Introduction

Simona Piattoni and Laura Polverari

RATIONALE AND AMBITIONS OF THE VOLUME

Cohesion policy (CP) is arguably one of the most important policies of the European Union (EU) and historically one of the most financially significant, today still representing roughly one-third of the EU budget. Beyond its financial dimension, CP is important also because through it the Community/Union has addressed some of its most vital challenges, from economic development to social and territorial cohesion; and has facilitated the attainment of some of its most defining goals, from the completion of the single market to eastern enlargement. It could be argued that all these goals were implicitly and synthetically captured in the original formulation of the Preamble of the Treaty of Rome, whose felicitous formulation of ‘harmonious development’ is contained in all subsequent treaties, albeit with varied emphasis on the expected drivers and the complementary aims of this development.¹ The nature of these drivers and the compatibility between the several objectives simultaneously pursued through CP, hence the many interpretations that can be given of this policy, are the objects of our analysis.

This Handbook, therefore, will not only chart what the EU is and does today, but also give a sense of the many aspects of EU integration that have been addressed through CP during its 40 years of existence. In particular, we will seek to highlight how CP has been used to elicit a sense of joint purpose and common direction among the territories of Europe, in an effort to draw them towards increasingly converging economic, social and administrative standards, thus favouring both a sense of community and a spirit of solidarity. Whether or not CP has achieved these ambitious objectives is obviously questionable, as it is questionable whether these were the ‘real’ objectives of this policy. What, according to us, is unquestionable is that CP is a highly political policy that tends to mobilise a large number of institutional and non-institutional actors, at supranational, national and subnational levels.

As already remarked, interpretations of CP abound. According to some, the funds distributed through CP have been a side-payment for the anticipated or unanticipated hardship that the completion of the single market would create for some of the more peripheral regions (Moravcsik 1993, 1998). For others, it has sugar-coated the bitter pill of successive rounds of enlargement, which created additional competitive pressures for some regions and countries while favouring others by lending them a new geographical centrality (Marks 1993; Pollack 1995). For others still, CP was the lever through which EU supranational institutions were disarticulating the territorial composition of the member states in an effort to achieve a direct connection between the new centre and its ‘periphery’ (Tömmel 1998; Smyrl 1998). Yet again for others, cohesion is the language through which the EU seeks to create a sense of solidarity and goodwill and glosses over some of the real tensions that beset it (Diez 1999; Schimmelfennig 2001).

What this debate unequivocally reveals is the highly political nature of this policy. This feature of CP should not come as a surprise, particularly to those who work in the public policy analysis tradition: redistributive policies normally arouse many different interests and mobilise both collective and individual actors (Lowi 1972; Wilson 1973). But also those who work in the EU integration study tradition and who look at the polity structuring effect of EU policies will concur that CP has constitutional aspects which cannot but activate many diverse institutional actors in defence or for the promotion of their institutional or constitutional prerogatives (Bartolini 2005; Scharpf 2010).

Given the varied nature of the interests affected, in this Handbook we decided to place particular emphasis on the institutional and social dynamics activated by CP, dedicating an entire part of the book (Part II) to them. For the same reason, we provided an ample range of interpretive keys and engaged the (sometimes rather critical) debates that have been prompted by CP (Parts I and V). We also decided to address the interrelations between CP and other EU policies with the aim of offering a more rounded comprehension of this policy (Part IV) and we correspondingly decided to limit the analysis of Cohesion policy 'on the ground' to one part of the book only (Part III). Consequently, and contrary to most existing books and edited volumes which focus only on one or two country cases (Bache 1998; Börzel 2002; Gualini 2004) or on a subset of member states (e.g. Bache and Andreou 2011; Baun and Marek 2008; Bachtler and Turok 1997; Hooghe 1996; Paraskevopoulos and Leonardi 2004), we do not provide country-by-country analyses of the implementation and impact of CP in a selection of countries, but rather chapters dedicated to groups of countries which can be argued to face similar (never identical) problems. Nevertheless, by so doing, we do cover all of the EU28 member states, an effort that we have not seen in any other preceding edited volume. We realise that these are unconventional choices but we are confident that we have provided an accessible, but not banal, overview of CP.

