

BOOK REVIEW SECTION

Dotti, N.F., Musiałkowska, I., De Gregorio Hurtado, S. and Walczyk, J. (eds.): EU Cohesion Policy: A Multidisciplinary Approach. Cheltenham–Northampton, Edward Elgar, 2024. 380 p.

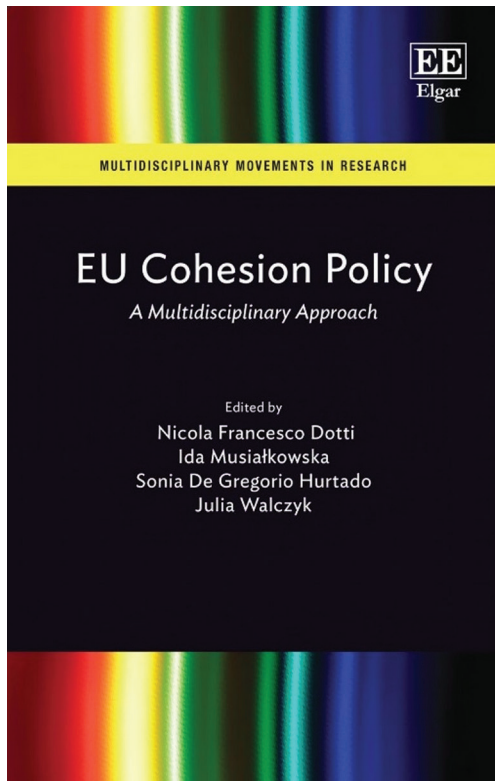
For almost 50 years, European regional policy, then Cohesion Policy (CP), has shaped the nature of the European Communities/European Union (EU), promoting the catching-up process between less and more developed countries and regions in order to reduce territorial disparities between Member States and their regions. Since 1988, the amount of money allocated to the EU's cohesion policy has increased to such an extent that it has become one of the Union's most important policies, along with the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), while at the same time being the European Union's most important investment policy. Over the decades, the CP has evolved from a framework aimed at compensating for regional deficiencies to a policy aimed at unlocking local development potential, embedded in an integrated place-

based approach. As economic, social, and territorial cohesion remains an attractive and compelling objective, the CP is often recognised as "the most explicit and most visible expression of solidarity within the EU" (AHNER, D. 2009, 1).

At the same time, it is perhaps the best known and most expensive of the EU's policies, and yet one of "the most complex policies in the world" (DOTTI, N.F. *et al.* 2024, 1), as well as one of the most controversial and frequently criticised (BACHTLER, J. and GORZELAK, G. 2007; BAUN, M. and MAREK, D. 2013). Although CP is a mature policy, it is characterised by constant evolution and the need to respond to the dynamically changing challenges of today and the anticipations of the future. This makes CP an extremely interesting, albeit very challenging subject of research. Indeed, any scientific attempt to understand, characterise, and evaluate CP requires a comprehensive and multidimensional approach open to multiple research and geographical perspectives.

Such an approach is proposed by Nicola Francesco DOTTI, Ida MUSIAŁKOWSKA, Sonia DE GREGORIO HURTADO, and Julia WALCZYK, the editors of this volume, which examines the origins and development, current status and performance, and future challenges of EU Cohesion Policy. The book is a result of the collective effort of the members of the Regional Studies Association's (RSA) Research Network on EU Cohesion Policy (#CPnet), which was established in 2011 as a forum for debating CP, with the aim of bridging the gap between academia and policy-making. The authors aim for this publication to contribute to the contemporary academic and policy debates on CP, territorial cohesion and European integration, to serve as a 'compass' and to enable a better understanding of its complexity.

The book brings together academics from across Europe to discuss the roots, performance, and prospects of CP. Bringing together such a broad team of people with a wealth of knowledge on the subject of the book is a guarantee of proper insight and reflection on the CP. At the same time, the fact that the European Union, and with it its most important and best-known policy, is facing more challenges than ever before, makes the book extremely timely and relevant. Finally, its relatively simple language, synthetic coverage, and inviting format make it a publication that can reach a wide audience – academics, policy-makers, practitioners, students, but also anyone else interested in CP.



The volume consists of an introduction, twenty chapters grouped into four thematic parts, and a summary highlighting the main lessons learned and key messages.

