

# THE FUTURE OF EU COHESION POLICY AFTER 2028 AND THE DEVELOPMENT NEEDS OF CZECH MUNICIPALITIES

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## Abstract

In the context of the forthcoming EU Cohesion Policy Strategic Framework 2028+ and the proposed Multiannual Financial Framework after 2027, significant changes in the funding conditions are expected to have an impact on the development of municipalities in the Czech Republic. The article discusses the future of EU cohesion policy after 2028 in relation to the development needs of Czech municipalities. It is based on a combination of analyses of EU and Czech strategic documents, a questionnaire survey conducted in municipalities, and focus groups representing different types of municipalities. The results confirm the stability of local priorities, especially in the areas of transport, education, and the environment. The focus is on the expected shift of cohesion policy towards a narrower thematic concentration and greater use of repayable financial instruments, which may disadvantage smaller municipalities with limited administrative capacity and financial stability. The study stresses the need for a balanced mix of grants and financial instruments, the strengthening of national grant programmes, and the reduction of administrative burdens. These steps are key to ensuring sustainable local development and preventing the widening of regional disparities.

Keywords: Development Needs of Municipalities, Cohesion Policy, Local Administration

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## Introduction

Since its inception, the European Union's Cohesion Policy has been a key instrument for balancing regional disparities and promoting long-term sustainable development. Since its accession to the EU in 2004, the Czech Republic has been a major beneficiary of the European Structural and Investment Funds. These have become an essential pillar of funding for local development, especially in smaller towns and cities. However, the European Commission (2025) and the Ministry for Regional Development of the Czech Republic (2024, 2025) are currently preparing major changes in the form of Cohesion Policy for the period after 2028, which may significantly affect the possibilities of financing development projects at the local level.

The debate on the shape of the European Union's Cohesion Policy after 2028 is currently one of the most important issues in European and national regional policy. The current system, based primarily on direct non-repayable subsidies, will be fundamentally transformed under the draft Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) presented in 2024. There is an increasingly clear trend towards greater use of repayable financial instruments, dominated by loans, guarantees, and other forms of financial engineering. This shift is motivated both by the pressure to use scarce budgetary resources more efficiently and by the desire to increase the accountability of beneficiaries and the sustainability of investments (European Commission, 2025).

At the level of the Czech Republic, the Strategic Framework for Cohesion Policy 2028+ was elaborated in 2024, which formulates two possible options for the future approach. Option A envisages maintaining a broader range of supported areas and a gradual integration of repayable instruments, while Option B emphasises a stronger thematic concentration and the dominant role of financial instruments. The common denominator of both options is a shift towards a single overarching national instrument—the National and Regional Partnership Plan (NRPP)—to ensure greater strategic coherence and clarity (MMR, 2024).

This article presents a synthesis of both the results of research on the needs of Czech municipalities and current European and national strategic documents. The aim is to link knowledge about the development priorities of municipalities with the forthcoming reforms of Cohesion Policy.

## Theoretical Framework for the Development of EU Cohesion Policy After 2028

Cohesion Policy plays a key role in promoting economic, social, and territorial cohesion among the regions of EU Member States. Despite efforts to reduce regional inequalities, significant challenges remain. There is a lack of coordination and coherence between Cohesion Policy and other policies; the positive impacts of Cohesion Policy are not evenly distributed across regions; and the growing number of instruments, along with pressure for transparency, is leading to increased administrative complexity (Jančová *et al.*, 2024). If no changes are made, one possible future scenario is a significant reduction in Cohesion Policy funding.

Cohesion Policy has multidimensional effects, linking a number of areas, and the authors (Calegari *et al.*, 2023) emphasise its role in promoting regional welfare and individual income levels, in addition to contributing to the process of regional convergence. Other work (Fidrmuc *et al.*, 2023) confirms that EU funds have a significant positive impact on regional growth but also highlights “spillover” effects—a large part of the benefits goes to surrounding regions, not always directly to the project location.

The use of financial instruments remains an open challenge. Financial instruments have been expanded in different programming periods, combined with new methods and new actors. There has been increasing pressure for the effective implementation of policies and instruments, which requires framework conditions that range from strong administrative capacity with clear and stable rules to institutional arrangements and appropriate financial-instrument ecosystems (Dotti *et al.*, 2024).

It is necessary to rethink the approach and strengthen the instruments of EU Cohesion Policy to ensure that its interventions respond more effectively to the specific needs of different territories (Churski *et al.*, 2024). There is an emerging need to strengthen responsiveness to development challenges at the supra-local level by building local and supra-local institutional capacities. Strengthening the linkages between urban and rural areas should create the conditions for a more effective transfer of development impulses to non-urban areas, thereby enhancing the role and importance of smaller cities and rural areas.