Despite our long-term and ongoing interest in CP, we have learnt a lot from the contributions contained herein. In the remainder of this Introduction we offer the reader not just an overview of the arguments of this Handbook, but also 'itineraries' through some of the cross-cutting themes that link several chapters, and tips for the beginner as well as for the experienced traveller.

We believe that this Handbook may be of interest to a variety of readers: students will be able to learn about the essential elements and fundamental milestones of EU CP, while scholars with an interest in this policy will be able to delve into some of the most sophisticated debates. Finally, practitioners will find reference to some of the more technical aspects of CP, as well as theoretical grounding for their daily activities and an update on the more recent policy developments. Our intended readership, however, is not only confined to those with an interest in Cohesion policy. Students and scholars interested in other EU policies, European integration, public policy dynamics, actor mobilisation in multilevel contexts, and in the role of EU institutions in EU policy-making will find in this resource useful content too.

OVERVIEW OF THE CHAPTERS

We offer here an overview of the main parts of the Handbook and a brief account of what is contained in each chapter. Part I covers the evolution, structure and rationale of

CP. Even as we tackled the birth and evolution of this policy, we privileged a theoretically informed reading over a merely descriptive one. Therefore we asked our contributors not only to reconstruct with as much precision as possible the main stages of CP evolution, from its origins in the Treaty of Rome to the present day, but also to give us a sense of the many different objectives simultaneously pursued through this policy. Brunazzo (Chapter 1) offers a complete overview of evolution of the regulations governing this policy area – which is complemented by the maps enclosed in this Handbook showing the progressive territorial coverage of Cohesion policy – and Stephenson (Chapter 2) maps the institutions and procedures activated by this policy, thus jointly providing the coordinates necessary to navigate the rest of the Handbook. From the third chapter onward we equip the reader with the necessary gear to trek the difficult landscapes of the various economic theories which informed this policy during its life. The reader is thus alerted to the fact that the principles and regulations governing the policy have changed through time and that the ideas and theories driving it have also changed, drawing inspiration from standard trade theory, regional economics, New Economic Geography and developmental economics, and that the more recent emphasis on technology and human capital may even work against economic convergence across regions (Begg, Chapter 3).

Part I also hosts chapters that interpret Cohesion policy from other vantage points and address wide bodies of literature that have developed in connection with this policy. One important question is whether the multilevel governance (MLG) structures that govern Cohesion policy contribute to or detract from overall EU democratic legitimacy (Piattoni, Chapter 4). The chapter argues that, by adopting a notion of democracy as ‘delegation cum accountability’, this literature cannot but emphasise the breaks that occur in the chains of delegation and accountability when multiple principals and multiple agents are taken into account, and suggests that a different notion of democracy – multilevel or transnational democracy – should be adopted for interconnected settings like the EU. A second major body of literature that has addressed Cohesion policy, among others, is that on Europeanisation (Dąbrowski and Graziano, Chapter 5). The difficulties that are observed in the implementation of this policy in several member states are caused mainly by different policy traditions and by incompatible or shifting inter-institutional relations causing various degrees of fit or misfit between the regulations that govern it and member state institutional capacities and, consequently, triggering reactions that range from resistance to adaptation. This *problématique* directly feeds into the question that animates the chapter on the ‘quality of government’ (Charron, Chapter 6), which asks whether institutional capacities have an impact not only on the utilisation of Structural and Cohesion Funds, but also on their allocation across regions. The answer is that it does.