Part I (*Disciplinary Genealogies*) includes Chapters 2–6, which present the roots of the CP from the perspective of political science and European integration, regional economics, legal studies, and urban studies. Chapter 2, authored by Ida MUSIAŁKOWSKA, Piotr IDCZAK, and Dagmara KOCIUBA, sheds light on the genesis and development of the CP through a three-stage periodisation, presenting the main turning points and directions of change that determined its current form as a territorially-oriented development policy for the European Union, characterised by a place-based approach (BARCA, F. 2009) and shaped according to a new paradigm of regional policy. The chapter provides a concise and clear presentation of an extremely complex issue, allowing a better understanding of the processes and arguments underlying its current state. In Chapter 3, Nicola Francesco DOTI, Ugo FRATESI, and Christian OBERST introduce the reader to the broad context of the regional economic theories, schools of thought and policy narratives that underpin solutions and directions for change in CP and provide a rationale for policy interventions. The chapter links specific theoretical approaches to key policy challenges and their context. In the following Chapter 4, Serafin PAZOS-VIDAL discusses the origins and evolution of the CP from a legal perspective, highlighting the legal provisions in the EU Treaties and key legal principles of CP as well as crucial legal changes in the context of the 2021–2027 Financial Perspective. Recognising cities as key actors for territorial, economic, and social cohesion, Chapter 5, written by Sonia DE GREGORIO HURTADO, provides an insight into the evolution of the urban dimension of CP from its origins to the present day. The chapter also examines the main urban challenges that need to be addressed and discusses the way forward towards more sustainable and resilient urban areas in the EU. Chapter 6, which concludes Part I of the book, is devoted to the quality of life as an objective and inherent ambition of the CP. In this paper, Bryonny GOODWIN-HAWKINS identifies and develops three dominant frameworks: ‘standard of living’, ‘social model’, and ‘territorial well-being’, which offer a different way of defining and measuring quality of life.

Part II (*Assessing What Works*) aims to critically discuss the effects and performance of CP. It starts with Chapter 7 by Oto POTLUKA, who reviews the different evaluation methods used to measure the contribution of the CP to policy objectives and tries to answer the question of why we do not have clear and unambiguous information on the (positive) impact of the CP on cohesion between EU regions and states. The authors of Chapter 8, Riccardo CRESCENZI and Mara GIUA, look at the economic impact of the CP, outlining its effects on growth, employment, and economic development

more broadly. In Chapter 9, Claudia GLOAZZO examines the problems of a relatively new form of CP support, Financial Engineering Instruments (FEIs), which include such repayable funds such as equity, loans, and guarantees. The author discusses their growing importance, the arguments for their use, and the relevant governance arrangements. Chapter 10 by Piotr IDCZAK combines the themes of financial engineering instruments described in the previous chapter and the urban dimension of the CP taken up in Chapter 5. The author discusses in detail the assumptions, institutional system, and impact of the JESSICA initiative as a more sustainable and efficient response to the needs of urban areas. Chapter 11, written by Alberto BRAMANTI and Paolo Rosso, discusses the sub-regional dimension of European territorial development policies. Going beyond the ‘administrative region’, the chapter focuses on functional and place-based approaches, characterising three main features of local development from the strategic-territorial perspective: the goals, the actors, and the instruments, and linking them to the CP.

Part III (*The ‘When’ and ‘Where’ of Cohesion Policy Implementation*) introduces issues of CP implementation, such as governance and stakeholder engagement. In Chapter 12 Sébastien BOURDIN looks at the Strategy of Smart Specialisation, an approach to regional development in the EU based on a new paradigm of research and innovation. From the perspective of territorial governance, this contribution highlights the challenges of coordinating the activities of different stakeholders. In Chapter 13, Silvia GRANDI and Federico MARTELLOZZO link EU cohesion policy with environment and sustainable development policy, highlighting the convergence between the thematic objectives of CP and the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Chapter 14 by Alberto BRAMANTI and Paula TULLPO, offers a cross-border perspective on European local and regional development policies, discussing cross-border cooperation under INTERREG programmes. The authors analyse the role of multilevel governance structures and examine three constituent elements of cross-border policies: (i) the objectives of cross-border cooperation, (ii) the actors of cross-border interaction, and (iii) the specific new instruments developed to implement the policies. In Chapter 15, Oto POTLUKA examines the relationship between civil society organisations and Cohesion Policy by presenting the participation of these organisations in the policy-making process and assessing the impact of the CP on civil society organisations. Part III concludes with Chapter 16, written by Paula TULLPO and Silvia GRANDI, which discusses the administrative dimension of the governance and management of the operational programmes of the CP and examines the relationships between power, politics, place, space, territory, and institutions. For this purpose, the authors adapt the Geofinance Diamond Model which allows them to highlight the interlinkages of the EU Structural Funds with the pillars of the new political geography and geo-finance.

