutch-speaking region of Flanders. The city is administratively composed of 25 officially recognized neighborhoods (*wijken*), which include both historic urban cores (e.g., Binnenstad, Dampoort, Ledeborg) and suburban or peripheral zones (e.g., Mariakerke, Sint-Kruis-Winkel, Zwijnaarde). The municipal boundary of Ghent (BE234, LAU2) forms the territorial scope of this case study and has remained stable across the EU programming periods under review (2014–2020 and 2021–2027). Ghent does not function within a formal metropolitan governance structure but plays a central role in intermunicipal and cross-border collaborations, notably within the North Sea Port District and the Gentse Kanaalzone. In addition, Ghent is part of the relatively recently (2022) established Reference Region (Referentieregio Gent)¹, a network-based cooperation framework that evolved from earlier intermunicipal collaborations on themes such as mobility (*vervoersregio*). The Reference Region brings together 20 municipalities for joint work on mobility, environment, and economic development, but, since it has no governance powers, budget, or legal authority, it serves more as a coordination platform than a decision-making body. While these partnerships are strategically important, the focus of this case study is strictly on the administrative city of Ghent and its governance of the urban dimension of Cohesion Policy. Ghent is known for its strong, neighbourhood-oriented approach to urban development (*stedelijke vernieuwing*), which bridges spatial and social policy through long-term area-based programmes. This model integrates participatory planning, cross-sectoral coordination, and strategic investment, including tools such as *wijkstructuurschetsen* (neighbourhood structure sketches) to guide integrated local development over extended timeframes. The city implements its policies through a network of municipal departments, para-municipal agencies like sogent (urban development corporation), and civil society partners, with a particular emphasis on social inclusion, sustainability, and spatial quality. In relation to EU Cohesion Policy, Ghent is an active and experienced city. It participates in both shared management programmes (ERDF Flanders, ESF Flanders & several INTERREG programmes) and direct EU funding streams (e.g., Horizon Europe, UIA/EUI). The city plays a co-steering role within the Joint Urban Integrated Territorial Investment (ITI) for Antwerp and Ghent under the 2021–2027 Flemish ERDF programme. This has formalized its role in the urban dimension of Cohesion Policy, though final decision-making remains with the regional managing authority, VLAIO. As part of the ERDF Flanders programme, there is an urban contact point embedded within the strategic Funding team of the City of Ghent. Over the years, this has led to the development of capacity and expertise, enabling city services and external Ghent-based organisations to rely on support from application to implementation. Although the role of the City of Ghent is rather limited within the framework of ESF Flanders – merely a member of the monitoring committee – this programme does offer substantial support for, for example, the development of local partnerships for vulnerable job seekers and employment guidance for EU citizens from Eastern Europe. In this way, ESF strengthens urban policy on employment (cf. Arbeidspact for Ghent). However, Ghent faces ongoing challenges in leveraging Cohesion Policy effectively. Thematic constraints, administrative burdens, and limited flexibility in programming often restrict the city’s ability to fund integrated and socially oriented projects. For this reason EU funding - except for UIA/EUI - are used primarily as a complementary lever, rather than being structurally embedded in the city’s urban agenda.

The report is structured as follows:

- **Chapter 2: Introduction** – outlines the scope and relevance of the case study.

¹ The creation of Referentieregio Gent is part of a broader Flemish policy shift, articulated in the *Regiovorming – nota* (VR 2022 0402 DOC.0139-1), which proposes clearer delineation of Reference Regions to improve coherence among inter-municipal and above-local collaboration structures

- **Chapter 3: National Overview on Cohesion Policy** – presents the governance architecture of Cohesion Policy in Belgium and Flanders.
- **Chapter 4: Urban Structure and Governance** – examines Ghent’s territorial configuration, governance mechanisms, and institutional actors in relation to Cohesion Policy.
- **Chapter 5: Administrative Capacity and Innovations** – explores local capacities, institutional challenges, and innovative practices in project delivery and fund management.
- **Chapter 6: Cohesion Policy Contributions to Long-Term Agendas** – provides a brief reflection on how EU funds support, rather than shape, Ghent’s strategic planning. Given Ghent’s bottom-up approach, Cohesion Policy plays a complementary rather than central role.
- **Chapter 7: Funding Schemes and Synergies** – analyses how shared and direct EU funds are accessed and coordinated within the city.
- **Chapter 8: Recovery and Resilience Plan** – outlines limited city-level involvement in Belgium’s RRF. In Ghent’s case, RRF programming has had minimal relevance for urban development compared to ERDF and ESF+.
- **Chapter 9: Challenges and Policy Recommendations** – synthesises key issues and provides policy recommendations at the local, regional, and European levels.
- **Chapter 10: Conclusion** – summarises the case study’s findings and implications for urban policy and Cohesion Policy governance.

3 National Overview on Cohesion Policy

Governance Structure and Division of Responsibilities

Belgium implements EU Cohesion Policy within a federal governance framework, where responsibilities are highly devolved to the three regional entities - Flanders, Wallonia, and the Brussels-Capital Region. This structure requires a multilevel coordination approach to policy implementation and gives rise to what is known as a double-filtering mechanism, which ensures both strategic alignment with EU priorities and regional adaptability. The first filter operates from the EU level to the national and regional levels. The European Union establishes the overall strategic priorities and regulatory frameworks for Cohesion Policy via the Common Provisions Regulation and fund-specific rules (e.g., for the ERDF and ESF+). These guidelines are transposed into the national context through the Belgian Partnership Agreement (PA), negotiated between the federal government and the regions, and formally adopted by the European Commission. However, unlike centralized Member States, the federal level in Belgium acts primarily as a coordinator, not a central authority (European Commission, 2023a). This means that each region is responsible for its own Operational Programmes, ensuring their alignment with EU priorities such as smart specialization, climate neutrality, and social inclusion (OECD, 2020). The second filter occurs at the regional level, where operational programmes are developed and managed. In Flanders, the Flemish Government provides the strategic orientation for the Operational Programme for the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and for the European Social Fund (ESF). The Flemish Agency for Innovation and Entrepreneurship (VLAIO), through its Department of European Programmes, acts as the Managing Authority, launching open calls for projects, coordinating thematic working groups, and overseeing fund disbursement. The development of the ERDF Operational Programme by VLAIO follows a consultative process involving regional agencies, sectoral experts, and key stakeholders such as the Association of Flemish Cities and Municipalities (VVSG), knowledge institutions (e.g., VLIR), and civil society. Projects are selected through open calls assessed by thematic working groups involving VLAIO staff and external experts. In short, this approach reflects a strategic alignment with EU-level goals, thematic concentration and smart specialization. For the European Social Fund, management responsibilities in Flanders lie with the unit Europe WSE of the Department of Work, Economy, Science, Innovation and Social Economy (*Departement Werk, Economie, Wetenschap, Innovatie en Sociale Economie - WEWIS*), which oversees programmes related to employment, lifelong learning, and social inclusion. Moreover, Europe WSE delegates the management of part of its resources to two intermediary bodies because of their specific role in the labour market and in the educational landscape respectively, VDAB (Flemish Employment Service) & Department Education and Training. ESF+ complements the ERDF by funding labour market-related and human capital development projects, thus reflecting a clearer division of responsibilities between the two funds (Flemish ESF Agency, 2021). Within this multilevel governance framework, the federal level retains a limited but essential role, primarily in concluding the national Partnership Agreement, while the full implementation of Cohesion Policy takes place at the regional level with similar arrangements in Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels. Projects must align not only with EU thematic goals but also with region-specific priorities informed by smart specialization strategies and stakeholder consultations (VLAIO, 2023). In this way, project selection becomes a localized filtering process guided by both EU and Flemish policy logic. This study focuses specifically on how Cohesion Policy is implemented and organized in Flanders, with a particular emphasis on the city of Ghent as a case study. Brussels and Wallonia fall outside the scope of this analysis and are therefore not discussed.

Thematic and Strategic Focus

The ERDF Flanders programme has undergone strategic consolidation between the 2014–2020 and 2021–2027 programming periods. During the 2014–2020 cycle, the programme in Flanders supported initiatives across the full range of 11 EU-defined thematic objectives, which were translated into a regionally tailored strategy comprising 13 strategic transitions. These transitions were developed in response to major societal challenges identified in the SWOT analysis—such as innovation gaps, demographic ageing, climate change, urbanization, and labour market mismatches—and were aligned with the broader goals of the Europe 2020 Strategy and the Flemish long-term vision *Vlaanderen in Actie – Pact 2020*. The 13 transitions provided a roadmap for transformative investment across domains such as industrial renewal, SME growth, labour inclusion, targeted innovation, sustainable energy, spatial planning, and urban development. Projects supported during this period included both investment-heavy initiatives (e.g. infrastructure, equipment) and operational actions (e.g. training, capacity building), reflecting a broad interpretation of cohesion-oriented development.

In contrast, the 2021–2027 programme streamlined its focus to seven themes² organized under two overarching priorities, corresponding to the specific objectives (*specifieke doelstellingen*, SD's) under two EU Policy Objectives (*beleidsdoelstellingen*, BD):

- **Smart Flanders (PO1 / BD1 smarter Europe)**, which includes strengthening innovation capacity, promoting digitalisation, and enhancing skills development;
- **Sustainable Flanders (PO2 /BD2 Greener, carbon-free and climate resilient Europe)**, encompassing support for renewable energy, improvements in energy efficiency, the promotion of sustainable mobility, and efforts in climate adaptation (Flemish Government, 2022).

This thematic narrowing reflects the EU's thematic concentration requirements, which aims to maximize impact by concentrating funding on areas most aligned with EU strategic goals. In addition to thematic consolidation, the nature of supported projects has also shifted. While the 2014–2020 programme financed both investment (e.g. infrastructure, equipment) and operational (e.g. training, advisory services) projects, the 2021–2027 programme places greater emphasis on investment-heavy initiatives for ERDF (projects where at least 50% of costs are investments). Operational projects are now primarily supported by the European Social Fund (ESF), marking a clearer division of roles between funding instruments (VLAIO, 2023, Interview, VLAIO official, 2025).

While ERDF in Flanders emphasises territorial, economic and infrastructure development, ESF+ ensures the human and social dimensions are addressed—skills, inclusion, adaptability and active participation throughout the life course. Flanders translated the overarching ESF+ objectives into three main priorities:

- Promoting sustainable, high-quality jobs and labour mobility, and investing in education, training and lifelong learning. These activities complement the Flemish career policy aimed at a more effective labour market. ESF projects focus in particular on critical transition points in individual careers.
- Supporting social inclusion, equality and poverty-reduction projects. These projects target pathways into work and society for the main at-risk groups.
- Active ageing. Structural measures to encourage older people to remain in or re-enter work are promoted at both federal and Flemish level. ESF projects under this priority add value by making it easier for companies to offer older workers an attractive working environment.

² The 13 strategic transitions that guided the Flemish ERDF Operational Programme 2014–2020 are: (1) New industrial policy (transforming industrial activity into future-proof value chains), (2) SME growth and internationalisation (Gazellesprong), (3) Targeted innovation linked to societal challenges, (4) Inclusive labour market ("Everyone active"), (5) Child poverty reduction, (6) Healthcare innovation (Flanders'Care), (7) Renewable energy and smart grids, (8) Sustainable housing and construction, (9) Circular materials management, (10) Integrated spatial planning ("Space for tomorrow"), (11) Smart and sustainable mobility, (12) Acceleration of permitting and investment processes, and (13) Creative and sustainable cities (Vlaamse Regering, 2014).

Territorial Governance and Role of Cities

In Flanders, territorial distribution is within the ERDF Flanders programme operationalized through Integrated Territorial Investments (ITIs). These are designed to support place-based development by bringing together different investments within a single, integrated strategy for a specific territory. Flanders has designated four ITIs for the 2021–2027 period:

- Limburg (as a transition region): responds to the specific challenges of economic restructuring in the province, particularly following the SALK Turbo plan³ as its foundation.
- West Flanders: aligns with the “West Deal” strategic vision to drive forward the sustainable and future-oriented development of the entire province.
- Kempen: addresses the socio-economic and territorial challenges of the region, drawing on the *Dynamisch Actieplan Kempen–Dynak* (*Kempen Dynamic Action Plan - DYNAK*).
- Joint urban ITI for Ghent and Antwerp: covers coordinated urban development strategies for the two largest Flemish cities, combining ERDF resources to support integrated urban projects.

Each ITI has its own steering committee, a type of localized monitoring body, responsible for the preparation of calls in close collaboration with the Managing Authority (MA) and validation of the selected projects with regional development strategies. So the ITI has no role in the selection of the submitted proposals. The EU requires that at least 5% (2014–2020) and 8% (2021–2027) of the ERDF budget be allocated to the Sustainable Urban Development (SUD) objective. In Flanders, this threshold has not only been met but has been exceeded in urban ITI for Antwerp and Ghent, and currently exceeds it, with 10% of ERDF funds devoted to urban priorities. By contrast, in the 2014–2020 period, there was no formal urban ITI for these cities. Sustainable Urban development was pursued through a dedicated priority axis, granting cities some autonomy within the broader regional framework. Nevertheless, Flemish cities like Ghent remain dependent on the regional level for access to EU funds; they do not manage their own ERDF budgets. In an interview with a Flemish official involved in ERDF implementation, it was emphasized that the ITI model is considered effective, particularly in the urban ITI for Antwerp and Ghent. According to the official, ITIs enable strategic bottom-up input from cities, which can shape funding calls and influence project priorities, provided they remain within the thematic priorities of the Operational Programme (Interview, VLAIO official, 2024). Each ITI's steering committee not only aligns projects with regional goals but can also initiate calls for proposals. In the case of Antwerp and Ghent, the cities have different urban profiles, yet the model works well due to clear pre-agreed rules on funding allocation—60% for Antwerp, 40% for Ghent—and tailored thematic calls. This helps prevent competition between the cities while maintaining a shared governance responsibility within the ITI framework (Interview, VLAIO official, 2025). However, neither in the 2014–2020 programming period nor in the current one is there an official assigned decision-making role for cities in managing ERDF budgets. Nevertheless, there is substantive scope for dialogue on urban needs, often resulting in calls that also offer funding opportunities to cities such as Ghent. By contrast, the ESF Flanders operates through calls for organisations, which are launched and managed at Flemish level by the unit Europe WSE of the Department of Work, Economy, Science, Innovation and Social Economy. Cities and municipalities can still participate as project promoters or partners. ESF+ supports locally embedded projects in employment, lifelong learning, social inclusion and active ageing and therefore also offers funding opportunities for cities.

Political Dimensions and External Influences

Cohesion Policy implementation in Flanders is shaped by regional political priorities, which emphasize innovation, economic competitiveness, and environmental sustainability. These priorities are in line with broader EU goals, such as the European Green Deal, but they also reflect the distinct long-term vision of the Flemish Government as articulated in its regional development plans. Key strategic

³ The SALK Turbo plan (“Strategisch Actieplan Limburg in het Kwadraat – Turbo”) is an updated regional development strategy launched to accelerate the socio-economic transformation of the province of Limburg following industrial decline. Building on the earlier SALK programme, SALK Turbo focuses on strengthening innovation, supporting entrepreneurship, promoting sustainable mobility and energy transitions, and enhancing workforce skills to foster long-term economic resilience.

goals of the Flemish ERDF programme 2021-2027 include “Smarter Flanders” and “Sustainable Flanders,” aiming at strengthening growth, competitiveness, low-carbon transition, circular economy, and energy efficiency. Political considerations have also influenced territorial targeting. The recognition by the EC of Limburg as a transition region allowed it to receive a dedicated ERDF envelope. Similarly, the designation of ITIs reflects both economic profiles and urban development needs, eg., industrial renewal in Kempen, and smart city initiatives in Antwerp and Ghent. These territorial and thematic choices are backed by political commitments at the regional level to invest in infrastructure, innovation, environmental transition, and to ensure more balanced growth across Flanders. Meanwhile, the ESF+ priorities are intentionally structured to support those same transitions: ensuring that people have the skills, inclusion and labour market support needed for transitions to greener, digital and more sustainable economic models.

4 Urban structure and governance of Cohesion Policy

This chapter examines the spatial, administrative, and governance dimensions that shape the implementation of Cohesion Policy in the city of Ghent. As a mid-sized European city characterized by a distinctive mix of urban, suburban, and industrial areas, Ghent operates within a complex multilevel governance framework that influences both the design and delivery of EU cohesion interventions. The city's urban structure—organized around 25 neighborhoods and positioned within broader functional and economic regions—provides the territorial basis for policy implementation. Simultaneously, its administrative setup reflects Belgium's federalized system and the multi-layered nature of EU policymaking. The chapter explores how Ghent navigates the opportunities and constraints of Cohesion Policy through a governance model that is highly localized in execution but closely aligned with regional and European frameworks. It highlights the importance of institutional coordination, territorial integration, and strategic coherence in advancing cohesion objectives effectively.

