



RURBANIVE

RURAL · URBAN · IMMERSIVENESS

RURal-uRBAN synergies emerged in an immersIVE innovation ecosystem

D6.1 Analysis and mapping of relevant policies at EU level

Author: Janne Sinerma & Serafin Pazos-Vidal (AEIDL)



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| Author | Janne Sinerma (AEIDL) Serafin Pazos-Vidal (AEIDL) |
| Reviewer(s) | Kostas Naskou (ICCS) Giorgos Papapostolou (RFF) |

The Consortium

| | Legal Name | Short Name | Country |
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| 1 | EREVNITIKO PANEPISTIMIAKO INSTITOUTO SYSTIMATON EPIKOINONION KAI YPOLOGISTON | ICCS | GREECE |
| 2 | GEOPONIKO PANEPISTIMION ATHINON | AUA | GREECE |
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| 6 | ASSOCIATION EUROPEENNE POUR L'INNOVATION DANS LE DEVELOPPEMENT LOCAL | AEIDL | BELGIUM |
| 7 | CESKA ZEMEDELSKA UNIVERZITA V PRAZE | CZU | CZECHIA |
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| 11 | THE LISBON COUNCIL FOR ECONOMIC COMPETITIVENESS ASBL | LC | BELGIUM |
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| 15 | INNOVATION CAMPUS LEMGO E. V. | ICL | GERMANY |
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Executive Summary

This report (D6.1, Analysis and Mapping of Relevant Policies at EU Level) provides a comprehensive analysis of EU policies impacting rural-urban linkages. It serves as a foundational document for subsequent tasks within Work Package 6, particularly those related to mutual learning, capacity building, and policy recommendations. The analysis spans institutional, sectoral, territorial, and thematic dimensions, offering insights into the broader EU-policy landscape and its implications for rural-urban dynamics.

The EU's Political Guidelines and Strategic Agenda for 2024-2029 emphasises security, prosperity, and democracy, reflecting a shift from the previous focus on ecological transformation. Key policies include the European Green Deal, Farm-to-Fork Strategy, Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), and the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas (LTVRA). The Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) and the Social Climate Fund (SCF) represent significant financial instruments supporting sustainable recovery and resilience.

Cohesion Policy and CAP are central to addressing regional disparities and promoting balanced development. Urban policies are guided by the Urban Agenda for the EU and the New Leipzig Charter, while rural policies are framed by the LTVRA and the Rural Pact. The EU's twin transition policies (green and digital) aim to synergise environmental sustainability and technological innovation.

The thematic policy areas covered in this document include the circular bioeconomy, which promotes resource efficiency and low-carbon systems, enhancing rural-urban complementarities. Ecosystem and biodiversity restoration focuses on nature-based solutions and legally binding restoration targets. Improving logistics and shortening value chains emphasises local production and regionalised supply chains. User engagement and empowerment support participatory governance and digital transformation. Enhanced mobility advocates for sustainable transport systems and multimodal connectivity. Culture, landscape, and heritage integrate cultural diversity and heritage preservation into sustainable development.

This report also highlights several challenges and emerging trends. Demographic shifts, such as urban expansion and rural decline, necessitate balanced territorial development. The technological revolution, particularly the digital divide, impacts urban-rural linkages, requiring targeted policies for digital inclusion. Environmental sustainability, driven by climate change and green transitions, offers opportunities for rural revitalisation. Institutional adaptability and inclusive governance are vital for addressing urban-rural disparities.

In conclusion, Deliverable D6.1 underscores the importance of integrated policy frameworks in fostering rural-urban synergies. By aligning EU policies with the goals of the RURBANIVE project, the document provides a strategic foundation for enhancing connectivity, cooperation, and sustainable development across European territories.

Context

Deliverable 6.1 provides an initial assessment of existing EU policies affecting rural-urban linkages. It screens the most relevant elements of the EU and UN agendas, including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the EU Green Deal, Just Transition, and the Farm-to-Fork strategies, the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), the long-term vision for the EU's rural areas, and the EU Territorial Agenda for 2030. The document aims to be as useful as possible to the RURBANIVE pilots by offering a comprehensive overview of the EU policies influencing the RURBANIVE policy domains.

This deliverable is a key output of Work Package 6, Synergies, Policies, and Governance, and specifically corresponds to Task 6.1, Mapping and Analysis of Relevant Policies at EU Level. The document plays a foundational role in the overall project architecture, establishing a comprehensive policy baseline that informs and enables evidence-based dialogue and strategic action across subsequent tasks and work packages.

Its relevance is particularly pronounced in relation to Task 6.3 Mutual Learning and Capacity Building at the EU-Level for Future-Proofed Policy Action and Task 6.4 EU Policy Recommendations. As a core reference document, it will serve as a basis for the design and facilitation of future capacity-building workshops, ensuring that discussions and activities are anchored in the most current and pertinent EU policy developments. Moreover, the insights generated through this mapping and analysis exercise will directly feed into the formulation of actionable and context-sensitive EU policy recommendations, enhancing the project's contribution to long-term governance and innovation processes.

By aligning closely with the thematic focus on rural-urban synergies and rural innovation, this deliverable also supports cross-cutting objectives within the project, including stakeholder engagement, policy learning, and multi-level governance coordination. Its integrative function ensures that the policy dimension remains embedded throughout the project's lifecycle, reinforcing the coherence and strategic orientation of all related activities.

Conclusions

In summary of this extensive mapping, RURBANIVE policy aims face both a set of threats and opportunities:

Threats to RURBANIVE:

- **Policy Fragmentation and Implementation Challenges:** Despite the supportive policy frameworks, the implementation of EU policies can be fragmented and inconsistent across different territories. This could pose challenges for the replicability potential of RURBANIVE's Innovation Framework.
- **Economic and Political Uncertainties:** The ongoing geopolitical tensions and economic uncertainties within and without the EU could impact funding availability and policy priorities. New priorities such as defence or economic protectionism might overlook the continuation of the more granular EU support for local development. This may affect the long-term sustainability and scalability of RURBANIVE initiatives.
- **Digital Divide:** While there is significant support for digital transformation, the digital divide between urban and rural areas remains a challenge. Ensuring equitable access to digital tools and infrastructure is crucial for the success of RURBANIVE's objectives.
- **Regulatory and Bureaucratic Hurdles:** Navigating the complex regulatory environment and bureaucratic processes within the EU can be a significant barrier. This could slow down the implementation of innovative solutions that will be proposed by RURBANIVE.
- **Environmental and Social Resistance:** Initiatives aimed at promoting sustainability and innovation may face resistance from local communities due to perceived disruptions to traditional practices and lifestyles. Effective stakeholder engagement and communication strategies are essential to mitigate this risk.

Opportunities for RURBANIVE:

- **Enhanced Policy Support for Rural-Urban Linkages:** The EU's Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas (LTVRA) and the Rural Pact emphasise the importance of strengthening rural-urban interactions. These frameworks provide positive background conditions for initiatives like RURBANIVE by promoting policies that enhance connectivity, cooperation, and innovation between rural and urban areas.

- **Funding and Investment Mechanisms:** The European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF), including the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), provide substantial financial support for projects that foster rural-urban synergies. These funds offer opportunities for funding innovative projects aimed at sustainable development.
- **Focus on Sustainability and Green Transitions:** The European Green Deal and the Farm-to-Fork Strategy prioritize sustainable practices and environmental stewardship. These policies align with RURBANIVE's goals of promoting well-being economies and sustainable innovation in rural and urban areas.
- **Digital and Technological Advancements:** EU policies such as the Digital Europe Programme and the Connecting Europe Facility support the digital transformation of rural areas. This enhances the potential for RURBANIVE to leverage digital tools and platforms to foster innovation and connectivity.
- **Support for Participatory Governance:** The EU's emphasis on participatory governance and stakeholder engagement aligns with RURBANIVE's focus on putting rural citizens at the centre of policy-making.

The analysis reveals a discernible trend towards recognising the interconnectedness of urban and rural territories. Several policies, particularly those within the Horizon Europe framework and the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), acknowledge the mutual dependencies and potential synergies that can arise from fostering stronger urban-rural relationships. Innovation ecosystems, a central principle of RURBANIVE, are frequently positioned as catalysts for this integration, with policies aiming to support collaborative projects that bridge the geographical divide.

However, the mapping of EU policies also highlights persistent challenges and areas requiring further consideration. While the rhetoric of balanced territorial development is prevalent, the practical implementation and specific targeting of policies to foster genuine rural-urban synergies remain somewhat uneven and fragmented. Certain policy domains, while having indirect implications for both urban and rural areas, do not always explicitly articulate or prioritise the strengthening of their interdependencies. This can lead to a siloed approach, where the unique opportunities presented by integrated urban-rural development are not fully realised.

Furthermore, the analysis suggests that the conceptualisation of rural-urban linkages within EU policy frameworks could benefit from greater refinement. While there has been emphasis on more granular definition of interlinkages between rural and urban areas, still often the relationship is framed in terms of a rather simplistic unidirectional

flow, for example, urban areas providing markets or technology to rural areas or rural areas providing raw resources to urban centres. While these dynamics are undoubtedly present and needed, a more holistic understanding would acknowledge the bidirectional contributions, such as the provision of ecosystem services, cultural heritage, and distinct forms of knowledge originating from rural areas that can enrich urban life and drive innovation in diverse sectors.

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List of Terms and Abbreviations

| Term/Abbreviation | Meaning |
|-------------------|--|
| AI | Artificial Intelligence |
| AEIDL | European Association for Innovation in Local Development |
| ALDE | Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe Party |
| CAP | Common Agricultural Policy |
| CBAM | Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism |
| CF | Cohesion Fund |
| CLLD | Community Led Local Development |
| CPR | Common Provisions Regulation |
| EAFRD | European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development |
| ECOPP | European Community of Practice on Partnership |
| ECI | European Citizens' Initiative |
| EEAS | The European Commission and the European External Action Service |
| EIP-AGRI | The agricultural European Innovation Partnership |
| EP | European Parliament |
| EPP | European People's Party |
| ERDF | European Regional Development Fund |
| ESF+ | European Social Fund Plus |
| ESIF | European Structural and Investment Fund |
| ETS | Emissions Trading System |
| EU | European Union |
| EUI | European Urban Initiative |
| EYE | European Youth Event |
| FRA | Functional Rural Areas |
| FUA | Functional Urban Areas |
| GDP | Gross Domestic Product |
| ICT | Information and Communication Technology |
| ITD | Integrated Territorial Development |
| ITI | Integrated Territorial Investments |
| JTF | Just Transition Fund |
| LAG | Local Action Group |
| LEADER | Liaisons Entre Actions de Développement de l'Economie Rurale |
| LTVRA | Long Term Vision for Rural Areas |
| MFF | Multiannual Financial Framework |
| NEAC | New European Agenda for Culture |
| NEB | New European Bauhaus |
| NGEU | Next Generation EU |
| OECD | Organisation for Economic Development and Cooperation |
| OLP | Ordinary Legislative Procedure |
| PES | Party of European Socialists |
| QMV | Qualified Majority Voting |
| RRF | Recovery and Resilience Facility |
| RUCL | Rural-Urban Collaborative Laboratories |
| SCF | Social Climate Fund |
| SDG | Sustainable Development Goal |
| SME | Small and Medium sized Enterprises |
| STEM | Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics |

| | |
|-------|---|
| SUD | Sustainable Urban Development |
| TEN-T | Trans-European Transport Network |
| TFEU | Treaty on the Functioning of European Union |
| TEU | Treaty on European Union |
| UN | United Nations |
| US | United States |

1 Introduction

Deliverable 6.1 provides an initial assessment in terms of existing EU policies affecting urban-rural linkages. It screens the most relevant elements of the EU and UN agendas (Sustainable Development Goals, in particular SDG11, the EU Green Deal, Just Transition, and the Farm-to-Fork strategies, the common agricultural policy (CAP), the long-term vision for the EU's rural areas and its initiative "Research and innovation for rural communities", and together EU Territorial Agenda for 2030 and EU Cohesion Policy, in particular Policy Objective 5, together with the Recovery and Resilience Facility as well as the New European Bauhaus (NEB) projects.

However, in order to be as useful as possible to the RURBANIVE pilots this deliverable provides a comprehensive overview of the EU policies influencing the RURBANIVE Policy domains. Furthermore, this Deliverable is the result of was an iterative process that involved the production of an inception report, further discussed with partners to seek their feedback, complemented by a dedicated assessment for RURBANIVE Partners of the New European Commission Priorities 2024-2029 (September 2024, unpublished) as well as the input received for the contribution to various EU consultations (notably the 2025 new Agenda for Cities¹ and the post 2027 Multi Annual Financial Framework²). As such D6.1 analytical work is the foundational step to identify the key instruments within these policies to support the development of policy recommendations and guidance for policymakers at EU level.

1.1 Context

This deliverable is a key output of **Work Package 6, Synergies, Policies and Governance**, and specifically corresponds to **Task 6.1, Mapping and Analysis of Relevant Policies at EU Level**, implemented from the RURBANIVE project's start, spanning over the period from Month 1 (January 2024) to Month 18 (June 2025). The document plays a foundational role in the overall project architecture, as it establishes a comprehensive policy baseline that informs and enables evidence-based dialogue and strategic action across subsequent tasks and work packages.

Its relevance is particularly pronounced in relation to **Task 6.3 Mutual Learning and Capacity Building at the EU-Level for Future-Proofed Policy Action** and **Task 6.4**

¹ [Feedback from: European Association for Innovation in Local Development \(AEIDL\)](#)

² [EU's next long-term budget \(MFF\) – implementing EU funding with Member States and regions](#)

EU Policy Recommendations. As a core reference document, it will serve as a basis for the design and facilitation of future capacity-building workshops for policymakers at the EU level, helping to ensure that discussions and activities are anchored in the most current and pertinent EU policy developments. Moreover, the insights generated through this mapping and analysis exercise will directly feed into the formulation of actionable and context-sensitive EU policy recommendations, enhancing the project's contribution to long-term governance and innovation processes.

RURBANIVE project is synergistic with New European Bauhaus (NEB), as the project have a dedicated **Task 5.2 - Synergy with the New European Bauhaus** - solely focused on synergies with NEB. The task aims to foster the transfer of innovative ideas and concepts from urban-based initiatives to enhance rural living environments. In particular, it seeks to create synergies with the New European Bauhaus by identifying good practices and inspiring projects that facilitate the bidirectional flow of ideas between urban and rural contexts. The policy analysis will provide robust support and background information regarding New European Bauhaus.

By aligning closely with the thematic focus on urban–rural synergies and rural innovation, this deliverable also supports cross-cutting objectives within the project, including stakeholder engagement, policy learning, and multi-level governance coordination. Its integrative function ensures that the policy dimension remains embedded throughout the project's lifecycle, reinforcing the coherence and strategic orientation of all related activities.

This deliverable is associated with **Milestones 5 and 6**, which are focused on **Mutual Learning and Capacity Building for Policymakers in Multi-Actor Workshops** (led by AEIDL), scheduled for Month 35 (November 2026) and Month 45 (September 2027) respectively. The policy analysis and mapping conducted under Task 6.1 serve as a critical input into the design and implementation of these workshops by providing an evidence-based overview of relevant EU-level policy frameworks and developments.

The deliverable thus plays a preparatory and enabling role, ensuring that the content and orientation of the workshops under Milestones 5 and 6 are aligned with current policy priorities and grounded in an understanding of evolving governance challenges and opportunities. It contributes to the strategic build-up toward these milestones, supporting their effectiveness by equipping participants with a solid foundation for informed exchange, learning, and policy co-creation.

It is also closely linked with **Deliverable 6.3 – EU Policy Recommendations** (due at the end of the project). Deliverable 6.1 constitutes the foundational evidence that will then be used, together with other deliverables and findings from the RURBANIVE policy recommendation workshops under Task 6.4, to feed directly into the formulation of final policy recommendations, ensuring they are grounded in practical findings and cross-cutting analysis of rural-urban dynamics and existing EU policies affecting rural-urban linkages.

The present Deliverable also contributes to **Deliverable 4.2 – Community Store Final Version** (M36, December 2026) by supplying relevant, up to date information regarding EU policies affecting rural-urban linkages that enhance the usability and practical value of the Community Store for local stakeholders.

In addition, the deliverable supports the development of **Deliverable 3.6 – Final Version of Rural-Urban Enablers (RUEs)** (M36, December 2026). It offers broader picture of EU policies which support rural-urban synergies and offer contextual insights that inform the refinement of RUEs and strengthen their applicability across varied territories.

The content is further relevant for Deliverables 2.3 and 2.5 – **Results of Experimentation and Innovation in Rural-Urban Synergies** (M24–M48, respectively, December 2025 – December 2027) by contributing to the interpretation of outcomes and providing lens to higher level European Union policies during the experimentation process.

Finally, it provides useful input to Deliverable 4.5 – **Rural-Urban Innovation Framework** (M32, August 2026), particularly by offering analysis of enabling EU policies, challenges, and possible bottlenecks that can structure the framework's core components.

Overall, this deliverable plays a key integrative role, supporting multiple project outputs and enhancing consistency across thematic and operational strands.

1.2 Intended Readership and Document Structure

This document is intended primarily for project partners, stakeholders, and policymakers engaged in the development and implementation of strategies aimed at strengthening urban–rural synergies and fostering rural innovation. It seeks to provide these audiences with a structured, policy-relevant analysis that supports informed decision-making and strategic planning. By addressing both overarching shifts in the European Union’s policy landscape and specific thematic areas relevant to the project, the document aims to bridge research, policy, and practice.

The structure of the document reflects a deliberate progression from the general to the specific. The initial chapters offer a broad analysis of evolving EU policy frameworks, highlighting institutional and strategic transformations that have shaped the current policy environment. Following this, the analysis turns to the European Union’s new policy priorities for the 2024–2029 institutional cycle, with particular attention to sectoral (e.g., agriculture, cohesion) and territorial (e.g., rural, urban) dimensions.

Subsequently, the document explores thematic priorities specific to the project’s focus, ensuring alignment between the EU’s strategic agenda and targeted regional or local innovation needs. The final chapter addresses emerging megatrends and challenges, such as demographic shifts, climate adaptation, and digital transitions, that are expected to influence EU policymaking in the near to mid-term, thereby contextualising current priorities within longer-term strategic foresight.

1.3 Purpose and scope of the analysis

This document provides a structured and forward-looking analysis of the evolving European Union policy framework with specific relevance to rural innovation and urban–rural synergies. It is developed as part of Task 6.1 - Mapping and Analysis of Relevant Policies at EU Level within Work Package 6 - Synergies, Policies and Governance, covering the period from Month 1 (January 2024) to Month 18 (June 2025) of the project. The overarching purpose is to deliver a comprehensive, policy-grounded baseline that will guide subsequent tasks, particularly those focused on mutual learning (Task 6.3) and the formulation of EU-level policy recommendations (Task 6.4). It also serves as a key reference for upcoming capacity-building activities and multi-actor workshops.

The scope of the document is defined by a multi-layered analysis that spans institutional, sectoral, territorial, and thematic policy dimensions.

It begins in Chapter 2 with an overview of the EU policy framework and governance, providing insights into the broader landscape, strategic priorities for the 2024–2029 institutional cycle, key legislative processes, and funding mechanisms. This sets the foundation for understanding how policy is shaped and implemented at the European level.