Part II of the Handbook is dedicated to the institutional, political and societal mobilisation that is triggered by Cohesion policy: the politics of Cohesion policy. A distributive policy with clear redistributive and constituent implications, which moreover tends to upset existing domestic territorial and administrative arrangements, Cohesion policy is highly political and arouses a great variety of institutional and non-institutional interests, injecting a disordering dynamic in both national and EU interinstitutional relations. After all, this is the essence of multilevel governance (Piattoni 2010), the expression that best describes the politics of Cohesion policy. For this reason, we decided to dedicate an entire part of the Handbook to the exploration of these interests and to the ways in which

institutional and non-institutional actors mobilise to influence the policy. In this way, we aimed at providing a more nuanced, but also more problematic, view of Cohesion policy as seen from the vantage point of the main EU institutional and non-institutional actors.

The first five chapters of Part II are dedicated to those EU institutions which are directly involved in decision-making. These chapters offer a multifaceted view of Cohesion policy, refracted as it were through the prism of each institution's role and interest. The European Commission has been at the centre of this policy since the beginning, having spearheaded its creation and successive strengthening and having gained enormous room for political manoeuvre from it (Tömmel, Chapter 7). The Council of the European Union and, increasingly, with the augmented politicisation of the periodic EU multiannual financial framework exercise, the European Council have equally been central to Cohesion policy policy-making, offering governmental representatives and heads of state and government the opportunity to promote their own agenda of what this policy should accomplish. A vivid account of the negotiations surrounding the 2014–2020 common provisions regulations (Bachtler and Mendez, Chapter 8) gives the full flavour of the often divergent interests that the MSs try to promote through Cohesion policy.

An 'insider' view of the role of the European Parliament in shaping this policy is provided by Hübner (Chapter 9). This chapter puts a great emphasis on the interinstitutional dialogues between Commission, Council and Parliament, and on the intense interactions between Commission's directorates-general (DGs) and parliamentary committees, first and foremost the European Parliament's dedicated Committee on Regional Development (EP REGI), giving the reader the full sense of the enormous political significance of this policy. A less frequently studied, but nevertheless crucial, minor EU institution is the Committee of the Regions (Schönlau, Chapter 10), which has managed to shape salient features of Cohesion policy 'from below' by interacting closely with the Commission and the European Parliament and by placing its bets on its capacity to offer these institutions knowledge of how Cohesion policy exerts its effects on the ground.

Even less commonly studied are the two following institutions, which are however crucially important for the success of the policy: the European Court of Auditors (ECA) and the European Investment Bank (EIB). The ECA has acquired increasing centrality in the assessment of the regularity of Cohesion policy expenditure and, more recently, of its effectiveness in achieving its stated objectives. It also provides opinions on new legislation, supporting the legislative process with hard evidence. These activities have made the ECA a key interlocutor for both the European Commission and the European Parliament, and an important actor across the entire policy cycle (Karakatsanis and Weber, Chapter 11). Contradicting previous research, the chapter highlights that the strengthening of internal control and external audit has considerably reduced the level of error in Cohesion policy expenditure, noting nevertheless the high administrative costs associated with this and the limited uptake (and effectiveness) of the simplification measures recently introduced to curb them.

The EIB has supported Cohesion policy since the beginning by providing affordable credit to national and regional governments for the required co-funding of investments. More recently, this institution has become even more pivotal due to the effect of the crisis on domestic budgets. Starting with an analysis of the macroeconomic and territorial impact of the economic crisis, and with a review of the changes introduced in the

relationship between Cohesion policy and the EU's macroeconomic governance, Bubbico et al. (Chapter 12) show how the EIB's operations, services and instruments have become more strongly interlinked with the policy, making this institution a crucial interlocutor for member states and regional authorities alike.