Theory and existing studies suggest that after 2028, EU Cohesion Policy is likely to adopt a hybrid model: grants with a limited shift towards financial instruments, with significant thematic concentration but balanced by protection mechanisms for regions with weaker financial or institutional starting points.

## Objectives and Methodology

The main objective of the research is to assess the current debate on the future of EU Cohesion Policy and to compare it with the identified development needs of Czech municipalities. The sub-objectives include:

- to identify the main planned changes in the implementation of Cohesion Policy 2028–2034;
- to identify the key development needs of Czech municipalities;
- to name the key challenges that municipalities will have to address in their development planning in the new programming period.

The methodology combined document analysis, a questionnaire survey, and focus groups. The document analysis was conducted in September 2025 and included:

- Proposal for a Multiannual Financial Framework (European Commission, 2025);
- Strategic Framework for Cohesion Policy 2028+ in the Czech Republic (MMR, 2025);
- Position of the Union of Towns and Municipalities of the Czech Republic on the Future of Cohesion Policy 2028+ (SMO, 2024);
- Position of the City of Prague (2024);
- position papers of metropolitan areas and agglomerations of the Czech Republic (MA/A, undated);
- MA/A position on the implementation of the territorial dimension in the period 2028+ (undated).

The analysis focused on two dimensions:

- content priorities, and
- the procedural framework (instruments, implementation structures, and funding modalities).

The questionnaire survey was carried out between 1 and 21 November 2023 among the members of the Union of Towns and Municipalities of the Czech Republic via the Click4Survey platform. A total of 712 completed questionnaires were received. To increase the response rate, a combination of mass mailing and subsequent individual reminders to respondents who did not complete the questionnaire in the first two weeks was used. The questionnaire was structured to capture not only the priorities of the municipalities and cities but also their experiences with the use of EU funds to date and the obstacles they encounter.

Respondents were classified into eleven categories according to the size of the municipality and also identified their affiliation with the types of territories according to the Regional Development Strategy of the Czech Republic. This enabled the results to be analysed by both population size and territorial categorisation. This approach is important because the needs of small rural municipalities often differ fundamentally from those of large cities, as confirmed by previous studies on the differentiation of municipal priorities in the Czech Republic (Pěluha *et al.*, 2017).

The quantitative part was subsequently complemented by qualitative research in the form of three focus groups, which took place on 15 December 2023 at the headquarters of the Union of Towns and Municipalities of the Czech Republic. Each focus group represented one of its chambers—the Chamber of Municipalities, the Chamber of Towns, and the Chamber of Statutory Cities. A total of 21 representatives of municipalities participated, both in person and online, as well as professional staff of the Union and researchers from the academic sector (Needs Analysis of Cities and Municipalities of the Czech Republic, 2023). The aim of these discussions was to validate and deepen the findings of the questionnaire survey, to provide context to the figures, and to identify nuances not captured by the structured questionnaire.

## Results

The results of the research show the long-term stability of the development priorities of the municipalities. The key areas are: water infrastructure - water supply, sewerage and wastewater treatment plants (these projects are considered the highest priority and their implementation depends on subsidy support in more than 60% of cases; this is confirmed by international comparisons, according to which investments in basic infrastructure are typically strongly dependent on European support (Baun and Marek, 2014); education - especially kindergartens and primary schools (about two-thirds of investments in this area would not have been made without subsidies); transport infrastructure - local roads and related projects (key especially for smaller municipalities and peripheral regions); and public spaces and municipal buildings - revitalisation of squares, parks, community centres and libraries, which support local identity and community life.

Significant investments were also made in leisure infrastructure and cultural facilities. In contrast, health and social services have long suffered from a lack of appropriate subsidies, although demand for these services is growing. Similar conclusions have been reached by other authors, who point out that so-called “soft” areas, such as social services or community development, tend to be underfunded in European programmes (Fransen *et al.*, 2018).

Size differences were clearly evident in the survey. Smaller municipalities (up to 2,000 inhabitants) emphasise basic infrastructure and schools, medium-sized cities prefer leisure and cultural infrastructure, and large cities (over 50,000 inhabitants) focus on strategic projects that improve the quality of life. These differences show that future funding needs to be sensitive to the diversity of needs and that a one-size-fits-all approach cannot be applied to all types of municipalities (Czech Cities and Municipalities Needs Analysis, 2023).

At the same time, more than 70% of municipalities face a lack of administrative capacity in preparing and submitting applications, and around half of them face the problem of securing co-financing. These data confirm previous empirical research that highlights the disproportionate impact of the administrative burden on small municipalities. This is a key finding in the context of the planned funding changes.

The focus groups further elaborated on these findings. Representatives of smaller municipalities emphasised that complex processes and the obligation to co-finance often discouraged them from applying. In contrast, representatives of larger cities pointed out that although they manage complex administration better, their projects are financially demanding and require a high proportion of their own resources. Discussions also confirmed concerns that the transition to financial instruments, as envisaged under the 2028+ Strategic Framework, may further exacerbate this disparity, as smaller municipalities will face even greater demands on their financial stability and ability to manage the credit burden.