Chapter 3 focuses on sectoral and territorial policies of direct relevance to rural and regional transformation. It explores cohesion and regional development policies, rural and urban strategies, agricultural and environmental priorities, and the EU's dual digital and green transitions. These elements are analysed through a territorial lens, with attention to spatial disparities and the needs of less connected regions.

Chapter 4 presents a thematic deep dive into policy areas critical to the project's goals, including the circular bioeconomy, biodiversity restoration, logistics and value chains, societal empowerment, mobility, and cultural and landscape promotion. These thematic areas reflect both the priorities of the project and broader EU ambitions for sustainable, inclusive territorial development. Furthermore, the analysis focuses on how the critical policy areas and EU level policies affect urban-rural linkages around Europe.

The chapter 5 examines emerging challenges and megatrends shaping EU policymaking in the medium to long term, providing strategic foresight that underpins the relevance and durability of the policy insights presented.

Finally, chapter 6 offers concluding reflections on the complex interrelations between urban and rural areas as conceptualised within the RURBANIVE project. The chapter synthesises key overarching themes and highlights critical junctures where EU frameworks either address or overlook the essential linkages connecting urban and rural territories.

The document thus plays an integrative role across the project's work streams, anchoring applied activities in a robust understanding of the EU policy landscape.

2 EU policy framework and governance

Chapter 2 provides a structured analysis of the evolving European Union policy environment in the 2024–2029 institutional cycle. In light of shifting geopolitical dynamics, emerging societal challenges, and evolving economic imperatives, the EU’s strategic agenda reflects a complex interplay of continuity and change. This chapter seeks to unpack the core components shaping the Union’s policy direction, offering a lens on how priorities are defined, translated into institutional processes, and supported through financial mechanisms.

Section 2.1 offers an overview of the current policy landscape, mapping the principal themes, drivers, and contextual factors that inform the EU’s overarching agenda.

Section 2.2 delves into the strategic priorities and policy directions set out by Ursula von der Leyen for the 2024–2029 period, examining how political ambition is framed across key areas such as the green and digital transitions, economic resilience, and global engagement.

Section 2.3 analyses the institutional and legislative processes through which these priorities are operationalised, with particular attention to the role of interinstitutional dynamics and legislative planning.

Finally, Section 2.4 reviews the principal funding and investment instruments mobilised in support of these priorities, assessing their strategic alignment and potential for impact. Taken together, these sections aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of the EU’s current policy trajectory and the mechanisms underlining its implementation.

2.1 Overview of the policy landscape

Europe confronts a set of complex and interrelated challenges: rising geopolitical instability, structural economic vulnerabilities, demographic ageing and population decline, intensifying climate and environmental pressures, disruptive technological change, and widening social and regional inequalities. These dynamics threaten long-term stability, competitiveness, and cohesion across the continent (European Parliament et al, 2024). Furthermore, the EU grapples with persistent migration pressures, the imperative to enhance its economic competitiveness within the globalised landscape, and the crucial need to ensure social cohesion between its ambitious green and digital transition (Council of the European Union, 2024).

There are several overarching EU wide policies affecting directly or indirectly the rural-urban linkages across the Union, for example, the objective of territorial cohesion, as enshrined in **Article 174 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU)**. This objective is operationalised primarily through the **EU Cohesion Policy**, encompassing the **European Regional Development Fund (ERDF)**, the **European Social Fund Plus (ESF+)**, and the **Cohesion Fund**, as well as the **European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD)**, under the **Common Agricultural Policy**. These instruments are implemented through shared management arrangements and guided by the partnership principle, ensuring multi-level governance and stakeholder involvement.

In response to the socio-economic challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the European Union launched the **NextGenerationEU** recovery instrument, central to which is the **Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF)**. This financial mechanism aims to promote a sustainable and inclusive recovery while reinforcing the Union's long-term resilience.

Urban and rural development policies form integral components of the EU's territorial approach. Urban policy is steered by initiatives such as the **Urban Agenda for the EU**, and the New Leipzig Charter and the forthcoming **EU Agenda for Cities**, while rural development is framed by the **Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas (LTVRA)** and the accompanying **Rural Pact**. These frameworks aim to strengthen territorial balance and cohesion by enhancing quality of life and economic opportunities across diverse regions.

In the broader integration of sectoral policies, the EU has taken significant steps to align agriculture, environmental protection, and climate action. This is evident in the reformed **CAP**, which introduces eco-schemes to incentivise sustainable agricultural practices. Complementary initiatives under the **European Green Deal**, such as the **Farm to Fork Strategy**, the **European Climate Law**, and the **Fit for 55 package** further embed environmental objectives across EU policymaking. The **EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030** also plays a pivotal role in advancing ecological conservation and restoration goals (European Commission, 2020a).

The overarching strategic direction is defined by the twin transition, which seeks to synergise digital transformation and green sustainability. This dual ambition is supported by initiatives such as the **Digital Decade** targets, the **Digital Europe Programme**, the **Connecting Europe Facility**, and key regulatory instruments including the **Digital Services Act (DSA)** and the **Digital Markets Act (DMA)**.

Complementing this overarching framework, the analysis also incorporates project-specific thematic policy areas. These focus on the impact of EU interventions across domains such as the **circular bioeconomy**, **ecosystem and biodiversity restoration**, the **shortening of value chains**, enhanced **territorial awareness**, sustainable **mobility solutions**, and improved **access to culture and heritage**. A particular emphasis is placed on strengthening rural-urban linkages, thereby contributing to a more integrated and cohesive territorial development strategy.

The onset of the 2024–2029 EU institutional cycle reflects a moment of significant transition, both in terms of priorities and political logic. Whereas the previous term (2019–2024) was largely defined by the European Green Deal and a sweeping narrative of ecological transformation, the current term marks a discernible shift towards a triadic framework of **Security, Prosperity, and Democracy**. This reorientation does not entirely abandon sustainability objectives, but it places them within a broader matrix of geopolitical resilience, industrial competitiveness, and social cohesion (von der Leyen, 2024a).

This pivot must be situated within a context of accelerating systemic disruption. Russia's ongoing war of aggression in Ukraine has shattered many post-Cold War assumptions about peace and security in Europe. Simultaneously, intensifying strategic rivalry with China and the return of protectionist policies in the United States, manifested through large-scale subsidies and tariffs, for example such as those for electric vehicles (Bown, 2023), have prompted a fundamental rethink of Europe's economic model and its external dependencies. These dynamics have fuelled inflation, disrupted global value chains, and intensified competition for access to strategic raw materials, especially in green and digital sectors, prompting European Union to seek a more autonomous and risk-managed position in global affairs.

The Commission's language of "de-risking without decoupling" epitomises this balancing act. The goal is to minimise Europe's exposure to geopolitical shocks and critical dependencies, while avoiding a wholesale fragmentation of global trade and investment systems that could exacerbate insecurity and economic volatility (European Economic and Social Committee & CEPS, 2023). This nuanced posture signals a growing maturity in EU external economic strategy, moving beyond rhetorical declarations of "strategic autonomy" toward more operational and sector-specific interventions.

Internally, European Union faces mounting political pressures. The 2024 European Parliament elections revealed not just voter volatility but also growing fragmentation within the pro-European camp. The re-election of Commission President Ursula von der Leyen required a four-party coalition, suggesting a weakening of the traditional centre-right and centre-left duopoly (Menzel-Meyer et al., 2024). Public dissatisfaction, amplified by regional inequalities and perceived institutional distancing, has driven a renewed focus on delivering visible and tangible outcomes to citizens and territories. As a result, issues previously more marginal in EU discourse, such as housing affordability and health system resilience, have risen on the political agenda, despite the Union's limited competences in these areas under the Treaties.

As a result, there is a paradigm shift as evidenced in the Letta (2024) report that directly feed into the new EU priorities (Von der Leyen, 2024a). Letta's call for a more proactive use of industrial policy tools, ranging from strategic state aid to procurement reform, signals a deeper shift in the European economical landscape. For decades, the EU has positioned itself as a guardian of open markets and rules-based trade. Now, amid growing geo-economic fragmentation, the Union is suggesting a more interventionist and strategic role, aligning industrial and cohesion policies with geopolitical imperatives. (Letta, 2024).

Therefore, the EU faces a set of strategic dilemmas:

- Face increased geopolitical instability
- Address its competitiveness loss
- Ensure that there is sufficient social buy-in on its sustainability policies
- Invest in new priorities to meet internal demands and external pressures (European Council, 2024)

This requires a whole new set of policies and in some cases new powers that are a significant departure from often decades-long EU policy and programme portfolios.

The 2024-2029 Commission policy response is facing with increasing its competitiveness and reinforce its internal market (Draghi, 2024; Letta, 2025), face **increased geopolitical tensions** (Russia, China), but also within the West itself (USA): the tariff war with the USA and the perceived backsliding of EU industrial base (best exemplified by the loss of competitiveness of EU and particularly German carmakers) partly due to the catching up needed by the EU economy to match the EU

world leadership in sustainability policies, best exemplified by the **EU Green Deal** (Tordoir & Cornago, 2025).

Such disconnect between the policy ambitions and economic reality has also raised a significant domestic **unrest** in the powerful agrifood sector and led to a swift reversal – simplification- or green and biodiversity legislation particularly in the EU Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) but also SMEs and large strategic industries in the so called “**Omnibus**” packages.

At the same time increased demands for a more resilient economy while not abandoning (but rather slowing or simplifying) sustainability demands has led to new **Clean Industrial Deal** (European Commission, 2025a), **European Competitiveness Compass** (European Commission, 2025b) which will include, inter alia, strategic EU-wide industrial initiatives named Important Projects of Common European Interest (IPCEIs), but also in line with the above-mentioned Draghi and Letta Reports a more proactive industrial policy supported on the one hand, by a more activist reform of EU procurement and state aid rules in 2026 (i.e. looser limits to Member State to invest and prioritise investments without fear of infringing EU competition rules) but also, by a new large **European Competitiveness Fund** merging and expanding existing programmes that directly managed by the European Commission as to be able to more directly react to emerging crisis and proactively mobilise resources than has been possible to do in previous emerging crisis, as traditionally the room for manoeuvre the multi-annual financial framework -that is, without having to reprogramme existing funds- is only 4% of the total EU budget (Von der Leyen, 2025).

Furthermore, increased demands due to internal dissatisfaction and geopolitical instability has led to **new EU initiatives** in areas of prior limited EU action – limited by the powers conferred to the EU by the EU Treaties themselves- namely the forthcoming European Affordability **Housing** Plan (European Commission, 2025c) – which both aims to address the housing crisis, improve energy efficiency and boost the EU economy and **defence** most exemplified by the €800bn (though only €150bn directly financed by the EU through the ReArm Europe plan which also likes to marry increased preparedness, defence expenditure and economic boost (European Commission, 2025d)

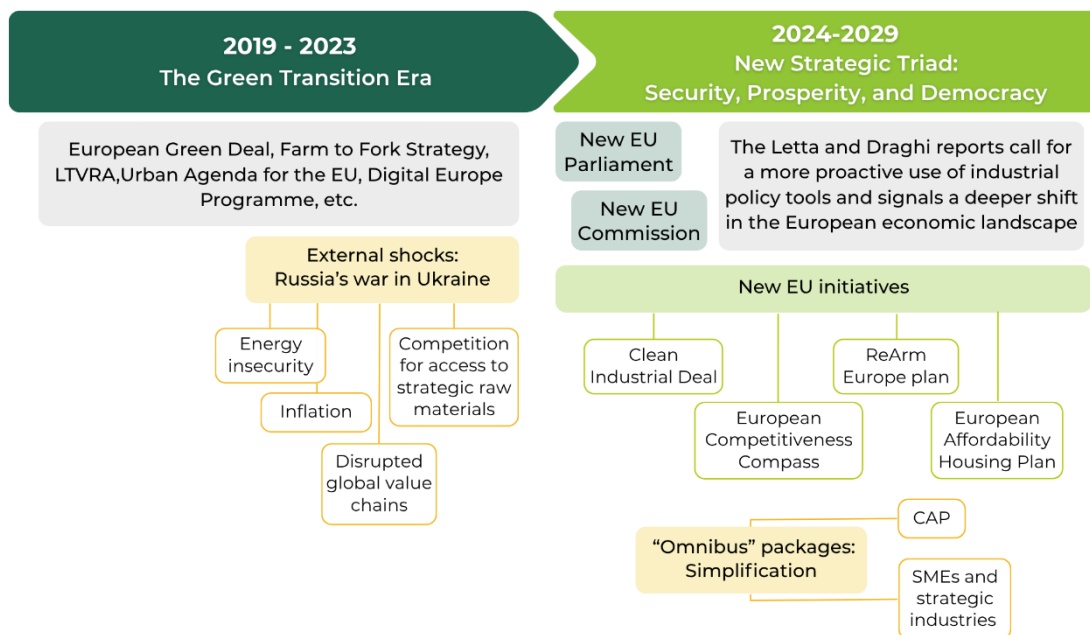


Figure 1 Overview of the policy landscape. Source: Authors own implementation.

Impact in local development: This systemic shift in geopolitical, economic and environmental needs, will bring very significant changes to the EU policies, an expansion of these policies, and even deeper changes on how these policies are funded (despite the next EU budget not exceeding the 2% of EU GDP that was only exceptionally reached as a result of the response to COVID-19). Therefore, a logical conclusion would have been that EU policy and funding interventions to support local and indeed rural communities would be completely overlooked in this new landscape. While this is certainly a possibility (Rural Pact Coordination Group, 2025) the EU priorities of the Commission make abundantly clear that a more economically dynamic EU Internal Market and geopolitically active EU is likely to fail unless sufficient ownership of its benefits is tangibly felt across the EU.

The Letta Report thus serves as a conceptual linchpin in this emerging policy discourse. It advances a more inclusive vision of European integration, grounded in principles of territorial cohesion, service accessibility, and the **"freedom to stay"** (Letta, 2024) which the Commission 2024-2029 Policy Guidelines reconceptualise as "right to stay" (Von der Leyen, 2024a). In contrast to the traditional EU freedom of movement paradigm that priorities and labour market flexibility, Letta foregrounds the right of individuals and communities to remain in their regions and access core

services, irrespective of market dynamics or demographic pressures (Letta, 2024). This perspective implies a rebalancing of EU internal market logic with stronger social and territorial guarantees, a move that challenges the subsidiarity and competition principles that have long structured EU economic governance.

The EU policy cycle

| Year | 2023 | 2024 | 2025 | 2026 | 2027 | 2028 | 2029 |
|-----------------------------|---|---|--|---|---|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Existing policies | Jun: Mid Term MFF Review Dec: End 2014-2027 Programming period | Feb: Mid Term Review EU Budget agreed & Review Next Generation EU | April: Mid Term Review Cohesion | Dec: End NGEU | Dec: End MFF 2021-27 | Jan: Start EU Budget 2028-2034 | |
| Political Developments | | Jun: EP elections July: New EU Priorities Nov: New Commission | Jan: new CoR Mandate Jan: Vision Agriculture Food Feb: Competitiveness, Defence, Procurement May: MFF Consultation Q3: Agenda for Cities | Q1: State Aid and Procurement Q3: Right to Stay | Jan: EP midterm switch | | May/June: EP Elections |
| New Programmes/ EU policies | | March-April post 2027 Commission ideas (9CR, LTVRA, Letta) | July: 2028-2034 MFF tabled Oct: New Fund Regulations tabled | Feb: Draft Reports / positions July: EP/ Council Vote Sept: EP- Council trilogues | Jun: MS start Drafting Plans Dec: Regulations Agreed | Dec: End Drafting PA/CSP/OPs | Jan: new 2028-34 programmes start |
| RURBANIVE | | | | | | | |

Figure 2 The present EU Policy Cycle: policies, programmes and politics.
Source: Adaptation of AEIDL, 2024

2.2 Strategic priorities and policy directions 2024 - 2029

A key dimension of this policy turn is institutional simplification. The accumulation of overlapping funding instruments, spanning Cohesion Policy, CAP, Horizon Europe, the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), and multiple climate and digital transition funds, has generated considerable administrative complexity and inefficiencies. Under the motto **"Europe faster and simpler,"** labelled by von der Leyen in her new Commission priorities for 2024 – 2029, the Commission is now seeking to rationalise the policy architecture, with a view to the upcoming 2028–2034 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) to be tabled in July 2025. The experience of the COVID-19 crisis, which led to the unprecedented issuance of common EU debt through the €750 billion Next Generation EU (NGEU) programme (D’Alfonso, 2020), demonstrated the potential for swift, coordinated action but also the institutional challenges of managing a fragmented budgetary landscape.

There is growing consensus that simplification must go beyond streamlining procedures; it should also entail strategic prioritisation. In this regard, the post 2027 EU budget proposal (European Commission, 2025e) to shift towards **Single National Plans**, consolidating various sectoral and regional instruments into a unified national framework, reflects a new model of EU policy delivery. Though this is severely contested (European Parliament, 2025a), this drastic move promises greater coherence and strategic focus but raises concerns about the marginalisation of subnational actors and the erosion of the EU's traditional emphasis on territorial development. Particularly in less developed or structurally disadvantaged regions, the risk is that funding may become concentrated in national-level priorities and large-scale flagship investments, further exacerbating regional disparities (Pazos-Vidal, 2024a).

The implications for SMEs are particularly salient. The introduction of a **new SME and competitiveness check**, measures to reduce financing constraints for small and mid-sized firms (von der Leyen, 2024a), and safeguards against predatory non-EU takeovers all point to a growing awareness of the need to nurture Europe's entrepreneurial ecosystem as a foundation for economic resilience. Moreover, the increasing preference for EU-based suppliers in strategic sectors such as digital, clean tech, and artificial intelligence reflects a significant departure from prior free-market orthodoxy, drawing the EU closer to the industrial policies now practiced in the US, China, and Japan.

Financing these ambitions, however, remains an open and politically contentious question. Mario Draghi's proposal for €800 billion annually in EU-wide public and private investment in strategic sectors echoes the ambition of the NGEU, but its feasibility is uncertain in a post-pandemic fiscal context. With several Member States opposed to further joint borrowing, the Commission may be compelled to repurpose existing resources, potentially at the expense of legacy policy areas such as agriculture and cohesion (Draghi, 2024). The idea of tapping into European savings, estimated at €300 billion annually leaving the EU for foreign investments, through mechanisms like the new EU Competitiveness Fund (European Commission, 2025b), represents one route, though it remains unclear how such funds would be mobilised and governed.

The launch of the €80bn Social Climate Fund (SCF) in 2026, on top of the existing EU budget 2021-2027 as it is to be funded through ETS (Emissions Trading System) revenues and national co-financing, offers a potential template for the future. It links climate action with social redistribution, reflecting a more integrated policy logic that

recognises the distributive consequences of the green transition (European Union, 2023; Jüngling et al, 2025). Similarly, climate objectives remain formally entrenched, with the EU still committed to its 2030 emission targets and 2050 neutrality goal (von der Leyen, 2024a), but policy design increasingly reflects a concern for pragmatic transitions.

Institutional innovation is also visible in governance and accountability mechanisms. The Commission's plan to introduce regular **Implementation Dialogues**, **Citizens' Panels**, **Reality Checks**, and **Youth Tests** is part of a broader shift toward participatory governance and regulatory humility (von der Leyen, 2024a). The growing use of "sandbox" approaches, initially popularised in financial regulation, suggests a willingness to experiment with adaptive, real-time policy development. These innovations, building on the **Better Regulation agenda** and **rural proofing tools** introduced in 2021, aim to close the legitimacy gap between EU institutions and local constituencies (European Commission, 2021a).