4.1 Spatial boundaries and administrative configuration

City Boundaries

The city of Ghent is the capital of the East Flanders province in Belgium and the second largest city in the Flemish Region. As a municipality, Ghent is classified at the LAU2 (Local Administrative Unit) / NUTS5 level under Eurostat, with the code BE234. It is composed of 25 officially recognized neighborhoods (*wijken*) which serve as fundamental units for local service delivery, planning, and social policy implementation. A neighborhood can consist of one or more statistical sectors. In defining these, consideration was given to historical and sociological boundaries, natural borders, and the size of the areas. This internal geography spans from dense urban quarters to suburban and even rural areas, making Ghent both a compact city and a patchwork of distinct spatial identities.⁴ At a broader scale, Ghent plays a vital role in regional and metropolitan development. While not located directly on a national border, its proximity to the Netherlands facilitates cross-border cooperation, particularly through Interreg. Within Belgium, Ghent actively engages in inter-municipal collaboration, most notably through its participation in the Gentse Kanaalzone, a cross-jurisdictional industrial corridor that forms part of the North Sea Port District. North Sea Port District is a transnational cooperation platform involving Flemish and Dutch municipalities (Ghent, Evergem, Zelzate on the Flemish side; Terneuzen, Borsele, Vlissingen on the Dutch side) and the province East-Flanders (Flanders) and Zeeland (Netherlands). This zone is strategically important for logistics, energy transition, and heavy industry, positioning Ghent as a key node in the European North Sea economic zone. Ghent is also one of the 20 municipalities that form the Reference Region (*Referentieregio Gent*), a larger administrative and functional area used for regional planning and policy coordination. Its formation reflects a broader shift in Flemish spatial governance toward recognizing urban regions as functional entities,

⁴ The 25 neighborhoods of Ghent are: *Binnenstad (Medieval City Center)*, *Elisabethbegijnhof-Prinsenhof – Papegaai – Sint-Michiels (west of the city center, 19th-century residential quarters)*, *Watersportbaan-Ekkerghem (west of the city center, dense 19th-century residential neighborhood)*, *Bloemekenswijk (Northwest of the city center, 19th-century belt)*, *Macharius-Heirnis (southeast of the city center, 19th-Century Belt)*, *Dampoort (East of center, 19th-Century Belt)*, *Sint-Amandsberg (East of Dampoort, 19th-Century Belt extending into outer areas)*, *Oud Gentbrugge (Southeast of the city, just outside the inner ring, 19th-Century Belt)*, *Gentbrugge (South of Oud Gentbrugge, 19th-Century Belt)*, *Ledeberg (Directly southeast of the center, 19th-Century Belt)*, *Muide-Meulestede-Afrikalaan (North of the center, near the old port, 19th-Century Belt)*, *Rabot-Blaisantvest (Northwest edge of the center, 19th-Century Belt)*, *Sluizeken-Tolhuis-Ham (north of the center)*, *Moscou-Vogelhoek (South of Ledeberg)*, *Nieuw Gent-UZ (Southwest, beyond the 19th-century belt, Postwar Development)*, *Stationsbuurt Noord (North of Gent-Sint-Pieters station, Postwar Development)*, *Stationsbuurt Zuid (South of Sint-Pieters station, Postwar Development)*, *Drongen (Western outskirts, Suburban Residential Zone)*, *Mariakerke (Northwest outskirts, Suburban Residential Zone)*, *Wondelgem (North-northwest, Suburban Residential Zone)*, *Sint-Denijs-Westrem-Afsnee (Southwest, Suburban Residential Zone)*, *Zwijnaarde (Southern fringe, Suburban Residential Zone)*, *Gentse Kanaaldorpen en -zone (Northeast, near port and canal zone, Peripheral Village)*, *Oostakker (Northeast, behind Dampoort and Sint-Amandsberg, Peripheral Village)*.

where social and economic dynamics extend beyond city limits. Reference Regions are not new government layers, they were created as network-based cooperation models, not as entities with governance powers, budgets, or regulations of their own. This reference region fosters collaboration among neighbouring municipalities in domains such as mobility, environment, and economic development. However, its lack of legal authority makes it less relevant for this analysis. The territorial perimeter of this case study is limited to the administrative boundaries of the municipality of Ghent (BE234) including the 25 neighborhoods. No changes to this perimeter or its Eurostat codes occurred between the 2014–2020 and 2021–2027 EU programming periods.

Administrative configuration

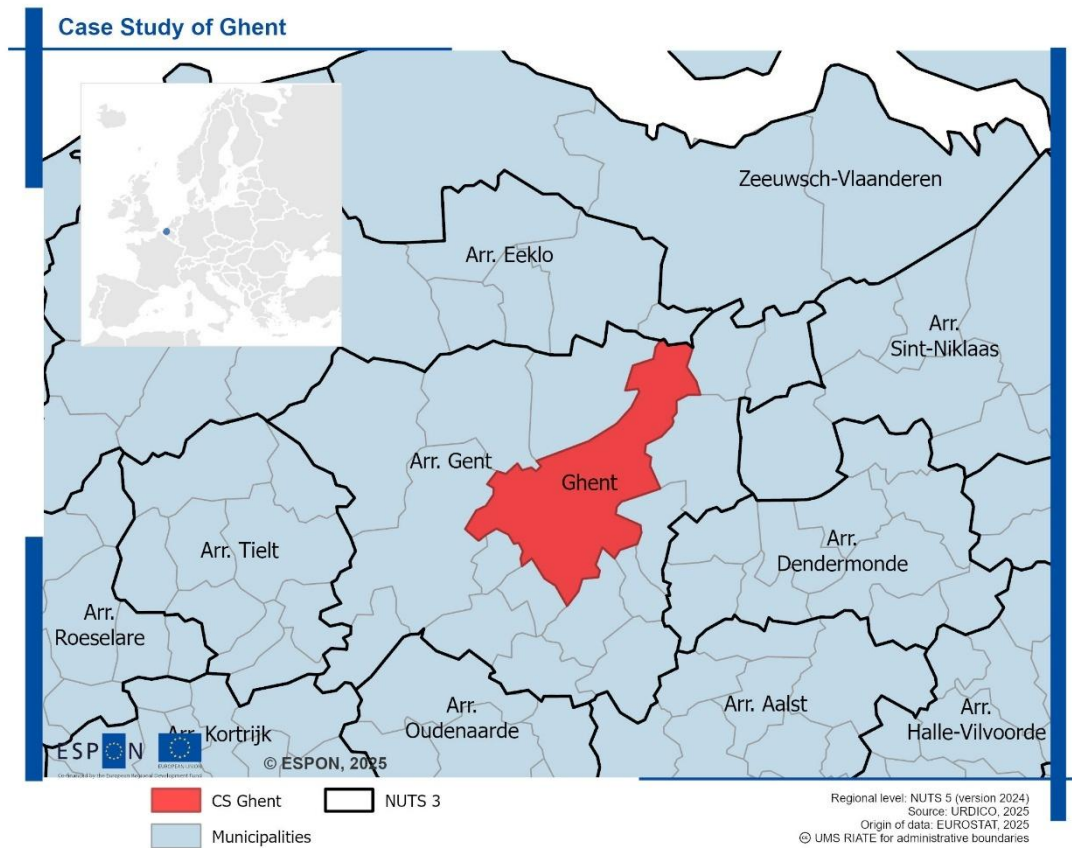
Ghent's urban governance reflects the complexity of Belgium's decentralized federal system, in which cities enjoy significant autonomy while simultaneously operating within a multi-tiered governance structure. As such, Ghent acts as a key node at the intersection of local, intermunicipal, regional (Flemish), federal, and European levels of policy and planning. With a population of approximately 270.473 residents (as of 2024), Ghent is the second-largest city in Flanders and a major urban centre in Belgium. At the local level, the City of Ghent (*Stad Gent*) exercises a wide range of responsibilities through its elected city council. These include urban planning, education, social services, housing, mobility, and cultural policy. The city has actively developed its own strategic frameworks, such as the *Ruimtelijk Structuurplan Gent* (Spatial Structure Plan), the *Climate Plan 2030*, and a *Mobility Plan*. Internally, governance is supported by a district-based service delivery model, with participatory budgeting playing a key role in fostering civic engagement and localized decision-making. Beyond the municipal borders, Ghent operates within several intermunicipal and metropolitan coordination structures. One of the most notable is VENAK (*Vereniging van de Kanaalzonegemeenten*), which brings together six municipalities — Ghent, Evergem, Zelzate, Wachtebeke, Lochristi, and Assenede — involved in the spatial and economic development of the Ghent Canal Zone. This area forms part of the larger North Sea Port District, a vital industrial corridor connecting the Port of Ghent with Zeeland in the Netherlands. VENAK coordinates cross-boundary planning on industrial growth, environmental sustainability, and logistics infrastructure in a region with a combined population of over 350,000 people. Additionally, Ghent participates in the Urban Core Group Ghent, a collaborative platform involving surrounding municipalities to align policies on housing, land use, and mobility across municipal boundaries. At a broader level, the city is also an active member of the VVSG (*Vlaamse Vereniging voor Steden en Gemeenten*, the Association of Flemish Cities and Municipalities), which advocates for interests of local authorities in regional and national policymaking. In addition, the City of Ghent is actively involved in the inter-municipal association “Knowledge Centre Flemish Cities” (*Kenniscentrum Vlaamse steden*), which aims to strengthen urban life in Flanders in all its facets. At the regional level, Ghent functions within the jurisdiction of the Flemish Region (*Vlaamse Gewest*), which holds competencies over spatial planning, housing, the environment, and public infrastructure. Regional planning priorities are outlined in the *Beleidsplan Ruimte Vlaanderen* (Flemish Spatial Policy Plan), to which Ghent aligns its own local plans. The team Urban Policy (Team stedenbeleid), of the Flemish Agency for Home Affairs (Agentschap Binnenlands Bestuur - ABB) supports cities like Ghent through the *Vlaams Stedenbeleid* (*Flemish Urban Policy*) programme, a targeted policy instrument aimed at addressing the complex challenges faced by urban areas in their development as sustainable and liveable cities. Established in the early 2000s, *Stedenbeleid* formulates policy proposals, guides and supports local governments, provides subsidies for urban renewal, smart city initiatives, and social inclusion, funds areas facing persistent metropolitan challenges, builds knowledge and expertise in provincial and smaller cities, and monitors urban policy through tools such as the *Gemeente- en Stadsmonitor*. As a funding framework, it consists of three main components: *Grootstedenbeleid*, supporting large cities like Ghent, Antwerp, Mechelen, Oostende, and Sint-Niklaas through urban renewal investments; *Plattelandsfonds*, targeting rural municipalities; and *Stadsvernieuwing*, providing concept, project, and thematic subsidies for urban renewal. Through these mechanisms, Ghent receives funding and strategic guidance for integrated urban development projects, combining infrastructure investment with social programming, such as revitalising disadvantaged neighbourhoods, improving access to services, and enhancing public space. Unfortunately, this Flemish funding is also under pressure.

Table 4.1
Spatial boundary of Ghent' case study

Level	2014-2020	Level	2021-2027
	LAU(s)		LAU(s)
Core Municipality	BE234	Core Municipality	BE234

Source: author's own elaboration

Map 4.1
Spatial boundaries of Ghent, Belgium



Source: author's own elaboration

Table 4.2
Administrative configuration and responsibilities in Belgium

Level	NUTS	Responsibility
European Union		Defines overarching policy priorities (e.g. Green Deal, Urban Agenda), promotes integrated territorial development
Federal State	NUTS0	Ensures cross-regional consistency in planning norms, supports national data and statistical infrastructure
Flemish Region	NUTS1 (BE2)	Core authority for spatial planning (Beleidsplan Ruimte Vlaanderen), housing, environment, mobility, economic strategy

Level	NUTS	Responsibility
Province of East Flanders	NUTS3 (BE23)	Provides advisory support to municipalities, coordinates intermunicipal initiatives, offers regional planning data
City of Ghent	LAU2 (BE234)	Develops and implements local spatial plans (e.g. <i>Ruimtelijk Structuurplan Gent</i>), climate strategy, mobility framework, and urban development projects

Source: author's own elaboration

4.2 Governance of Cohesion Policy in Ghent

The governance of Cohesion Policy in Ghent is embedded in a multi-level institutional framework that connects EU policy priorities with Flemish regional strategies and local implementation. While shaped by European and regional directives, Ghent has developed a strongly localised and strategically coordinated governance model in which municipal departments, para-municipal entities, and social partners collaborate to deliver urban development and social cohesion. This integrated approach — grounded in area-based planning and participatory methods — enables the city to align EU funding instruments such as ERDF and ESF+ with long-term goals for spatial justice and neighbourhood renewal.

Multi-Level Actor Configuration

At the EU level, the European Commission — notably DG REGIO — sets the strategic direction for Cohesion Policy, defining priorities and frameworks for funds such as ERDF and ESF+. While Ghent does not manage these funds directly at the EU level, it benefits from Flanders' broader positioning within the European policy landscape. In this context, the Vlaams-Europees Verbindingsagentschap (VLEVA) supports Flemish stakeholders by facilitating access to EU policy developments and funding instruments, strengthening participation in European networks, and helping align local strategic projects with evolving EU priorities. VLEVA is a partly publicly and by membership funded organization that thus aims to strengthen the region's presence and influence within the EU policy landscape, especially aimed at local and regional stakeholders such as cities, provinces, public agencies, research institutions, and civil society organisations. VLEVA monitors EU policy and funding developments, helps Flemish stakeholders access and align with EU funding opportunities, builds capacity through training and guidance, facilitates networking within European networks, and supports Flemish representation and advocacy at the EU level. The Federal Government of Belgium plays a relatively minor role in cohesion policy due to Belgium's strong regionalisation. It is responsible for the drafting of the Partnership Agreement (PA), in cooperation with the Commission and involvement of the regions. The PA is a strategic document for programming investments from the cohesion policy funds and the EMFAF during the Multiannual Financial Framework. It specifies the programmes that will be implemented and allocates the corresponding budgets for each. The Government of Flanders holds the key coordinating role at the regional level, acting as managing authority for ERDF & ESF. VLAIO (Flemish Agency for Innovation and Entrepreneurship) is the MA for ERDF Flanders programme and the unit Europe WSE of the Department of Work, Economy, Science, Innovation and Social Economy (Departement Werk, Economie, Wetenschap, Innovatie en Sociale Economie) is responsible for ESF Flanders, of which the management is partly delegated to VDAB & department Education and Training. The Flemish urban policy encourages cities to develop into sustainable cities. Cities are the driving force behind society, places where innovative solutions to social challenges are found. The Department of Environment, particularly its Spatial Planning Division, defines the regional spatial planning frameworks that guide local territorial development, but has no role in the governance of CP in Flanders. This includes instruments such as the *Ruimtelijk Structuurplan Vlaanderen* (RSV, Spatial Structure Plan for Flanders) and the more recent *Beleidsplan Ruimte Vlaanderen* (BRV, Spatial Policy Plan for Flanders), which provide strategic guidance to municipalities for sustainable and space-efficient development. The Flemish Government approved the strategic vision of the BRV in 2018, setting long-term spatial policy goals and a renewed approach but without adopting formal spatial policy frameworks yet. Implementation focuses on stimulating local initiatives, pilot projects, and support for local spatial planning to gradually realize the vision in practice. Additionally, in 2022, the government approved the "bouwshift" (building shift) concept to reduce new land

consumption, aiming for zero additional land use by 2040. The Province of East Flanders plays an intermediate, facilitating role in spatial governance and occasionally cofinances cohesion-related projects with a regional or cross-municipal dimension, such as in the areas of green infrastructure, mobility, and socio-economic development. The Province of East Flanders has an official role in certain INTERREG programmes, such as INTERREG Flanders–Netherlands. In this context, the BGTS North Sea Port District — a cross-border collaboration between Ghent and its Dutch counterparts around the port area — represents a relevant actor promoting territorial integration and spatial-economic cooperation beyond administrative borders.

Local Governance: Ghent’s Integrated and Neighbourhood-Oriented Model

At the city level, Ghent has developed a locally grounded and socially integrated model of urban renewal, led by a well-developed network of municipal services and partner organisations. *Dienst Stedelijke Vernieuwing* (Urban Renewal Service) acts as the main coordinating body for neighbourhood-level interventions. Its distinctive approach combines physical regeneration with social inclusion, often in vulnerable areas. What distinguishes this service is its focus on developing long-term plans for specific neighbourhoods, through a programmatic approach, which serve as the basis for broader urban renewal programmes. These programmes consist of a wide range of projects, experiments, service enhancements, and participatory activities, all tailored to the needs and potential of each neighbourhood. Such programs guide integrated territorial development over periods of up to 20 years. These long-range renewal programmes, are often supported by *wijkstructuurschetsen* (neighbourhood structure sketches), strategic spatial vision plans aimed at ensuring greater coherence between existing and future projects.

Under this umbrella vision, specific initiatives are identified and developed—some of which may become eligible for European co-financing, particularly under ERDF, depending on thematic alignment and readiness. This model allows the city to embed social and physical objectives within a coherent urban development strategy while maintaining flexibility and responsiveness to emerging needs. All the more, the city is in this way exploring how a socially just and inclusive form of urban renewal can be pursued.

Sogent, Ghent’s urban development company, translates policy into practice, developing large-scale spatial projects, often in partnership with the city and private actors. These projects are often supported by ERDF funding and reflect a strong spatial-social integration, combining housing, public space, and community infrastructure.