The two last chapters of Part II tell us about subnational mobilisation around Cohesion policy, whether from subnational authorities or from regional and regionalist parties. Regional authorities and societies have been involved in and activated by Cohesion policy since its early days. Hepburn (Chapter 13) goes beyond the established argument about the role that this policy has played for the empowerment of regional authorities as constituent actors in EU decision-making to show how these actors have themselves used it instrumentally to meet their own political aims domestically (see Smyrl 1997). The chapter charts the way in which Cohesion policy has been intrinsically linked with first a rise, and subsequently a fall, of a 'Europe of the Regions', ultimately leading many parties to abandon an autonomy agenda in favour of an outright independentist one. As Massetti and Schakel (Chapter 14) demonstrate, however, this shift has not necessarily translated in a decline of pro-EU stances. With a focus on regionalist parties, and based on an original dataset of 31 regionalist parties' positioning on European integration (1989 to 2006), the authors conduct a first comprehensive examination of the degree to which a region's Cohesion policy receipts appear to affect the level of Europeanism (or indeed Euroscepticism).

In Part III, as already noted, we decided to group country cases. We have done so according to whether the policy addressed mainly the southern periphery (Polverari, Chapter 15), the service economies of the north (Charles, Chapter 16), the rich central regions (Balsiger, Chapter 17), the sparsely populated countries (Muravska et al., Chapter 18), and Central and Eastern Europe (Pálné Kovács, Chapter 19). While this choice may disappoint those who look for an in-depth study of 'their' member state, we think that by imposing a comparative spin onto the empirical chapters we have enriched the usual analysis without impoverishing its empirical depth. In this way, our contributors could highlight common challenges and still identify distinct responses to them.

In structuring Part III, we have aimed to achieve a balance within each chapter between country-specific coverage and discussion of commonalities and trends, while granting flexibility for the authors to develop those topics that are particularly relevant for their group of countries whilst at the same time providing key information for each country (in order to allow country comparisons across chapters and country groupings). To achieve these aims, the chapters in Part III have been structured along a common template, with each chapter reviewing: (1) the regional disparities and the regional policy background of the group of countries considered; (2) the evolving Cohesion policy eligibility and coverage; (3) the financial resources allocated to each country across each programming period from 1989; (4) the strategies pursued across the five programming periods; (5) the outcomes and impacts achieved (according to existing evaluation evidence); and (6) a critical appraisal of implementation challenges and successes.

The chapters do not focus only on the most recent and current programmes, but discuss the long-term evolution of CP in the countries considered. To facilitate this longitudinal view and allow cross-country comparisons, some standard tables are included in each chapter, providing the details of the number of programmes and implementation arrangements in each country and period; national commitment appropriations in each

programming period; and thematic concentration and European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and European Social Fund (ESF) share in the current, 2014–2020, period, whereas a table describing the financial resources allocated to the 2014–2020 Partnership Agreements of all 28 EU member states is provided at the beginning of the Handbook. We are of course aware of the limitations of the way in which we have grouped countries: no EU member state is identical or faces exactly the same regional development problem as any other. Yet, as the reader will appreciate when exploring this part of the Handbook, the way countries have been grouped has allowed interesting trends and key messages to surface – for example, the importance of institutional and administrative capacities and of policy continuity for policy performance – providing empirical and analytical insights that complement other chapters in this volume.

Although singularly important, Cohesion policy obviously impacts upon and is affected by other equally relevant EU policies and strategies. Part IV is therefore dedicated to these interactions and to the exploration of whether they work towards the same goals or rather aim in different directions, creating effectiveness problems for one another.² Agricultural and rural development policy, the second-largest EU budget item and oldest Community policy, has an independent redistributive impact on EU regions and powerfully shapes member states' calculations at each budgetary round. By taking a 'place-based' territorial approach and by questioning the economic theories that have been summoned to explain local development, Crescenzi and De Filippis (Chapter 20) show how indeed common agricultural and rural development policies often work at cross-purposes with Cohesion policy. Even more 'damaging' is the impact of infrastructure policy and, particularly, of transportation policy (Faiña et al., Chapter 21) since building better transport connections among EU regions increases regional specialisation and reinforces the differential accumulation of factors of economic development across regions.