The political guidelines for the new Commission mandate provide a window into these emerging priorities. The focus on a **New Vision for EU Agriculture**, **cybersecurity in critical infrastructure** (such as hospitals), a **Clean Industrial Deal**, and **new AI legislation**, all identified as key deliverables within the first 100 days (von der Leyen, 2024a), illustrate the ambition to couple strategic autonomy with democratic legitimacy and social fairness. Whether this comprehensive policy realignment can be implemented effectively, in the face of fiscal constraints, institutional inertia, and geopolitical uncertainty, will determine the shape and sustainability of the European project in the years to come.

2.3 Institutional and legislative process

The institutional and legislative machinery of the European Union is a unique supranational framework marked by its hybrid character, neither a federal state nor a traditional international organisation. Its architecture is grounded in the treaties, notably the **Treaty on European Union (TEU)** (European Union, 2016a) and the **Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU)** (European Union, 2016b), which portrays the competences, procedures, and powers of its principal institutions. This design reflects an effort to balance supranational integration with intergovernmental sovereignty (European Union, 2016a).

At the core of the EU's institutional triangle stand the **European Commission**, the **Council of the European Union**, and the **European Parliament**, each playing a pivotal role in legislation. The **European Commission** functions as the initiator of legislation and the guardian of the treaties. The Commission also embodies a supranational logic, as Commissioners are expected to act independently of national interests, although in practice, national backgrounds and political affiliations subtly influence their actions (Kirpsza, 2023).

Legislative proposals by the Commission are examined and adopted primarily through the **Ordinary Legislative Procedure (OLP)**, formerly known as the co-decision procedure. Under the OLP, the European Parliament and the Council act as co-legislators on an equal footing (European Parliament, 2025b). This evolution reflects a significant shift in EU governance toward democratic legitimacy, particularly after the **Lisbon Treaty** enhanced the powers of the Parliament (European Union, 2007). Nonetheless, the distribution of institutional influence remains uneven. The Council, representing member state governments, frequently negotiates legislative outcomes in informal trilogues with the Commission and Parliament (Del Monte, 2025).

The **Council of the EU** operates under a system of rotating presidencies and is composed of ministers from the member states, organised into different configurations depending on the policy domain. Decision-making within the Council varies by policy area but often uses **Qualified Majority Voting (QMV)**, whereby votes are weighted according to population size and other criteria. This system seeks to reconcile national equality with demographic representation (Devaney & Poptcheva, 2014). Parallel to the Council, the **European Parliament** serves as the only directly elected institution within the EU framework.

Beyond the OLP, several **special legislative procedures** exist, primarily in areas such as taxation, competition, or foreign policy, where the Council plays a more dominant role. However, under this procedure, the Parliament can accept or reject a legislative proposal by an absolute majority vote without amending it, and the Council cannot overturn the Parliament's opinion (European Parliament, n.d.). They also reflect the strategic calculus of member states to maintain tighter control over sovereignty-linked domains, despite the broader integrationist trend.

Although formal mechanisms of accountability have been strengthened over time, including greater transparency, enhanced parliamentary powers, and improved citizen

participation tools, by presenting tools like, for example the **European Citizens' Initiative** (European Parliament, 2025c).

An additional complexity arises from the role of **informal institutions and lobbying networks**, which shape legislative outcomes behind the scenes. Expert groups, business associations, civil society actors, regions and permanent representations of member states play a significant role in the preparatory and negotiating phases of legislation by participating in public consultations and the partnership structures that can be summarised under the Multilevel-Governance paradigm (Pazos-Vidal, 2019, European Commission, 2023a).

Recent trends in EU legislative practice point to growing reliance on **secondary legislation**, particularly delegated and implementing acts (European Parliament, 2025d). These instruments allow the Commission to flesh out technical details of laws without undergoing full legislative scrutiny. While such mechanisms enhance efficiency, they also shift decision-making further away from the directly elected Parliament, exacerbating concerns about the transparency and legitimacy of rulemaking.

Furthermore, there is an increasingly relevant layer of multilevel interaction that goes beyond the formal decision-making process which emphasises meta-governance, quality of governance and administrative capacity aspects over formal procedures over defined legal powers, as the former can have a disproportionate effect in the impact and effectiveness of the EU decisions. It is important to highlight in this regard the **European Semester, EU Missions and Better Regulation**.

The **Semester** is a multilevel process of EU peer-review of national economic and fiscal policies started in 2010 on the back of the post 2008 Great Recession. Being aware that EU legislation let alone an EU budget that at most would amount to 1.25% of EU GDP would be insufficient to address the entrenched structural reforms long postponed by Member States, this annual cycle annually consolidates various processes related to the oversight, monitoring, and coordination of budgetary, fiscal, economic, and social policies. As such it goes well beyond areas of EU competence (e.g. it considers issues such as pensions or the quality of public administration) However it has been spatially blind as it tends to overlook local and regional context and powers (European Committee of the Regions et al., 2023), even despite that in 2019 an Annex D was added to consider these issues. The arrival of Next Generation EU was instrumental in the delivering on these reforms as for the first time all Member

States received financial incentives in exchange of addressing long postponed reforms, a template that will be expanded further in the post 2027 EU budget (European Commission, 2025e).

Complementary to the Semester, a parallel way of improving the vertical governance of the existing EU policy goals is through **EU missions**, which includes support for EU priorities such as the Green Deal or the new European Bauhaus:

1. Adaptation to Climate Change: support at least 150 European regions and communities to become climate resilient by 2030
2. Cancer: working with Europe's Beating Cancer Plan to improve the lives of more than 3 million people by 2030 through prevention, cure and solutions to live longer and better
3. Restore our Ocean and Waters by 2030
4. 100 Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities by 2030
5. A Soil Deal for Europe: 100 living labs and lighthouses to lead the transition towards healthy soils by 2030.

The vision of professor Mazzucato, from which the EU Mission approach under the Von der Leyen Commission takes direct inspiration from (Mazzucato, 2019) suggest a bolder approach (essentially a top down narrow setting of big societal goals whose delivery would have to permeate further down the multilevel delivery chain to the local level) than what the New European Bauhaus had been able to provide at the moment: essentially optimising and making accommodations to the structures of the present 2021-2027 MFF, particularly in the Horizon Europe programme as compared to Structural funds the Commission has a larger leeway HE being under the Commission's direct management. Indeed, the Commission own externally commission independent evaluation signal that the synergies between policies, as well as sufficient buy in at the national, local and regional levels remain critical factors for improvement (European Commission, 2023b) as indeed there is limited mobilisation of resources beyond those specifically allocated to Missions from the relatively small budget of Horizon Europe (European Commission, 2024a).

While the semester seeks to address domestic implementation and alignment of EU and domestic policies, the above-mentioned **Better Regulation** process (European Commission, 2021a) seeks to do improve the regulatory landscape of the EU rules themselves, both by improved evaluation and impact assessment but also simplifying the ever-expanding EU rulebook , the most significant of this is the “one-in, one-out”

notional benchmark whereby the amount of legal instruments on a given topic should decrease or at most remain stable. It includes a drive for more generalised use of impact assessment (which have improved but still subject to the pressures of a more political and increasingly changing environment) and of public consultations (Have Your Say). From the point of view of local and rural development in particular the 2021 Guidelines include the so-called Tool #34 to carry out Territorial impact Assessment of prospective or already existing legislation, which is still only tentative (Anglmayer et al. 2025). Within such assessments the concept of **rural proofing** (i.e. assessing the impact of EU policies and legislation specifically in rural areas, often involving stakeholders and rural actors directly in these assessments). Though introduced as part of the new EU Vision for Rural Areas (European Commission, 2021b) – discussed further below in detail- the concept remains elusive and still subject to methodological improvements, which are being developed at the moment (Gautisch et al., 2024; REDR, 2024; Martino, et al. 2024; Bryce, 2024).

Another complementary, but politically very significant process is the implementation and indeed Localisation of the United Nations (UN) **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**, agreed in 2015 and that set out global goals (unlike previous agendas such as the Millenium Development Goals that were only focused on developing countries) across 17 sectors to achieve by 2030 (European Commission, 2020a), with a framework of indicators to report via the so-called Voluntary National Reviews (namely UN Member States, but also international organisations such as the EU and indeed local and regional authorities by way of the optional Voluntary Local Reviews) .

While the EU institutions initially saw this UN agenda – not too different in this regard to comprehensive strategies of the EU such as Europe 2020 strategy and the Common Strategic Framework sitting under it to deliver EU policies – saw this merely a compliance exercise – the more so as developing and middle-income countries where much further away in reaching the SDGs (Eurostat, 2017), with the arrival of the first Von der Leyen commission there was a concerted move – as requested by part of the political coalition that voted her candidacy at the European Parliament – to mainstream the SDGs into its broad policy priorities (European Commission, 2020a).

The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (used courtesy of the UN)



Figure 3 The UN Sustainable Development Goals and the EU. Source: European Commission, 2020a

This is a process that has if anything further entrenched with the 2nd von der Leyen Commission has mainstreamed them further as outlined in the respective Mission Letters for each Commissioner (Von der Leyen, 2024a). However, for the moment, the SDGs remain excessively focused on performance reporting – signalling the positive contribution by EU policies to the SDGs- (European Commission, 2023c) than performance monitoring let alone performance management, whereby performance or underperformance of SDGs indicators (the UN ones or their EU adaptation) are used to target investment and reward or penalise performance. (Pazos-Vidal, 2021; Berisha, et al., 2021). Among the SDGs Sustainable Development Goals, **SDG 11 Sustainable Cities and Communities** is the one that is more directly available for what is known as “Localisation” i.e. to define and deliver at the local level these big global goals (United Cities and Local Governments, 2023), a process which is context-dependent (political and institutional framework, culture of partnership, etc.). While the potential for this mainstreaming is most obvious in the sustainable urban development earmarking in Cohesion policy (vid. infra) this is still to happen in a comprehensive way. The holistic approach of the new National Single Plans that will programme all EU funds in each Member State provide an opportunity to align with the respective Voluntary National Reviews of the SDGs (Pazos-Vidal, 2025).

The EU’s institutional and legislative process reflects a complex interplay of supranationalism, intergovernmentalism, and democratic aspirations. While the evolution of procedures and institutional powers demonstrates a trajectory toward greater coherence and legitimacy, persistent asymmetries and democratic shortcomings continue to challenge the Union’s capacity to act decisively and inclusively.

Furthermore, the EU's legislative process must increasingly contend with **polycrisis pressures**, including climate change, digital transformation, migration, and geopolitical instability (Diamond & Skrzypek, 2024). These complex challenges have as mentioned spurred new policy initiatives, such as the European Green Deal and the Digital Services Act, that require rapid and coordinated legislative responses across institutions.

Future reforms will need to address not only structural inefficiencies but also the deeper cultural and political disconnect between EU institutions and European citizens.

2.4 Key funding and investment mechanisms

The European Union operates a complex and expansive systems of public finance, structured around a **multiannual financial framework (MFF)** that sets expenditure ceilings over a seven-year period. The current 2021–2027 MFF, combined with the Next Generation EU (NGEU) recovery instrument, amounts to an unprecedented financial package of €2.018 trillion, reflecting a strategic alignment of long-term and crisis-responsive funding mechanisms (European Union, 2021c). Central to understanding the EU's fiscal capacity is an exploration of its key funding instruments, their institutional logic, and the political priorities they embody.

A fundamental component of the EU's expenditure is the Cohesion Policy, which seeks to reduce regional disparities and promote balanced development across the Union. Under the **European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF)**, comprising the **European Regional Development Fund (ERDF)**, the **European Social Fund Plus (ESF+)**, and the **Cohesion Fund (CF)**, the EU channels significant resources into infrastructure, employment, and social inclusion. These instruments reflect a longstanding political consensus on territorial solidarity and the importance of enhancing convergence among less developed regions. However, debates persist about their effectiveness and the extent to which they contribute to durable economic transformation rather than perpetuating dependence on external support (Bachtler & Mendez, 2020).

The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) is another major budgetary pillar, absorbing around 30% of total EU spending. Despite successive reforms aimed at greening the CAP and enhancing its market orientation, the policy continues to attract criticism over its compatibility with the EU's climate objectives (European Court of Auditors, 2024).

Nevertheless, CAP exemplifies the institutional inertia of entrenched policy frameworks and the political economy dynamics that shape budgetary negotiations among member states.

Recent years have witnessed a paradigmatic shift in EU funding with the establishment of the **Next Generation EU (NGEU)** recovery instrument. NGEU, particularly through its centrepiece, the **Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF)**. Sitting outside the EU budget 2021-2027 and equivalent to two thirds of it, it marks the first large-scale instrument of common EU debt to finance grants and loans to member states to restore effects of COVID-19 (European Parliament, 2025e). This departure from conventional fiscal rules, prompted by the COVID-19 crisis, represents both a deepening of fiscal integration and a testing ground for future forms of risk-sharing.

Moreover, the evolution of EU funding reveals broader institutional trends, including the European Commission's expanded role as an executive actor managing a complex portfolio of financial instruments. The shift from grants to financial instruments, such as guarantees and equity under programs like **InvestEU**, reflects a growing emphasis on leveraging private investment and ensuring budgetary efficiency. This transformation aligns with broader trends in post-crisis EU economic governance, where fiscal prudence, risk-sharing, and strategic investment coexist in a fragile but innovative equilibrium.

European Union's funding mechanisms are not merely technical instruments but reflect political choices, institutional compromises, and evolving visions of European integration. The shift from traditional redistribution toward strategic investment and conditional solidarity underscores the EU's adaptive capacity in times of crisis. Yet, the legitimacy and effectiveness of these mechanisms will depend on their transparency, inclusiveness, and ability to produce tangible results for citizens across the Union. As such, the future of EU funding will be as much about governance and trust as it is about economics and regulation.

2014-2020 MFF, 2021-2027 MFF, NGEU and top-ups (commitments, € billion, 2018 prices)

| | | |
|-----------|--------------|--|
| 2014-2020 | MFF €1 083.3 | |
| 2021-2027 | MFF €1 074.3 | NGEU €750 |
| | | Total €1 835.3 |
| | | €11 Top-ups through the increase of MFF ceilings |

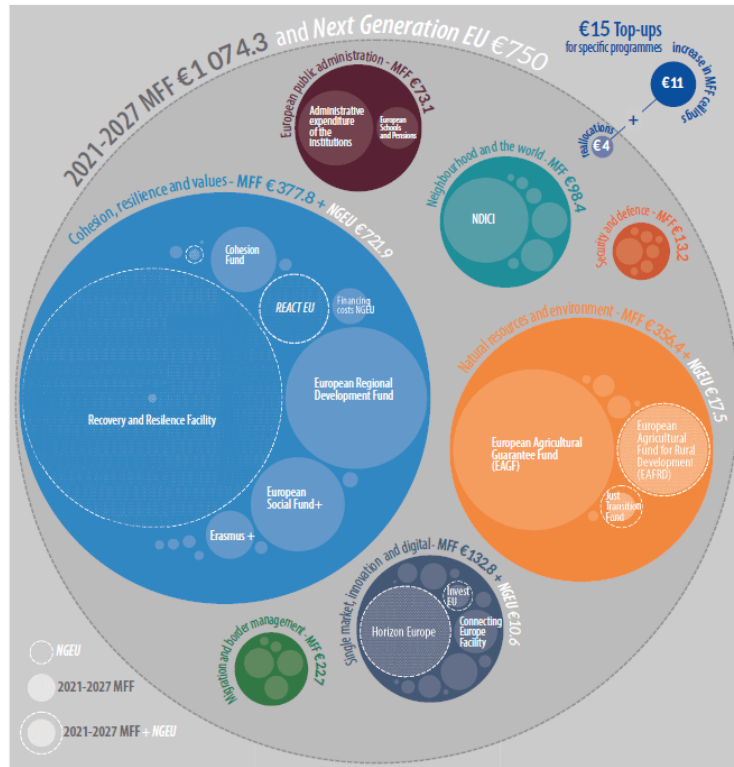


Figure 4. 2021-2027 MFF and Next Generation EU (€ billion, 2018 prices) overview.
Source: EPRS (2020)

3 Sectoral and territorial policies

Chapter 3 examines the territorial, environmental, and sectoral dimensions of European Union policy, focusing on the intersecting domains of regional development, spatial planning, agricultural transformation, and sustainability transitions. As the European Union continues to pursue a balanced and inclusive model of growth, this chapter explores how policy frameworks are being deployed to reduce regional disparities, enhance territorial cohesion, and drive systemic change across rural, urban, and sectoral contexts.

Section 3.1 discusses the evolving role of cohesion policy and regional development instruments in addressing structural inequalities and supporting convergence across Member States and regions.

Section 3.2 turns to the differentiated strategies for urban and rural areas, highlighting the importance of place-based approaches and integrated territorial development.

Section 3.3 focuses on the nexus between agriculture, environmental stewardship, and climate action, with attention to how policy reforms seek to reconcile productivity with ecological sustainability.

Finally, Section 3.4 analyses the dual digital and green transitions as cross-cutting policy priorities, evaluating their implications for regional economies, infrastructure, and innovation ecosystems. Collectively, these sections provide a comprehensive view of how the EU is responding to complex territorial and environmental challenges through a coordinated and multidimensional policy agenda.

3.1 Cohesion and regional development

Territorial cohesion, enshrined in **Article 3 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU)** (European Union, 2016a), is not merely a thematic priority but a constitutional commitment of the EU, intended to ensure balanced and inclusive development across all regions. This commitment is reinforced in **Article 174 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU)** (European Union, 2016b), which identifies a wide range of geographically disadvantaged areas, such as rural, mountainous, island, and border regions, as requiring targeted support. These treaty provisions provide the legal and strategic foundation for a wide array of EU policies and instruments designed to address persistent spatial inequalities.

The principal operational mechanism for realising territorial cohesion is the **EU Cohesion Policy**, which encompasses three main funds: the **European Regional Development Fund (ERDF)**, the **European Social Fund Plus (ESF+)**, and the **Cohesion Fund**. Complementing this architecture is the **second pillar of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP)**, namely the **European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD)**. Together, these instruments represent the EU's most substantial financial commitment to spatial justice, amounting to nearly **two-thirds of the 2021–2027 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF)**, or roughly €800 billion over seven years. Although this seems enormous in nominal terms, it still represents just over **1% of EU GDP**, highlighting the constraints of the EU's limited fiscal capacity in comparison to national budgets (European Parliament, 2024).

Nonetheless, in relative terms, these funds constitute a major source of public investment in many Member States, especially in **less developed regions**, where they often account for the majority of public capital expenditure. The principle of **shared management** governs their implementation: while the **European Commission** sets

strategic priorities and oversees compliance, it is up to **national, regional, and local authorities** to design, deliver, and monitor programmes, in partnership with local stakeholders including civil society and business actors. This participatory approach is mandated by the **partnership principle**, which has been progressively embedded in the programming cycles of EU structural and investment funds (Pazos-Vidal, 2024b).

However, the **COVID-19 pandemic** precipitated a paradigm shift in EU funding logic. In response to the severe economic shock, the EU created **NextGenerationEU (NGEU)** in 2020, a temporary recovery instrument worth over €800 billion, financed not through traditional intergovernmental transfers but through unprecedented **common EU-level borrowing**. Its centrepiece, the **Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF)**, channels investments and reforms through **national Recovery and Resilience Plans**, which must be implemented by the end of 2026 (European Commission, 2024b).

