

Title

Cohesion Policy and Crises: Lessons from the Pandemic and the Ukrainian Aggression, and Pathways for the Future

Brief description of the topic

In recent years, the European Union and its regions have been confronted with multiple, overlapping crises — including the COVID-19 pandemic and the energy shock — all of which have posed significant challenges for regional cohesion and resilience. In line with the 2026 ERSA Congress theme on how regions respond to global challenges, a reassessment of the role of Cohesion Policy in crisis situations is both timely and policy-relevant.

Through different instruments, Cohesion Policy contributed to addressing both the pandemic and the consequences of the Russian aggression against Ukraine. An ex post evaluation focusing on these crisis-response mechanisms has been carried out under the **2014–2020 Cohesion Fund ex post evaluation (Work Package 12)**, examining the results of these instruments particularly in relation to **SMEs, health systems and refugee support**.

This session will present the main findings of this evaluation, with a focus on **relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, coherence and EU added value** under crisis-oriented use of Cohesion Policy funding.

The objectives of the session are to stimulate discussion on the key trade-offs inherent in crisis response under Cohesion Policy — such as **speed vs. strategic investment, flexibility vs. administrative and governance burden**, and **short-term relief vs. long-term cohesion goals**. The session will also aim to:

- Provide a **comparative, cross-regional and cross-Member State perspective**, through case studies showing how different contexts shaped the outcomes of CF/ERDF crisis-related measures.
- Identify **lessons and policy implications for the post-2027 period**, contributing to debates on resilience, preparedness and place-based approaches within Cohesion Policy.

- Encourage dialogue between **researchers, policymakers and practitioners**, combining evaluation evidence with implementation experiences and forward-looking policy reflections.

Proposed format

- **Duration:** 90 minutes
- **Structure:** 4–6 presentations (papers), followed by a discussant or a panel discussion
- **Example contributions:**
 - Presentation of the ex post evaluation methodology and the overall findings (by a member of the evaluation team or an expert familiar with WP12)
 - A paper focusing on **SMEs**
 - A paper focusing on **health systems**
 - A paper focusing on **migration and refugee support**

Target audience / participants

The session is expected to attract **researchers in regional science, spatial economics and public policy; evaluators of Cohesion Policy; regional and national policymakers; practitioners involved in Cohesion Fund and ERDF management; and stakeholders interested in resilience, crisis response and territorial cohesion across the EU**.

Expected contribution

The session will enrich the ERSA 2026 programme with timely empirical evidence combining evaluation results and field-based insights. It will contribute to a more informed and critical debate on how Cohesion Policy can adapt to crisis contexts while safeguarding long-term cohesion objectives. In addition, it will offer **policy-oriented lessons** relevant for the design of **post-2027 Cohesion Policy interventions**, particularly concerning flexibility, resilience, governance and crisis-responsiveness.

Keywords / subject areas

Cohesion Policy; Crisis response; Regional resilience; Evaluation; European Union; Multilevel governance; Territorial development.

Potential contributors / presenters (indicative)

- An expert from the **evaluation team** (Work Package 12)
- A researcher or academic specialising in **crisis impacts and EU/national instruments**
- Additional contributors to be confirmed depending on the thematic focus (SMEs, health, migration)
- Additional contributors may include researchers working on **crisis-response policy instruments at EU, national or international level**, including comparative analyses of measures used to address the impacts of COVID-19 and other recent crises.