A few more recent but equally (and increasingly) crucial policy strategies interact with Cohesion policy in ways that deserve to be studied, among them 'smart specialisation' (McCann and Ortega-Argiles, Chapter 22), the green economy (Lenschow and Baudner, Chapter 23), macroregional strategies (Gänzle, Chapter 24), 'external Europeanisation' (Ágh and Kovács, Chapter 25), and urban development (Aktinson and Zimmermann, Chapter 26). One of the *ex ante* conditionalities of 2014–2020 programming, 'smart specialisation', is now a cornerstone of Cohesion policy. McCann and Ortega-Argiles (Chapter 22) show how this concept has evolved from a mainly theoretical, and non-spatial, notion to an important tool supporting policy-makers in the difficult task of policy prioritisation when translating the different and often conflicting interests of different constituencies into an operational framework for action. Another key theme in the current Cohesion policy, in line with the Europe 2020 strategy, is that of the green economy. Lenschow and Baudner (Chapter 23) trace the evolution of the environmental dimension in Cohesion policy, from the emergence of the concept of sustainable development and a focus on compliance with environmental law in the 1980s and 1990s, to the current emphasis on climate change mitigation and adaptation, 'green growth' and a low-carbon economy, concluding that, despite the successful discursive framing, the seemingly fading commitment in the current European Commission may hinder the realisation of these ambitious goals.

Territorial cooperation in the EU has taken different organisational forms and

functions over time, including for example city twinning, Euro-regions and, more recently, macro-regional strategies as well as European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTCs). Gänzle (Chapter 24) explores these institutional frameworks as tools for implementing EU Cohesion policy, which have been framed as important factors contributing to broader EU policy objectives, such as fostering innovation and sustainable economic growth. Ágh and Kovács (Chapter 25) argue that the EU is fundamentally concerned about ‘wider Europe’ and has a vital interest in a wider ‘cohesive Europe’, which it pursues through Cohesion policy in Eastern Europe. This Eastern Partnership-specific Cohesion policy needs a new conceptual framework based on: (1) external Europeanisation and/or external governance; (2) a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA); and (3) the largest possible operationalisation of the meaning of security as its three main analytical pillars.

Since the early 1990s the European Commission has launched several urban initiatives as part of Cohesion policy which helped cities cope with challenges such as social exclusion and the regeneration of deprived areas. Atkinson and Zimmermann (Chapter 26) argue that, although the notion of integrated sustainable urban development is prominent in the current Cohesion policy programmes and a predefined share of each member state’s ERDF funds must now be invested in urban areas, the urban dimension has become somewhat blurred in this latest programming round.

Finally, we wanted to conclude in Part V by raising even more fundamental questions and reporting on a few critical debates spurred by Cohesion policy. Thus Leonardi and Holguin (Chapter 27) question the conventional principles of Cohesion policy (which are found in Chapter 1, by Brunazzo) and suggest that other ‘real’ principles actually inspired this policy during its evolution. More importantly, these principles were often contentiously debated even within EU institutions, thus making Cohesion policy less coherent and effective than it could have been. The debate on the effectiveness of Cohesion policy is tackled head on by Fratesi in Chapter 28, which addresses the many facets of assessment, spanning from mere accounting rigour to the leveraging effect that the European Structural and Investment Funds resources have on regional development. The author argues that Cohesion policy evaluation, despite the wealth of cross-sectional and longitudinal data, is hampered by the sheer number of variables which must be taken into account, the complex interactions among different policies, the possible existence of threshold effects, and other more technical issues linked to the models used for the assessment. Notermans (Chapter 29) questions the capacity of EU Cohesion policy to engender the economic convergence of the peripheral member states towards the development levels (as measured by per capita gross domestic product) of the core member states and questions the interaction between Cohesion policy and other macroeconomic policies, first and foremost Economic and Monetary Union (EMU). Rather, economic cohesion has deteriorated as income convergence has given way to economic polarisation between the north-western core and the southern and eastern periphery. Fargion and Profeti (Chapter 30) discuss the nature and relevance of the social dimension in both the regulations and operational programmes of Cohesion policy, with a specific focus on the 2007–2013 and 2014–2020 programming periods, examining in particular employment support and social inclusion. Although, particularly after 2012, EU institutions have taken several initiatives aimed at reinforcing the social and anti-poverty dimensions of Europe 2020, social inclusion is still apparently caught between the entrepreneurial role

of socially oriented EU bodies and the ordinary political bargaining between EU institutions and national governments.