Unlike Cohesion Policy, which is characterised by complex multi-level governance and detailed ex-ante programming, the RRF operates via **payment-by-results**. Disbursements are conditional upon the achievement of **pre-agreed milestones and targets**, typically tied to the **European Semester**, as mentioned the EU's annual coordination cycle for economic and social policy reform. As a result, the RRF bypasses many of the administrative procedures associated with traditional Cohesion Policy, making it **faster and more centralised**, but also less territorially granular. Funds are primarily managed at the national level, and the role of subnational actors has been relatively limited, raising concerns about the implications for territorial equity and stakeholder participation. As there is a strong impression that either RRF or the Social Climate Fund (*vid. infra*, and which at least includes a form of consultation) will become the template for post 2027 National Single Plans there has been a strong reaction by stakeholders (ECoPP, 2025; Rural Pact Coordination Group, 2025).

This dual-track funding landscape has led to growing speculation about a **long-term reconfiguration** of the EU's approach to investment and reform. The success, or failure, of the RRF may influence how future EU funding programmes are designed, especially in terms of governance, conditionality, and subsidiarity. This is further illustrated by the forthcoming **EU Social Climate Fund**, set to launch in 2026 with a budget of **€65 billion**, which is likewise expected to operate on milestone-based disbursements rather than through shared management (Pazos-Vidal, 2024c). While such instruments may enhance responsiveness and macroeconomic coherence, they

risk diminishing the territorial focus and participatory ethos that have traditionally characterised Cohesion Policy.

The implications for **territorial development** are therefore profound. As the EU moves toward the **post-2027 programming period**, it must reconcile competing imperatives: the desire for **fiscal efficiency and reform leverage** on the one hand, and the longstanding commitment to **place-based, inclusive development** on the other.

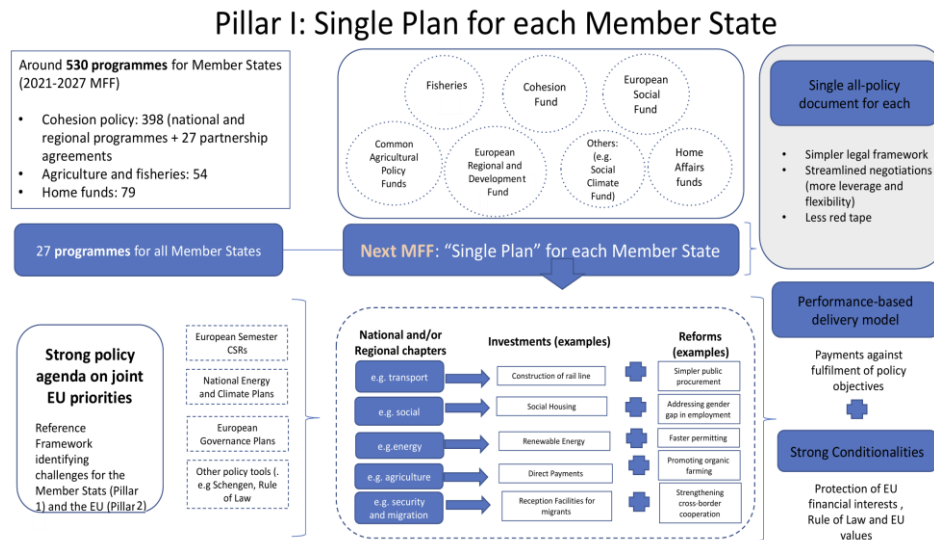


Figure 5. Expected Single Plan for each Member State. Source: Pazos-Vidal, 2025 (https://ldnet.eu/wp-content/uploads/bsk-pdf-manager/2025/03/LDnet-Webinar-2_25-Key-challenges-of-cohesion-policy_SPV.pdf).

Whether this results in a hybridisation of Cohesion Policy and RRF-style instruments, or in a more fundamental transformation of the EU’s territorial model, remains a key strategic question for the years ahead.

3.2 Urban and rural policy strategies

Within the evolving framework of EU priorities, territorial cohesion remains a foundational yet complex objective. Anchored in **Article 174 TFEU**, which explicitly calls for special attention to urban, rural, and remote areas, the Union has developed a diverse architecture of policies, initiatives, and financial instruments aimed at addressing spatial disparities and enhancing both place-based and networked development. What emerges is a dual-track governance structure: on one side, the

European Commission articulates broad strategic frameworks; on the other, national and subnational actors participate in shaping implementation through multilevel governance mechanisms.

For **urban areas**, a quasi-acquis has gradually emerged over the past two decades, commonly referred to as the "urban acquis." This includes both formal strategies and informal governance arrangements, most notably the **Urban Agenda for the EU**, a multilevel platform identifying policy bottlenecks and opportunities for cities within EU regulation. This is underlined by intergovernmental consensus documents such as the **New Leipzig Charter** (building on the Pact of Amsterdam), which emphasise integrated and participatory urban development (EU ministers responsible for Urban Matters, 2020). Though the European Commission (2025f) consultation document intends to reassure urban authorities of the contrary, there is strong probability that the new "**Agenda for Cities**", a key part of the 2021-2029 term, will prioritise large cities where the biggest scale and effect can be achieved, which unless it builds upon the existing urban-rural acquis, it would be detrimental to functional area approaches and urban-rural dynamics (Pazos-Vidal, 2025).

At the intergovernmental level, the broader **Territorial Agenda 2030**, endorsed by ministers responsible for spatial planning, complements this promoting the importance of functional regions that integrate urban and rural areas beyond administrative boundaries, promoting development through strengthened interconnections and place-based cooperation. It calls for integrated, multilevel governance to reduce spatial inequalities and ensure cohesive territorial development across Europe (Territorial Agenda 2030, 2020).

Conversely, **rural development policy** has recently undergone a strategic refresh. The **Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas (LTVRA)**, launched in 2021 and updated in 2024 (European Commission, 2024c) and developed further through the [Rural Action Plan](#) (a set of discrete actions across the various Commission departments to support rural areas), the [Rural Observatory](#), and [Rural Proofing tools](#), aims to provide a more coherent, forward-looking approach to rural policymaking (European Commission, 2024c). Central to its ethos is the **Rural Pact**, a participatory governance initiative that seeks to mobilise stakeholders across levels and sectors in shaping rural futures (European Commission, 2021b). This growing rural agenda reflects not only longstanding development gaps but also a heightened political awareness of spatial alienation and uneven demographic dynamics across the EU. Furthermore, despite a

context of increased security, environmental and economic uncertainty, with the agrifood sector mobilising demanding and obtaining a simplification of legal, administrative and environmental burdens (including the Green Deal and the Nature Restoration Law), the new **Vision for Agriculture and Food** (European Commission, 2025g) one of the key strategic documents of the European Commission for the present term, includes a dedicated section where non-agriculture rural development is considered, including the confirmation of the continuation of the EU Rural Action Plan, EU Rural Pact and Rural Proofing initiatives.

Table 1. Long Term Vision for Rural Areas, Rural Action Plan and Rural Pact

| LTVRA 4 Blocks | LTVRA 10 Goals | Rural Action Plan 9 Flagships | Rural Pact 3 Objectives |
|---|---|--|---|
| <p>STRONGER</p> <p>Empowered communities</p> <p>Access to services</p> <p>Social innovation</p> | <p>I. Attractive spaces, developed in harmonious territorial development</p> <p>II. Engaged in multi-level and place-based governance</p> <p>IV. Dynamic communities focusing on well-being, including livelihoods, fairness, prosperity and quality of life</p> <p>IX. Lively places equipped with efficient, accessible and affordable public and private services</p> <p>X. Places of diversity</p> | <p>Creating an innovation ecosystem</p> <p><u>Flagships</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Rural revitalisation platform ▶ Research and innovation for rural communities | <p>1. Amplify the voice of rural areas to bring them higher on the political agenda:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Strengthen participation of RP community members in decision-making processes ▶ Ensure a participatory approach to the 10 shared LTVRA goals ▶ Contribute to acting upon the concerns and potential of rural areas |
| <p>PROSPEROUS</p> <p>Diversification of economic activities</p> <p>Sustainable food production</p> | <p>VIII. Entrepreneurial, innovative and skilled people</p> <p>III. Providers of food security, economic opportunities</p> | <p>Supporting economic diversification (short supply chains, rural tourism, labelling schemes)</p> <p><u>Flagship</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Entrepreneurship and social economy in rural areas | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Spread the word on the benefits rural areas provide to society to change the perception that surrounds rural areas |
| <p>RESILIENT</p> <p>Resilience to climate change</p> <p>Environmental resilience</p> | <p>VI. Flourishing sources of nature, enhanced by and contributing to the objectives of the Green Deal, including climate neutrality, as well as sustainable management of natural resources</p> <p>V. Inclusive communities of inter-generational solidarity, fairness and renewal, open to</p> | <p>Increasing environmental, climatic and social resilience</p> <p><u>Flagships</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Support rural municipalities in energy transition and fighting climate change (best practice, guidance incl. Covenant of Mayors) | <p>2. Structure and enable collaboration and mutual learning between pact members:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Rural Pact community members will be given the opportunity to inspire each other ▶ They will collaborate across |

| | | | |
|--|---|---|--|
| Social resilience | newcomers and fostering equal opportunities for all | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Climate action in peatland through carbon farming ▶ EU Mission on soil health and food ▶ Social resilience and Women in rural areas | <p>different sectors, as well as with social partners, on how to deliver the shared goals</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ These activities will be coordinated with existing networks and platforms |
| <p>CONNECTED</p> <p>Digital Connectivity</p> <p>Transport links and new Connectivities</p> | <p>VII. Fully benefiting from digital innovation with equal access to emerging technologies, widespread digital literacy and opportunities to acquire more advanced skills</p> | <p>Boosting sustainable transport links and digitalisation</p> <p><u>Flagships</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Rural digital futures ▶ Sustainable multimodal mobility best practices for rural areas | <p>3. Encourage and monitor voluntary commitment for action by Rural Pact community members:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ RP will provide a framework for RP community members to launch new initiatives contributing to the LTVRA |
| <p>Rural proofing - Toolkit on EU Funding opportunities for rural areas - EU Rural Observatory</p> | | | |

This awareness is increasingly framed through the lens of the “**geography of discontent**”, a term capturing the frustration of communities in structurally disadvantaged regions who perceive themselves as neglected by both national and EU-level institutions (Rodríguez-Pose et al., 2023). Indeed, one of the priorities of the Agriculture Commissioner is to on addressing the targeted spread of disinformation in rural areas (Von der Leyen, 2024b) This sense of exclusion has been compounded by demographic decline, service withdrawal, and limited economic diversification. Responding to this, the Commission has initiated a linkage between **Democracy and Demography** highlighting challenges such as **depopulation in Southern Europe** (ESPON, 2018) and **brain drain in Eastern Member States** (Boc, 2020) with tangible implications for cohesion and labour market policy.

The **9th Cohesion Report** (European Commission, 2024d) – which is provided every three years as mandated by article 175 TFEU and is both the official assessment of territorial prosperity and provides first outline of the Commission’s future proposals – provides a sobering assessment: many regions, having addressed basic infrastructure gaps, now face a “**talent development trap**”—a structural stagnation in attracting and retaining human capital despite improved connectivity and service provision. This has serious implications for the EU’s ambitions around innovation, competitiveness, and inclusive growth. It also underscores the limitations of a one-size-fits-all approach to

regional development and points toward the need for a more granular, functional understanding of territorial needs and capacities (European Commission, 2023d)

In financial and programming terms, the EU's urban and rural policies are operationalised through a patchwork of instruments—some embedded within **Cohesion Policy**, others residing in sectoral frameworks or managed through decentralised partnerships. On the urban side, the flagship initiative is the **Sustainable Urban Development (SUD)** programme, which earmarks at least 8% of the **European Regional Development Fund (ERDF)**, approximately €18 billion, for integrated strategies in selected urban areas. These are supported by the **European Urban Initiative (EUI)**, a dedicated platform for capacity-building, knowledge exchange, and pilot experimentation (European Urban Initiative, 2022). Parallel initiatives such as the **EU Mission Cities**, the **Covenant of Mayors**, and **Smart Cities and Communities** provide additional avenues for innovation and sustainability, although many lie outside the strict confines of Cohesion Policy.

In rural regions, the primary vehicle remains the **European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD)**, which allocates at least 5%—roughly €4.8 billion—to the **LEADER programme**. LEADER remains a rare EU initiative where **local action groups (LAGs)**, led by most non-public actors, hold real decision-making authority over project funding. Although constrained by scale (typically around €5 million per LAG per 7-year period) and criticised by the **European Court of Auditors** for its administrative complexity and limited impact (European Court of Auditors, 2022), LEADER has nonetheless become emblematic of bottom-up, community-led development in rural Europe. More broadly, up to €25 billion in CAP funds including EAFRD, around **8% of the total, support non-agricultural rural investments**, demonstrating a growing diversification of rural policy instruments (European Commission, 2024c). However, **only €750m go to Community Led Local Development (CLLD) in rural and non-rural areas from the Cohesion Policy** compared to €7.7 bn from CAP via the LEADER-CLLD programme (European Commission, 2023e).

Yet the ambition to bridge urban and rural divides is hampered by institutional fragmentation. Notably, the **2021–2027 programming period** has seen a re-separation of the **EAFRD** from the **Common Provisions Regulation (CPR)** governing ERDF, ESF+, and other cohesion instruments. This administrative split has complicated efforts to develop **Integrated Territorial Development (ITD)** strategies,

such as **Community-Led Local Development (CLLD)** and **Integrated Territorial Investments (ITIs)** that aim to foster urban-rural interdependencies and polycentric development (Kah et al., 2023; Huete Garcia et al., 2023).

A notable example of asymmetries within the MFF is the **allocation of more funds to rural development beyond farming in cohesion policy, €45.6 billion** (Kah et al. 2020) than in rural development policy itself (€24.6 billion): 8% of CAP expenditure (European Commission, 2024c). While 5% of EAFRD (whereas EAFRD to date amounts to about 1/3 of CAP expenditure) is earmarked for non-agricultural rural development, in Cohesion Policy only 8% of ERDF is earmarked for Sustainable Urban Development with no such ringfence exist for rural development or local development as a whole, because of the 5 big Policy Objectives upon with all Structural Funds (i.e. ESIF) need to be structured under, the **Policy Objective 5 ‘A Europe closer to citizens’** can be used to support integrated investment strategies targeting relevant territorial scale (e.g. cities, rural areas, metropolitan areas and functional areas) is the only such objectives not having a dedicated earmark (Pertoldi, et al. 2022)

The proliferation of funds and delivery mechanisms has become so complex that the EU has issued a **Guide to EU Funding** and launched an interactive **EU Rural Toolkit** to assist beneficiaries and practitioners in navigating the landscape (Margaras & Széchy, 2023).

Historically, **urban–rural relations** within EU policy frameworks have been characterised by a fragmented approach, situated between Cohesion Policy, largely implemented through the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), and a predominantly rural focus represented by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD). These two strands have traditionally been administered by separate institutional bodies within the European Commission: The Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy (DG REGIO) and the Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development (DG AGRI), respectively. This institutional division has contributed to a lack of coherent, integrated territorial policy that adequately reflects the interdependencies and functional linkages between urban and rural areas.

Efforts to bridge this policy gap began to gain traction with the **RURBAN** preparatory action driven by the European Parliament Urban Intergroup, which provided a foundational impetus for a more integrated territorial approach (OECD, 2013). This initiative was instrumental in highlighting the need to reconceptualise urban–rural interactions not merely as spatial dichotomies but as mutually reinforcing components

of broader regional development. In parallel with these policy developments, significant progress was made at the analytical and statistical levels to support this paradigm shift.

Furthermore, a major milestone in this regard was the development of a harmonised urban–rural typology by Eurostat, grounded in the **TERCET** classification (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2017). This classification system introduced a more nuanced, functional understanding of territorial dynamics, moving beyond rigid administrative boundaries. However, it is yet to be used to target EU funds notably ESIF including EAFRD. In addition, a promising development is the effort to better define **Functional Rural Areas (FRAs)**, territories outside **Functional Urban Areas (FUAs)**, not merely as residual spaces, but as interconnected systems with their own demographic, economic, and infrastructural dynamics. A key analytical component involves measuring **access to essential services** and **distance to critical infrastructure**, metrics that reveal deep spatial inequalities masked by traditional administrative boundaries (Dijkstra & Jacobs-Crisioni, 2023). This is increasingly seen by the Commission as a key area of policy intervention by the EU (European Commission, 2024e). The ultimate aim is to inform more differentiated and equitable policymaking by recognising **urban-rural interdependence** as a foundational principle, rather than treating rural development as a sectoral niche.

Crucially, these classifications enable spatial analysis at a high level of granularity, ideally down to 1 km² grid cells and thereby facilitating a more precise understanding of the functional use of territory, demographic and economic flows, and the spatial structure of policy needs (Pertoldi et al., 2022). By defining what is not urban through exclusion, the **DEGURBA** typology also provides a more robust and evidence-based framework for rural policy design. One in which the European Union, with the support of the OECD has created a world standard of “what is a city” (and what is not) that has been adopted by the United Nations (Dijkstra et al., 2020). Together, these statistical tools reflect a conceptual evolution in EU territorial governance: from territorially segmented approaches to functionally integrated spatial planning that better accounts for interlinkages between urban centres and their rural hinterlands.

The **New European Bauhaus initiative** (NEB), launched by the European Commission, aims to translate the European Green Deal into tangible changes that enhance daily life through sustainable, inclusive, and aesthetically pleasing designs in buildings, public spaces, fashion, and furniture (European Commission, 2021d). The initiative seeks to create a new lifestyle that reduces carbon emissions and is

affordable for all, while respecting Europe's diversity. Funding for the initiative comes from both EU-level programs and Member States' resources, with approximately €85 million allocated for projects in 2021-2022. The initiative includes calls for proposals open to public authorities, start-ups, and citizens' initiatives, with the first five demonstrator projects expected to be selected by spring 2022. Member States play a crucial role in promoting participatory co-design processes and supporting local transformation projects. The New European Bauhaus Lab will work on co-creating and testing tools, solutions, and policy actions, while the New European Bauhaus Prizes will recognize projects that embody sustainability, aesthetics, and inclusion. The initiative also aims to expand its global reach through partnerships and the annual New European Bauhaus Festival, which will showcase projects and foster community engagement. The co-design phase of the initiative involved over 2000 contributions and identified key thematic axes such as reconnecting with nature and prioritizing areas in need. The initiative encourages broad participation and aims to create a sense of community around sustainable transformation.

Furthermore, the 2023 Progress Report of the **New European Bauhaus** (NEB) highlighted the initiative's role in fostering stronger urban-rural synergy through inclusive, sustainable, and aesthetically driven transformations aligned with the European Green Deal. Emphasising participatory design, local engagement, and context-sensitive solutions, the NEB supports integrated development in both urban and rural settings via demonstrator projects and targeted funding (European Commission, 2023f). The NEB focus on a holistic approach to innovation ecosystems, involving coordinated efforts from policymakers, theorists, and practitioners. For urban-rural community interactions, this means governments must provide essential infrastructure and address housing as a basic human right. Industry should advance collective methodologies construction to promote sustainability through circular design. The climate crisis and COVID-19 highlight the need for resilience and human-machine collaboration, requiring inclusive, community-driven data environments. This initiative calls for broad participation and innovative financing to support sustainable urban-rural interactions and the Future of Work (Rosado-Garcia, et al., 2021).