The Strategic Funding Team – as part of the International Networking & Funding Service is a critical coordination nodes within the city’s administration. It helps departments identify suitable EU funding streams, align local project ideas with operational programmes, and provides technical support during the application and implementation phase. This institutional layer enables a strategic approach to funding, where cohesion policy instruments are seen as levers for local priorities rather than isolated funding opportunities. Especially the ERDF Urban Contact Point (*stedelijk EFRO Contactpunt Gent*), embedded in the Strategic Funding Team, acts as a technical liaison with the managing authority in Flanders (VLAIO) in the context of ERDF Flanders and supports various actors, including a range of public entities in Ghent, regarding ERDF funding. Social policy and labour market interventions — often funded through ESF+ — are delivered through the Labour and Employment Service (Dienst Werk) and the Public Centre for Social Welfare (OCMW Gent). These departments collaborate with local NGOs and social economy enterprises to embed employment and inclusion efforts within spatially targeted renewal areas.

Table 4.3
Governance of Cohesion Policy in Ghent

Name of the actor	Level	Responsibility	
		Cohesion Policy	Spatial Planning
European Commission (DG REGIO)	EU	Sets strategic priorities for Cohesion Policy; manages ERDF and ESF+ regulations and approval	N/A

Name of the actor	Level	Responsibility	
		Cohesion Policy	Spatial Planning
VLEVA	EU/Flemish	Supports Flemish stakeholders with EU funding access and policy alignment; facilitates participation in EU networks	Indirectly supports policy alignment
Federal Government of Belgium	Federal	Drafting PA between Belgium and the EC	Minimal role due to regionalisation
VLAIO (Flemish Agency for Innovation & Entrepreneurship)	Regional	Managing authority for ERDF in Flanders; oversees funding calls, is in charge of decision making of submitted proposals and is responsible for the overall management of the programme	
Department of Work, Economy, Science, Innovation and Social Economy (Departement Werk, Economie, Wetenschap, Innovatie en Sociale Economie) - Unit Europe WSE		Responsible for the implementation and management of ESF Flanders. The management is partly delegated to VDAB & department Education and Training	N/A
TeamStedenbeleid (Urban Policy Unit)	Regional	Advises on urban development and pleads for urban funding in EU/Flemish policy;	Shapes urban policy strategies and supports cities with urban renewal approaches
Province of East Flanders	Provincial	Involved in cohesion-related projects with regional scope; member of the monitoring committee of certain Interreg programmes, cofinancing in EU funded projects, supports inter-municipal coordination	Facilitates spatial coherence; supports green corridors, mobility, and socio-economic integration
BGTS North Sea Port District	Cross-border/Prov.	Fosters territorial cooperation and spatial-economic coordination in the port area (Ghent-NL); supports cross-border development linked to ERDF	Promotes integrated planning across national borders in the North Sea Port region
City of Ghent – Urban Renewal Service (Dienst Stedelijke Vernieuwing)	Local	Develops long-term urban renewal programmes; identifies projects potentially eligible for EU co-financing	Coordinates area-based urban development; designs neighbourhood structure plans (“wijkstructuurschetsen”)
sogent (Ghent’s Urban Development Corporation)	Local	Implements on request of the city of Ghent urban development projects; applies for EU funding (ERDF Flanders); manages strategic real estate and brownfield re-generation	Operational planning and transformation of key sites
International Networking & Funding Service	Local	The strategic funding team coordinates EU funding applications and supports in the implementation; aligns Ghent’s strategic projects with EU funding opportunities, and the urban ERDF contact point is embedded in this service.	N/A

Name of the actor	Level	Responsibility	
		Cohesion Policy	Spatial Planning
Labour and Employment Service (Dienst Werk)	Local	Implements ESF+ projects focused on employment, training, and social inclusion	Supports alignment of labour market strategies
OCMW Ghent (Public Centre for Social Welfare)	Local	Executes social inclusion and poverty reduction projects under ESF+	Indirect contribution to social aspects

Source: author's own elaboration

4.3 Ghent involvement in Cohesion Policy

4.3.1 2014-2020 programming period

During the 2014–2020 programming period, Ghent played a substantial role as a beneficiary of ERDF Flanders Programme, focusing on the urban dimension of Cohesion Policy. Although the city did not act as a Managing Authority or Intermediate Body, it was instrumental in implementing and selecting strategic urban projects under a dedicated priority axis for sustainable urban development. Importantly, while this axis created space for tailored urban interventions, it did not take the form of a formal Integrated Territorial Investment as defined by EU regulations. According to local stakeholders, this setup gave Ghent a considerable degree of flexibility. Projects could be shaped around locally defined needs, allowing for a mix of physical investments (e.g. housing, mobility, climate adaptation) and softer, operational interventions (e.g. community development, training). For example, Ghent in the Oude Dokken area, European funds played a key role in connecting historical heritage with new urban development. ERDF co-financed the renovation of quay walls along the Houtdok, the historic brick arches integrated into Kapitein Zepposspark, the quay walls and residential moorings in the Handelsdok, and the quay wall along the Achterdok, as well as the purchase of two historic harbor cranes. Meanwhile, other aspects of the brownfield redevelopment were supported by VLAIO funding. (VLAIO, 2020). (VLAIO, 2020).

Ghent accessed additional ERDF funding through Interreg in all three strands:

- Cross-border cooperation: *North-Sea Port Talent* (Interreg Vlaanderen–Nederland) aimed to strengthen the labour market in the North Sea Port region through closer cooperation between employers and other stakeholders. The overall objective of *PACE* (Interreg 2 Sea) was to create more flexibility in childcare and to establish an integrated approach to childcare and employment. These projects often linked local innovation with EU-wide networks and cross-border knowledge exchange (Interreg 2 Seas, 2020).
- Transregional cooperation: in the *BEGIN* project (Interreg North Sea), which focused on blue-green infrastructure and climate adaptation, Ghent served as a lead partner, showcasing its capacity to coordinate complex international consortia. Such roles significantly boost the city's visibility and leadership credentials at the European level.
- Interregional cooperation: in *PROSPERA* (Interreg Europe), several cities, including Ghent, cooperated to improve regional policies on protection and promotion of natural heritage by tackling loss of ecosystem services and improving sustainable development in peri-urban areas threatened by urban-sprawl.

In addition, the city benefited from other European funding within the framework of cohesion policy, including the UIA programme, URBACT, and projects co-financed by the European Social Fund. Examples include the project *Gent Knapt Op (ICCARus)*, which improved housing conditions for vulnerable homeowners and installed a recurrent fund; participation in the URBACT network *ROOF* to develop an integrated strategy to end homelessness based on the Housing First model; and European Social Fund projects such as *House of Skills*, which enhanced employability and social inclusion for disadvantaged groups or Jobteam Gent who helps vulnerable job seekers find work.

Table 4.4
Ghent's engagement in delivering cohesion policy 2014-2020

Document	Level	Program- ming	Phase		Role		
			Managing	Implement- ing	Managing Authority	Intermedi- ate Body	Beneficiary
ERDF Flanders	Regional	Consulted via urban priority axis	Responsible for the selection of projects via a steering Committee	Urban projects under PA4	Vlaamse Agentschap Innoveren en Ondernemen (VLAIO)		X
ESF Vlaanderen	Regional			X			X
Interreg Vlaanderen-Nederland/France - Wallonia - Flanders / 2 Seas/North Sea/ North west Europe	Cross border/trans- national/in- terre- gional	As project /lead partner		X			X
Urban innovative Actions	EU			X			X
URBACT III	EU			X			X

Source: author's own elaboration

4.3.2 2021-2027 programming period

In the current programming period (2021–2027), Ghent continues to strengthen its role as a leading urban beneficiary in Cohesion Policy delivery. Although the city does not serve in a managing or coordinating capacity, it increasingly acts as a strategic urban innovator aligned with EU goals on green transition, digitalisation, and territorial cohesion. Projects supported in this phase include climate adaptation measures (e.g., permeable pavements, rain gardens), public building retrofits, and multi-modal mobility hubs. (Stad Gent, 2021; VLAIO, 2022). Importantly, the 2021–2027 period also introduced the ITI mechanism, under which Ghent and Antwerp now share a joint urban strategy within the ERDF framework. While the ITI has formalised territorial governance for urban funding, Ghent's role remains predominantly that of a beneficiary, with limited direct influence on fund management. Nevertheless, this programme creates opportunities for Ghent in areas such as cybersecurity, digitisation, etc.

The city plays a pioneering role in urban living labs, which function as incubators for EU co-financing. These labs promote co-creation with citizens, researchers, and SMEs, and often serve as stepping stones toward broader project partnerships under Horizon Europe or the European Urban Initiative (European Commission, 2022). *Rewild the City* has been approved within the EUI programme. In this project Ghent is experimenting in densely built-up neighbourhoods with stripping away sealed surfaces (paving etc.) and increasing green space, to enhance biodiversity, water infiltration, cooling, and general livability.

Ghent remains actively involved in all three strands of Interreg:

- cross-bordercooperation: *North Sea Port Talent 2.0* (Interreg Vlaanderen – Nederland) builds on the previous project and focuses on helping employers find qualified staff. In light of climate change, houses and buildings are being renovated and increasingly well insulated

and airtight. This is very important in order to combat further global warming, but it means that species that depend on our buildings are losing even more places to rest and sleep. The project *Natuur-inbouw* (Interreg Vlaanderen –Nederland) therefore aims to create or maintain opportunities in more buildings for animal species such as birds, bats and insects that depend on them.

- Transnational cooperation: the COPPER (Interreg North Sea) project is preparing Europe's municipalities to coordinate green locally-powered cities. It is the first Europe-wide collaboration to test and demonstrate local energy action plans (LEAP), a bundle of techniques and activities that will enable local authorities to drive locally-powered cities.
- Interregional cooperation: the *JUSTGREEN* (Interreg Europe) project aims to ensure that urban greening measures are socially equitable, including for vulnerable population.

During this programme period, Ghent does not yet have an approved URBACT project. Nevertheless, the urban renewal programmes for neighbourhoods have been selected as good practice by URBACT and a proposal to transfer our knowledge and experience to other cities has been submitted. In addition Ghent has engaged in a City-to-City exchange, a format that promotes targeted, small-scale peer learning. In one such exchange, Ghent collaborated with cities from Latvia and Portugal, conducting in-depth site visits and thematic discussions aligned with New European Bauhaus principles. These exchanges are appreciated for their hands-on nature, minimal administrative burden, and real-time knowledge transfer. As in the previous programme period, the City of Ghent, together with several Ghent-based organisations, is receiving support under the *Jobteam* project to provide intensive guidance to job seekers with multiple problems who currently have nowhere else to turn for activation assistance. Each job seeker receives guidance from a mobile employment counsellor. There is also additional ESF support to expand Jobteam's capacity to assist more EU13 citizens with complex issues. In addition, extra expertise is being deployed (intake sessions in the native language, legal expertise, immigration law/labour law, etc.) to meet the needs of these groups better.

Table 4.5
Ghent engagement in delivering Cohesion Policy 2021-2027

Document	Level	Program- ming	Phase		Role		
			Managing	Implementing	Managing Au- thority	Interme- diate Body	Benefi- ciary
ERDF Flanders	Regional	X	Member of the monitoring committee	X	VLAIO		X
ESF Flanders	Regional		Member of the monitoring committee	X			X
Interreg Vlaanderen –Nederland / North Sea/ Europe	Cross-bor- der/transna- tional/inter- regional			X			X
European Urban Initiativ	EU			X			X
European Urban Initiative	EU			X			X

Source: author's own elaboration

4.3.3 Main differences

The transition from the 2014–2020 to the 2021–2027 programming period brought significant shifts in Ghent’s position within the Cohesion Policy framework—most notably, the formal introduction of an ITI-structure in the ERDF Flanders programme, shared with the City of Antwerp. This evolution has altered not only Ghent’s role in governance but also its influence on programming, implementation, and access to funding.

Governance Structure

The most defining change between the two periods lies in the governance architecture. During the 2014–2020 cycle, Ghent and Antwerp operated under a dedicated priority axis for sustainable urban development within the Flemish ERDF programme. While this axis gave the cities a degree of influence and a clearer urban focus, it did not constitute a formal ITI under EU regulation. According to local stakeholders, this arrangement provided greater flexibility and alignment with local needs, offering the city autonomy in shaping and selecting projects that responded to urban realities. In the 2021–2027 period, however, Ghent became part of a formal ITI, introduced as a mandatory requirement by the EU for earmarked funding for sustainable urban development (art. 11 ERDF regulation). While this new structure was expected to strengthen place-based governance, some interviewees perceive it as a more rigid, top-down model. In particular, the thematic constraints imposed at the regional level are highlighted as somewhat limiting flexibility in implementation. The shift toward a joint ITI with Antwerp, while structurally significant, has also introduced coordination complexities and a more narrowly defined strategic space for cities. In ESF Flanders, the governance structure has remained unchanged over the two programme periods, so there is no direct role for the City of Ghent, although the city is now represented in the monitoring committee.

Programming Process

Programming in the earlier period involved some consultation with urban actors but lacked a formal territorial strategy. In contrast, the current period requires a joint territorial strategy for the ITI in ERDF Flanders, developed by Ghent and Antwerp in collaboration with the regional Managing Authority. Nevertheless, cities remain constrained by limited thematic flexibility and top-down programming priorities. While cities like Ghent may align with some of these goals—e.g., in areas like cybersecurity or green mobility—they find that thematic selection and project eligibility are more narrowly defined. For instance, projects on skill development or educational transitions—relevant to Ghent’s urban economy and labour market—may no longer fit neatly into the current (more innovation-oriented) priorities. This might also limit opportunities to embed ERDF funding within the socio-spatial neighbourhood based renewal approach, that arguably spearhead Ghent’s territorial development. The ESF+ programme was prepared by the European Programmes Division (Europe WSE) of the former Department of Labour and Social Economy. During this preparatory process, various consultations and discussions were held with relevant Flemish stakeholders, including administrations, social partners, and civil society organisations, as well as the city of Ghent. Although ESF Flanders does have a significant added value for Ghent’s policy, it is not entirely in line with the city’s own needs and priorities. In the context of social inclusion, for example, social support is also needed for vulnerable groups, not just guidance towards employment.

Funding Schemes and Implementation Tools

Another key difference lies in the design of funding schemes and implementation tools. The 2014–2020 ERDF Flanders programme featured a dedicated urban axis, though without formal ITI mechanisms. Between 2021 and 2027, the introduction of the ITI provides a dedicated funding envelope and a more structured implementation framework. Nevertheless, this is constrained by the city of Ghent’s limited strategic autonomy, and the ultimate decision-making authority remains with VLAIO, the regional Managing Authority. An additional challenge is the persistent fragmentation between ERDF and ESF+. The two funds continue to be managed by separate bodies with different administrative cultures and project logics. As a result, integrated urban strategies that aim to bridge economic development and social inclusion remain difficult to operationalise. Similarly, projects that combine social support and infrastructure, such as educational pathways into biotech jobs, are challenging to fund due to this fragmentation. From an administrative standpoint, the 2021–2027 programming period also introduced a pre-application process (vooraanmeldingen) for ERDF Flanders, which, according to VLAIO, is intended to provide greater clarity and direction to local governments at an early stage of the project pipeline. This step aims to further align local project ideas with

programme priorities before submitting a complete application, thereby enhancing administrative efficiency and reducing the risk of ineligible or mismatched proposals later in the process. ESF Flanders consistently issues calls for proposals. The support percentages and amounts vary per call and are always stated on each call form. In both programming periods, ESF Flanders works with calls and partnerships.

Thematic Priorities

The thematic architecture of the Flemish ERDF Operational Programme has undergone both expansion and consolidation across the two programming periods.

In the 2014–2020 period, the Flemish Government chose to allocate ERDF funding across four Priority Axes (*Prioriteitsassen*, PA) in line with the overarching EU cohesion policy goals:

- Stimulating research, technological development, and innovation
- Enhancing the competitiveness of SMEs
- Supporting the transition to a low-carbon economy
- Promoting sustainable urban development

Each Priority Axis was operationalised through a set of Specific Objectives (*Specifieke Doelstellingen*). Project calls were issued within these SOs to attract relevant project proposals, which allowed for a degree of flexibility and responsiveness to local needs. In particular, PA4 (urban development) served as a dedicated strand for Ghent and Antwerp, providing them with the opportunity to align projects with their specific urban agendas—even in the absence of a formal ITI mechanism.

By contrast, the 2021–2027 programme introduced a streamlined structure, reducing the number of thematic areas from thirteen to seven, grouped under just two broad priorities:

- Smart Flanders (Innovation), encompassing innovation capacity, digitalisation, and skills development
- Sustainable Flanders (Green Transition), covering renewable energy, energy efficiency, sustainable mobility, and climate adaptation

This strategic consolidation was meant to focus resources and improve coherence, but it also narrowed the thematic scope. While priorities such as sustainability, circular economy, and innovation remain consistent across both periods, the new structure imposes tighter boundaries around eligible themes and expected results.

The ESF Flanders programme 2014-2020 had four priority areas:

- Curative career policy
- Preventive career policy
- Social inclusion and poverty reduction
- Partnership development and people-oriented entrepreneurship

The ESF Flanders programme 2021-2027 has four priorities:

- Access to employment
- Social inclusion
- Lifelong learning
- Investing in workable jobs and an inclusive labour market
- Social innovation

Thematically speaking, the ESF programmes in both programme periods are similar, although the current programme includes a mandatory thematic concentration, namely that at least 25% must be allocated to social inclusion. In addition, social innovation is a new priority. Overall, there is a strong emphasis on employment. Within the priority of social inclusion, the ESF programme also focuses strongly on strengthening the basic conditions for labour market participation and full participation in society. However, attention is also paid to the integrated pathway of vulnerable groups.