The two final chapters create a sort of small debate among themselves by raising criticisms from a ‘critical economic geography’ point of view. Faludi (Chapter 31) discusses the notion of territoriality, which is historically and conceptually linked to the rise of the nation-states, and highlights how CP has called it into question, propounding instead a ‘place-based’ approach to cohesion regardless of the administrative boundaries that parcel out the EU territory. Underlying the tensions that inevitably arise is the issue of whether representative democracy, operating on the assumption of ‘absolutistic territorialism’, can deal with functional interdependencies implying new cross-border configurations, and with it relativist constructionism. Gualini (Chapter 32) takes this critique one step forward by exploring in detail the notion of multilevel governance and questioning its appropriateness in capturing the spatial dimension on Cohesion policy, and suggests that multiscale may be a more apt way of conceptualising the space in which to realise economic and social cohesion.

KEY THEMES AND ‘READING ITINERARIES’

The scope and scale of this Handbook is quite ambitious, with 32 chapters and about 300 000 words. However, we do not anticipate that the Handbook be read cover to cover, but rather that the table of contents be taken as a menu from which readers can pick and choose what to focus on, based on their specific interests. For example, those new to Cohesion policy, including students, could start with Brunazzo (Chapter 1) and Stephenson (Chapter 2), who explain the policy’s nuts and bolts, and continue with the country-grouping chapters of Part III (Polverari, Charles, Balsiger, Muravska et al., and Pálné Kovács, Chapters 15 to 19), for a review of coverage, strategies, achievements and implementation challenges, and finish with the chapters by Begg and by Leonardi and Holguin (Chapters 3 and 27) for a more critical examination of the economic rationale and underlying principles of the policy.

Those interested in the political dynamics activated by Cohesion policy may read the chapters on territoriality and territorialisation (Faludi and Gualini, Chapters 31 and 32 respectively), the critical perspectives on a new model of democracy in interconnected settings offered by Piattoni (Chapter 4), the chapters on regional mobilisation and regionalist parties by Hepburn and by Massetti and Schakel (Chapters 13 and 14), as well as some of the chapters on the EU institutions (Tömmel, Bachtler and Mendez, Hübner, and Schönau, Chapters 7 to 10).

Those who should wish to follow the thread of multilevel governance may find the chapters by Faludi (Chapter 31), Gualini (Chapter 32), Piattoni (Chapter 4), as well as those on macroregional strategies and the cities (by Gänzle, and by Atkinson and Zimmermann, Chapters 24 and 26) especially relevant; whilst readers with an interest in topics related to administrative capacity and implementation efficiency will find useful the arguments developed by Charron (Chapter 6) and by Dąbrowski and Graziano (Chapter 5), and in the country-groupings chapters (Chapters 15 to 19).

Further cross-cutting themes include the appraisal of policy results and effectiveness, and the interrelation with other EU policies. Issues related to policy results and

effectiveness – whether overall, related to the goals of the policy and of its programmes, or in relation to methodological or specific dimensions – are discussed in about half of the chapters, thus not only in Fratesi's contribution (Chapter 28), but also in the country-groupings chapters of Part III (that provide a summary of policy achievements), and in the chapters on the relationship with other EU policies and strategies (smart specialisation, the green economy, the social dimension, Chapters 22, 26 and 30).