As the EU looks toward the **post-2027** funding period (see Table 1), the challenge is to reconcile this intricate mosaic of strategies, instruments, and visions with a more streamlined, impactful, and democratically legitimate territorial agenda. Whether through the continued evolution of the Long-Term Vision, the operationalisation of functional area-based planning, or a reformed architecture of EU funding, the ability to

sustain and empower all types of territories, urban, rural, and in-between, will be a decisive factor in shaping the Union's social contract in the decades ahead.

3.3 Agriculture, environment, and climate actions

The European Union has increasingly sought to integrate agriculture, environmental protection, and climate action within a coherent policy framework, reflecting the interdependence of these domains in the face of ecological degradation and global warming. Central to this agenda is the reformed **Common Agricultural Policy** for 2023–2027, which aims to align agricultural subsidies with sustainability objectives while maintaining food security and rural livelihoods. The new CAP introduces “eco-schemes,” incentivising farmers to adopt practices such as crop diversification, agroecology, and carbon farming, thus marking a shift from towards more performance-based environmental stewardship (IFOAM Organics Europe, 2020).

The CAP reform operates in conjunction with the broader **European Green Deal**, particularly its flagship initiative, the **Farm to Fork Strategy**. This strategy sets ambitious targets for reducing pesticide and fertiliser use, increasing organic farming, and promoting sustainable food systems across the supply chain (European Commission, 2020c). However, critics have argued that there remains a structural tension between environmental ambition and entrenched agricultural interests. The current structure of area-based direct payments disproportionately favours larger farms, facilitating their expansion while contributing to the capitalisation of payments into land prices. This dynamic creates significant barriers to generational renewal within the agricultural sector. Moreover, area-based payments are insufficient in providing fair income support across the diverse range of farms in the European Union, as they fail to account for substantial variations in farm size and agricultural activity. (Guyomard et al, 2024).

Climate policy has also become more deeply embedded in EU agricultural and environmental strategies. The **European Climate Law** (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2021) enshrines the goal of climate neutrality by 2050, compelling sectors including agriculture and land use to contribute to decarbonisation targets. **The Land Use, Land Use Change and Forestry Regulation** (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2018a), revised as part of the **Fit for 55 package**, requires member states to enhance carbon sinks through forest

preservation, rewetting peatlands, and afforestation (Jensen, 2023). Yet the effectiveness of such policies is contingent on robust monitoring systems and the political will to enforce climate conditionality at the national level. Furthermore in 2024 a significant backlash took place both due to farmer protest and a significant political divide at the European Parliament. The most obvious output was the significant change of tone in EU agricultural policy (the so-called Strategic Dialogue on the future of EU Agriculture, Strohschneider, 2024) and the simplification of a number of reporting and environmental obligations for farmers (European Commission, 2025h)

Biodiversity conservation has also gained prominence in EU environmental policy. The **EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030** calls for the protection of at least 30% of the EU's land and sea areas and the restoration of degraded ecosystems, especially agricultural landscapes that have suffered from habitat loss and monoculture practices (European Commission, 2020b). Nevertheless, implementation gaps remain significant, particularly due to the lack of binding obligations and uneven national commitments.

While the EU has made significant strides in integrating agricultural, environmental, and climate goals, a key challenge lies in ensuring coherence between policy ambitions and budgetary allocations. The success of this integrated approach will depend not only on technical policy design but also on overcoming political resistance from vested interests and enhancing coordination across governance levels. However, accelerated and comprehensive action is urgently needed across sectors, particularly agriculture, energy, and the food system, to meet climate targets, enhance biodiversity monitoring, and reverse unsustainable trends, as current efforts under EU regulations remain insufficient and require intensified emission reductions, infrastructure investment, and policy support (European Commission: Joint Research Centre et al., 2025)

In addition, von der Leyen's new political guidelines' section on sustaining our quality of life: food security, water, and nature outlines several initiatives aimed at supporting the transition toward a more sustainable and resilient agricultural sector. The European Commission proposes measures to assist farmers in promoting decarbonisation, enhancing biodiversity, and advancing organic farming practices. Central to this approach is the establishment of an EU-wide benchmarking system designed to assess risks and preparedness needs across key sectors, including infrastructure, energy, water, food, and land, in both urban and rural contexts. For this purpose, European Commission proposed in 2025 European Preparedness Union Strategy,

which set out a comprehensive framework to enhance collective European capacity to anticipate, prepare for, and respond better to future threats (European Commission & High Representative, 2025). This system will also identify gaps in data availability and early warning mechanisms.

The guidelines emphasise the need to reduce administrative burdens on farmers, allowing them to manage their land with greater autonomy while promoting family farming. Particular support will be directed towards farmers who adopt practices that preserve biodiversity, protect natural ecosystems, and contribute to the EU's decarbonisation objectives, notably the goal of achieving climate neutrality by 2050.

Water security, increasingly threatened by climate change and rising demand, is identified as a priority area for action. Furthermore, the competitiveness of the entire food value chain will be strengthened through investments and innovation, not only at the farm level but also within cooperatives, agri-food enterprises, and the numerous SMEs active in the sector. Broader considerations of social fairness are also addressed, underscoring the importance of equitable transitions across European society.

3.4 Digital and green transitions

The European Union's twin transition, digital and green transitions, forms the cornerstone of its long-term strategic agenda for economic recovery, competitiveness, and resilience for the Union. Framed within the **European Green Deal** and the **Digital Decade** targets, these transitions are not merely technological or environmental shifts but overarching structural transformations with deep implications for industry, governance, and society. The green transition, guided by the ambition of climate neutrality by 2050, is operationalised through key instruments such as the **European Climate Law**, the **Fit for 55 package**, and the **Just Transition Mechanism**, for example. These policies aim to cut greenhouse gas emissions, enhance energy efficiency, and promote sustainable mobility, while ensuring social cohesion in regions most affected by decarbonisation efforts (European Commission, 2019a). Simultaneously, the EU **Emissions Trading System (ETS)**, expanded under Fit for 55, reinforces the internalisation of carbon costs across multiple sectors, while the **Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM)** seeks to mitigate carbon leakage and protect European industries during the transition (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2023).

Parallel to the environmental ambitions, the EU's digital transition framed under the **Path to the Digital Decade** policy aims to achieve technological sovereignty, digital inclusivity, and cyber resilience by 2030. Four primal targets, digital skills, secure digital infrastructures, digital transformation of businesses, and digitisation of public services serves as the backbone of this strategy (European Commission, 2021e). For example, flagship programmes such as the **Digital Europe Programme** and **Connecting Europe Facility** support investments in artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, advanced computing, and broadband networks, with particular emphasis on cross-border collaboration and common data spaces (European Commission, 2022). Furthermore, the **Digital Services Act** (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2022a) and **Digital Markets Act** (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2022b) represent a regulatory paradigm shift aimed at rebalancing power in the digital economy, curbing monopolistic practices, and protecting users' rights.

Crucially, the EU acknowledges that the green and digital transitions must be mutually reinforcing. The twin transition approach promotes the application of digital technologies to accelerate decarbonisation. Linking the green and digital transitions requires balancing innovation with resilience, ensuring that digitalisation enhances rather than undermines sustainability; this necessitates frugal, forward-compatible technological development and transdisciplinary research that integrates social dimensions to support a just and inclusive transformation (European Commission: Joint Research Centre, 2022).

The Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), a €723.8 billion instrument under NextGenerationEU, enshrines this integrated vision by mandating that member states allocate at least 37% of their plans to climate-related investments and 20% to digital transformation (European Commission, 2021d, 2021f). However, challenges remain. For example, understanding the environmental impacts of digitalisation remains limited, with growing but still insufficient attention to its footprint and a general lack of stakeholder awareness regarding the environmental consequences of digital products and their usage (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 2024)

In addition to more conventional digitalisation policies, the European Union is advancing a comprehensive agenda in the upcoming mandate for technological sovereignty and digital transformation through the development and deployment of frontier technologies such as supercomputing, semiconductors, the Internet of Things, and space technologies. Central to this agenda is the proposed **EU Cloud and AI**

Development Act, which aims to boost computational capacity and foster innovation among SMEs. A new, **unified EU cloud policy for public administrations and procurement** is also foreseen, public consultations ongoing in summer 2025, enhancing digital sovereignty in the public sector (von der Leyen, 2024c).

Implementation of the EU Chips Act remains a priority, aimed at reducing strategic dependencies in semiconductor production. In parallel, a long-term **Quantum Chips Plan** will be tabled to position the EU at the forefront of quantum innovation. Cybersecurity will also be reinforced through a new **Cybersecurity Action Plan**, targeting critical sectors such as public administration and healthcare, alongside updated standardisation and compliance guidance for SMEs and mid-caps, to be introduced in the 2025 **European Digital Rulebook** (von der Leyen, 2024c).

Furthermore, the EU will propose a **Digital Networks Act** to accelerate the rollout of high-speed broadband and decommissioning legacy technologies (de Luca, 2025) and present a **European Data Union Strategy** to streamline and harmonise existing data governance frameworks for public and business interactions. Alongside these new initiatives, continued implementation and refinement of existing frameworks, including the **Digital Services Act** (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2022a), **Digital Markets Act** (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2022b), and the deployment of key infrastructure such as the **EU Digital Identity Wallet**, will be critical to strengthening European Union's digital resilience and competitiveness.

While the European Union's twin transition policies reflect a sophisticated and ambitious response to the challenges of the 21st century, the success of the twin transition depends not only on policy coherence and financing, but also on governance capacity, public engagement, and strategic autonomy in key technologies.

4 Thematic policy areas

Chapter 4 explores a set of interconnected thematic policy areas that reflect the European Union's ambition to foster sustainable, inclusive, and territorially balanced development. These areas, while diverse in focus, are unified by a shared emphasis on systemic transformation, socio-ecological resilience, and the valorisation of regional assets. As the EU transitions towards a more regenerative economic model, the integration of environmental, social, and cultural considerations into policy design and implementation has become increasingly central. This chapter provides an analytical

overview of RURBANIVE thematic domains and illustrates the multifaceted and intertwined nature of this transition.

Section 4.1 examines the circular bioeconomy as a key pillar in advancing resource-efficient and low-carbon systems, focusing on its potential to stimulate innovation, rural revitalisation, and sustainable biomass use. Section 4.2 addresses ecosystem and biodiversity restoration, highlighting the policy frameworks and strategies aimed at halting environmental degradation and fostering nature-based solutions. Section 4.3 discusses the imperative to improve logistics and shorten value chains, particularly in light of recent supply chain disruptions and the need for more resilient, localised production systems. These domains collectively underline the shift toward ecological rationality in economic organisation.

The second half of the chapter considers the human and cultural dimensions of transformation. Section 4.4 explores user engagement, empowerment, and territorial awareness, stressing the importance of participatory governance, behavioural change, and local ownership in achieving policy goals. Section 4.5 focuses on enhanced mobility, both as a vector for cohesion and as a site of innovation in sustainable transport solutions. Finally, Section 4.6 turns to culture, landscape, and heritage, examining their role in identity formation, community resilience, and sustainable tourism. Together, these sections offer a comprehensive view of how thematic policies contribute to a holistic vision of territorial development rooted in sustainability, inclusivity, and place-based value creation.

In addition, this chapter focuses on how the specific thematic policy areas and individual policies aims to affect and influence, directly or indirectly, **urban-rural linkages** across Europe.

Table 2. New EU priorities per RURBANIVE domain.

Circular bioeconomy

- **The Circular Economy Act** aims to transition Europe towards a circular bioeconomy, where materials, including biological resources, are reused and recycled to reduce waste and promote sustainability. It supports the development of a bio-based economy by promoting the use of renewable resources like biomass in production and energy generation.

- **The Circular Economy Act** enhances the development of **a single market for waste** and provides incentives for industries to reduce waste, supporting a more sustainable production model in line with the goals of the **European Green Deal**.
- **Sustainable agriculture** and **biotechnology** are key components of the circular bioeconomy. **The European Biotech Act** promotes the use of biotechnology to improve biomass production, enabling the bio-based sectors to innovate in areas like biofuels, bio-based materials, and renewable agricultural practices.
- The circular bioeconomy is further supported **by policies** encouraging sustainable forestry, renewable energy, and farming, ensuring that Europe's economy can rely more on renewable biological resources while reducing its carbon footprint.
- The priorities will enable Europe to be better prepared for circularity and circular solutions, and are well aligned with **RURBANIVE**, as the project aims to facilitate circular bioeconomy practices capturing the resource flow from urban areas and establishing comprehensive catalogue of conversion solutions to effectively utilise these resources.

Ecosystem & biodiversity restoration

- **Nature-based solutions** are promoted to help restore ecosystems and providing benefits like improving soil health, water retention, and carbon sequestration. The solutions include **reforestation**, **wetland restoration**, and creating green urban spaces, all of which can contribute to climate resilience and ecosystem recovery.
- **A new Vision on EU Agriculture and Food** - The political guidelines include a section titled Sustaining our Quality of Life: Food Security, Water, and Nature, which proposes support for farmers in promoting decarbonisation, biodiversity, and organic farming.
- European Union remains committed to its climate neutrality targets. **The European Green Deal** complements this by further promoting actions that protect and restore Europe's natural environment, linking economic growth with the sustainable use of ecosystems. Policies supporting organic farming

and agroecology help ensure that agricultural practices enhance biodiversity while preserving critical natural landscapes.

Improving logistics & shortening value chains

- One of the core focuses is to **reduce Europe's dependency on external sources** (including Europe's dependency on Russian energy sources), especially in key sectors like energy and raw materials. This involves boosting local production and building more regionalised supply chains to protect against supply chain disruptions seen during global crises like the pandemic and the Ukraine conflict.
- **Clean Industrial Deal** aim to promote domestic production of green technologies, supporting efforts to localize and simplify value chains. This will not only minimize transportation costs and emissions but also enhance the efficiency of European industries by reducing reliance on external suppliers.
- **The Circular Economy Act** encourages the use of local resources and secondary materials, directly impacting logistics by shortening value chains. The goal is to keep materials circulating within the EU economy for longer, reducing the need for importing goods and materials from outside the region.
- The EU's push for clean and efficient logistics systems ties into the broader effort to decarbonise Europe's supply chains. **Investment in clean mobility infrastructure** (for example, electric vehicles and networks, rail transport) will shorten value chains by making transportation of goods within Europe more sustainable and cost-effective.
- As **RURBANIVE** project aims to utilise digital solutions and platforms as part of improving logistics and shortening value chains, the Commission new priorities promote Europe's need to be a leader in digitalisation and Artificial Intelligence. For example, **European AI Research Council**, **AI Factories Initiative** and the **Apply AI Strategy** are highly topical for shortening value chains across Europe.

User engagement, empowerment, society & territorial awareness

- **The Union of Skills** places a heavy focus on improving user engagement by providing European citizens with the skills necessary to thrive in the green and digital transitions. The emphasis on lifelong learning, particularly in

STEM, empowers workers and communities by improving access to education and upskilling opportunities.

- **The Youth Advisory Board** will enhance youth engagement by giving younger generations a voice in shaping EU policies. This board is designed to represent young people from across the EU, providing insights into the issues most relevant to their communities and ensuring their participation in discussions about Europe's future.
- **Investments in education, green technologies, and infrastructure development** will focus on ensuring that rural regions and disadvantaged areas are not left behind. By empowering local communities and ensuring that they benefit from the green transition, this policy seeks to foster a greater sense of territorial inclusion.
- The European Union's push for **digital innovation** across all sectors will enhance citizen participation, particularly in areas like culture, education, and governance. By promoting open data and digital access, these policies empower citizens and communities to engage more fully with local and regional initiatives, fostering a sense of societal and territorial ownership.

Enhanced mobility

- **Single Digital Booking and Ticketing Regulation** aims to simplify trans-European travel, making it easier for citizens to navigate cross-border journeys by purchasing multimodal tickets (combining train, bus, and air travel) through a single platform. By facilitating easy access to sustainable transportation options, such as trains and electric buses, the regulation supports Europe's mobility goals while helping to reduce the carbon footprint of travel.
- **The Clean Industrial Deal** contributes to decarbonise heavy transport is integral to improving Europe's overall mobility framework. Investments in electric vehicle networks, public transit infrastructure, and green logistics systems are key aspects of enhancing mobility while meeting Europe's climate targets.
- **Mobility networks will be enhanced by investments in infrastructure**, with a particular focus on sustainable transport systems. This is part of the

broader European Green Deal and Clean Industrial Deal, which prioritise decarbonisation of transportation sector and improving cross-border connectivity.

- There's also a clear focus on **creating efficient transport** systems that **enhance local and regional mobility**, with renewable energy-powered transportation playing a crucial role in reducing greenhouse gas emissions from this sector.
- Artificial Intelligence is heavily emphasised. European Union is promoting AI through mechanisms such as European AI Research Council, AI Factories Initiative and the Apply AI Strategy, to secure Europe as a leader in AI development which intertwine with **RURBANIVE** project, where we **focus on enhancement of mobilities**, how appropriate **dispatching algorithms** can be designed and tested on how existing and established on-demand dispatching strategies are able to handle such elements.

Culture, landscape, heritage access & promotion

- **The New European Bauhaus** promotes the melding of culture, creativity, sustainability, and innovation to create spaces that reflect Europe's diverse cultural heritage while supporting modern needs. This will push the development of cultural hubs that are environmentally sustainable and accessible, encouraging the preservation of cultural landscapes.
- The **Culture Compass** outlines a strategic framework to strengthen the role of culture in the European Union by integrating social, economic, and technological dimensions into a cohesive policy vision.
- There is a focus on **enhancing the working conditions of artists and cultural professionals** while boosting the competitiveness of Europe's creative and cultural industries.
- **AI Strategy tailored to cultural and creative industries**, supported by policies promoting open data and Artificial intelligence, will make Europe's cultural heritage more accessible to citizens. Digital platforms can allow people to explore, for example, cultural sites, museums, and historical landmarks remotely, which broadens access and participation in Europe's cultural life.

- **The digital approach**, merged with **physical investments** in heritage promotion, will ensure that Europe's rich cultural landscapes can be preserved and made available, especially for future generations, while also promoting tourism and engagement with European history and culture.

4.1 Circular bioeconomy

The overarching objective of the RURBANIVE project is to advance circular bioeconomy practices by capturing resource flows from urban areas and establishing a comprehensive catalogue of conversion solutions for their effective utilisation. The European Union's bioeconomy framework spans multiple policy sectors, including agriculture, forestry, climate action, and circular economy. At its core, bioeconomy encompasses the production and extraction of renewable biological resources and their transformation into bio-based products, bioenergy, and food. This approach is designed to leverage biological resources in a sustainable manner, fostering economic growth, environmental sustainability, and innovation across industries. By integrating bioeconomy principles into diverse policy domains, the EU seeks to enhance resource efficiency, climate resilience, and sustainable development (Bourguignon, 2017).

Crucially, this policy direction has profound implications for strengthening **urban-rural linkages** across Europe. Urban areas, as hubs of consumption and innovation, generate significant volumes of organic waste and residual biomass that, if effectively captured and processed, can supply rural-based bioeconomy sectors. Conversely, rural areas possess the natural resource base and processing capacities to transform these inputs into value-added bio-based goods. Thus, the circular bioeconomy acts as a conduit for mutually beneficial urban-rural exchange, facilitating both resource circularity and territorial cohesion.