4.4 Networking and lobbying activity

The city of Ghent demonstrates a strong and increasingly strategic approach to networking and lobbying within European urban governance and funding landscapes. The city actively participates in a range of formal and informal arenas, recognising its dual function: accessing funding and positioning Ghent as a credible, capable, and visible actor within the European urban community. At the European level, Ghent has been a full member of Eurocities for several years, a key network representing over 200 European cities through which it participates in thematic working groups and high-level policy dialogues. From 2025 to 2027 Ghent is elected president of Eurocities and for the period 2025-2028 Ghent will be member of the Executive Committee of the network. Different civil servants of the City of Ghent are active in thematic Eurocities working groups and fora. In the past, Ghent chaired the Environmental Forum (2023-2025). Several city council members actively take part in debates during Eurocities events. The Eurocities network serves not only as a formal advocacy platform but also as a valuable space for building long-term relationships and partnerships with many different cities spread over Europe. City staff have remarked that contacts made through Eurocities often lead to new opportunities, whether in the form of joint project applications, shared knowledge, or increased visibility in the European urban scene. Ghent is also a member of ICLEI, a global network dedicated to sustainability and resilience, which reinforces its environmental agenda and provides access to global best practices. Besides Eurocities and ICLEI, the City of Ghent is in the year 2025 a member of 46 thematic international networks, covering different policy topics (tourism, culture, mobility, climate such as Polis (Cities & Regions for Better Transport), Climate Alliance, Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy, UNESCO Creative Cities Network, etc. Ghent's urban renewal strategy has received increasing attention on the European stage. A significant milestone was the recognition of its neighbourhood renewal methodology as a URBACT 'Urban Good Practice', drawing on two decades of experience. Building on this recognition, the city plans to submit an application for a URBACT Transfer Network by summer 2026, aiming to both share its expertise with other cities and strengthen its own internal learning culture. On the national level, Ghent is represented through the VVSG (Association of Flemish Cities and Municipalities), which plays a vital role in aligning Flemish urban interests with national and EU policies. In addition, the City of Ghent is actively involved in the inter-municipal association "Knowledge Centre Flemish Cities" (Kenniscentrum Vlaamse steden), which aims to strengthen urban life in Flanders in all its facets. Finally, city officials underscore the added value of cumulative recognition. Having a portfolio of successful projects across multiple programs—URBACT, Interreg, EU—builds credibility in the eyes of funders and partners. It also contributes to Ghent's ability to position itself as a trusted and capable urban actor, both in terms of implementation and knowledge sharing. Ghent's approach to networking and lobbying, therefore, reflects both strategic ambition and a learning-oriented mindset. Through participation in European networks, the city is not only expanding its access to funding, but also building institutional knowledge, visibility, and a strong European identity. Its increasingly deliberate participation in knowledge-sharing platforms like URBACT signals a shift toward long-term capacity building—ensuring that EU engagement strengthens both external partnerships and internal expertise.

Table 4.6
Networking and lobbying activity of Ghent, Belgium

Name of the network	Level	Topic	Role	Additional comment
Eurocities	EU	Urban policy, mobility, innovation, MFF	Full member; active, president 2025-2027	Key platform for visibility, advocacy, and peer exchange
Climate Alliance	EU	Climate action	Political representation	Promoting climate action in European municipalities

Name of the network	Level	Topic	Role	Additional comment
Convenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy	EU	Three pillars: mitigation, adaptation & energy poverty	Signatory	Framework is the Paris Agreement and 2030 Sustainability Agenda and the European Green Deal, with a range of cross-sectorial policies, from the Renovation Wave, sustainable mobility, food system sustainability, to nature-based solutions and adaptation, just transition and circular economy
Polis	EU	Sustainable mobility and innovation	Full member	
ICLEI	Global	Sustainability, resilience	Full member	Participates in global dialogues and sustainability initiatives
North Sea Port District	EU/cross border	Connecting the port region into a single district, with three objectives: maximising employment, high-quality living and being a leader in climate action.	Shareholder	Established in 2021 by North Sea Port, six municipalities and two provinces, the legal working form is Benelux Grouping for Territorial Cooperation.
Association of Flemish Cities and Municipalities (Vlaamse Vereniging voor Steden en Gemeenten - VVSG)	National	Governance, policy advocacy, European funding & follow up MFF	Political representation	Ensures Ghent's voice in Flemish and national policy discussions Inter-city reflection group
Knowledge Centre Flemish Cities (Kenniscentrum Vlaamse Steden)	National	Urbanisation, knowledge gathering & dissemination, networking	Political representation	Inter-municipal organisation founded by the 13 central cities in Flanders

Source: author's own elaboration

Figure 4.1
Networking mapping of Ghent, Belgium

Networks Levels

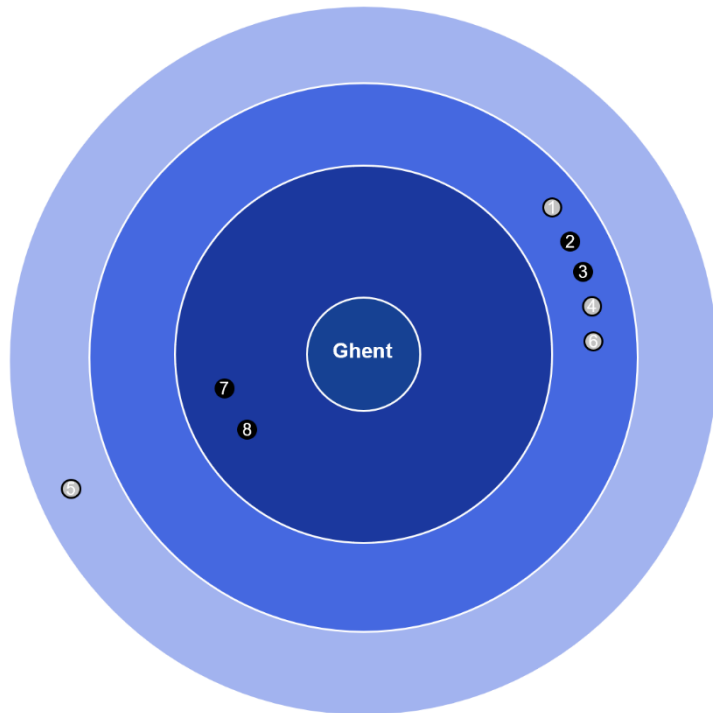
- National Level
- European level
- International Level

Role within the Network

- Observer
- Full member
- Coordinating role
- Political responsibility

Name of Network

- Eurocities
- 2 Climate Alliance
- 3 Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy
- 4 Polis
- 5 ICLEI
- 6 North Sea Port District
- 7 Association of Flemish Cities and Municipalities
- 8 Knowledge Centre Flemish Cities



Source: authors' own elaboration

5 Administrative capacity and Institutional innovations

5.1 Administrative capacity and management gaps

Ghent has participated in various EU programmes, including ERDF Flanders, ESF Flanders, UIA/EUI-IA, URBACT, LIFE, Horizon Europe, and several Interreg programmes. While this engagement has provided opportunities for innovation and investment, it also involved extra workload for which the necessary capacity and the relevant expertise are crucial. A recurring concern is the disproportionate administrative burden associated with relatively small grants. City staff have expressed frustration at the imbalance between effort and reward, where securing modest ERDF funding entails extensive documentation, complex procurement procedures, and long lead times. This not only slows down project delivery but also discourages departments from experimenting with smaller, more agile initiatives. A related issue is the compliance-driven administrative culture that arises from perceived overregulation and legal uncertainty. Ghent's experience reflects broader urban concerns about the audit-heavy nature of EU funding mechanisms. The audit process is further complicated by a lack of consistency and transparency in control mechanisms, making it difficult for project managers to navigate compliance with confidence. Even in a city like Ghent—with a relatively mature EU project culture—this ambiguity generates friction and hesitancy, reinforcing a perception that auditing bodies lack trust in the capacity of implementing authorities. Another structural barrier is the high co-financing requirement, which can be up to 60% in ERDF Flanders. This is particularly challenging for projects targeting social or environmental objectives, such as affordable housing, inclusive mobility, or climate adaptation—initiatives that are essential for sustainable urban development but often lack revenue-generating potential.

Ghent's access to non-ERDF programmes, such as LIFE or Horizon Europe, is also constrained by the specialised knowledge and cross-sectoral coordination they require. Although the city has successfully participated in Horizon Europe through projects focused on innovation ecosystems and climate neutrality, this progress has largely depended on strong partnerships with local universities and research institutions. Many departments, however, lack the strategic foresight and dedicated capacity to engage meaningfully with these more demanding funding instruments. Despite these challenges, Ghent has undertaken several targeted efforts to enhance its administrative capacity. A cornerstone of this approach is the centralised funding unit (*Dienst Internationale Netwerken en Subsidies*), which was already in place before 2014 but has been gradually expanded as the city's European engagement grew, projects volume increased and funding rules become more complex. The unit supports municipal departments by providing technical expertise, ensuring strategic alignment, and monitoring the delivery of European projects. This unit has played a central role in improving internal coordination, reducing duplication of effort, and enabling a more coherent and proactive approach to funding opportunities.

In parallel, Ghent has demonstrated leadership in participatory governance, experimenting with mechanisms such as urban living labs, citizen co-creation processes, and participatory budgeting. These initiatives closely align with the EU's policy ambitions for inclusive governance. However, they often sit uncomfortably within the rigid frameworks of EU funding, which leave little room for iterative or experimental approaches. While the urban ERDF contact point in ERDF Flanders programme has improved the capacity building in Ghent, its remit remains focused narrowly on one programme. Ghent - and other cities - would benefit from the establishment of a broader, cross-programme institutional support structure, designed to help urban authorities navigate multiple funding streams and craft integrated strategies that cut across administrative and policy silos. The lack of such a structure currently limits the city's ability to engage consistently and strategically with the full range of EU instruments.

Finally, Ghent has highlighted the value of peer learning and transnational networks—such as URBACT or Eurocities, and the EU Mission for Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities—as informal but highly effective mechanisms for capacity building. These networks offer access to tested practices, hands-on tools, and practical learning opportunities that are often more immediately usable than formal

guidance. Through these alliances, Ghent continues to align local priorities with EU-level goals while strengthening its internal capabilities to manage increasingly complex urban agendas.

5.2 Multilevel governance

Multilevel Cooperation and City Involvement

In Belgium, Cohesion Policy implementation is devolved to the regional level. In Flanders, VLAIO manages the ERDF Flanders programme with a strong emphasis on economic growth, innovation, and smart specialization. Ghent participates through the Joint Urban ITI (Integrated Territorial Investment) with Antwerp, a framework designed to enable bottom-up urban input. This ITI structure has improved cooperation compared to earlier periods, offering Ghent some say in shaping project calls and aligning priorities with its local strategy. Yet, while the ITI mechanism allows for a certain degree of urban influence, it remains embedded in a top-down, theme-specific funding logic. Ghent's integrated approach—built on long-term area-based programmes and cross-sector collaboration—is often difficult to reconcile with the strict thematic approach of the overall programme, which prioritizes economic innovation or climate projects over social cohesion or cultural development and within which ITI projects must fit. This thematic fragmentation creates a fundamental mismatch with Ghent's holistic urban agenda. While the ITI framework includes the city administration and allows for some co-steering of priorities, key local actors remain absent from formal governance structures. For instance, stakeholders from sogent, Ghent's urban development agency, note that the agency is not structurally involved in the consultation round of the programme design or call formulation, despite its expertise in implementing complex urban regeneration projects. However, the city administration itself participates in preparing calls and naturally considers urban needs, including those overseen by sogent, albeit within the constraints of the programme's strict thematic focus. As already indicated, the city's involvement in ESF Flanders differs from ERDF Flanders. There is no ITI for ESF, although calls for proposals do create subsidy opportunities for the City of Ghent. Calls for proposals are launched by Europe WSE of the Department of Work, Economy, Science, Innovation and Social Economy. In particular, the financing of local partnerships (Jobteam) is of great importance to the City of Ghent, as it facilitates multidisciplinary cooperation. The call 'Direct allocation of subsidy project to local authorities in Antwerp, Ghent and Roeselare' resulted in an expansion of Jobteam's capacity, enabling it to focus on a specific target group in Ghent (EU 13 citizens with complex issues). This demonstrates that, even without urban earmarking, urban needs can be addressed.

The Gatekeeper Role of the Regional Government

The Flemish Government plays a decisive gatekeeping role in Cohesion Policy delivery, setting the overarching strategic direction and thematic priorities. The final selection and funding decisions for projects remain firmly under regional control. While VLAIO's ITI engagement in ERDF Flanders with cities is seen as constructive, it does not equate to full co-decision or operational autonomy. Cities like Ghent remain implementers, not co-programmers, despite the complexity of the challenges they are asked to address. Thematic concentration requirements and the prioritization of innovation, competitiveness, and green transition mean that Ghent's integrated, long-term neighbourhood approach is not always fundable or legible within existing programme criteria. For example, projects that combine social inclusion, spatial transformation, and cultural activities may not fit any one thematic call and are thus deprioritized, despite their demonstrated local impact. Within ESF Flanders, the role of the city is limited to that of implementer. Although calls for proposals certainly allow for the strengthening and further implementation of urban policy, there is a very strong emphasis on the labour market, even when it comes to social inclusion. One difference with the previous programme period is that the cities of Ghent and Antwerp are represented in the ESF Flanders monitoring committee. This was already the case for ERDF Flanders and has now been extended to ESF Flanders. The Monitoring Committee is not responsible for selecting projects, but it is responsible for establishing the principles governing the methodology and criteria for project selection. It monitors the implementation of the programme and meets to discuss its overall progress. The representation of cities in the Monitoring Committee allows cities to make their voices heard.

Relationship with Managing Authorities

The relationship between Ghent and VLAIO is generally constructive but constrained by structural limitations. The ERDF urban contact point provides essential support and helps applicants navigate procedures, but there is no equivalent point of contact for the ESF, and administrative complexity remains a barrier. The city's long-term urban development plans, such as those addressing inequality

across neighbourhoods, are often forced into fragmented project applications that do not reflect their integrated character. Moreover, co-financing requirements (60% in ERDF Flanders) and legal uncertainties around audit procedures undermine local capacity and introduce risk-averse behaviours, especially for smaller departments and pilot projects. ESF Flanders works with a Flemish co-financing fund, which reduces the city's own contribution. This is an important lever for securing the financing of projects, as ESF support is limited to 40%. The limited predictability of ESF call cycles, on the other hand, makes it less straightforward for the city to plan in line with its social policy objectives.

How City Priorities Are Received

Ghent's priorities are more likely to be accepted by regional managing authorities when they align with the predefined thematic areas of the Operational Programme. Calls for projects linked to innovation, digitalisation, labour market and sustainability receive more support than those rooted in social policy, cultural participation, or spatial regeneration. This reflects a disconnect between urban realities and programme logic. Ghent's neighbourhood-based plans are designed to tackle multiple, interlinked issues—such as poverty, housing quality, public space, and employment opportunities—through integrated interventions. Yet the current ERDF and ESF structures rarely allow for this kind of bundling. As a result, city officials often need to “dissect” comprehensive projects into discrete components to meet eligibility, which undermines both coherence and efficiency.

5.3 Financial constraints and technical complexity

The city of Ghent has been successful in mobilising a wide array of EU funding instruments. Quantitative data (see Chapter 7) reveals a total of 79 EU-funded projects since 2014, with a main focus (77%) on shared management programmes (such as ERDF Flanders, ESF/ESF+ Flanders, Interreg, URBACT) and less (23%) direct EU funding schemes (such as, Horizon, UIA/EUI, LIFE). From the perspective of cohesion policy, it can be concluded that just over 80% of the approved projects are financed by the ERDF and ESF structural funds. The qualitative findings from interviews with key stakeholders—including Sogent, Dienst Stedelijke Vernieuwing, VLAIO, and the urban EFRO contact point—highlight (practical) challenges that arise in the implementation of projects, especially shared management programmes. These relate primarily to co-financing obligations (especially in ERDF Flanders), high administrative burden, and a growing disconnect between EU programme structures and local urban practices and day-to-day reality.

Accessibility: High Potential, Uneven Realities

On paper, Ghent's participation in EU programmes appears exemplary. The city consistently engages with ERDF & ESF Flanders, has benefited from a dedicated ITI (Integrated Territorial Investment) framework, and actively participates in European networks and projects through Horizon, Interreg, URBACT, and UIA/EUI. Internal coordination mechanisms, such as the urban ERDF contact point and cooperation between strategic/supporting and policy services, are relatively mature. These institutional capacity increases Ghent's ability to identify funding opportunities and develop high-quality proposals.

Yet, interviews indicate that actual access is not uniform across departments or project types. More technically complex or transnational programmes, such as Horizon and LIFE, require advanced expertise, English fluency, and intensive project management capacity—resources that not all departments possess. Shared management programmes, such as ERDF & ESF Flanders, are more predictable but often less flexible. While the number of projects is significantly higher for shared management programmes, the nature of access remains highly dependent on internal expertise, strategic alignment, and administrative support.