CONCLUSION

At the end of this journey, we want to reflect on the broader significance that Cohesion policy is acquiring in the context of today's Union. While this is the policy that most of all translates in practice the idea of solidarity across member states, the recent economic crisis has revealed its limited effectiveness in the absence of a renewed pledge by the member states to solidarity and a veritably common investment policy. Cohesion policy is supposedly favoured by a stable and sustainable macroeconomic context, which is ostensibly EMU's main goal. However, the particular emphasis given to stability over growth during the current crisis – which began in 2008 and for some member states is still ongoing at the time of writing – is causing distinctive problems to the national and regional governments of the most troubled countries in raising sufficient matching funds.

Even though some of the innovative liquidity operations of the ECB make co-financing easier for some of the Cohesion countries, at the same time the stringent conditions that accompany these liquidity operations restrict their ability to then use the funds towards Cohesion policy investments. Even worse is the provision which allows the Commission to request revisions to Partnership Agreements or Operational Programmes in order to comply with European Financial Stability Facility or European Stability Mechanism conditions and recommendations (Begg et al. 2014: 35–9). Particularly worrisome is the possibility of imposing suspensions of Cohesion policy funding as a disciplinary mechanism for those countries that exceed the stability parameters. We consider these provisions deflections, if not veritable perversions, of the original goals of Cohesion policy and a significant betrayal of the principle of solidarity which originally inspired it.

If anything, the crisis has shown how Cohesion policy continues to be an important financial resource for public investments, compensating for cuts in domestic capital spending and providing relief against joblessness. Questions have been raised as to whether this policy should be deployed to face contingent emergencies or, reversely, to sustain wider EU policy strategies (such as Europe 2020 through the Common Strategic Framework). This policy approach undermines the ability to pursue the structural, long-term goals assigned to Cohesion policy by the Treaty and turns this policy into a financial resource for other, not necessarily congruent, goals. Are the resources devoted to Cohesion policy truly sufficient to sustain the harmonious development of the EU, through a reduction of economic disparities between regions, or do they not run the risk of mixing countercyclical and procyclical, short-term and long-term objectives, eventually reaching none?

As we have seen, concerns have been raised about the efficiency of policy delivery

and the policy's effectiveness in reaching its (unclear) goals – a rhetoric that appears to inevitably push Cohesion policy towards ever growing cuts. Whether linked to the complexities of the shared management system, to the inadequate levels of institutional and administrative capacity in the member states, or to the lack of adequate leadership by the European Commission, it is apparent that the simplification agenda, heralded as a slogan at each policy reform since 1999, have yet to materialise (Davies 2015). Moreover, the administrative burden associated with policy implementation is not only eroding value for money, but is also acting as a disincentive to engage with the policy for those member states, regions or beneficiaries that can afford not to do so. Further, the latest round of reform has sought to address a number of performance-related factors, which are external to the policy but which condition its success, via a number of thematic and general conditionalities linked to sanctions (Bachtler et al. 2016): it remains to be seen whether attaching sanctions to factors over which the actors who deliver the policy often have little or no control will yield the desired effects.

We think that this is a self-defeating course and that the moment has come to take a fresh look at this policy and decide whether it should keep giving 'something to everyone' – thus engendering the impression of achieving nothing at all – or, rather, be openly and exclusively used to help disadvantaged regions to catch up with the relatively advantaged ones. In other words, we wonder whether Cohesion policy should be openly branded as a redistributive policy. While the task of moving the Union towards a path of sustained growth could be entrusted to a veritable common macroeconomic policy – with specific measures in support of strategic investment – Cohesion policy could instead be charged with the more specific (but not for this any simpler) task of favouring the structural catching-up of disadvantaged regions.

This way, Cohesion policy could deliver important material and immaterial goods, crucial for the continued sustainability of the Union. First, it would finally give substance to the idea of economic, social and territorial cohesion, that is, the expectation that whatever else the Union (the Single Market) does to its various regions, it does not deepen their inequalities, but rather works towards their growing convergence. This, in itself, is a powerful legitimacy booster. Second, Cohesion policy directly contributes to a new notion of democracy that brings the particular ideas and interests of different scales and places of aggregation to bear on the process of European integration. The involvement of subnational authorities and local expressions of civil society should not be interpreted as a symbolic nod towards the much trumpeted but often neglected partnership principle, but as the opportunity to collect intelligence on local needs and as the necessary ingredient of multilevel democracy. Finally, the European Union can hardly win the hearts and minds of EU citizens unless it is seen to create, through communities of practice, a sense of belonging and a feeling of identification with the European project.