A pivotal moment in shaping the EU's bioeconomy landscape was the adoption of the **Bioeconomy Strategy** in 2013, which underscored the necessity of environmentally, economically, and socially sustainable resource use. This strategy aimed to stimulate innovation and investment in novel technologies, methods, and business models within the bioeconomy sector. Complementing this initiative, the European Commission launched the **New Circular Economy Action Plan** in 2020, a strategic roadmap

designed to promote circularity and sustainability across key economic sectors. The plan articulates several fundamental objectives, including:

- Establishing sustainable products as the norm within the EU;
- Empowering consumers and public buyers to make informed, sustainable choices;
- Prioritising resource-intensive sectors with high circularity potential, such as electronics, ICT, batteries, vehicles, packaging, plastics, textiles, construction, buildings, and food systems;
- Minimising waste generation and promoting resource recovery;
- Ensuring that circularity contributes to regional and urban development while supporting the EU's global leadership in circular economy efforts (European Commission, 2020d).

Importantly, the Action Plan specifically recognises the role of circularity in **supporting regional and urban development**, thereby institutionalising urban-rural complementarities. By promoting resource loops that connect urban consumption centres with rural production and processing sites, the plan enhances territorial integration and reinforces interdependencies between city regions and their surrounding rural hinterlands.

The Circular Economy Action Plan (European Commission, 2020d) embodies a systemic approach to sustainability by embedding circularity into EU-wide policy frameworks. It emphasises product design, waste reduction, and recycling, positioning the circular bioeconomy as a central pillar of the EU's broader climate and sustainability strategies.

Furthermore, Ursula von der Leyen tabled in her new Commission priorities for 2024 – 2029 task for Commissioners Séjeurné and Roswall to prepare Circular Economy act, which aims to boost market demand for secondary materials and establish a single market for waste, with particular focus on raw materials (von der Leyen, 2024d)

The circular bioeconomy operates at the intersection of multiple policy frameworks, with several EU policies directly or indirectly influencing its trajectory. Notably, the **revised European Bioeconomy Strategy** (2018) aligns closely with circular economy objectives, aiming to ensure food and nutrition security, promote sustainable agricultural practices, and mitigate food waste. Additionally, it seeks to enhance the sustainable management of natural resources, ensuring biodiversity conservation

while fulfilling the needs of present and future generations. The strategy also prioritises reducing dependency on non-renewable resources by promoting renewable alternatives and circular approaches. Furthermore, it integrates climate mitigation and adaptation measures, seeking to lower greenhouse gas emissions while fostering economic resilience through circular economy-driven innovation and job creation (European Commission, 2018a).

The objectives have direct implications for territorial development. Rural regions, as primary sites of biomass production and ecosystem services, are critical enablers of the bioeconomy. Urban centres, in contrast, are sources of demand, innovation, and waste generation. The strategic alignment of these spatial roles through bioeconomy policies facilitates **functional urban-rural partnerships**, enabling the joint valorisation of bio-resources and the spread of sustainable practices across the urban-rural continuum.

Given the interconnectivity between bioeconomy, food production, and agriculture, several EU policy initiatives significantly impact the circular bioeconomy. Key among these is the **Common Agricultural Policy (CAP)**, the **Farm-to-Fork Strategy**, the **General Food Law** (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2002), the **Sustainable Use of Pesticides Directive** (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2009b), and regulations concerning food packaging and plant health. These policies shape agricultural sustainability, food safety, and resource-efficient practices across the EU.

The CAP's new focus on **territorial cohesion**, **smart villages**, and **eco-schemes** reinforces urban-rural integration by promoting sustainable rural development, digital infrastructure, and green innovation that support circular systems. The concept of smart villages, as developed through the ENRD Thematic Group, emphasises people centered approach where rural communities take initiative to address challenges and opportunities. Term "Smart" refers not only to the use of digital technologies, but also in broader sense of innovation, cooperation and place-based solutions as it involves thinking beyond individual villages to include surrounding rural areas, towns and urban linkages, fostering partnerships between local actors, municipalities, civil society and the private sector (United Nations Human Settlements Programme, 2022). Similarly, the Farm-to-Fork Strategy, introduced in 2020, aims to establish fair, healthy, and environmentally sustainable food systems through a legislative framework designed to accelerate the transition to sustainable practices. The strategy adopts a holistic

approach, addressing environmental concerns, public health, and socio-economic equity to ensure resilient and equitable food systems.

By advancing shorter supply chains, localised food production, and agroecological methods, the Farm-to-Fork Strategy enhances **added value** (European Commission, Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development, 2023g) while meeting urban demand for sustainable food. This encourages the development of circular food systems where rural producers and urban consumers are integrated into closed-loop systems that reduce food waste, lower emissions, and increase resilience across territories.

Beyond agriculture and food systems, the EU has implemented a range of policies to facilitate the transition towards a circular and sustainable economy. A key component of this transition is waste management legislation, which aligns closely with circular economy principles. The **Waste Framework Directive** (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2000) serves as the foundational regulatory instrument, complemented by legislative directives such as the **Packaging and Packaging Waste Directive** (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2024a), the **Landfill Directive** (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2018b), and the **Single-Use Plastics Directive** (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2019). These policies collectively establish a regulatory framework aimed at reducing waste generation, enhancing recycling and resource recovery, and minimising landfill reliance.

By integrating waste management policies with circular bioeconomy initiatives, the EU reinforces a systemic approach to sustainability, promoting innovation in bio-based materials, enhancing the efficiency of resource utilisation, and advancing the broader transition to a regenerative and resilient economic model.

The EU's commitment to circular bioeconomy reflects a comprehensive and multi-sectoral approach to sustainability, intersecting with various legislative frameworks and policy initiatives. The integration of bioeconomy principles into key strategic policies, such as the Bioeconomy Strategy, the Farm-to-Fork Strategy, and the Circular Economy Action Plan demonstrates the EU's ambition to harmonise environmental, economic, and social objectives. As the bioeconomy sector evolves, the intersection of these policies will continue to shape its development, fostering innovation, sustainability, and resilience across European industries. Moreover, by enabling

spatial integration through urban-rural partnerships, functional interdependencies, and decentralised circular systems, the EU's policy architecture increasingly supports a **territorially balanced bioeconomy transition**, positioning both cities and rural areas as active co-developers of sustainable transformation.

4.2 Ecosystem and biodiversity restoration

The RURBANIVE project is dedicated to enhancing ecosystem and biodiversity restoration through a multifaceted approach. Central to its objectives is the restoration of landscapes, the propagation of endemic plant species, and the development of high-quality agro-industrial products aimed at fostering biodiversity and sustainability. Additionally, the project seeks to diversify visitors' recreational behaviours to mitigate the adverse effects of unsustainable tourism practices. A key component of RURBANIVE is the promotion of balanced and sustainable regional development that generates mutual benefits for both rural landscapes and urban populations. In this context, the project functions as a platform for reinforcing **urban-rural linkages**, where ecological restoration and sustainable tourism provide shared socio-economic and environmental value across territorial boundaries.

From the perspective of ecosystem management and biodiversity restoration, the European Union's **Biodiversity Strategy** plays a crucial role in supporting ecological restoration and sustainable ecosystem governance. The strategy's overarching goal is to preserve and rehabilitate Europe's fragile natural environments by extending protected areas to cover 30% of the European Union's land and sea territory. In parallel, the strategy focuses on the restoration of ecosystems already impacted by anthropogenic activities across the Union. These objectives carry direct implications for both urban and rural territories. Urban areas often benefit from the ecosystem services provided by rural and natural landscapes, for example such as clean water, climate regulation, and recreation, while rural regions are often the sites of biodiversity restoration efforts. Therefore, the strategy inherently supports the rebalancing of ecological responsibilities and benefits between urban and rural actors, contributing to more **integrated territorial governance** (European Commission, 2020b).

Furthermore, the EU aims to strengthen its biodiversity governance framework while mitigating the ecological impact of external trade through international action. Despite the ambitious targets to halt biodiversity loss by 2020, substantial gaps remain (Halleux, 2021), underscoring the need for enforceable measures and coordinated

multi-level governance. These gaps also reflect the necessity of **territorially sensitive implementation**, where rural and peri-urban areas, which are often rich in biodiversity yet under socio-economic pressure, require tailored support mechanisms and policy coherence to contribute meaningfully to biodiversity targets while sustaining local livelihoods.

The Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 is structured around four thematic pillars, each addressing different dimensions of biodiversity preservation and restoration at both the EU and global levels. The first pillar emphasises the protection of nature within the EU by expanding land and marine protected areas and establishing a coherent trans-European nature network to prevent genetic isolation. The second pillar is dedicated to restoring nature within the EU by rehabilitating soil ecosystems, promoting biodiversity-friendly agricultural practices, and introducing legally binding restoration targets. The third pillar focuses on enabling transformative change by enhancing biodiversity governance, strengthening knowledge-sharing mechanisms, and mobilising financial and investment resources. Lastly, the fourth pillar outlines EU-led actions to support biodiversity conservation on a global scale.

Each of the pillars presents distinct but interconnected implications for urban-rural dynamics. For example, the expansion of protected areas and the development of a trans-European nature network not only prevent ecological fragmentation but also support **connectivity** that benefits both rural biodiversity hotspots and urban residents through access to green infrastructure and nature-based solutions. Likewise, transformative governance and financial mobilisation under the third pillar offer potential for **rural regeneration**, linking ecological functions to sustainable economic opportunities that may be co-developed with urban centres.

The European Union's legislative framework for nature protection consists of two primary directives: the **Birds Directive** (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2009a) and the **Habitats Directive** (Council of the European Communities, 1992). These directives provide the legal foundation for safeguarding species and habitats of ecological significance and serve as the basis for the **Natura 2000** protected areas network. Complementary legislative measures, such as the **Directive on the Sustainable Use of Pesticides** (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2009b) and the **Directive on Environmental Liability** (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2004), further contribute to biodiversity protection within EU territories. These regulations are particularly relevant to the

RURBANIVE project's ecological restoration efforts, as they establish a framework for ecosystem management across the Union and furthermore introduces responsibilities for environmental stewardship that spreads away from urban and rural jurisdictions. In this way, they create **shared accountability across territories**, reinforcing interdependencies between urban consumption patterns and rural ecological impacts.

In addition to terrestrial biodiversity protection, the EU has implemented the consolidated version in 2014 of the **Water Framework Directive** (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2000) and the 2017 consolidated version of the **Marine Strategy Framework Directive** (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2008), both of which focus on preserving and restoring freshwater and marine ecosystems. These directives are particularly significant for the RURBANIVE project, especially concerning ecological restoration initiatives in coastal, island, marine, or freshwater environments (Halleux, 2021).

A landmark development in biodiversity policy is the **EU Nature Restoration Law** (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2024b). Unlike directives, which require national transposition, this regulation directly mandates restoration efforts across EU member states. It sets ambitious targets, including restoring at least 20% of the EU's land and sea areas by 2030, with the broader objective of rehabilitating all ecosystems in need of restoration by 2050. Alongside the above-mentioned protestation over the new CAP commitments to the Green Deal, this piece of legislation became paradigmatic in the clash over those advocating economic competitiveness over environmental goals and vice versa, with MEPs in particularly very evenly split (Aubert & Underwood, 2024). It eventually approved in July 2024 this legislative tool aims to reinforce **territorial responsibility**, compelling urban and rural authorities alike to identify and restore degraded lands, coordinate across jurisdictions, and integrate ecological objectives into spatial planning. It also elevates the potential of initiatives like RURBANIVE to function as demonstrators of best practices in **cross-scale ecological restoration**.

Furthermore, The **Directive on Soil Monitoring and Resilience**, also known as the **Soil Monitoring Law**, introduced in 2023, is a legislative proposal by the European Commission aimed at ensuring the health and sustainable management of soils across the European Union (European Commission, 2023h). The directive seeks to establish a comprehensive framework for soil monitoring, with the overarching goal of achieving healthy soils throughout the EU by 2050. Given that soil degradation disproportionately

affects rural and agricultural areas, this directive has implications for **rural sustainability**, while also recognising the subsequent benefits for urban food security, climate mitigation, and ecosystem services.

Given the underlying link between biodiversity restoration and climate change, the EU has implemented a range of policies to address climate mitigation and adaptation. Article 191 of the **Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union** (TFEU) explicitly recognises climate action as a key objective of EU environmental policy (Erbach et al., 2021). At the core of the EU's climate strategy is the **European Green Deal**, adopted in 2019, which sets the long-term goal of achieving climate neutrality by 2050 (Widuto, 2021). This ambitious objective is reinforced by the **Fit for 55 package**, which mandates a 55% reduction in carbon emissions by 2030 compared to 1990 levels. Furthermore, the European Climate Law, enacted in 2021, legally binds the EU to its climate neutrality commitment, underscoring the urgency of implementing comprehensive legislative measures to address climate change (Widuto, 2021).

Recognising the need for further action, the European Commission issued recommendations in February 2024 regarding the EU's 2040 emission reduction target. This communication highlights the necessity of reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 90% by 2040 to stay on track for climate neutrality by 2050. The recommendations emphasise key policy conditions, including the full implementation of the 2030 framework, safeguarding the competitiveness of European industries, ensuring a just transition to protect vulnerable groups, establishing equitable international partnerships, and engaging in strategic dialogue for the post-2030 climate framework. These measures signal a strong commitment to advancing sustainable development, social equity, and long-term prosperity across Europe (European Commission, 2024f).

Such climate strategies inevitably intersect with land use, biodiversity, and ecosystem services, domains predominantly situated in rural landscapes. Yet, their benefits, such as improved air quality, carbon sinks, and resilient food systems, extend directly to urban populations. The European Union's approach encourages **cross-territorial climate action**, incentivising urban investment in rural-based carbon sequestration, sustainable agriculture, and biodiversity corridors, which in turn reinforces **overarching resilience**.

The RURBANIVE project aligns with and operationalises the EU's environmental and climate policy frameworks, particularly through its integrated approach to biodiversity

restoration, ecological connectivity, and sustainable regional development. By drawing upon existing legislative and strategic instruments, RURBANIVE not only contributes to biodiversity and climate objectives but also exemplifies a **place-based implementation model** that bridges the urban-rural divide. Through ecosystem restoration, sustainable tourism, and agro-industrial innovation, the project facilitates **functional urban-rural partnerships**, supports territorial cohesion, and contributes to a just ecological transition that benefits all European regions.

4.3 Improving logistics and shortening value chains

The RURBANIVE project aims to develop and implement a short value chain digital platform designed as a socially driven digital hub. This platform seeks to integrate a diverse range of stakeholders from the agri-food value chain, fostering collaboration and efficiency. By facilitating interaction among producers, processors, distributors, and consumers, the platform can offer tools for strengthening **urban-rural linkages** through decentralised and participatory food systems. This aligns with broader European Union ambitions to strengthen European Union's territorial cohesion, food system resilience, and ecological sustainability. The food supply chain within the European Union is an intricate and multifaceted system comprising multiple sectors, stakeholders, and individuals operating in tandem. Broadly, the food supply chain can be categorised into three primary sectors: agriculture, food processing, and distribution (Augere-Granier, 2016). Given this complexity, EU regulations define a short supply chain as "a supply chain involving a limited number of economic operators, committed to cooperation, local economic development, and close geographical and social relations between producers, processors, and consumers" (European Parliament and Council, 2013). Short food supply chains play a pivotal role in relocalising food systems, reducing transport emissions, enhancing producer autonomy, and revitalising rural economies, which in turn reinforces **urban-rural interdependencies** and offering alternatives to conventional, centralised supply chains. (Mantino, et al. 2023)

The regulatory framework influencing logistics and value chains in the EU is shaped by a myriad of policies, each playing a direct or indirect role in fostering efficiency and sustainability. These policies align with broader objectives, including sustainability, resilience, and competitiveness. One of the primary policy drivers in this domain is the **European Green Deal**, which aspires to achieve climate neutrality by 2050. A fundamental component of this initiative is the **Farm-to-Fork Strategy**, which seeks to establish a more sustainable, resilient, and secure food system. This strategy underscores the necessity of reducing the environmental footprint of food production,

promoting sustainable dietary practices, and strengthening local food systems. The success of this transition necessitates a collective approach, involving authorities at all levels of governance, private sector actors, non-governmental organisations, social partners, academics, and individual citizens (European Commission, 2020c). By prioritising localised food systems, the Farm-to-Fork Strategy contributes to reducing transportation emissions, reinforcing local economies, and fostering closer producer-consumer relationships. Through its emphasis on territorialised food systems, the strategy directly supports projects such as RURBANIVE, which contribute to more inclusive, localised economic models that blur traditional urban-rural boundaries.

Another fundamental policy framework shaping the agricultural and agri-food sectors is the **Common Agricultural Policy (CAP)**. Article 39 of the **Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU)** establishes CAP's primary objectives, which include increasing agricultural productivity through technological progress and the optimal use of production factors, ensuring a fair standard of living for farmers, stabilising markets, guaranteeing the availability of food supplies, and maintaining reasonable prices for consumers (European Parliament, 2023). Over time, CAP has evolved to address economic, environmental, and social objectives within the agricultural sector, with particular emphasis on logistical challenges and value chain efficiency. The enhancement of food value chains is one of **the ten key objectives of CAP 2023–2027**, with further significant revisions anticipated in the 2027 review (Casares, 2023). Notably, CAP has been criticised for its historical emphasis on large-scale agricultural subsidies, which some argue have disproportionately benefited industrial farming over small-scale, sustainable producers. As CAP undergoes further reform, there is a growing focus on ensuring that short food supply chains and regional food networks receive adequate support and policy backing.

Complementary to CAP, the **EU Action Plan for the Development of Organic Production** plays a crucial role in reshaping food value chains. This action plan is structured around three principal axes: stimulating demand and ensuring consumer trust, encouraging the transition to organic farming while reinforcing the value chain, and enhancing organic farming's contribution to sustainability (Caprile & McEldowney, 2021). Of particular relevance to the RURBANIVE project is the second axis, which focuses on improving the organisation of food chains across Europe. More specifically, **Sub-Objective 2.4** seeks to reinforce local and small-scale processing while fostering short supply chains (European Commission, 2021g). The increased consumer demand for organic products presents both an opportunity and a challenge: while it

fosters greater market access for local producers, it also necessitates improvements in infrastructure, logistics, and regulatory frameworks to support the efficient functioning of organic food systems. However, this approach is particularly relevant for the RURBANIVE digital platform, which could serve as a tool to scale organic production through improved logistics, traceability, and market access and thus enabling mutual gains for rural producers and urban consumers engaged in sustainable consumption practices.

Efficient transportation and mobility solutions are instrumental in achieving the objective of shortening value chains. To this end, the EU employs a variety of indirect strategies aimed at improving logistical efficiency. Notably, the **Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) Policy** plays a pivotal role in shaping the EU's transportation infrastructure, facilitating the movement of goods while promoting sustainability. Moreover, the **Sustainable and Smart Mobility Strategy** further complements these efforts by promoting intelligent mobility solutions, enhancing transport security and safety, and strengthening the Single Market. Collectively, these policies contribute to the overarching goal of reducing logistical inefficiencies and fostering sustainable practices within the agri-food sector. Although these are not agri-food specific, their indirect influence on territorial logistics is substantial. Integrated and multimodal transport solutions can reduce bottlenecks and challenges for peri-urban and rural producers seeking access to urban markets, enabling more spatially balanced economic flows.