Co-Financing: The Structural Limitation

A recurring theme across interviews is the financial constraint posed by co-financing requirements, especially under ERDF Flanders. The standard 60% local contribution imposes a significant burden on municipal budgets, particularly for capital-intensive projects such as infrastructure or brownfield regeneration. Moreover, in present times where budget cuts are imminent, this can considerably limit Ghent's participation in EU funding schemes. Departments like Sogent and Dienst Stedelijke Vernieuwing emphasised that EU funding often acts as the catalyst or lever for implementation—but only if co-financing is secured in time. Delays in aligning city budget cycles with EU calls create missed opportunities.

Administrative Burden and Programme Complexity

Interviewees also pointed to the technical complexity and administrative load associated with EU funds—particularly ERDF-funded programmes, such as ERDF Flanders and Interreg. The demands of reporting, auditing, and performance monitoring are described as disproportionate to the scale of some grants. This is especially burdensome when dealing with small or socially driven projects, where the overhead risks outweigh the benefits. Sogent described the audit culture in ERDF Flanders as producing a sense of mistrust, shifting focus away from content toward compliance. The thematic fragmentation of funds is another obstacle. Local actors—especially those working on neighbourhood-based, integrated projects—often struggle to align their priorities with the narrowly defined EU calls. Projects that combine social, spatial, and environmental goals are forced to “slice” their ambitions to fit the available funding logic, which undermines both project coherence and impact.

Institutional Responses and Adaptive Strategies

Despite these challenges, Ghent has adopted a range of adaptive strategies. These include:

- Early internal coordination, led by experienced services such as the strategic funding team (e.g. for Interreg, URBACT and UIA/EUI) and by the urban ERDF contact point ERDF Flanders.
- Leveraging co-funding from Flemish instruments (e.g. the Stadsvernieuwingsfonds) when possible and allowed.
- Increasing participation in knowledge-sharing networks (Eurocities, ICLEI and others) to improve practices and anticipate calls.

These strategies show that Ghent is not only a “user” of EU funds, but also a learning organisation, capable of improving how it navigates the EU funding ecosystem over time.

Strategic Misalignments

Beyond the technical and financial constraints, interviews highlighted a more profound governance mismatch. Many local actors feel that EU programmes are still too top-down, with insufficient space for local flexibility and holistic approaches. The ITI model—though conceptualised as a means of urban integration—is increasingly seen as rigid, theme-bound, and misaligned with the lived realities of neighbourhood-based approaches. Moreover, the lack of integration between ERDF and ESF Flanders—both operationally and administratively—undermines efforts to deliver holistic urban transformation. Social and physical investments remain compartmentalised, despite being interdependent in reality.

5.4 Innovations and good practices

In recent years, Ghent has adopted several good practices that have contributed to overcoming common barriers associated with EU funding mechanisms, particularly within the framework of the ERDF. These good practices reflect strategic institutional adaptations, improvements in coordination, and integrated planning models.

GOOD PRACTICE**Urban ERDF Contact Point**

The urban ERDF contact point operates as a technical and strategic support service in ERDF Flanders for project developers, internal city departments, and external stakeholders. It ensures early alignment between local project proposals and programme priorities, provides guidance during application, and facilitates communication with the managing authority. The operation of the contact point is funded through the technical assistance of the ERDF Flanders programme, and this long-standing support has contributed not only to capacity building within the strategic subsidies team of the city of Ghent, as well as among external organisations. The presence of such a contact point also leads to higher-quality project proposals, which in turn increases the chances of project success.

GOOD PRACTICE**Integrated Neighborhood Approach (INA)**

Ghent's Integrated Neighbourhood Approach was developed to overcome siloed planning in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. The integrated neighborhood approach bundles spatial, social, economic, and environmental investments into comprehensive programmes, supported by both local budgets and EU funds. These neighbourhood plans are developed in close cooperation with residents, civil society, and multiple levels of government. It has led to more holistic regeneration efforts, with impacts on social cohesion, mobility, green infrastructure, and public space.

GOOD PRACTICE**Public-Private Partnerships as a Lever**

In large-scale urban projects like Oude Dokken, Site Sacred Heart Square, and Wintercircus, Ghent (also via sogent, its urban development agency) has successfully used EU funding as a lever to unlock private and public investment for infrastructure and social facilities. For example, the renovation of the quay walls at Oude Dokken was partly financed by the ERDF, resulting in a quay promenade that opens up the area and makes it accessible to pedestrians and cyclists. Other developments in this area, such as (social) housing, houseboats, etc., also benefit from this infrastructure and as such the further development of the area is stimulated. Often, the financial burden of public infrastructures such as cycling bridges, parks, or social housing—is too big to be borne by developers or local authorities alone. By strategically injecting ERDF funds, Ghent has closed funding gaps and ensured that key public amenities are delivered as part of larger redevelopment strategies. They have delivered impactful infrastructure beyond the core real estate developments, helping to realize city-wide mobility and sustainability goals.

5.5 Added value of negative experiences

Ghent has developed a mature and proactive approach to European funding, nevertheless, several experiences have demonstrated that even well-designed projects can run into structural or political bottlenecks. First of all, political support across electoral cycles is not always guaranteed. It happens frequently that EU projects start in one legislature and continue into the next. After all, projects span several years, from initiation to full implementation and administrative completion. Ghent experienced cases where a project, initiated under the previous board of Aldermen, could no longer count on the support of the new Aldermen due to shifting priorities, re-scaled budgets, or other changes.

Although none of these changes resulted in financial corrections by the EU, they caused delays and required renegotiation with partners and/or city services. That is why the Strategic Funding team of the city strives on strong support from both the management of the executive city(s) and political representatives, and is particularly vigilant at the end of a legislature. From this perspective, critical reviewing and improvement of internal flows and processes, optimisation of communication and budgeting process are very important. Since European projects cannot rely on ad hoc political enthusiasm, a stable, cross-party consensus on strategic goals is needed, as well as a strong link to the city's multiannual plan. Given that every European subsidy programme, with the exception of Horizon, requires its own co-financing, this link is even more important because the activities in the multi-year plan also have a budget that can be used for co-financing. The aim of this vision is to make the best possible use of the subsidies available from higher authorities (Flanders, federal, European, international) in our organisation and to use them as a lever to achieve the objectives of Ghent's strategic multiannual plan, preferably in a more ambitious way than would be possible with our regular resources. In this context, more ambitious can be interpreted in various ways: more innovative, more sustainable, in more neighbourhoods, faster, with room for experimentation, etc. Due to the unexpected absence of staff, it became necessary to find productive solutions within the project context. This led to fruitful cooperation across the organisation, crossing departmental boundaries and enabling organisation-wide thinking and collaboration in order to minimise the impact of the loss of expertise when key staff members leave or are reassigned. By taking on tasks and extra challenging project targets together, city departments and the civil servants are growing closer, resulting in increased job satisfaction. These experiences underscored that institutional memory is as important as technical skill. In response, the centralised funding unit (Strategic Funding Team of the International Networking and funding service) now provides a stable "home" for EU project knowledge. It offers templates, checklists, internal training, and mentoring to help project management survive personnel changes. One template worth mentioning is the evaluation template for subsidised projects, which allows lessons to be learned from previous projects and used in future projects. Failure in projects often made way for valuable lessons learned and improved insights. As an organisation, the city of Ghent also learned not only from our own mistakes but also from mistakes other cities had made and challenges they faced. Capacity building can be based on conclusions derived from failures, not specifically in your own city context.

Table 5.1
Added value of negative experiences in Ghent

Name of the Initiative	Topic	Objective	What went wrong	What the city learnt
Anchoring EU projects in multi-annual strategic plans	Need for cross-legislature support for EU-funded priorities	Ensure continuity of EU-funded projects across electoral cycles by embedding them in long-term city strategies	Political shifts between legislatures affecting long-term EU projects (affecting budgets, priorities, causing delays, etc.)	Even greater emphasis on both administrative and political commitment, particularly in the run-up to a new legislature. Critical reviewing and improvement of internal flows and processes
Centralised Strategic Funding Team (International Networking and funding service)	Knowledge continuity and capacity building	Provide a permanent "home" for EU project expertise, templates, training and mentoring	Staff turnover leading to loss of EU expertise	Institutional memory is as important as technical skill, secure continuity even when staff change. Leverage the power of crosssectoral collaboration and lessons learnt from past projects in your organisation to find solutions

Source: author's own elaboration.

6 Cohesion Policy contributions to city long-term agendas

In the case of Ghent, CP has offered valuable impulses to ongoing projects and provided meaningful support for the city's long-term agenda. Stakeholder interviews have highlighted that while its contribution is often indirect and project-based, it has complemented local initiatives and helped advance priorities that might not have been realized as quickly without this additional support. The city's urban development is primarily guided by locally developed long-term strategic frameworks, especially a neighbourhood-based approach to urban renewal. These plans are typically structured as long-term trajectories focused on the spatial, social, and functional transformation of selected districts, combining a physical renewal with a programmatic, community-based and participatory approach. Under this umbrella, numerous sub-projects, experimental interventions, and additional services are developed, shaped by local needs and policy priorities. While ESIF, especially the ERDF, eventually co-finance some of these projects, Cohesion Policy funding is generally not the starting point nor the initiating factor in the development of such neighbourhood based projects. Projects are sometimes conceptualised, and in some cases initiated, well in advance of any engagement with EU funding mechanisms. In Ghent, applications are thus typically submitted when internal staff or external actors (e.g., the urban ERDF contact point) identify strong alignments between ongoing local projects and available European funding calls. This reflects a pragmatic and opportunity-driven approach, in which the city actively seeks to connect its priorities with Cohesion Policy instruments.

“We draw up long-term neighbourhood plans for urban renewal. That programme consists of many different projects, experiments, and services over a 20-year period. Occasionally, under this umbrella, we define projects that might be eligible for European subsidies — EFRO or otherwise. But that only happens when someone alerts us to a funding opportunity.” (Interview fragment)

This way of working means that European funding plays a complementary rather than central role in Ghent's urban development model. When successfully secured, EU funds are considered an important leveraging mechanism: they help legitimise projects politically, accelerate implementation, and anchor long-term transformation agendas. In some cases, the confirmation of EU support has helped convince local authorities to move forward with complex or innovative interventions that might otherwise face resistance. Although the financial contribution is often relatively modest (e.g., around 40% of the total project cost in many ERDF Flanders projects in Ghent), its symbolic and strategic value is significant. EU funding helps validate projects internally and externally. At the same time, Ghent's experience illustrates several recurring challenges in reconciling local priorities with Cohesion Policy frameworks. Insights from stakeholder interviews highlight recurring issues that shape how EU funding is used in practice, including the following themes:

- **Rigid frameworks hinder local fit:** Ghent's integrated, area-based urban renewal model, which blends spatial, social, cultural, and economic components, does not always fit neatly within the thematic silos of structure programmes like ERDF Flanders and ESF Flanders. As a consequence, funding calls are perceived as overly narrow and inflexible, making it difficult to capture the complexity of neighbourhood transformations.
- **Social objectives under pressure:** A recurring frustration is that socially oriented projects often remain underfunded, especially when ERDF Flanders focus, as implemented by the Managing Authority (VLAIO), prioritises economic outcomes. Local actors perceive a mismatch between EU discourse on inclusive, just cities and the funding criteria used in practice. This is thus particularly evident considering Ghent's socio-spatial approach to renewal.
- **Thematic alignment is sometimes retrofitted:** When local projects are not developed with Cohesion Policy priorities in mind from the outset, alignment with EU objectives is often reconstructed post hoc, in the application stage. While this ensures that projects remain locally relevant, it can also limit the deeper, strategic integration of Cohesion Policy into Ghent's long-term urban governance. However, this is not always the case, which means that CP priorities and funding do indeed reinforce the urban strategic vision and/or contribute new policy insights (see 6.2).

- **Institutional navigation is essential:** The ability to secure Cohesion funds heavily depends on internal capacity and expertise, as well as proximity to support networks. The presence of knowledgeable individuals (e.g., EFRO contact point) is critical in identifying relevant funding opportunities and guiding the technical application process.
- **EU urban funding should be better integrated:** Stakeholders in Ghent stress that urban funding should not only address local development, but also contribute to broader EU objectives such as social inclusion, climate neutrality, and digital transitions. However, the current thematic focus of Cohesion Policy is often perceived as too narrow, making it challenging to support Ghent's integrated urban strategies that span social, spatial, cultural, and economic dimensions. Stakeholders therefore call for greater flexibility and stronger recognition of integrated approaches in future programming.

6.1 Main development instruments

Ghent's urban development strategy is strongly guided by long-term, multi-decade frameworks rather than being primarily shaped by European Cohesion Policy funding. Nevertheless, CP funding, especially from ESIF, plays a complementary role, supporting the implementation of locally conceived projects. The main instruments currently shaping Ghent's urban dimension can be grouped into statutory planning frameworks, neighbourhood-based renewal programmes, sectoral strategies, and incentive schemes. *Ruimte voor Gent* (Space for Ghent) is Ghent's overarching spatial development plan. It provides the legal and strategic framework for the city's physical development, establishing priorities for urban growth, land use, and sustainable infrastructure. Its statutory nature ensures that municipal departments must adhere to its provisions in implementing urban projects. The plan's main goals are to integrate spatial, social, and functional planning; support urban regeneration; and create a sustainable city fabric. Actors involved include the city planning department, private developers, citizen councils, and regional authorities where relevant. Implementation occurs through multi-year projects executed at the neighbourhood or district level. Cofinancing of ERDF Flanders can sometimes be mobilized for projects that are already embedded in the plan, the creation and content of *Ruimte voor Gent* are not driven by or directly aligned with ERDF Flanders calls. Rather, masterplans and neighbourhood renewal initiatives developed under the framework of the spatial development plan may, at a later stage, apply for EU co-financing if and when individual projects happen to match open calls. Project planning typically precedes any EU funding application.

Neighbourhood-based urban renewal programmes represent a core instrument for Ghent's urban transformation. These programmes are multi-phase, area-focused strategies that integrate spatial, social, and functional interventions. They are voluntary in terms of internal project design, but their implementation is governed by statutory planning requirements that ensure coherence with broader municipal objectives. The programmes' main goals include improving housing quality, strengthening social cohesion, and enhancing local services. Implementation follows a long-term, iterative process: initial interventions are followed by adaptive measures based on monitoring and evaluation. Cohesion Policy funding often plays a complementary role, allowing for integration of innovative elements or acceleration of implementation timelines. For example, in the Wintercircus project, ERDF support contributed to the development of the public space, illustrating how EU funding can strengthen the overall renewal effort and, indirectly, create favourable conditions for cultural and social interventions that might otherwise have been delayed.

The Climate Plan for Ghent is another statutory framework that shapes the city's urban development agenda, particularly regarding sustainability and climate neutrality. The Climate Plan outlines emission reduction targets, energy efficiency measures, climate adaptation strategies, and the expansion of green infrastructure. Key actors include the municipal climate department, energy providers, NGOs, and citizen groups. While not primarily designed with ERDF support in mind, the plan has occasionally benefited from co-financing for projects that advance climate-related objectives. For example, pilot initiatives in energy-efficient housing or district heating systems have sometimes received ERDF support, providing a small but meaningful contribution to the plan's implementation.

In operationalising the development instruments described and other policy instruments, Ghent's approach varies, sometimes taking a more opportunity-driven approach, sometimes a more policy-reinforcing approach, and sometimes a combination of both. In any case, EU projects are always

based on the city's strategic objectives, although the city does see EU funding as a lever to achieve its strategic objectives and/or make them more ambitious. It goes without saying that the share of own co-financing also determines the scope for greater ambition. In the case of ERDF Flanders, the own contribution is 60% and therefore a more opportunity-driven approach is applicable. In this case, projects are often conceptualised independently of the funding priorities of ERDF Flanders; alignment with these priorities is then considered at the stage of application for co-financing. Projects eligible for funding are identified, but the initial project trajectory is guided by local needs, priorities, and strategic visions rather than the priorities of the ERDF Flanders programmes. Nevertheless, ERDF Flanders projects do have an impact and often create significant leverage at the neighbourhood level. The added value may be less evident in the city's strategic policy planning, but it is certainly visible on a micro scale in the neighbourhood. One example is the renovation of the Sacred Heart Church and presbytery into a meeting place in the neighbourhood, which has created a whole new dynamic in the social fabric of the neighbourhood. Ghent's neighbourhood-based model blends social, cultural, and economic dimensions, which do not always fit neatly into thematic silos defined by ERDF Flanders. Socially oriented projects often remain underfunded when economic outcomes are prioritised, creating a mismatch between the city's long-term social objectives and available EU funding. The rigid thematic focus of calls in the current ERDF Flanders programme often constrains the city's integrated approach. Other programmes such as Interreg, URBACT, etc., allow for a more policy-reinforcing approach. Although anchoring in the strategic multi-year plan remains important, projects and associated consortia are set up in line with the call and the subsidy programme. This ensures that concrete action is taken to address policy challenges or that ambitions are sharpened. EU funding acts as a lever, accelerating project timelines, enabling the integration of novel elements, helping to solve financial gaps, and sometimes improving project quality. The main driver of the action planning network of the Urbact ROOF project is to end homelessness through innovative housing solutions at the city level. The result was a locally integrated plan developed in collaboration with various stakeholders (civil society, public sector, private sector, politicians, academics, etc.). This led to a shift in focus from crisis accommodation to prevention and permanent housing with counselling, towards the Housing First model, which has proven effective in providing sustainable housing for vulnerable groups.