Perhaps due to the highly political and intergovernmental nature of the simultaneous negotiations on the EU budget and on the content of EU Cohesion policy, and the related necessity to reach consensus across multiple and diverse constituencies, the reforms have often ended up in regulatory frameworks that did not resolve the key controversies on the policy's overarching goals, territorial coverage and financial status relative to other EU policies. They have instead delivered incremental changes and compromise solutions, principally on the more practical aspects of implementation, that

leave sufficient room for manoeuvre for member states and regions to make the policy fit with domestic agendas without necessarily addressing the problems that beset it. Whilst this has guaranteed the survival of the policy in nominal terms, it has come at the price of a loss of purpose. We are left wondering whether the ‘real’ objectives of Cohesion policy have become too many and too contradictory, ultimately condemning this policy to an ancillary role which bears no resemblance with the higher ideals that inspired it in the beginning. Against a quickly evolving and considerably altered political and economic scenario, the next round of reform, on which debates are now starting, should tackle the most divisive issues that have proven intractable in the past and should re-state what the ultimate goal of Cohesion policy is.

To conclude, we hope that EU institutions, member states’ representatives, subnational authorities, social partners, non-governmental organisations and EU citizens at large will seize the opportunity represented by the current crisis and the impending negotiation round to tackle, without preconceptions, the debate on the post-2020 reform of Cohesion policy in a systematic and forward-looking manner, abandoning the exclusive (and reductive) focus on the problems of policy implementation and addressing openly the fundamental questions of the role and purpose of Cohesion policy (Begg 2010), its position in the context of the wider EU policies and strategies, and what this would imply in budgetary terms (rather than start from the threat of budget cuts to then remodel the policy in its application).

If at the beginning of this century Joshka Fisher raised the question ‘Quo vadis Europa?’ (Fischer, 2000), it is now time to openly ask ‘Quo vadis Cohesion policy?’ in the acknowledgement that, from the point of view of cultivating both a sense of identification with Europe and a truly multilevel democracy in addition to convergent growth, we could say, paraphrasing the words of another German politician, Angela Merkel (Merkel 2011): ‘If Cohesion policy fails, then Europe fails.’ We hope that this Handbook will provide the reader with the background to appreciate the political and territorial questions raised by cohesion, the challenges that the forthcoming policy reform may have to face, as well as the opportunities that exist for capitalising on the many successes, innovations and lessons learnt from the past 30 years.

NOTES

1. In the Preamble of the Treaty of Rome, the signatories declare themselves ‘anxious to strengthen the unity of their economies and to ensure their harmonious development by reducing the differences existing between the various regions and the backwardness of the less-favoured regions’. A few lines later (Art. 2), the Treaty states that: ‘The Community shall have as its task, by establishing a common market and progressively approximating the economic policies of member states, to promote throughout the community a harmonious development of economic activities, a continuous and balanced expansion, an increase in stability, an accelerated rising of the standard of living and closer relations between the states belonging to it’. The Treaty of Amsterdam leaves the Preamble untouched, but expands Art. 2, stating that: ‘The Community shall have as its task, by establishing a common market and an economic and monetary union and by implementing common policies or activities referred to in Articles 3 and 4, to promote throughout the Community a harmonious, balanced and sustainable development of economic activities, a high level of employment and of social protection, equality between men and women, sustainable and non-inflationary growth, a high degree of competitiveness and convergence of economic performance, a high level of protection and improvement of the quality of the environment, the raising of the standard of living and quality of life, and economic and social cohesion and solidarity among Member States.’

2. We regret only not being able to include in this group of policies, through no fault of our own, competition policy.

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