### *I: Priority themes for support through cohesion policy after 2028 by size category of municipality*

Order of priority	0–2,000 inhab.	2,001–5,000 inhab.	5,001–20,000 inhab.	20,001–50,000 inhab.	50,001+ inhab.
1	transport	transport	education	transport	transport
2	environment	education	transport	education	environment
3	education	environment	social services	technology	education
4	public health	public health	environment	environment	social services
5	technology	technology	technology	social services	technology
6	economy, employment	social services	public health	economy, employment	public health
7	social services	economy, employment	economy, employment	public health	culture, leisure
8	culture, leisure	culture, leisure	culture, leisure	culture, leisure	economy, employment

Source: Sýkora *et al.* (2023)

Tab. II: Priority themes for support through cohesion policy after 2028 by type of territory

Order of priority	Metropolises	Agglo-merations	Regional Centres	Structurally affected regions	Dis-advanted areas	Other
1	transport	transport	transport	education	transport	environ-ment
2	education	education	education	environ-ment	education	transport
3	environ-ment	technology	environ-ment	transport	environ-ment	education
4	technology	environ-ment	technology	technology	public health	public health
5	social services	public health	economy, employ-ment	economy, employ-ment	technology	technology
6	public health	social services	public health	public health	economy, employ-ment	social services
7	economy, employ-ment	economy, employ-ment	social services	social services	social services	economy, employ-ment
8	culture, leisure	culture, leisure	culture, leisure	culture, leisure	culture, leisure	culture, leisure

Source: Sýkora *et al.* (2023)

The future prospects for Cohesion Policy after 2028 are linked by the municipalities interviewed mainly to transport, education, and the environment. This trio of topics, although not always in the same order, appears in most municipalities across size categories and types of territory.

The situation is specific for municipalities with between 5,000 and 20,000 inhabitants (see Tab. I). In their case, the environment did not rank among the top three priorities, while social services occupy the third position. The order of the top three priorities also differs for municipalities with 20,000 to 50,000 inhabitants, where technology ranks ahead of the environment.

When examining municipal priorities for the upcoming period by type of territory, the themes appearing among the top three (see Tab. II) remain largely consistent, except for agglomerations, where technology enters the top three at the expense of the environment. The theme of culture and leisure, which is not considered a priority by any type of territory, is identical across all territorial categories and consistently ranks last in the comparison.

## Discussion

According to the draft Multiannual Financial Framework (European Commission, 2025) and the Strategic Framework 2028+ (MMR, 2024, 2025), major changes are on the way, which are likely to be reflected in a shift towards repayable financial instruments - the European Commission plans to reduce the share of conventional grants and make more use of loans, guarantees and blended finance products (Milio, 2013; Mendez *et al.* 2019). Furthermore, in thematic concentration, i.e. a greater focus on a limited number of priority areas, notably climate, digital transformation, competitiveness and security.

The key challenges for local development, as emerged from the analysis of strategic documents, will be (MMR, 2025) security and resilience - the need to strengthen civil protection, health preparedness and crisis preparedness; rapid access to loans after disasters and the use of the new SAFE instrument for the defence industry are being considered; economy and competitiveness - emphasis on digitisation, eGovernment and smart solutions; support for the business environment and employment in the context of demographic change; environment and climate - response to climate change, soil protection, air quality and water management; demography and social - growing need for starter homes, social services and telemedicine; transport, infrastructure and energy - development of major transport works (including military mobility) and critical infrastructure under the NRPP; local projects (parking, local roads, brownfields revitalisation) are important for municipalities and will be financed through a combination of loans, guarantees and grants.

The results of an empirical survey of Czech municipalities and towns confirm that their development priorities are relatively stable and focus on transport infrastructure, education, water management projects and municipal buildings over the long term. This pattern is consistent with previous findings on the investment needs of municipalities in Central Europe, which show that basic infrastructure represents a dominant part of local development projects (Baun and Marek, 2014; Ferry and Polverari, 2018). However, a new element is the shift in European cohesion policy towards a narrower thematic concentration and a preference for repayable financial instruments, which may have major implications for the ability of municipalities to implement their priorities.

The Strategic Framework for Cohesion Policy 2028+ presented two options for the future organisation of support in the Czech Republic. Option A envisages the continuation of support in a wider range of

thematic areas and the gradual introduction of financial instruments, while Option B emphasises a narrow concentration on a limited number of priorities and the dominant use of loans and guarantees (MMR, 2024). Based on the results of the questionnaire survey, it can be concluded that municipalities would benefit more from Option A as it corresponds to the breadth of their stated needs. Smaller municipalities and rural regions in particular would face the risk of exclusion under Option B, as their needs often go beyond narrowly defined priorities, while they do not have sufficient capacity to use repayable instruments.