The last series of chapters is grouped in Part IV (*Looking Forward: The Future Challenges*). It is opened by Chapter 17 by Serafin PAZOS-VIDAL, which discusses the future perspectives of CP with emphasis on the Next Generation EU as a new challenge for CP. Chapter 18, authored by Mattia CASULA, Robert LEONARDI, and Raffaella Y. NANETTI, provides insights into the operational framework for effective multi-level policy implementation, taking up the discussion on the role of the partnerships and the partnership principle in CP. Chapter 19 by John BACHTLER, Sébastien BOURDIN, and Martin FERRY looks at the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the evolution of CP for the 2014–2020 period, and for the 2021–2027 financial perspective, analysing its main implications and the challenges it poses. In Chapter 20, Ekaterina DOMORENOK provides an overview of how the CP has integrated climate priorities into specific objectives and instruments in the 2014–2020 and 2021–2027 programming periods. Finally, the stimulating Chapter 21 by Kai BÖHME and Maria TOPTSIDOU reflects on how the idea of cohesion could evolve and what consequences this might have for the future of CP. The authors argue that it is time to rethink and broaden the understanding of cohesion. They propose some key points for discussion and call for more ambitious objectives and better adaptation to the challenges of today's and tomorrow's Europe. The book concludes with a summary by Nicola Francesco DOTTI, Ida MUSIAŁKOWSKA, Sonia DE GREGORIO HURTADO, and Julia WALCZYK, which provides a synthesis of the debates developed throughout the book and draws out lessons and key messages for policy-making and research.

The multidimensional and multidisciplinary approach, already mentioned here and thus appropriate to the aim of the volume, should be considered the main merit of the edited volume under review. However, the editors and authors of the chapters effectively hide the fact that different disciplines and research approaches are represented, so that the book appears to be coherent and without dissonance (in terms of language, terminology, and methodological basis) between the different parts. All chapters are written in a similar way, following a single pattern, despite significant thematic variations. Good navigation is facilitated by cross-references and links between chapters. The relatively simple language, which is largely (as far as possible) free of EU jargon, is also a great asset that significantly widens the potential audience. Thanks to this, the book can successfully serve as a textbook in academic courses as a useful introduction to the complex issues of the CP.

The book under review is characterised by a clear territorial context, which has not been so evident in previous works on the subject. At the thematic level, the volume is well balanced between the political, institutional, economic, social and, above all, environ-

mental strands. Finally, the diversity of authors, including researchers from old and new Member States, as well as from the core and periphery of the EU, allows for the presentation of different perspectives, so that the narrative and argumentation are not biased. All this has made it possible to address a relatively broad catalogue of problems and issues related to CP.

However, its strength in this context is also its weakness. The more informed reader, with some knowledge of CP and looking for more in-depth analysis or sharper assessments, may sometimes be disappointed by the rather superficial treatment of some important issues, the lack of broader reflection or the lack of presentation of the intricacies and nuances of the policy in some of its aspects. For example, the book lacks a more systematic approach to evaluating the effectiveness of CP, a review of past evaluations and assessments, existing evidence and contradictions in this area. Some crucial aspects of CP, such as the institutional framework, management and implementation, territorial instruments of CP, the functional approach and reference to the Territorial Agenda 2030, the European Green Deal, a just transition or, more generally, the links between mission-oriented policies and CP (CAPPELLANO, F. *et al.* 2023), are only marginally highlighted in chapters dedicated to other topics. It is also somewhat surprising that there is no broader reflection on the role and importance of European Territorial Cooperation (beyond INTERREG), one of the objectives of the CP. The way the CP is linked to the challenges of the future is also not entirely satisfactory considering that challenges of the future (perhaps because of the long publication cycle) have often already become the challenges of the present. The conclusions drawn and the solutions and recommendations proposed mainly relate to the 2021–2027 financial perspective without making a significant contribution to the ongoing debate on the Cohesion Policy 2028+ (with the exception of Chapter 21).

Despite these minor shortcomings, which are a natural consequence of the very broad thematic scope of the publication, the edited volume represents an important and necessary contribution to the debate on CP. By providing structured, cross-cutting, and accessible knowledge, the edited volume enables a better understanding of CP. I am convinced that this timely, valuable, and necessary work is a must for all researchers concerned with EU cohesion policy in particular and regional development policy in general.

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