In terms of leverage, the UIA/EUI programme has already been important for Ghent. In the UIA programme, the City of Ghent is the only European city with three approved projects (TMAAS, ICCARus & Coghent), and in the current EUI programme, Ghent has one approved proposal, Rewild the city. The involvement of a broad group of stakeholders and the integrated approach are tailor-made for Ghent (cf. integrated neighbourhood approach). UIA/EUI enables innovative solutions to be devised for urban challenges. The substantial level of support ensures greater political backing for testing such innovations and significantly increases the chance of effective implementation after the project has ended. In ICCARus, for example, a recurrent fund was set up to renovate the homes of vulnerable owners. A recurrent fund differs from the usual subsidies within a city, and UIA allowed this new financial instrument to be tested. Already during the project, the city government decided to implement this further and to provide an additional budget for the recurrent fund. This is therefore a good example of CP contributing to the city's long-term agenda. Institutional capacity plays a crucial role in navigating these funding mechanisms. Success in securing CP support heavily depends on the presence of knowledgeable staff, proximity to European networks, and an understanding of application requirements.

Table 6.1
Main instruments at national, regional and local level

Instrument	Level	Type (1) ⁵	Type (2) ⁶	Type (3) ⁷	Main Goals	Actors Involved
Ruimte voor Gent	municipal	Spatial vision plan	statutory		Integrated spatial planning	City planning department
Neighborhood-based urban renewal programmes	Municipal	Multi-year programme				Municipal departments, community organization
Climate plan	Municipal	Strategic framework	Statutory		Climate neutrality, adaptation	

Source: author's own elaboration.

6.2 Localisation of Cohesion Policy

In Ghent, the localisation of Cohesion Policy has largely occurred through the alignment of pre-existing local strategies with CP priorities, rather than through strategic adaptation of municipal instruments to EU frameworks. During the 2014–2020 programming period, local policies such as the neighbourhood-based urban renewal programmes were not originally developed to respond to CP objectives. Nevertheless, these instruments contributed to the implementation of CP strategies by enabling project eligibility for funding, enhancing practical realisation, and reinforcing thematic goals. A key feature of this localisation process is the pragmatic identification of EU funding opportunities. Local projects are typically conceived based on neighbourhood needs, social priorities, or long-term strategic goals. When a call opens, municipal staff assess whether existing projects align with the thematic and financial criteria. This retroactive alignment allows Ghent to benefit from EU funding without altering its long-term strategies. Mechanisms facilitating coherence include:

- Multi-year planning frameworks that anticipate interventions and create a pipeline of projects eligible for EU co-financing.
- Dedicated strategic funding team who guide the application process, ensuring compliance with CP objectives.
- Sectoral and thematic linkages between spatial planning, social inclusion, climate adaptation, and innovation projects, which naturally correspond to CP objectives.

For the 2014–2020 period, coherence with CP objectives was generally strong but selective. Key priorities addressed include integrated urban development (TO4), social inclusion and housing quality (TO9), and innovation in public services (TO1, TO2). Projects addressing purely social objectives sometimes faced funding constraints due to ERDF's focus on economic outcomes. Nevertheless, successful applications demonstrated that local instruments could complement CP priorities, particularly when multi-dimensional neighbourhood interventions were involved. During the 2021–2027 programming period, alignment remains partial. Thematic concentration on innovation and digital transitions prioritises new implementations, sometimes diverging from immediate local needs or

⁵ Strategy, programme, zoning, vision, sectoral (specify what sector) etc.

⁶ Statutory and mandatory Vs statutory but non mandatory Vs non statutory

⁷ Non-binding, binding for public authorities, binding for all subjects

crisis-driven interventions. For example, while the city was able to pursue cybersecurity projects under the new programme — reflecting contemporary urban challenges — funding for social interventions remains limited. This underscores a tension between CP thematic priorities and local, long-term strategies.

Table 6.2
Coherence with the Cohesion Thematic Objectives 2014-2020

Tool	Cohesion Thematic Objectives 2014-2020 ⁸										
	TO 1	TO2	TO3	TO4	TO5	TO6	TO7	TO8	TO9	TO10	TO11
Ruimte voor Gent	No	No	Partially	Yes	Partially	Yes	NO	No	NO	NO	Yes
Neighborhood-based urban renewal programmes	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Partially	Yes	NO	NO	Partially
Climate plan	Yes	NO	Partially	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes		No	NO	NO

Source: author's own elaboration.

Table 6.3
Coherence with the Cohesion Policy Objectives 2021-2027

Tool	Cohesion Policy Objectives 2021-2027 ⁹				
	PO 1	PO 2	PO 3	PO 4	PO 5
Ruimte voor Gent	No	Partially	Partially	Yes	Yes

⁸ 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.

⁹ 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).

Tool	Cohesion Policy Objectives 2021-2027 ⁹				
	PO 1	PO 2	PO 3	PO 4	PO 5
Neighborhood-based urban renewal programmes	No	Yes	Partially	Yes	Partially
Climate plan	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Source: author's own elaboration.

6.3 Key investment areas

Based on the analysis of Ghent's development instruments and their alignment with Cohesion Policy, the key investment areas where CP funding has made a difference are primarily complementary and opportunistic. EU support strengthens local strategies by accelerating project implementation, enabling innovative components, and providing legitimacy.

- **Acceleration of projects:** CP funding often functions as a catalyst, helping overcome financial barriers and enabling the timely delivery of interventions. In neighbourhood-based urban renewal programmes, modest ERDF/ESF contributions have accelerated the implementation of multi-phase projects, ensuring that social and spatial objectives are met on schedule.
- **Integration of innovative components:** Funding has enabled the inclusion of experimental or high-risk elements that would have been difficult to implement otherwise. In ICCARus, for example, a recurring fund was established to renovate the homes of vulnerable owners. A recurrent fund differs from the usual subsidies within a city, and UIA allowed this new financial instrument to be tested.
- **Effective realisation and financial leverage:** CP co-financing helps complete financial arrangements, enabling projects to move forward. For example, certain energy-efficiency upgrades or social infrastructure investments were realised only after EU funding helped close financial gaps. This leverage effect ensures that local strategies, designed with long-term goals in mind, can be executed without compromise.
- **Quality enhancement:** CP cofinancing has sometimes allowed projects to exceed minimum requirements, adding additional features, improving design quality, or expanding service provision. These enhancements increase the long-term value of investments and reinforce the city's broader urban vision.
- **Catalytic or domino effects:** Some interventions triggered additional initiatives, not necessarily through direct funding but through symbolic or strategic validation. The renovation of the Holy Heart Church and presbytery created a social dynamic. Pastory vzw, a volunteer-led initiative, has already been active since the renovation of the presbytery, creating a strong foundation for community engagement. There is a dedicated group of volunteers who manage the presbytery and warmly welcome new volunteers and initiatives. Next to their own initiatives, they actively seek collaboration with neighbourhood organisations.

7 Funding schemes and synergies

7.1 Funding schemes

In Ghent, the implementation of the EU Cohesion Policy is largely channelled through decentralised instruments, mainly the ERDF Flanders programme co-financed by the ERDF and the ESF Flanders programme co-financed by the European Social Fund/ESF+. In addition, the Interreg programmes and URBACT are also important for the City of Ghent. A systematic review of projects in which the beneficiary is the municipality, its districts or municipally owned companies highlights the city's strong engagement with these shared-management programmes over the last two programming periods. In addition to these shared-management funds, Ghent also actively participates in EU programmes managed directly by the European Commission, such as Horizon (2020 and Europe), the Urban Innovative Actions/European Urban Initiative (UIA/EUI), LIFE. These instruments complement the shared management programmes by financing research, innovation, transnational cooperation and experimental urban policies. While the 2014–2020 cycle is now complete and fully reported, the 2021–2027 programming period is still ongoing. Therefore, the analysis for the latter is based only on projects awarded or granted up to March 2025, and figures may increase as further calls are launched and approved.

7.1.1 Nationally or regionally distributed EU funds

Across all shared management programmes (ERDF Flanders, ESF/ESF+ Flanders, URBACT and Interreg), Ghent activated a total of 61 projects. Of these, 19 projects were funded by ERDF Flanders, 19 by ESF/ESF+ Flanders (of which one by REACT-EU), 18 by Interreg and 5 by URBACT. In financial terms, ERDF Flanders dominates: the combined project budgets for ERDF interventions amount to €39.9 million (of which the city's eligible budget is €37.8 million), with EU contributions of €15.2 million at project level and €13.7 million at the city level. ESF/ESF+ projects – including the one funded under REACT-EU – together account for €34.0 million in total budgets (city-eligible: €19 million), with €18.6 million EU co-funding at project level and €7.6 million at the city level. Interreg projects are fewer but often transnational and high-value, totalling €80 million (city-eligible: €8,5 million), with €43,2 million in EU contributions at project level and €4.4 million at the city level. In URBACT the total project budget was 3,5 million of which the city's-eligible budget was 0,8 million, with EU funding on project level of 2,7 million and 0,57 million on city level. This portfolio reflects the city's strategic alignment with EU priorities on employment, social inclusion, urban infrastructure and innovation. ERDF Flanders is typically used for capital-intensive interventions such as urban mobility improvements, brownfield redevelopment, SME support and sustainable infrastructure. ESF Flanders supports human capital development, labour-market integration and social cohesion, while Interreg enables Ghent to participate in cross-border initiatives and knowledge exchange. In terms of project numbers, ESF and ERDF Flanders are relatively balanced; in terms of financial weight, ERDF Flanders clearly leads. The funds are broadly accessible to the city, but co-financing in ERDF Flanders requirements (mostly 60 %) mean substantial local resources must be mobilised alongside EU support. City officials note that EU funding serves as a lever for co-investment rather than a substitute for municipal budgets. This has a positive effect on budgetary capacity: it anchors projects in long-term strategies and enhances their political and financial credibility.

Comparing programming periods, 2014–2020 was dominated by ERDF and ESF+ Flanders projects focusing on foundational infrastructure, urban renewal and social inclusion. In the early years of 2021–2027, Ghent has continued to secure ERDF Flanders and Interreg support but with more targeted themes linked to the European Green Deal, digital transition and sustainable urban mobility. In ERDF Flanders the thematic concentration is the reason for the more targeted themes. Early uptake suggests a stable or even growing absorption capacity in the current period.

Within the framework of URDICO, it was decided to analyse only those projects in which EU budget goes to the case study. The impact of cohesion policy in Ghent extends far beyond the city itself. ERDF Flanders, for example, is strongly committed to innovation, which results in investments in research infrastructure and incubators in Ghent. Over both programme periods, ERDF Flanders invested €24.6 million in Ghent innovation projects such as CAPTURE from Ghent University, Impact & Bio

Base Flow from Bio Base Europe Pilot Plant, etc. These investments reinforce Ghent's spearhead policy and the City of Ghent's ambition to become the technology capital of Europe. As part of the urban earmarking for sustainable urban development, a number of organisations in Ghent also received support from EFRO Flanders (1.4 million out of a total project budget of 3.8 million). These included small-scale urban projects that strengthen social cohesion in vulnerable neighbourhoods (De Kazematten, Circuskerk/Circus Church, renovation of the Maria-Goretti church). The leverage effect of ESF Flanders is also greater than what the URDICO analysis shows. For example, companies in Ghent can also count on ESF support to tackle issues such as lifelong learning, workable work, adjustments to working conditions, etc. In addition, ESF support is also available for numerous cultural organisations, social economy enterprises, Ghent knowledge institutions, etc.

7.1.2 Other relevant EU funds and programmes

In addition to shared management funding streams, Ghent increasingly accesses EU programmes that are centrally managed by the European Commission and awarded competitively. These direct funds allow the city to implement strategic, experimental and collaborative projects aligned with EU-wide priorities and to work closely with international partners. Based on the filtered dataset, Ghent implemented 18 projects financed through direct EU funds. The distribution shows a clear emphasis on research, innovation and sustainability. Horizon (2020 + Europe) is the most prominent, with 12 projects and a combined total project budget of €92.1 million (city-eligible: €2.66 million, EU funding at city level: €2.30 million). These projects typically focus on smart city technologies, urban data platforms, climate neutrality pilots and green transition initiatives, often in consortia with universities, industry and other municipalities. The Urban Innovative Actions/European Urban Initiative (UIA/EUI) accounts for 4 projects. Although fewer in number, these are larger and more integrative, with total budgets of €21.3 million (city-eligible: €13.1 million, EU co-funding at city level: €11.2 million). They enable Ghent to pilot new governance models, co-creation processes and high-visibility infrastructure investments under EU's experimental urban policy strand. Finally, the city has implemented 2 LIFE projects with total budgets of €16.0 million (city-eligible: €2.0 million, EU funding at city level: €1.2 million). LIFE grants signal Ghent's engagement with environmental protection, climate adaptation and circular economy initiatives – areas that could represent future growth given the programme's strong focus on biodiversity and resilience.

Relevance Compared to Indirect Funds and Local Resources

While direct and shared management funds each account for 79 projects in the city's EU funding portfolio, their financial and strategic roles differ significantly. In financial terms, shared management funds—especially those from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF)—still represent the majority of total allocated budgets. This is largely due to their focus on capital-intensive infrastructure, such as urban mobility, public facilities, and large-scale environmental projects.

However, it is important to note that ERDF support comes with a co-financing requirement. For ERDF Flanders this is up to 60%, meaning the city must mobilize substantial local resources alongside EU contributions. As such, the net financial benefit from shared funds is more modest than headline figures suggest. ERDF thus serves as a lever for co-investment rather than full project coverage. For ESF Flanders there is a Flemish cofinancing fund that increases the leverage effect of ESF. For the Interreg programmes the cofinancing requirements differ from programme to programme, from 20% to 50%. By contrast, direct EU funds (e.g., Horizon, LIFE, and UIA/EUI) tend to involve smaller individual budgets, but they support more specialized policy fields—such as research, innovation, transnational cooperation, and digital transformation. These funds are often less dependent on large local co-financing and offer the city greater flexibility to test experimental ideas, often in collaboration with international partners.

The share of EU funding in the total city budget is rather limited (an average of 0.15% over the period 2014-2020), which means EU funding—whether direct or shared—does not replace municipal funding, but rather acts as a strategic complement. According to city officials in the urban renewal department, European funding is particularly valuable for anchoring projects within long-term strategies, increasing their political and financial credibility, and offering a degree of certainty and continuity. This reinforces the enabling function of EU funds, beyond their purely financial role.

Programming Period Differences: 2014–2020 vs. 2021–2027

The city's participation in direct EU programmes shows a clear evolution across the two recent programming periods:

- **2014–2020:**
The majority of Horizon 2020 projects were launched during this period. These focused on regional cooperation, smart city development, and foundational climate actions. Although the city did not have extensive internal capacity for such projects, its strong network, including partnerships with local knowledge institutions, meant it was invited to join international consortia and pilot projects.
- **2021–2027:**
While the number of recorded projects is still limited (reflecting the ongoing nature of calls), the city has already begun implementing Horizon Europe and EUI projects. These newer initiatives tend to be more thematically targeted, aligning closely with EU priorities such as the Green Deal, digital transformation, and mission-oriented R&D.

Early uptake in the current period suggests that the city is not only maintaining but also expanding its capacity to attract competitive EU funds, particularly in programmes with higher complexity and added value.

7.1.3 Other funding alternatives

The city has not implemented any projects linked to the Just Transition Fund (JTF). This aligns with the fund's specific geographical targeting, which prioritises regions undergoing structural transition away from carbon-intensive industries. Gent does not fall within the designated JTF zones and, consequently, has not accessed this source of EU funding. The absence of JTF projects underscores the city's current position outside the immediate EU focus on industrial decarbonization, though it continues to engage with other EU instruments that support social, cultural, and infrastructural development. Under the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF), the city has participated in the Oasis project, demonstrating its engagement in trans-European transport, energy, and digital infrastructure initiatives. This participation highlights the city's commitment to connectivity and integration within the broader European network, enhancing both mobility and digital accessibility for residents and businesses alike. The city has also been actively involved in Erasmus programs, with a primary focus on social inclusion, early childhood education, and urban policy. Key projects include EDINA - Social Inclusion, Education and Urban Policy for Young Children, EDUCASE Space and Educare, EDINA Go Pro, IncluPAS, BENEMINDS, Future of Europe for Public Libraries, De Bibliotheek voor de Gentenaar, met de Gentenaar, YUPP, TEACH, EDINA Be GreaT, BE-IN, and BNeTIKO. These initiatives collectively demonstrate the city's emphasis on educational innovation, youth engagement, and inclusive urban development, reflecting a multi-faceted approach to knowledge exchange and capacity building within the EU context. Further support has been secured from ELENA, through the SUPRA (Speed Up Renovation through Accompaniment) project, and AMIF, with initiatives such as CONSOLIDATE and City Grow, which focus on energy efficiency, migration, and urban growth strategies. Engagement with CERV, via the DiGin and DeCiDE projects, emphasizes civic engagement and participatory governance, while Creative Europe funding for Libraries on Emotions for Good underscores the city's cultural and social innovation initiatives. In the digital domain, the city is preparing to launch Decide under Digital Europe, highlighting future-oriented investments in digital transformation. Additionally, EuropeAID funding through Food Smart Cities supports sustainable urban food systems, integrating environmental and social considerations.