Beyond direct policy interventions, the European Union actively supports research and innovation as mechanisms for enhancing logistics and optimising value chains. Various funding instruments are available to facilitate projects aimed at improving these domains, including **Horizon Europe**, which supports cutting-edge research and innovation, **the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EIP-AGRI)**, which fosters agricultural advancement, and **the LIFE Programme**, which funds environmental and climate-related initiatives. The role of innovation in logistics cannot be overstated: digitalisation, artificial intelligence, and blockchain technologies have the potential to revolutionise how food supply chains function by increasing traceability, reducing waste, and enhancing efficiency. However, the digital transition requires enabling policies, investment in infrastructure, and **capacity building in rural and peri-urban areas**, to prevent exacerbation of existing spatial inequalities and digital divides.

The improvement of logistics and the shortening of value chains are integral to the EU's broader sustainability and climate neutrality ambitions and is deeply embedded within the EU's climate and sustainability agenda. The convergence of policies such as the European Green Deal, CAP, and the Farm-to-Fork Strategy reflects the EU's commitment to fostering a more sustainable, resilient, and efficient agri-food sector. However, the realisation of these objectives requires not only policy alignment but also substantial investments in infrastructure, regulatory reforms, and stakeholder engagement across multiple levels. By leveraging research, innovation, and targeted funding mechanisms, initiatives like RURBANIVE contribute meaningfully to this overarching vision, ensuring a future in which food supply chains are both sustainable and economically viable. Ultimately, short food supply chains and digital innovation are essential instruments for reinforcing urban-rural linkages within the EU's broader food system transition.

4.4 User engagement, empowerment, society, and territorial awareness

The RURBANIVE project seeks to enhance user engagement, empowerment, and territorial awareness through the development and demonstration of an ecosystem for Startup Village. By fostering participatory methods and leveraging EU-wide digital and policy frameworks, RURBANIVE aims to strengthen societal involvement in sustainable rural-urban development.

The European Union has established several participatory methods to foster user engagement and empower citizens in decision-making processes. One of the most prominent mechanisms is the **European Citizens' Initiative (ECI)**, which enables citizens to actively influence EU policies. The initiative follows a structured process involving five key phases: forming a citizens' committee, registering the initiative with the European Commission, collecting statements of support, verifying these statements, and concluding the initiative (Kotavidis & Del Monte, 2022). This participatory tool ensures that European citizens have a direct channel to propose legislative changes and engage in EU governance. Furthermore, within the framework of urban-rural linkages, instruments like the ECI help decentralise political advocacy, empowering peripheral and rural actors to engage in supranational discussions. This promotes democratic inclusivity and enhances the spatial equity of policy formation, counterbalancing urban-centric policy-making tendencies.

Similarly, the right to petition, established by the **Maastricht Treaty** in 1992, grants EU citizens the ability to address concerns directly to the European Parliament on matters of public interest. This right provides an institutionalised avenue for engagement, allowing individuals to bring attention to pressing issues that affect them within the EU's jurisdiction (Ibid.). The relevance of this right in the context of rural-urban dynamics lies in its capacity to bridge the visibility gap often experienced by rural and remote territories in centralised governance frameworks.

Additionally, the **Conference on the Future of Europe** served as a significant forum for public deliberation, enabling citizens to engage in discussions and formulate policy recommendations for EU institutions. This initiative laid the groundwork for potential treaty revisions beyond the 2009 **Lisbon Treaty**, with citizen panels contributing ideas on deeper engagement in European governance. Complementing this initiative, the European multilingual digital platform further facilitates public participation by providing a space for citizens to share ideas and feedback on EU policies.

Another major participatory initiative is the **European Youth Event (EYE)**, held biennially by the European Parliament in Strasbourg. Targeting young citizens, this event encourages their active involvement in policy discussions and decision-making processes. By fostering dialogue between youth and policymakers, EYE contributes to a more inclusive and representative European political landscape.

Recognising the transformative role of digitalisation in user engagement, the European Union has implemented several initiatives to enhance digital interaction between citizens, businesses, and public authorities. **The eGovernment Action Plan** aims to improve public service efficiency by leveraging digital technologies to streamline communication and administrative processes. Importantly, in terms of urban-rural linkages, eGovernment model services help overcome geographical barriers to governance participation, reducing territorial disparities in access to public administration and integrating rural users into Europe's digital public sphere.

Beyond this, several EU-wide digitalisation policies support the transition towards a more connected society. Initiatives such as **EU4Digital**, **Europe's Digital Decade**, and **A Europe Fit for the Digital Age** play crucial roles in shaping the digital landscape of the Union. As digital infrastructure increasingly underlines economic and civic life, such policies play a critical role in **territorial balancing**, enabling rural areas to engage with urban centres, and fostering multidirectional flows of knowledge, services, and

innovation across regions. These policies align closely with the objectives of the RURBANIVE project, emphasising the need for digital tools and platforms that enhance citizen engagement in rural and urban innovation.

The European Union invests significantly in policies and funding programs aimed at strengthening social and territorial cohesion. Various financial instruments, including the **European Regional Development Fund (ERDF)**, the **Cohesion Fund (CF)**, the **European Social Fund Plus (ESF+)**, and the **Just Transition Fund (JTF)**, support efforts to reduce regional disparities and promote balanced economic development. In this context, such cohesion instruments are instrumental in addressing the **structural imbalances between urban and rural areas**, promoting territorial justice, and enabling rural regions to become active within wider functional urban-rural systems.

Territorial awareness and a sense of belonging are deeply connected to cultural heritage, an area actively promoted by EU policies. The European Commission and the European External Action Service (EEAS) jointly introduced the communication **"Towards an EU Strategy for International Cultural Relations"** in 2016, highlighting the significance of cultural diversity and international cultural cooperation. Building on this, **the New European Agenda for Culture (2018)** further strengthened EU cultural policy by fostering cultural diversity and supporting creative industries. Additionally, the **Creative Europe 2021–2027** program aligns with these frameworks, promoting cultural relations and enhancing the role of culture in EU policy. These policies support rural communities not as isolated traditions, but as influential cultural representatives embedded within European cultural narratives, and thus **reinforcing cross-territorial cultural flows** and mutual recognition.

Given RURBANIVE's emphasis on Startup Villages, several EU-wide policies reinforce the relevance of this concept in fostering rural innovation and entrepreneurship. In essence, Startup Village can be described as rural place or a network that fosters innovation and entrepreneurship by combining local assets with external knowledge, resources, and markets to support sustainable development and wellbeing (Goodwin-Hawkins et al. 2023). [The European Startup Village Forum](#), launched in 2021, serves as a platform for knowledge exchange and the adoption of innovations in rural areas.

Additionally, the **New European Innovation Agenda (2022)** positions Europe as a global leader in deep tech innovation and startups, directly supporting the Startup

Villages model. **The Long-Term Vision for the EU's Rural Areas** further strengthens this initiative by recognising the contribution of the European Startup Villages Forum in driving sustainable rural development.

The **Union of Skills** initiative is central to the European Union's efforts to equip citizens for the green and digital transitions. By prioritising lifelong learning, particularly in STEM subjects, the initiative seeks to empower individuals and communities through improved access to education, training, and upskilling opportunities (European Commission, 2025i). This focus enhances user engagement by fostering adaptability and resilience in an evolving socio-economic landscape. Critically, for urban-rural synergies, such initiatives help adjust human capital across territories, and hence reducing brain drain and enabling rural areas to retain and attract skilled populations and possibly sustaining demographic and economic vitality.

Youth participation is further supported through the creation of a **Youth Advisory Board**, which offers younger generations a formal platform to influence EU policy. Representing diverse regions across the Union, the board provides insights into youth-specific challenges and priorities, ensuring that young people are actively involved in shaping Europe's future.

In parallel, strategic **investments in education, green technologies, and infrastructure** are directed at promoting territorial cohesion. Particular attention is given to rural and disadvantaged areas, aiming to prevent social and spatial exclusion during the green transition. These investments are designed to empower local communities and reinforce a sense of inclusion and shared benefit.

The RURBANIVE project aligns with the EU's broader efforts to enhance user engagement, social inclusion, and territorial cohesion through participatory governance, digital transformation, and regional innovation. By integrating key EU policy instruments, ranging from the European Citizens' Initiative to digitalisation strategies and funding mechanisms, the project establishes a robust framework for sustainable rural-urban collaboration. The Startup Villages concept, reinforced by EU innovation and territorial development policies, exemplifies how strategic policy alignment can drive local empowerment and societal transformation across Europe.

4.5 Enhanced mobility

The enhancement of mobility within the RURBANIVE project is centred around the development and testing of appropriate dispatching algorithms, particularly assessing how existing on-demand mobility strategies can adapt to evolving transport needs in both rural and urban settings. This approach aims to improve accessibility and connectivity for rural areas, which often suffer from insufficient public transport options. By leveraging digital dispatching solutions, the project enhances **functional linkages** between rural and urban regions, addressing longstanding spatial imbalances in mobility services and helping to integrate rural and peripheral areas into wider regional systems.

The European Union addresses various themes that shape transportation and mobility sectors across the Union, including clean transportation, transport security and safety, research, innovation, logistics, and multimodal mobility. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic and shifting geopolitical landscapes, there has been a marked policy shift toward strengthening security within mobility frameworks. These interventions also open new possibilities for territorial balancing, as they expand the policy focus **beyond core urban transport corridors** to more inclusive and interconnected mobility systems.

In 2021, the EU introduced the **Sustainable and Smart Mobility Strategy**, designed to promote intelligent and sustainable mobility solutions across the Union. The strategy revolves around two key objectives: reducing carbon emissions and enhancing the overall sustainability, resilience, and digital integration of the transportation sector. This strategy is structured around ten flagship initiatives that encapsulate its fundamental goals.

The first five flagships focus primarily on sustainability in European mobility. These objectives address carbon emissions by encouraging the adoption of zero-emission vehicles, promoting sustainable practices in airports and ports, increasing the use of low-carbon fuels, offering enhanced incentives for end-users, and advancing mobility solutions that prioritise environmental and public health concerns. These measures collectively contribute to the development of a greener transportation industry (European Commission, 2020e). The environmental orientation of the initiative carries important implications for urban-rural relations, as many rural areas remain dependent on carbon-intensive transport modes due to lack of alternatives. By prioritising investments in zero-emission infrastructure and incentives across the EU territory, the

strategy **enables rural communities to participate in the green transition**, narrowing spatial disparities in access to sustainable mobility.

The second segment of the strategy underlines the significance of smart mobility solutions. It emphasises seamless, safe, and efficient connectivity across Europe through the implementation of connected and automated multimodal mobility. Additionally, the strategy prioritises the use of data, artificial intelligence, and innovation to enable smarter transportation systems across the Union (Ibid.). Smart solutions such as demand-responsive transport, digital ticketing, and real-time navigation tools can **bridge service gaps**, facilitate daily commuting between rural and urban centres, and strengthen labour market integration across territorial boundaries. By doing so, the EU promotes **urban-rural mobility corridors**, enabling both people and goods to move more effectively within regional systems.

The third component of the strategy underscores the necessity of fostering resilient mobility solutions across Europe. It highlights the importance of strengthening the single market, enhancing transport safety and security, and ensuring fairness in mobility. By advocating for affordable, accessible, and equitable mobility for all end-users, the strategy aims to establish a more balanced and inclusive transportation system within the Union (Ibid.).

Within the EU's transport policies, **the trans-European transport network** also known as TEN-T policy, plays a crucial role in shaping mobility solutions. This policy seeks to develop a cohesive, efficient, multimodal, and high-quality transport infrastructure across Europe. The **TEN-T** framework encompasses multiple transportation modes, including water, road, rail, and air. Moreover, in 2024, the TEN-T policy went through a revision to align more closely with the EU's climate policy objectives. The primary aim is to enhance the resilience and environmental sustainability of the transport sector and network, fostering greener and climate-friendly mobility solutions. While traditionally focused on linking major urban centres, recent revisions place growing emphasis on **rural connectivity**. This signals a shift toward a **more territorially inclusive transport system**, where rural regions are not bypassed but integrated as vital components of EU mobility chains.

European Union is actively combatting against transport poverty, a phenomenon more often linked addressing rural areas around Europe. The report from European Commission (2024g) highlights that transport poverty is not exclusively a rural phenomenon; the analysis reveals that challenges related to availability and

affordability are more pronounced in rural areas, with low-income households disproportionately affected and, simultaneously, significant transport-related challenges are also evident in urban peripheries and certain dense urban centres (European Commission, 2024g).

Furthermore, there is an urgent need to enhance the environmental sustainability of the transportation and mobility sectors. Notably, statistics indicate that transportation accounts for approximately 25% of all annual greenhouse gas emissions within the EU, and this figure has exhibited an increasing trend in recent years. As a result, mobility and transport policies are intricately linked to climate change, carbon emissions, and global warming. These sectors are central to the EU's broader climate adaptation and mitigation goals.

Achieving climate neutrality is a fundamental objective within the **European Green Deal**. In 2019, the European Commission formally committed to achieving climate neutrality by 2050 as a core component of the Green Deal (Widuto 2021 & Erbach et al. 2021). This commitment is integral to addressing climate challenges and ensuring long-term sustainability. As outlined earlier, the Sustainable and Smart Mobility Strategy is closely aligned with the European Green Deal, with half of its flagship initiatives explicitly dedicated to improving the sustainability of European mobility solutions.

Additionally, the European Commission's **Fit for 55 package** is a critical legislative initiative designed to achieve a 55% reduction in carbon emissions by 2030, compared to 1990 levels. This comprehensive package plays a pivotal role in the EU's overall climate mitigation strategy, emphasising the urgency of expediting decarbonisation efforts across all sectors. The Fit for 55 package is a key component of the EU's Green Transition and aligns with the broader commitment to fostering environmental sustainability and climate resilience.

Furthermore, the new Commission priorities for 2024 – 2029 introduced several key policy actions further enhance the mobility around Europe. **The Single Digital Booking and Ticketing Regulation** is a key initiative aimed at simplifying trans-European travel by enabling citizens to purchase multimodal tickets, combining train, bus, and air travel, through a single digital platform (von der Leyen, 2024e). By promoting easy access to sustainable transport options such as trains and electric buses, the regulation supports EU mobility goals while contributing to the reduction of transport-related carbon emissions. This will be quite relevant for **RURBANIVE** project

aiming for development of smart transport solutions. Furthermore, this innovation enhances accessibility for rural populations, who often face fragmented transport networks and limited ticketing options. By facilitating seamless travel, the regulation strengthens **territorial connectivity** and reduces dependence on private vehicles, which is a key obstacle for sustainable rural mobility.

Complementing this, **the Clean Industrial Deal** plays a critical role in decarbonising heavy transport. Investments in electric vehicle infrastructure, green logistics, and modern public transit systems are central to improving the efficiency and sustainability of Europe's mobility network, aligning with the climate objectives of the European Green Deal (European Commission, 2025a).

Significant emphasis is also placed on infrastructure investment to enhance cross-border connectivity and develop sustainable transport systems. These efforts aim to strengthen the interoperability of European transport while reducing reliance on high-emission modes.

Furthermore, the promotion of renewable energy-powered transport at local and regional levels supports the shift toward low-carbon mobility. Together, these initiatives reflect the EU's broader commitment to building an integrated, efficient, and climate-resilient transportation system. These policies have profound implications for **urban-rural linkages** as the policies promotes not only ecological transformation but also territorial reshaping, where mobility becomes a tool for cohesion, inclusion, and innovation.

4.6 Culture, landscape & heritage access and promotion

The RURBANIVE project represents a significant initiative aimed at transforming the domains of culture, landscape, and heritage by utilising the concept of "Affective value" to assess the intrinsic, non-relocatable values of cultural landscapes. The cultural sector within the European Union plays a crucial economic and societal role, contributing approximately 7.5% of the total employment across the Union (Pasikowska-Schnass, 2021). The governance of cultural policy within the EU is shaped by **Article 167 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union**, which stipulates that while cultural policy remains under the purview of individual Member States, the European Union serves as a supporting body to address common challenges (Yenbou, 2022). The framework enables the EU to promote cultural initiatives that reinforce **territorial integration** by supporting diverse communities,

including those in rural and peripheral regions, in accessing cultural funding, networks, and policy support.

A pivotal moment in the EU's cultural policy development was the introduction of the **European Agenda for Culture** in 2007, which aimed to promote cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue, harness culture as a driver for creativity, and establish culture as a central element of international relations (Yenbou, 2022). In alignment with these objectives, the European Commission and the European External Action Service (EEAS) released a joint communication in 2016 titled **"Towards an EU Strategy for International Cultural Relations,"** reinforcing the importance of cultural diversity and international cultural engagement (Ibid.). The communication outlined three main strategic pillars: supporting culture as a catalyst for sustainable socio-economic development, fostering intercultural dialogue for peaceful inter-community relations, and strengthening cooperation on cultural heritage (European Commission & High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 2016). The goals are not only international in position but also echoes at the pan European level, specifically in the context of **strengthening bonds between urban cultural centres and rural cultural landscapes**, which both contributes to Europe's cultural identity.

Building upon these foundations, the European Commission introduced the **New European Agenda for Culture (NEAC)** in 2018, offering a contemporary framework structured around three strategic dimensions: the social, economic, and external dimensions of culture. The social dimension aims to leverage cultural diversity as a means of fostering social cohesion, while the economic dimension focuses on enhancing creativity in education and innovation to drive employment and economic growth. The external dimension seeks to amplify the EU's cultural influence on the global stage. Additionally, two cross-cutting areas underlines these dimensions: the protection and valorisation of cultural heritage and the promotion of digital innovation within cultural sectors, reflecting the necessity of adapting to an increasingly digital landscape (European Commission, 2018b). This policy contributes to social inclusion by using cultural diversity to bridge urban–rural divides, where disparities in access to resources and participation remain significant. Economically, culture drives innovation and skills development, offering rural areas opportunities through cultural entrepreneurship, tourism, and local crafts. Externally, the EU strengthens its cultural diplomacy while promoting pan European cooperation through regional networks that connect diverse territories.

Among the EU's key cultural initiatives is the **Creative Europe 2021–2027 programme**, which aligns with the NEAC and the **EU Strategy for International Cultural Relations**. With an expanded budget of 2.44 billion Euros, nearly double that of its predecessor, this programme underscores the EU's commitment to cultural preservation and innovation. It seeks to enhance European cultural and linguistic diversity while simultaneously bolstering the economic potential of cultural and creative sectors, particularly in the audiovisual domain. Creative Europe facilitates the inclusion of **rural cultural actors**, enabling them to participate in pan-European networks and collaborative projects. This enhances **cultural accessibility** and equity across territories, countering the risk of spatial concentration of cultural capital in major urban hubs.

Furthermore, the **European Framework for Action on Cultural Heritage**, introduced in 2019 following the **European Year of Cultural Heritage** in 2018, was established to provide a structured approach to strengthening cultural heritage across the EU. This framework is highlighted by five pillars: enhancing inclusivity and participation, fostering sustainability and smart solutions, reinforcing the resilience of endangered heritage sites, advancing research and knowledge exchange, and deepening international cooperation (European Commission, 2019b).