The transition from grants to financial instruments brings a number of challenges. As the literature on the implementation of EU funds shows, repayable mechanisms tend to be more efficient in terms of sustainability but require developed financial markets and sufficient institutional capacity of beneficiaries (Milio, 2013; Mendez *et al.* 2019). In the Czech environment, the question is whether smaller municipalities can use such instruments, as they already cite lack of administrative capacity and limited co-financing opportunities as barriers (Czech Municipal Needs Analysis, 2023). In practice, this could lead to the strengthening of large cities, which have both a professional apparatus and more stable budgets, while smaller municipalities would be mainly dependent on national subsidy programmes or their own limited resources.

In this context, the forthcoming National and Regional Partnership Plan (NRPP) is of particular importance. If it is to be the main and only instrument of support at national level, it will need to reflect the diversity of municipal needs and ensure a certain balance between repayable and non-repayable forms of support. The focus group discussions showed that municipalities expect from future programmes in particular more flexibility in thematic settings, a reduction in administrative burden and the possibility to adapt the conditions to the specificities of individual types of territories (Analysis of the needs of cities and municipalities in the Czech Republic, 2023). These requirements can be seen as key recommendations for the development of the NRDP, which should be based not only on the strategic priorities of the state and the EU, but also on the specific needs of the local level.

Another aspect is the question of the balance between European and national resources. While European cohesion policy will be increasingly oriented towards thematically narrowly defined areas and financial instruments, a large part of local needs will remain linked to basic public services, the financing of which should be provided more by the national environment. This trend is confirmed by international studies which show that the role of national budgets in supporting local development is growing in a context where European funds are subject to increasing concentration and restriction (Begg, 2010; Charron *et al.* 2014). For the Czech Republic, this implies the need to strengthen national subsidy schemes, not only financially but also institutionally, so that they are able to respond flexibly to the specific requirements of municipalities.

The discussion should also be conducted in terms of equality of access. If subsidies were to be substantially reduced and replaced by repayable instruments, this could exacerbate regional disparities rather than alleviate them, which is the original aim of cohesion policy. This paradox has been referred to in the literature as the risk of a 'two-speed Europe', where more developed regions and large cities are able to take advantage of more complex financial mechanisms, while less developed areas are left out (Bachtler *et al.* 2017). The Czech case shows that this risk is real and that the future design of cohesion policy must include compensatory measures that allow for the involvement of smaller local governments.

## Conclusion

The analysis of the needs of Czech towns and municipalities, and their inclusion in the current debate on the future shape of cohesion policy after 2028, reveals a tension between the stability of local development priorities and the dynamics of the European institutional framework. The empirical investigation confirmed that municipalities have long considered investments in transport infrastructure, education, water management projects, and public buildings as their most important priorities. These areas represent the core of local development and are perceived as essential for maintaining the quality of life and the competitiveness of the territory (Needs Analysis of Cities and Municipalities of the Czech Republic, 2023). At the same time, however, it appears that many needs – particularly in the areas of social services, healthcare, and housing – remain beyond the reach of European funding, even during a period when cohesion policy had a relatively broad thematic scope. The current shift in European cohesion policy toward repayable financial instruments and closer thematic concentration represents a major challenge for Czech municipalities. The literature repeatedly points out that repayable mechanisms can be more effective and sustainable, but their use depends on well-developed administrative capacity and sufficient financial stability of beneficiaries (Milio, 2013; Mendez *et al.*, 2019). Smaller municipalities, which already identify a lack of capacity and co-financing as key barriers, may thus be effectively excluded from these instruments. Instead of reducing regional disparities, there is a risk of exacerbating them – directly contradicting the original mission of cohesion policy (Bachtler *et al.*, 2017).

For the Czech context, several key recommendations follow. Firstly, the National and Regional Partnership Plan (NRPP), which is to serve as the main implementation framework after 2028, must take into account the diversity of municipal needs and ensure a balance between grants and financial instruments. It is essential that at least part of the funds remain in the form of non-repayable grants, especially for small municipalities and for projects in the field of basic public services that cannot be financed through repayable mechanisms. Secondly, national subsidy programmes need to be significantly strengthened to cover areas outside European priorities, particularly social services, healthcare, and housing policy. Without such national compensation, many local needs would remain unaddressed, which could negatively affect quality of life and social cohesion. Thirdly, reducing the administrative burden and increasing programme flexibility remain priorities. As the survey showed, municipalities perceive the complexity of subsidy processes as one of the biggest obstacles. Simplifying procedures, digitising agendas, and strengthening methodological support are necessary preconditions for local governments to use the new mechanisms effectively. Otherwise, there is a risk that available resources will remain unused or concentrated in only a few of the largest cities.

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