7.2 Funding coordination mechanism

Ghent coordinates different funding opportunities available at the EU, national and regional levels, in line with the legal requirement that EU funds be “additional” to domestic or municipal spending. This means that each project is financed within one specific programme framework; combining multiple EU or national sources within a single budget line is avoided to reduce risks of ineligibility or double funding.

Within this constraint, the municipality nevertheless attempts to ensure internal coordination. Complex European funding programmes, such as ERDF Flanders, ESF+, Flanders Interreg, Horizon Europe or LIFE, typically require cooperation across several municipal departments (urban planning, mobility, social service). To manage this, Ghent has established cross-departmental collaboration

mechanisms: funding proposals are prepared jointly by the relevant services, and there is an internal overview of active and planned subsidy applications. An important role is reserved for the strategic funding team, which acts as a matchmaker and knowledge centre.

Between the 2014–2020 and 2021–2027 programming periods, there has been no major structural change in this coordination approach, but the system has been expanded to cope with the growing complexity of EU programmes and the city’s larger project portfolio. Officials note that the main challenge lies in the mismatch between the way EU funds are organised and the city’s own multi-year planning and budgeting structure. Aligning the timing, terminology and reporting of different programmes with Ghent’s internal budget cycles remains difficult and can limit the extent to which synergies between funds are exploited.

Several tools have been used or piloted to improve traceability and monitoring. Under the previous programming period, the city implemented the “Gent 2020” tool for financial follow-up of EU projects. This platform focused primarily on financial tracking but is no longer continued in its original form; a new, more content-oriented monitoring approach is currently being developed to replace it. In addition, Ghent uses subsidy codes in its accounting system to trace EU-funded projects. However, differences in terminology between the city’s internal codes and those of programmes such as ERDF Flanders can complicate aggregation and reporting.

8 Recovery and Resilience Plan

In the case of Ghent, the Recovery and Resilience Plan (RRP) has had little to no direct impact at the city level. Based on interviews conducted with local stakeholders, it became evident that the RRF has been largely managed and implemented at the federal and Flemish level in Belgium, with limited visibility or accessibility for cities such as Ghent and a lack of bottom-up approach or consultation. The city has not been significantly involved in either the design or the implementation of the national and regional part of RRP. As a result, Ghent has not aligned its strategic planning instruments or urban development documents with RRP priorities in any (substantial) way. Discussions during the Urban Lab confirmed this situation and prompted a clear recommendation: cities should be actively involved in the design of future recovery-related programmes to ensure that investments address local needs and priorities. Participants stressed that a lack of involvement risks cities bearing the consequences if national or regional entities fail to meet performance targets linked to RRF implementation. Furthermore, there is a fragmented overview of projects supported by the RRF. The City of Ghent was very successful in one call for proposals in the framework of “Town hall without a town hall” on digitisation in local authorities, which was financed with the Flemish part of RRF. A total of 11 projects were approved, together accounting for 6.2 million in support from the RRF. There were no urban earmarking or dedicated calls for cities. Compared to other EU structural funds, such as ERDF, and especially when weighed against the city's own investment budget and operational expenditures, the RRF's financial impact on Ghent was rather limited.

8.1 The Governance of Recovery and Resilience Plan

Belgium's Plan for Recovery and Resilience (PHV) is the result of a coordinated process between all Belgian governments. The plan falls under the responsibility of the cabinet of the State Secretary for Recovery and Strategic Investments, which ensures preparation, coordination, implementation, monitoring, and reporting. The PHV also requires approval from the European Commission to ensure compliance with EU RRF requirements. The federal government oversees the overall national strategy, coordinating across regions and ensuring that federal and regional priorities align with EU objectives. The regional governments - Flanders, Wallonia, Brussels-Capital, and the Communities - are responsible for developing and implementing region-specific projects within their allocated budgets. This federal-regional division reflects Belgium's complex intergovernmental system and ensures that recovery investments are distributed according to constitutional competencies. Despite the impact of the RRF on urban development, cities like Ghent were not actively involved in the planning or implementation phases. The city's administration has confirmed that the RRF did not influence the development or selection of urban projects. The only indirect connection to Ghent is the approval of digitisation projects with the call *Town hall without a town hall*. There is a rather fragmented picture of the implementation of RRF. A comprehensive overview is not available - neither on the Belgian RRF website nor on the Flemish 'Vlaamse Veerkracht' website - of specifically supported projects.

Table 8.1
The Governance of Recovery and Resilience Plan in Belgium

Name of the actor	Level	Responsibility
Federal Government	National	Oversees the national recovery strategy; coordinates between regions; ensures compliance with EU requirements
Cabinet of the State Secretary for Recovery and Strategic Investments		
Governments of Flanders, Wallonia, Brussels-Capital, Communities	Regional	Develop and implement region-specific PHV projects; manage allocated RRF funds

Source: author's own elaboration.

8.2 Coherence with Recovery and Resilience Plan

While Ghent has not been directly involved in the RRP, the city's existing strategic planning instruments and urban development documents align with several RRP priorities. This coherence, however, is coincidental rather than a result of deliberate alignment with the national plan.

8.3 Recovery and Resilience Fund

There is a fragmented overview of projects supported by the RRF. There was no bottom-up approach for the Belgian RRF and much uncertainty about its implementation. The city could only wait for calls for proposals. The City of Ghent was very successful in one call for proposals in the framework of "Town hall without a town hall" on digitisation in local authorities, which was financed with the Flemish part of RRF. A total of 11 projects were approved, together accounting for 6.2 million in support from the RRF. This lack of engagement stands in contrast to other EU structural funds, such as the European Regional Development Fund, where Ghent has been very active.

9 Challenges and Policy Recommendations

9.1 Local Level

9.1.1 Challenges

Drawing on a selection of interviews with key stakeholders and a workshop session, we have identified several structural and governance-related challenges that hinder the effectiveness of the implementation of Urban Cohesion policy on the city level.

Considering the urban structure and governance of cohesion, one of the key issues is the discrepancy between the thematic funding priorities set at higher policy levels and the area-based approaches developed by cities such as Ghent—for example, its integrated territorial neighborhood development strategy through a broad programmatic approach. This disconnect complicates the alignment between local urban strategies and the available funding instruments. Moreover, many societal challenges demand an integrated, place-based approach that current frameworks struggle to support. Building and sustaining the capacity needed to tap Cohesion Policy resources remains demanding. Application procedures are often complex and resource-intensive, creating administrative burdens not only for larger cities like Ghent, but even more so for smaller municipalities with limited capacity. Instruments such as Integrated Territorial Investments can be experienced as insufficiently responsive to local needs or integrated urban strategies, because of predefined thematic focal points. Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms present additional barriers. Indicators often fail to reflect the specific realities of urban contexts, requiring cities to invest additional effort in tailoring data to meet standardized templates. Although beneficial for quality control purposes, audit procedures can occasionally feel disproportionate to project size and risk; when they become overly prescriptive they risk discouraging partnership rather than building trust between municipalities and managing authorities. Although the Flanders Innovation and Entrepreneurship Agency (VLAIO) reports stakeholder involvement in the design of operational programmes, key local actors—such as sogent, Ghent’s urban development corporation— noted that they were not consistently engaged in consultation processes. However, the city administration itself participates in preparing calls and naturally considers urban needs, including those overseen by sogent, albeit within the constraints of the programme’s strict thematic focus. This can reinforce the perception that the ERDF Flanders programme naturally gravitates toward innovation and economic valorisation themes, with less visibility for integrated social-spatial projects. Finally, the European Social Fund (ESF) poses an additional challenge due to its unpredictable call cycles. This lack of regularity limits cities’ ability to engage in long-term strategic planning and collaborative project development with local stakeholders. In terms of administrative capacity, urban authorities continue to face significant administrative and institutional barriers that hinder their effective engagement with EU funding instruments. A key challenge lies in the sometimes high administrative burden associated with relatively small-scale grants. The complexity of procedures, combined with audit requirements that can be perceived as disproportionate, creates inefficiencies and undermines trust between managing authorities and cities. Instead of fostering innovation and responsiveness, such oversight mechanisms can perversely instigate a compliance-driven culture that discourages smaller, more agile urban initiatives.

The audit process itself contributes to legal uncertainty, as a lack of clarity and consistency in control mechanisms makes it difficult for cities to navigate compliance requirements with confidence. This ambiguity increases the perceived risk of engagement, particularly for smaller municipalities or organisations without robust legal and financial departments. Another major obstacle is the high co-financing rate of 60% in ERDF Flanders and 50 to 40% in most Interreg programmes, which proves prohibitive for many urban projects. As a result, promising initiatives may go unrealised due to a lack of accessible funding structures. While the urban ERDF contact point plays a crucial role in improving access and providing guidance, its remit remains limited to the ERDF Flanders programme. The centralized and dedicated strategic funding team with the city administration of Ghent is of high added value to increase access to different types of European funding (ERDF and beyond).

In Ghent, as in many other European cities, it shows that it can be challenging to align the structure of Cohesion Policy with the city’s long-term, integrated urban strategy. Ghent’s ambition to tackle urban challenges in a holistic and place-based manner—combining social, spatial, ecological, and economic dimensions—can be confronted with the thematic rigidity of the European Regional

Development Fund (ERDF) for well-developed regions. The fund's focus on predefined policy objectives, can render it challenging to finance cross-cutting initiatives that do not fit neatly into a single priority axis but are nonetheless essential to Ghent's long-term urban agenda. This is particularly evident in the underfunding of social priorities. Ghent places strong emphasis on inclusion, community development, and reducing inequality at the neighbourhood level. Yet these objectives struggle to find sufficient support within the current funding landscape, which tends to favour innovation, entrepreneurship, and infrastructure-led growth. As a result, socially-oriented projects, although critical to the city's strategic vision, often face higher barriers to implementation. Another key challenge is Ghent's limited role in the design phase of Cohesion Policy programmes. Despite being a frontrunner in urban development and a committed partner in delivering EU goals on the ground, the city has little formal influence over programming decisions made at the regional or national level. This top-down approach reduces the responsiveness of funding schemes to local realities and undermines the potential for integrated delivery.

9.1.2 Policy recommendations

Regarding the urban structure and governance of Cohesion at the local level, there is no need to alter Ghent's integrated approach; rather, the city would benefit from further strengthening its own city-led, area-based strategies that integrate social, economic, and ecological dimensions. Ghent's experience with integrated territorial development through its programmatic renewal approach illustrates the potential of grounded, place-based planning that effectively responds to the complexities of urban life. Ghent already benefits from a dedicated strategic funding team (e.g. for Interreg, EUI and Urbact calls) as well as an urban ERDF contact point in the ERDF Flanders programme, but its potential is not yet fully tapped. The service acts as the city's "antenna on the shop floor"—the first to hear where projects and involved actors stumble, administrative barriers that are hard to overcome, which themes are missing from calls, and how audit demands play out in practice. However, in practice the flagging of issues or bottlenecks does not easily get translated into actual reshaping of calls or indicators. Exchanges with the different programme secretariat (ERDF Flanders, Interreg, EUI) can be dependent on certain lock-ins that might result from the tight European reporting framework they have to work within. Turning ground-level signals into programme adjustments rather than one-off troubleshooting, would thus require some organisational innovation and more tailor-fit integration of workflows, and giving the contact point a clearer mandate to feedback recurring issues. A more proactive engagement with this contact point and with funding officers within European cities could help not only to improve coordination but also to advocate for the inclusion of underrepresented yet impactful themes, such as culture, social affairs and community-building. Within the city administration, optimizing the collaboration between the operational services, the ERDF contact point and the Strategic Funding team is an ongoing process and comes with a clear learning curve. Over the past programme cycle staff have learned the advantages of monitoring projects more actively and, crucially, mine the compulsory progress reports—and the audits that follow—for lessons. Regular debriefs with the Strategic Funding Team could help teams understand EU and Flemish compliance rules earlier, so issues can be fixed upstream rather than during an audit.

For Cohesion Policy contributions to city long-term agendas, Ghent can continue to develop and clearly articulate its integrated urban agenda in a way that connects local priorities to broader EU objectives. A mutual learning process which has been ongoing in a learning-by-doing fashion. This involves framing urban projects—particularly those centred on social cohesion, sustainability, and neighbourhood development—not merely as responses to local challenges, but as strategic contributions to overarching European agendas from the outset. Embedding this perspective in the early stages of project design can strengthen the city's position in funding negotiations and increase the visibility of its initiatives within EU policy frameworks. In order to guarantee optimal use of EU funding structures, cities like Ghent should continue to map available funding opportunities and invest in internal expertise to optimally align and combine resources from different EU programmes—including ERDF, ESF, Horizon Europe, LIFE, and URBACT. In addition, Ghent could further engage in European platforms such as URBACT and City-to-City networks to exchange innovative practices, scale successful interventions, and strengthen its visibility at the EU level and other EU programmes.

9.2 Regional Level

9.2.1 Challenges

A notable gap is the absence of culture as a recognized theme within the regional management of cohesion policy. Despite its proven capacity to mobilize communities, foster social cohesion, and contribute to broader urban objectives, culture remains underrepresented. This contrasts with initiatives such as the New European Bauhaus, where culture is put centre stage. Moreover, a neighbourhood renewal approach can benefit from mobilising interfaces between a socio-spatial and cultural approach. Something the city of Ghent has long been experimenting with. Also lacking are “people-to-people” initiatives, which could strengthen community engagement and support bottom-up development. A stronger cultural dimension could help build broader public ownership and legitimacy for cohesion policy at the local level.

9.2.2 Policy recommendations

At the regional level, ideally, managing authorities should move more flexibly between gatekeeping and enabling: simplifying the complex and resource-intensive application procedures that currently disadvantage many cities, particularly smaller ones with limited administrative capacity. Equally important is the broadening of stakeholder engagement in the development of programmes. Urban actors, local authorities, and civil society organisations should be systematically involved in both the design and implementation phases of cohesion policy funding programmes to ensure that interventions are grounded in local realities and genuinely address community needs. Moreover, the assessment of project applications should place greater value on integrated, cross-sectoral approaches rather than narrowly rewarding excellence in predefined thematic areas. This would create space for more holistic solutions that better reflect the multifaceted nature of urban challenges. Finally, governance models and audit regimes could be reoriented to demonstrate greater trust in cities. Municipalities should be granted the autonomy, flexibility, and budgetary control required to operate through area-based strategies. This should be accompanied by fewer audits and administrative burdens, based on the confidence that cities will responsibly and effectively manage allocated resources. Such empowerment would facilitate more integrated and context-specific responses to urban development, in line with the principles of the New Urban Agenda—where each city is able to define its own priorities based on local conditions and aspirations.

Managing authorities should provide clear, consistent, and user-friendly audit guidelines to increase legal certainty. For cities with a strong track record, the frequency and intensity of audits could be reduced, reflecting a trust-based approach. The current high co-financing thresholds - especially the 60% requirement in ERDF Flanders and up to 50 or 60% in most Interreg programmes - should be reconsidered, particularly for projects with strong social or integrated aims that do not generate direct financial returns. Moreover, the scope of urban contact points should be broadened beyond the ERDF to also cover the ESF, ensuring more coherent and accessible support for cities across policy domains. To make contributions to cohesion policy possible for city' long-term agendas, programme authorities should make greater efforts to integrate city-led strategies into the design of operational programmes. Ghent's role as both a policy innovator and key delivery partner should be formally recognised through structured consultation mechanisms during programming phases. Moreover, funding rules should allow for greater flexibility in supporting integrated urban interventions—particularly those that cut across thematic priorities. Projects that respond to long-term, cross-sectoral city strategies should not be penalised for lacking a tight thematic focus but rewarded for addressing complex challenges holistically. There is also a pressing need to address the persistent imbalance between economic and social investment. In Ghent, some of the most urgent urban challenges, particularly the growing pressure on affordable housing- require sustained, people-centred interventions that go beyond infrastructure and innovation. To support Ghent's ambition for inclusive urban development, Cohesion Policy must allocate adequate resources to socially oriented projects and recognise their long-term value in building resilient and equitable cities. Managing authorities should improve coordination between regional urban policy frameworks and EU-funded programmes. This includes synchronising application cycles, aligning thematic priorities, and creating clearer pathways for cities to combine funding sources across ERDF and ESF. Ensuring that funding calendars and

procedures are complementary would enable cities to plan and implement projects more coherently, especially those requiring both physical and social components.

9.3 National Level

9.3.1 Challenges

At the national level, no specific challenges are identified. This absence is consistent with Belgium's federal structure, where the national tier does not play a direct role in the design or implementation of Cohesion Policy in its urban dimension. Instead, competences are devolved to the regional level, with Flanders acting as the responsible authority for Ghent.

9.3.2 Policy recommendations

No policy recommendations are formulated at the national level. This reflects the fact that, within Belgium's federal system, the national government has no direct responsibility for the governance or delivery of Cohesion Policy. The relevant policy levers and implementation mechanisms are situated at the regional level (Flanders), which holds the key authority for Ghent.

9.4 EU Level

9.4.1 Challenges

Despite the growing emphasis on integrated territorial development, current EU funding structures remain fragmented, particularly at the intersection of different funding streams. One of the key challenges is the limited integration between the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the European Social Fund (ESF). These two core cohesion instruments often operate in parallel rather than in synergy, making it difficult for cities to implement comprehensive, cross-cutting urban strategies that address both physical infrastructure and social inclusion. In addition, there is weak coordination across other EU funding programmes relevant to urban developments, such as LIFE and Horizon Europe. Misalignment in content, timing of calls, and administrative requirements often prevents cities from combining or sequencing funding effectively. This results in missed opportunities for innovation, scaling, and long-term impact.