A more recent development in EU cultural policy is the **EU Work Plan for Culture for 2023–2026**, which sets out four core priority areas. The first priority emphasises the empowerment of cultural and creative sectors by advocating for fair working conditions. The second priority focuses on increasing cultural participation and broadening culture's role within society. The third seeks to reinforce cultural ecosystems to maximise their potential, while the fourth priority highlights the importance of integrating culture into the EU's external relations (Council of the European Union, 2022).

The **Culture Compass**, presented in the mission letter for the commissioner for intergenerational fairness, youth, sport and culture, outlines a strategic framework to strengthen the role of culture in the European Union by integrating social, economic, and technological dimensions into a cohesive policy vision. A central priority is to improve the working conditions of artists and cultural professionals (von der Leyen, 2024f), whose contributions to Europe's cultural vitality are often undermined by insecure employment, limited access to social protection, and income instability. The framework proposes EU-level standards for fair remuneration, mobility, and access to

welfare systems, addressing the fragmented landscape of cultural labour across member states. At the same time, the Culture Compass seeks to enhance the competitiveness of the cultural and creative industries, which are both economically significant and innovation-driven, yet underrepresented in industrial and digital policy agendas.

Strategic investment, skills development, and support for creative entrepreneurship are identified as key levers to boost the sector's resilience and growth. Moreover, the initiative calls for close collaboration with the Executive Vice-President for Tech Sovereignty, Security and Democracy to develop an **AI strategy tailored to cultural and creative industries** (von der Leyen, 2024f). This strategy would support responsible digital innovation while ensuring cultural sovereignty, ethical content creation, and the protection of intellectual property in the evolving digital landscape.

Furthermore, the proposed **European Democracy Shield** builds on existing EU measures to counter foreign information manipulation, aiming to strengthen information integrity, protect elections, and support independent media. It forms part of a broader, cross-sectoral strategy that integrates disinformation countermeasures with digital governance, cybersecurity, and resilience against hybrid threats (Bentzen, 2024).

Beyond direct cultural policy, climate action frameworks such as the **European Green Deal** significantly impact the cultural, landscape, and heritage sectors. The Green Deal, which enshrines the goal of climate neutrality by 2050, necessitates cross-sectoral cooperation to mitigate climate change (Widuto, 2021). This commitment is reinforced by the **Fit for 55** package, which sets an ambitious target of reducing carbon emissions by 55% by 2030 compared to 1990 levels. Given the intricate links between cultural heritage and environmental sustainability, these policies underline the necessity for cultural institutions and creative industries to adopt sustainable practices. Furthermore, they offer pathways for integrating **cultural heritage into green transition strategies**, fostering multifunctional land use, agroecological practices, and climate-resilient tourism. In doing so, the EU creates synergies between culture, sustainability, and spatial planning, reinforcing **urban-rural interdependencies** in addressing global environmental challenges.

The European Union's approach to cultural policy is deeply intertwined with broader socio-economic, technological, and environmental considerations. While the EU remains in a supporting role than a direct policymaker in cultural affairs, its strategic

frameworks, funding programmes, and regulatory initiatives play important role in shaping the cultural landscape of its Member States. This reflects a growing recognition that culture is not only a matter of identity and heritage but also a **driver of territorial cohesion**. Through funding programmes, policy frameworks, and regulatory initiatives, the EU fosters **inclusive cultural development** that embraces the diversity of European territories. For the RURBANIVE project, these developments validate the central role of culture in building **affective urban-rural linkages**, where shared values, narratives, and identities underlines the construction of a more integrated and resilient Europe.

5 Challenges and emerging trends

The European Union is undergoing deep structural transformation, shaped by converging global megatrends such as climate change, demographic shifts, health, and geopolitical instability (European Parliament et al., 2024). These trends are not only revamping the socioeconomic and spatial foundations of the Union but are also present challenges for urban–rural cooperation by creating new forms of interdependences and inequalities. Understanding the **evolving urban–rural linkages** is essential for developing inclusive policies that reinforce territorial cohesion, social equity, and resilience.

Demographic change is one of the most critical drivers reshaping urban and rural spaces. While cities continue to attract populations due to employment, education, and service opportunities, many rural and remote regions face ageing, depopulation, and impacts on labour markets (Curtale et al., 2025). However, urban expansion and rural decline are not strictly opposing trends; rather, they are functionally connected through labour mobility, service provision, and environmental flows. By 2040, this spatial divergence is expected to intensify, creating imbalances in public service accessibility and economic vitality, yet interdependencies are growing. Finding that by 2040 half of the EU regions will be demographically declining, the Ninth Report on Economic, Social and Territorial Cohesion by the European Commission underlines the necessity for balanced territorial development, enhanced infrastructure investment, and targeted support to mitigate the economic and demographic disparities between urban and rural areas. (European Commission, 2024d). The approach by the EU seeks to accommodate the different strategies at domestic level, which roughly can be classified as focused on depopulation as a territorial cohesion problem, “brain drain” as a human resources problem (Pazos-Vidal, 2023), and demographic decline as a process of

managed retrenchment in urban areas “smart shrinking” (OECD, 2025). Since the establishment of a dedicated portfolio of the 2019-2024 Commission (Vice President on Democracy and Demography) this issue has become more prominent resulting in a set of measures -“Demographic Toolbox”- (European Commission, 2023i) which combined with the “Harnessing Talent” agenda cited above, seek to outline the various actions that different parts of the Commission are presently undertaking. However, a more holistic approach is needed that goes beyond the sum of individual actions (Gargano & Pauwels, 2024). A strategic focus on strengthening rural-urban complementarities for example through regional transportation networks or via digital infrastructure, can help rebalance development trajectories and mitigate fragmentation. It is hoped that the confluence in the present Commission term 2024-2029 of the post 2027 with the focus on holistic approaches under the National Single Plans, the new “right to stay” agenda adopted by Von der Leyen from Letta’s proposal together with the ongoing work on functional urban-rural areas can provide a space for RURBANIVE policy recommendations to make an impact in policymaking.

The **digital and technological revolution**, especially in AI, robotics, and networked systems, is transforming work, production, and governance across regions (European Parliament et al., 2024). Technological diffusion tends to concentrate in urban innovation hubs, but it also opens new opportunities for “smart rurality” for example, through remote work or precision agriculture, and e-governance models.

However, the uneven distribution of digital infrastructure and skills exacerbates urban–rural disparities. The digital divide significantly impacts urban-rural linkages by exacerbating disparities in access to digital infrastructure, skills, and economic opportunities, thereby hindering balanced territorial development and equitable access to services (Committee of Regions et al., 2022). Policies such as broadband deployment, rural innovation ecosystems, and cross-regional knowledge transfer are essential to bridge this gap. Strengthening urban–rural linkages via technological integration also supports more flexible labour markets and reduces the pressure on urban housing and transport systems.

Environmental sustainability is central to the EU’s strategic foresight agenda, with a legally binding objective to reach climate neutrality by 2050. The 2023 Strategic Foresight Report underlines that advancing environmental sustainability through place-based and inclusive strategies is crucial for mitigating uneven climate impacts and implicitly strengthening urban-rural linkages as part of a cohesive territorial

resilience framework (European Commission, 2023j). Although recent developments indicate overall improvements in the quality of life within urban areas, progress in the domains of **sustainable mobility** and **environmental impact** remains limited, with several indicators pointing to persistent challenges (Eurostat, 2024). The ecological interdependence between urban centres and their surrounding rural hinterlands is expected to deepen in the coming decades, driven by shared environmental pressures, resource flows, and socio-economic linkages.

Rural regions are especially vulnerable for effects of climate change, often lack sufficient infrastructure, and face higher energy costs (Eurofound & European Environmental Agency, 2023), raising concerns about environmental justice and public acceptance. Simultaneously, green transitions offer opportunities for revitalising rural economies for example, through bioeconomy, agroecology, and sustainable tourism. Enhancing urban–rural collaboration in climate adaptation, circular economy, and ecosystem management is therefore not only ecologically imperative but socially equitable.

Efficient and sustainable transport infrastructure is foundational for urban–rural connectivity. There is need to strengthen urban-rural connectivity through the integration of rural areas into broader mobility planning, particularly and the need for targeted investments and policy measures to address accessibility gaps and support territorial cohesion. Furthermore, the role of revised TEN-T regulations in enhancing sustainable transport links across all regions, including remote and less-connected areas (European Commission, 2024h) Mobility innovations, for example on-demand transport, autonomous vehicles, and digital ticketing, could help overcome these barriers, but their deployment requires context-sensitive governance and investment. Furthermore, enhancing digital and multimodal connectivity in rural areas is essential for strengthening rural-urban linkages, supporting territorial cohesion, and ensuring rural inclusion in the green and digital transitions (European Commission, 2021b).

Moreover, the EU's strategic transport agenda increasingly emphasises multi-modal integration and cross-border connectivity (Mochan et al., 2025), which can strengthen rural regions' access to labour markets, services, and logistics chains. Policies targeting secondary transport hubs, active mobility, and rail revitalisation are essential for reducing peripherality and unlocking the socioeconomic potential of rural areas in functional regions linked to cities.

The future of European integration hinges on institutional adaptability and democratic legitimacy. As highlighted in the Conference on the Future of Europe (2022) – which provided a template for a future EU Treaty reform–, citizens across both urban and rural territories express support for EU action in climate, digital, and social domains, but also demand more inclusive, transparent, and territorially sensitive governance.

Urban–rural divides are often reflected in perceptions of political alienation and unequal policy outcomes. Strengthening participatory mechanisms, such as regional assemblies, citizen panels, and digital consultation platforms, can help ensure that the diverse needs of territorial communities are incorporated into EU policymaking (European Parliament, 2022). Furthermore, place-based governance and multi-level coordination are vital to align local development goals with European strategic foresight.

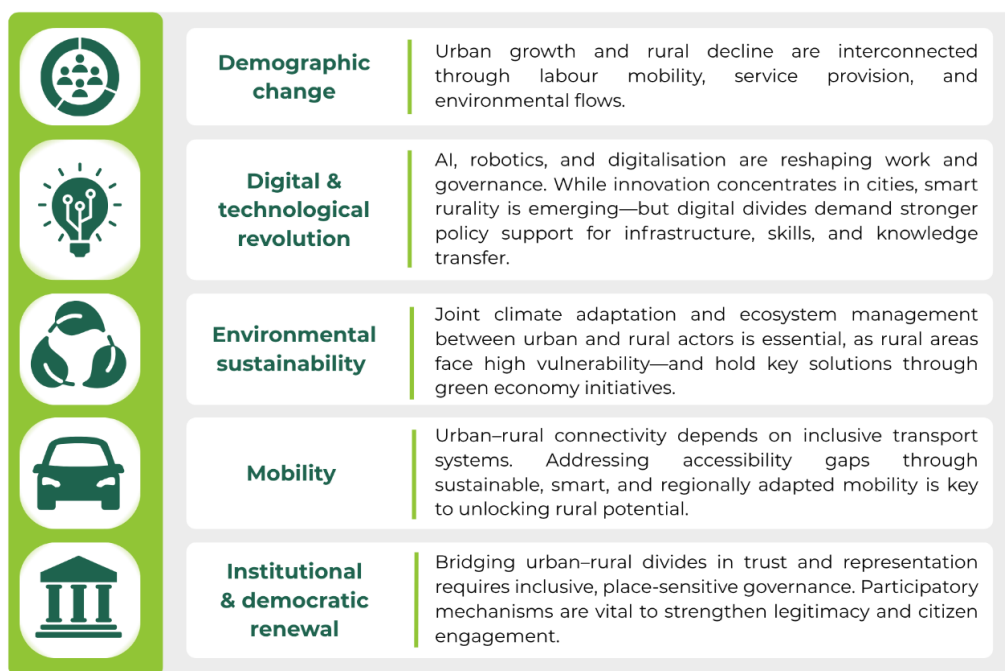


Figure 6. Challenges and emerging trends. Source: Authors own implementation

As the EU looks ahead to 2040, reinforcing urban–rural linkages emerge as a strategic imperative across all policy domains. Demographic divergence, technological disruption, environmental transition, and institutional transformation each shape and which are shaped by the interactions between cities and their surrounding territories. A forward-looking EU strategy must move beyond urban-centric or rural-specific paradigms toward integrated, functional regional development. This approach will be essential for building a resilient, cohesive, and sustainable Europe.

6 Conclusions

Drawing upon the preceding analysis of relevant European Union policies, this chapter offers concluding reflections on the intricate relationship between urban and rural areas as framed within the RURBANIVE project. Rather than reiterating the specific details of each policy instrument, this discussion seeks to synthesise the overarching themes and identify critical points where EU frameworks address, or indeed neglect, the crucial linkages between these two spheres.

This Deliverable aimed to provide a compendium of all EU policies that will directly impact the work presently carried out in RURBANIVE, but equally to identify those areas that will directly impact upon the policy recommendations that will be developed (D6.3). In order to summarise this extensive mapping RURBANIVE policy aims face both a set of threats and opportunities:

THREATS TO RURBANIVE:

1. Policy Fragmentation and Implementation Challenges:

Despite the supportive policy frameworks, the implementation of EU policies can be fragmented and inconsistent across different territories. This could pose challenges for the replicability-potential of RURBANIVE's Innovation Framework.

2. Economic and Political Uncertainties:

The ongoing geopolitical tensions and economic uncertainties within and outside the EU could impact funding availability and policy priorities re-directing funds towards domains such as defence or economic protectionism (seeking large scale EU champions, but possibly also an Agenda for Cities implicitly geared to metropolitan areas) which might overlook the continuation of the more granular EU support for local development. This may affect the long-term sustainability and scalability of RURBANIVE initiatives.

3. Digital Divide:

While there is significant support for digital transformation, the digital divide between urban and rural areas remains a challenge. Ensuring equitable access to

digital tools and infrastructure is crucial for the success of RURBANIVE's objectives.

4. Regulatory and Bureaucratic Hurdles:

Navigating the complex regulatory environment and bureaucratic processes within the EU can be a significant barrier (as shown by the very length of this overview), despite the progress in rural proofing and more holistic approaches, including those that will come after 2027. (reduction of EU programmes and instruments, National and Regional Single Plans). This could slow down the implementation of innovative solutions that will be proposed by RURBANIVE.

5. Environmental and Social Resistance:

Initiatives aimed at promoting sustainability and innovation may face resistance from local communities due to perceived disruptions to traditional practices and lifestyles or the above-mentioned pushback from EU sustainability goals. Effective stakeholder engagement (e.g. participatory approaches, partnership principle, consultation) and communication strategies (combat rural misinformation) are essential to mitigate this risk.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR RURBANIVE:

1. Enhanced Policy Support for Rural-Urban Linkages:

The EU's Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas (LTVRA) and the Rural Pact emphasise the importance of strengthening rural-urban interactions. These frameworks are set to continue (as confirmed by the Vision for Agriculture and Food) together with the newly coined “right to stay” providing positive background conditions for initiatives like RURBANIVE by promoting policies that enhance connectivity, cooperation, and innovation between rural and urban areas.

2. Funding and Investment Mechanisms:

The European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF), including the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), provide substantial financial support for projects that foster rural-urban synergies. These are set to continue albeit in a more integrated fashion that at present taking the mantle from the Recovery and Resilience Facility

(RRF) which expires in 2026 by way of concentration and reduction of initiatives to be provided by the National (and Regional) Single Plans as well as the European Competitiveness Fund at EU level. Both will offer opportunities for funding innovative projects aimed at sustainable development, including enhanced mainstreaming of the SDGs.

3. Focus on Sustainability and Green Transitions:

The European Green Deal and the Farm-to-Fork Strategy prioritise sustainable practices and environmental stewardship. The rethink of some of the EU sustainability goals as shown in the Vision for Agriculture and Food, the EU Competitiveness Compass (and its successive simplification measures) the Clean Industrial Deal does provide a new context in which at very least some of the targets have been slowed down and some of the reporting and compliance measures lightened. Despite this overall EU sustainability policies continue to align with RURBANIVE's goals of promoting well-being economies and sustainable innovation in rural and urban areas.

4. Digital and Technological Advancements:

EU policies such as the Digital Europe Programme and the Connecting Europe Facility support the digital transformation of rural areas. New measures to strengthen the EU internal market vis a vis global competition such as the new integrated transport ticketing system definitely provide a better enabling environment for innovation ecosystems. This enhances the potential for RURBANIVE to leverage digital tools and platforms to foster innovation and connectivity.

5. Support for Participatory Governance:

The EU's emphasis on participatory governance and stakeholder engagement, as seen previously in the European Citizens' Initiative and the Conference on the Future of Europe, the EU Rural Pact and now with the introduction of Rural Proofing regular Implementation Dialogues, Citizens' Panels, Reality Checks, and Youth Tests is part of a broader shift toward participatory governance and regulatory humility aligns with RURBANIVE's focus on putting rural citizens at the centre of policy-making.

The analysis reveals a discernible trend towards recognising the interconnectedness of urban and rural territories. Several policies, particularly those within the Horizon

Europe framework and the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), acknowledge the mutual dependencies and potential synergies that can arise from fostering stronger urban-rural relationships. **Innovation ecosystems**, a central principle of RURBANIVE, are frequently positioned as catalysts for this integration, with policies aiming to support collaborative projects that bridge the geographical divide. The emphasis on smart villages and the LEADER programme within the CAP, for instance, demonstrates an increasing awareness of the need to empower rural communities through innovation and partnership, often involving urban centres as hubs of expertise and markets.

However, the mapping of EU policies also highlights persistent challenges and areas requiring further consideration. While the rhetoric of balanced territorial development is prevalent, the **practical implementation and specific targeting of policies to foster genuine urban-rural synergies remain somewhat uneven and fragmented**. Certain policy domains, while having indirect implications for both urban and rural areas (such as environmental regulations), do not always explicitly articulate or prioritise the strengthening of their interdependencies. This can lead to a siloed approach, where the unique opportunities presented by integrated urban-rural development are not fully realised.

Furthermore, the analysis suggests that the conceptualisation of urban-rural linkages within EU policy framework could **benefit from greater refinement**. While there has been emphasis on more granular definition of interlinkages between rural and urban areas, still often the relationship is framed in terms of a rather simplistic unidirectional flow, for example, urban areas providing markets or technology to rural areas or rural areas providing raw resources to urban centres. While these dynamics are undoubtedly present and needed, a more holistic understanding would acknowledge the bidirectional contributions, such as the provision of ecosystem services, cultural heritage, and distinct forms of knowledge originating from rural areas that can enrich urban life and drive innovation in diverse sectors.

The RURBANIVE project, with its focus on immersive innovation ecosystems, presents a valuable lens through which to examine these complementary relationships. The concept of **rural-urban immersiveness** underlines the potential for deeper, more integrated forms of collaboration that move beyond simple transactional exchanges. Policies that actively promote such immersive environments, facilitating knowledge transfer, co-creation, and shared governance structures across urban and rural

boundaries, are likely to be more effective in unlocking the full potential of these interconnected territories.

In conclusion, while EU policies increasingly recognise the **importance of balanced territorial development** and the role of innovation in fostering connections, a more explicit and nuanced focus on the dynamic and complementary linkages between urban and rural areas is warranted. Future policy iterations could benefit from more targeted interventions that actively promote immersive collaborations, acknowledge the diverse contributions of both spheres, and strive for a truly integrated and synergistic European territory. The insights generated by the RURBANIVE project offer a valuable contribution to this ongoing discourse, highlighting the potential of innovative approaches to bridge the urban-rural divide and foster a more resilient and prosperous future for all European regions.

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