



Special Session Proposal

Special Session Title

Impossible Triangularity? Cohesion, Competitiveness, and Defense in European Governance

Liviu-George Maha, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iasi, Romania: mlg@uaic.ro

Cristian Incaltarau, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iasi, Romania: cristian.incaltarau@uaic.ro

Gabriela Carmen Pascariu*, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iasi, Romania: gcpas@uaic.ro

*corresponding convener for ERSA Congress Secretariat

Abstract

Recent geopolitical changes, economic shocks and security challenges have profoundly reshaped the strategic priorities of the European Union's governance in terms of its strategic objectives. As a result, increased attention has been directed towards strengthening European competitiveness and defense capabilities, raising critical questions about the role, scope and future orientation of EU cohesion policy, especially in the context of the European Commission's proposals for the new Multiannual Financial Framework 2028-2034.

This special session addresses the emerging and highly relevant debate on the potential trade-offs – and complementarities – between the objects of economic, social and territorial cohesion that have dominated EU governance for over three decades and the relatively recent priorities of economic competitiveness and increased defense spending in the context of new geostrategic realities.

Traditionally, EU cohesion policy has been a cornerstone of European integration, designed to reduce regional disparities, foster convergence and promote balanced territorial development. At the same time, competitiveness-oriented agendas – industrial policy, innovation strategies, and strategic autonomy and, more recently, investment in defense and security – have gained importance, particularly in discussions on the future Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF). While political narratives increasingly frame competitiveness and security as collective European goods, concerns have emerged about the potential



reallocation of resources away from cohesion objectives, with uneven territorial consequences.

This session aims to critically explore whether and how a logic of synergies can be outlined between cohesion, competitiveness and defense objectives, rather than a zero-sum or, more importantly, risks in terms of slowing down the convergence process or even reversing current trends, not so much nominally but above all structurally, with long-term destabilizing effects on the integration process.

Contributions are therefore invited that examine the territorial impact of changing budgetary priorities, the political economy of EU spending and the implications for regional inequalities, social cohesion and long-term development. Particular attention is paid to the dynamics of multi-scale governance, the role of defense-related and dual-use investments and the risks of reinforcing core-periphery divisions within the EU.

From a methodological point of view, papers are expected that address a wide variety of quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods, including spatial analysis, econometric modelling, policy evaluation, comparative studies and scenario-based assessments. Bringing together perspectives from regional science, political economy and European studies, the session aims to promote an informed debate on how Europe can balance security, competitiveness and cohesion without undermining its fundamental principles of territorial solidarity and equity.