9.4.2 Policy recommendations

At the European level, stronger structural support is needed to fully unlock the potential of cities as key actors in implementing Cohesion Policy. A first step is to introduce greater flexibility in operational programmes, allowing them to accommodate better integrated urban strategies that reflect the complex, cross-sectoral realities faced by cities such as Ghent. This would enable urban authorities to design projects that respond more effectively to their specific local contexts, rather than being constrained by narrowly defined thematic priorities. From that perspective, the structure of the EU programme is highly relevant to Ghent because it is also based on an integrated approach and close involvement of stakeholders. In addition, cities should be more systematically involved in the co-design of programmes and indicator systems. Their early participation in shaping the logic, criteria, and expected outcomes of funding programmes would not only improve alignment with urban realities but also ensure greater ownership and accountability in implementation. Indicators, in particular, should be adaptable to urban contexts. This could take the form of a flexible framework with a menu of options or the possibility for cities to propose context-specific indicators, supported by a precise monitoring and enforcement system in which cities are directly involved. The institutionalisation of urban contact points for both the ERDF and ESF across all Member States would ensure more consistent support structures for cities. The EU should also continue to promote administrative simplification and improve legal certainty by harmonising audit practices across programmes. Finally, dedicated urban capacity-building funds should be made available to help cities engage more effectively with a wider range of EU programmes—such as LIFE, Horizon Europe, or the Innovation Fund—thereby enhancing their ability to implement integrated and forward-looking urban strategies. Urban projects and especially neighbourhood-centred socio-spatial development strategies like those initiated in Ghent should be more explicitly recognised as strategic instruments for achieving EU objectives. This requires not only improved tracking and communication of urban contributions

within EU reporting systems, but also stronger political recognition of cities as co-creators of European policy. Ghent's integrated neighbourhood strategies, for instance, could serve as exemplary models for the kind of localised, holistic thinking that the New Urban Agenda and the European Urban Initiative aim to promote. The European Commission should support Member States in developing multi-fund strategies tailored explicitly to urban areas. This could involve clearer guidance on how to design and manage integrated urban projects that leverage multiple funding streams, as well as incentives for cross-funding synergies. In addition, regulatory frameworks should be made more flexible to allow for the combined use of funds particularly ERDF and ESF within a single intervention. Simplifying administrative barriers and harmonising eligibility criteria across programmes such as Horizon Europe and LIFE would further empower cities to innovate and respond to complex, cross-sectoral challenges.

10 Conclusion

Ghent is a medium-sized city of roughly 270 000 inhabitants that functions as the social and economic hub of a wider reference region comprising twenty neighbouring municipalities. Within Belgium's strongly decentralised federal system, the City of Ghent enjoys extensive local competences—ranging from land-use regulation to social services and culture—yet it must align its own strategic documents (Spatial Structure Plan, Climate Plan 2030, Mobility Plan, etc.) with frameworks defined by the Flemish Region and by EU Cohesion Policy. This multilevel setting positions the city simultaneously as an initiator of place-based strategies and as an implementer of programmes designed higher up the governance ladder. Over the past decade, Ghent has evolved from an occasional beneficiary into a systematic user of EU Cohesion funds. During the 2014 – 2020 programme period, it secured approximately €14 million in ERDF and ESF Flanders projects and 3,8 million in Interreg & Urbact. In the opening years of the 2021 – 2027 cycle, the city has already activated 7 new projects funded by ERDF & ESF Flanders and is involved in 5 Interreg projects. Rather than a loose collection of standalone initiatives, these resources are woven into long-horizon neighbourhood renewal agendas that combine public-space upgrades, brownfield recovery, social-inclusion pathways, and climate-adaptation measures. The result is a steadily expanding, multi-fund portfolio that demonstrates how an ambitious mid-sized city can translate its integrated territorial ambitions into Cohesion Policy reality. In what follows, we outline the conclusion of this report: Ghent's funding footprint, the governance structure and main actors, some of the specificities of Ghent's approach towards cohesion funding, the main challenges, and some strategic recommendations.

Ghent's Cohesion Policy funding footprint

Since the 2014 programming cycle Ghent has mobilised a total of 79 EU-funded projects. About 77% of these projects are funded under programmes in shared-management—ERDF and ESF(+); the other 23% on direct-management instruments such as Horizon and the Urban Innovative Actions/European Urban Initiative. Shared-management track: 61 projects—19 under ERDF, 19 under ESF/ ESF+, 13 under INTERREG and 5 under URBACT—have reached contract stage. Most ERDF resources support cycling infrastructure, urban renewal and digitalisation, whereas ESF(+) funds focus on skills, inclusion and youth employment. Direct-management track: 18 projects are distributed across Horizon 2020/Europe (12), UIA/EUI pilots (4) and a LIFE climate-action grant (2). Although individual budgets are usually smaller, these calls have financed Ghent's blue-green infrastructure experiments (Interreg BEGIN), smart-city pilots with Ghent University (Horizon) and the “Rewild the city” exchange under the European Urban Initiative.

Governance structure and key actors

EU–Flemish interface: Both ERDF Flanders and ESF+ Flanders are managed in Flanders by respectively the Agency for Innovation and Entrepreneurship (VLAIO) and the department for work and social economy. The cities Antwerp and Ghent influence the call calendar of ERDF Flanders and topic list through a joint Urban ITI steering group that safeguards 40 % of the Flemish urban ERDF envelope for Ghent, yet final project approvals remain in regional hands. Subregional level: the province of East-Flanders is also actively involved in Interreg programmes, sometimes as member of the monitoring committee. The province also offers support for Interreg programmes and co-finances EU projects that are in line with its policy. Municipal coordination hub: The Strategic Funding Team and a dedicated urban EFRO Contact Point for ERDF Flanders (both part of the International Networking en Funding Service) form the city's in-house clearing house for cohesion funds. They scan calls, match them with local pipelines, coach project owners and manage audit risks. Delivery arms: The Urban Renewal Service (Dienst Stedelijke Vernieuwing) steers socio-spatial neighbourhood programmes and aims to mobilise cohesion funding for targeted projects within their programs. The para-municipal developer sogent executes large spatial projects and leverages ERDF-supported land-value gains, while OCMW Ghent and the municipal Labour & Employment Service deliver social and labour actions financed by ESF(+). Horizontal partners: Ghent University, neighbourhood associations and social-economy firms are routinely drawn into consortia, while the city's active roles in Eurocities, URBACT and other networks keep it plugged into policy debates and transnational project pipelines.

Specificities that shape outcomes in Ghent

Several features distinguish Ghent and condition how it navigates Cohesion Policy:

- A mature ecosystem of municipal and para-municipal actors – notably the Urban Renewal Service and sogent – that can bundle spatial and social expertise into long-horizon programmes.
- Deep engagement in European learning (URBACT, EUJ, Interreg) and international networks (Eurocities, ICLEI), which increases visibility and accelerates policy transfer but also raises expectations for local delivery.
- An urban ERDF contact point for ERDF Flanders that acts as an “antenna on the shop floor,” picking up real-time signals on where project promoters stumble and which themes lack coverage; when fully used across departments, it helps translate those signals into better-targeted calls and smoother compliance.
- A central funding unit (Strategic funding team as part of the International Networking and Funding Service), acting as a matchmaking and knowledge centre for EU funding
- A strong track record in social innovation: Ghent consistently channels ESF resources into inclusion, skills and poverty reduction, making ESF its most frequently used shared-management fund.
- For ERDF Flanders and ESF Flanders, dependence on a regional gatekeeper: The Flemish managing authority (VLAIO) decides final project selection in ERDF Flanders, sets high co-financing rates (60 %), and privileges themes such as innovation and competitiveness, tilting the playing field away from culture, community-building or small-scale social infrastructures.

Main challenges

During the 2021-2027 programme period five inter-locking difficulties have become particularly visible in Ghent’s day-to-day work with Cohesion Policy. First, the thematic rigidity of the current ERDF Flanders Integrated Territorial Investment (ITI) framework obliges the city to disaggregate its integrated neighbourhood ambitions into narrowly defined project components that correspond to the calls for proposals. Because the official menu of specific objectives privileges innovation, SME support and low-carbon technologies, issues such as culture-led regeneration or community-building often fall outside the funding lens, forcing project designers to reshape narratives—or to abandon potentially transformative ideas—so they can be filed under a recognised theme. Second, the formal separation between ERDF and ESF+ Flanders makes it exceedingly hard to finance physical and social measures within a single, seamless intervention. Separate managing authorities, application timetables and procedure, and eligibility rules translate into parallel project files for what, on the ground, is one neighbourhood challenge. The result is a fragmentation of resources: a renovated building may be ready months before accompanying activation programmes can start, or social-inclusion actions kick off without the supportive infrastructure envisaged in the original concept. A third constraint is the high co-financing requirement, especially in ERDF Flanders. With ERDF grants capped at 40 % of total project cost, the municipality must marshal large volumes of match funding ahead of each call. This threshold has proven manageable for capital-intensive investments with clear revenue streams, but it systematically disadvantages smaller-scale, socially oriented projects whose returns are measured in community cohesion or poverty reduction, rather than cash flow. Administrative burden constitutes a fourth, cross-cutting obstacle, not only for ERDF and ESF Flanders, but also for Interreg. The city’s departments report that the cumulative weight of ex-ante eligibility checks, multiple procurement layers, and ex-post audits induces a culture of risk aversion. To minimise the threat of financial corrections, project promoters are increasingly clustering activities into fewer, larger work packages, sidelining experimental, community-scale ideas that carry a higher compliance risk.

Main Recommendations

Ghent’s evolving role as a strategic actor within Cohesion Policy highlights several areas where programme architecture, governance frameworks and implementation tools could be improved to better serve urban realities—not just in Ghent, but across similar mid-sized cities in Europe. Based on the city’s hands-on experience, five key recommendations emerge.

- First, there is a pressing need for more flexible and context-sensitive indicators. Current performance frameworks often fail to reflect the integrated and area-based nature of urban strategies. Cities like Ghent would benefit from a more adaptable system—one that either provides

a menu of urban-relevant indicators or allows municipalities to define their own metrics. Crucially, this should be embedded within a monitoring and enforcement structure that gives cities a formal voice, not only in reporting outcomes but in shaping how success is defined. Such a shift requires regulatory anchoring at the EU level and close consultation with cities during the development of operational programmes.

- Second, stronger trust-based governance models are essential. For cities to fully realise their place-based ambitions, they must be granted the autonomy and budgetary discretion to design and deliver integrated interventions. Allowing urban authorities to define their own thematic priorities and work in an area-based manner would align EU funding more closely with the principles of the New Urban Agenda. This means moving beyond thematic silos and toward frameworks that enable cities to weave physical, social and economic goals into coherent, long-term strategies.
- A third recommendation takes inspiration from the Recovery and Resilience Facility. As with national recovery plans, cities should be involved early in the programming cycle of Cohesion Policy—co-designing operational strategies and setting investment priorities in dialogue with regional and national authorities. This process should be institutionalised, with mechanisms to ensure that city input is not only collected but meaningfully acted upon. At the same time, safeguards should be put in place so that cities are not penalised for shortcomings in delivery or compliance that lie outside their control.
- Fourth, Ghent’s experience confirms the value of having an in-house contact point for ERDF Flanders and a centralised strategic funding team - a mechanism that has proven indispensable in aligning local project pipelines with regional and European calls and navigating compliance requirements. Sustaining and institutionalising such contact points across all major cities would significantly improve fund absorption and strategic coherence. Extending this model to ESF, where no equivalent structure currently exists, would help cities bridge the operational divide between physical and social investments and enable more genuinely integrated projects.
- Finally, greater clarity is needed around the concepts of “functional urban areas” and “metropolitan regions.” These spatial categories are increasingly invoked in policy rhetoric but remain vaguely defined in operational terms - especially in cross-border or polycentric contexts like the North Sea Port District. Clearer guidance is required on how such areas should be delineated, how they relate to programme eligibility, and what collaborative arrangements are permitted or encouraged under different funding streams.

Taken together, these recommendations aim to empower cities—not as passive beneficiaries of Cohesion Policy but as active, capable partners in designing and delivering Europe’s territorial future.

References

- Agentschap Binnenlands Bestuur. (2019). *Stedenbeleid in Vlaanderen*. <https://www.vlaanderen.be/stedenbeleid>
- Belgian Federal Planning Bureau (2022). *Overview of Federal and Regional Competences in EU Funds Management*. Brussels.
- ESF Vlaanderen (2022). *Annual Report on Social Fund Programmes in Flanders*. <https://www.esf-vlaanderen.be>
- European Commission. (2021). *ERDF Urban Development Report – Flanders Case*.
- European Commission (2021). *EU Cohesion Policy 2021–2027: Investing in Europe's Regions*. <https://cohesiondata.ec.europa.eu>
- European Commission. (2022a). *Belgium Cohesion Policy Implementation Report*.
- European Commission. (2022b). *Flanders Operational Programme ERDF 2021–2027*.
- European Commission. (2022). *European Urban Initiative – Overview*. <https://urban-initiative.eu>
- European Commission (2023a). *Partnership Agreement Belgium 2021–2027*. https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/2021_2027/belgium
- EUI. (2023). *Inclusive Commons Project Summary – Ghent*. <https://urban-initiative.eu/projects/inclusive-commons>
- Flemish ESF Agency (2021). *Strategic Plan ESF+ 2021–2027*. Department of Work and Social Economy.
- Flemish Government (2020). *Evaluation Report of the ERDF 2014–2020 Operational Programme Flanders*. <https://www.efro.be>
- Flemish Government (2022). *ERDF Operational Programme Flanders 2021–2027*. <https://www.efro.be>
- Interreg 2 Seas. (2020). *SCIFI Final Report*. <https://www.interreg2seas.eu/en/scifi>
- OECD (2020). *Decentralisation and Regionalisation in Belgium*. OECD Multi-level Governance Studies. <https://doi.org/10.1787/6f9c9a50-en>
- Stad Gent. (2021). *Klimaatplan 2030*. <https://klimaatplan.stad.gent>
- UIA. (2020). *CoGhent – Cultural Participation Through Digital Innovation*. <https://uia-initiative.eu/en/uia-cities/ghent>
- URBACT. (2024). *URBACT IV City Network Catalogue*. <https://urbact.eu>
- Vlaamse Regering. (2022). Regiovorming – nota (VR 2022 0402 DOC.0139-1). <https://themis.vlaanderen.be/files/61fd1d65d129f6000c000528/download?name=VR%202022%200402%20DOC.0139-1%20Regiovorming%20-%20nota.pdf&content-disposition=inline>
- VLAIO (2023). *Annual Implementation Report – ERDF Flanders*. Flemish Agency for Innovation and Entrepreneurship.
- VLAIO. (2020). *ERDF Flanders Final Report 2014–2020*. <https://www.efro.be>
- VLAIO. (2022). *ERDF Flanders Programme 2021–2027*. <https://www.efro.be>
- VLAIO. (2023). *Impactevaluatie van het EFRO 2014–2020 programma voor Vlaanderen*. <https://www.vlaio.be/nl/nieuws/impactevaluatie-zoomt-op-resultaten-efro-programma-2014-2020>
- VLAIO. (2022). *Tussentijdse evaluatie EFRO Vlaanderen 2014–2020*. <https://www.vlaio.be/nl/nieuws/resultaten-tussentijdse-evaluatie-efro-programma-beschikbaar>

Interviews & Urban Lab

Interview 1 – Head of the Urban Renewal Department, Ghent, 15 May 2025

Interview 2 – Programme Coordinator of the Flemish ERDF Programme, Managing Authority ERDF, VLAIO; and Policy Advisor for Smart Cities at VLAIO, Advisor, Smart Region Office, VLAIO, Government of Flanders, 21 May 2025

Interview 3 – Liaison Officer for EU Subsidies and Funding at Vleva, Flanders–Europe Liaison Agency, 23 May 2025

Interview 4 – The urban ERDF contact point, 26 May 2025

Interview 5 – Urban Policy Department, Government of Flanders, 28 May 2025

Interview 6 – Area Development Manager, sogent, 4 June 2025

Interview 7 – Secretary of the North Sea Port District, Province of East Flanders, 6 June 2025

Urban Laboratory – 6 participants: Director International Networking & Funding Service, policy adviser Team international Relations, International Networking & Funding Service, teamcoach financial team Team Strategic Funding, International Networking & Funding Service, funding officer & urban ERDF contactpoint Team Strategic Funding, International Networking & Funding Service, staff officer Funding Unit & Data planning Public Centre for Social Welfare, coordinator policy & support, Labour and Employment Service, 10 June 2025

ESPON



Co-funded by
the European Union
Interreg

espon.eu



ESPON 2030

ESPON EGTC
11 Avenue John F. Kennedy
L-1855 Luxembourg
Grand Duchy of Luxembourg
Phone: +352 20 600 280
Email: info@espon.eu
www.espon.eu

The ESPON EGTC is the Single Beneficiary of the ESPON 2030 Cooperation Programme. The Single Operation within the programme is implemented by the ESPON EGTC and co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund, the EU Member States and the Partner States, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, and Switzerland.

Disclaimer

This delivery does not necessarily reflect the opinion of the members of the ESPON 2030 Monitoring Committee.

