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# The Social and Territorial Dimension of the Recovery and Resilience Facility

## Innovative Solutions and its Constraints

*One of the most important financial instruments for recovery from the pandemic crisis is the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), which replaces austerity-oriented conditionality introducing a demand-driven and results-oriented framework, with access to support conditional on forward-looking reforms and investment plans. All this contributes to the renewal of European economic governance, which in the post-pandemic period relies heavily on the principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) and the general objectives of the RRF. Based on an analysis of the relevant literature, EU documents and databases, the study argues that the interconnection of the EPSR and RRF governance architectures has created an opportunity to strengthen the socialisation and territorialisation of European economic governance, at the same time the effectiveness of implementation is influenced by several factors, above all, the diversity of social policy and regional development practices represented by Member States, the differing domestic priorities of recovery strategies, and the unclear relationship between the RRF and cohesion policy.*

**Keywords:** recovery, social and economic policy coordination, governance architectures, social and territorial cohesion, complementarity

## Introduction

In response to the complex effects of Covid-19, the European Union (EU) established the NextGeneration EU (NGEU) funds with the aim of successfully managing the burdens of the green and digital transitions by stimulating public investment, while contributing to a socially inclusive recovery from the pandemic. With this, the EU has taken another step that was previously considered taboo: following the temporary suspension of the Stability and Growth Pact, it has temporarily increased its fiscal capacity through joint European debt and bond issuance.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> GUILLÉN et al. 2022.

The main financial instrument of the seven programmes financed by the NGEU is the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), which originally provides €723 billion in non-repayable grants and loans to Member States along six thematic pillars (calculated at 2018 prices) to promote economic, social and territorial cohesion, and address common challenges such as the diversification of energy supply.<sup>3</sup> The RRF represents a novel approach to support, primarily in that it breaks with the austerity-oriented conditionality policy of the European Stability Mechanism, which tied the disbursement of loans and credits to far-reaching structural reforms and cuts in social spending. Instead, it introduced a new demand-driven and results-oriented framework, which made access to support conditional on forward-looking reforms and investment plans.<sup>4</sup> The disbursement of grants and loans requested by the Member States is based on the National Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRPs), which contribute to the development and strengthening of ownership.

The innovative nature of the RRF stems from the complexity of the problem it aims to address. Within this comprehensive framework, the new financial instrument aims not only to mitigate the socio-economic consequences of the pandemic crisis, but also to promote the economic, social and territorial convergence and cohesion of the EU on this basis.<sup>5</sup>

The social and territorial dimensions of recovery from the crisis give particular importance to the creation of the RRF, thanks to the shift in perspective that sees social welfare systems not merely as a means of cost competitiveness, but as a key prerequisite for productivity and economic growth. In this context, the integration of the social dimension into EU economic governance through the European Semester (hereinafter referred to as the Semester) introduced in 2011 and the related country-specific reports (CSRs) has become particularly important. The socialisation of the Semester progressed gradually between 2011 and 2016 and became embedded in the EU's new post-crisis governance architecture.

One of the key outcomes of this process was the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) adopted in 2017 and the action plan approved in 2021. From this point onwards, the CSRs also reflect the principles of the EPSR, which is a further key step towards the coordination of the EU's social and economic policies.<sup>6</sup> The close link between the EPSR and the Semester has also had an impact on the functioning of the RRF, as the legal framework for the RRF stipulates that Member States must take into account the CSRs set out in the Semester and the principles of the EPSR when compiling their NRRPs, and that the European Commission (hereinafter: Commission) shall assess the plans submitted on the basis of these requirements when assessing the plans submitted.<sup>7</sup>

The literature on the subject deals separately and in detail with the “socialising” of the Semester, the “compass” role of the EPSR, and the planning, design and governance structures of the RRF and NRRPs. However, less attention has been paid to the extent and under what conditions the coordinated functioning of European economic

<sup>3</sup> European Commission 2023.

<sup>4</sup> ARMINGEON et al. 2022; CORTI-VESAN 2023.

<sup>5</sup> Official Journal of the European Union 2021b; FÁSI 2024.

<sup>6</sup> ZEITLIN-VANHERCKE 2018; VESAN et al. 2021; DE BECKER 2024.

<sup>7</sup> Official Journal of the European Union 2021b.



governance, the EPSR and the RRF can support the EU's social and territorial cohesion. The aim of this study is to examine the international literature, EU documents and expert materials, as well as the data from the scoreboards published by the Commission, to explore the interrelationships between the overall objectives, integrated governance mechanisms, and progress in social and territorial cohesion.

Based on both primary and secondary data, the paper seeks to answer the question of to what extent does the integration of the EPSR and RRF governance architectures effectively drive social and territorial cohesion in practice, and what governance failures constrain this potential?

To test the assumption that administrative constraints and the unclear relationship with cohesion policy prevent effectiveness, the study conducts a gap analysis using the 2025 Recovery and Resilience Scoreboard. Specifically, it contrasts the nominal financial allocations for social goals against their classification as "primary" or "secondary" objectives. This allows for an empirical test of whether Member States are undertaking deep social reforms or merely attaching existing infrastructure projects to meet quota requirements.

## **The EPSR and post-Covid-19 recovery: Relaunching the notion of Social Europe**

The global financial and economic crisis that emerged in 2008 and the euro crisis that unfolded in 2010 were managed by a logic focused on competitiveness, fiscal stability and austerity, which further deepened social and territorial disparities.<sup>8</sup> However, the socio-political tensions that arose during this period of strict economic surveillance and austerity measures, as well as the noticeable erosion of public support for the EU, have, over time, called into question the dominance of the neoliberal paradigm, which promotes competition in terms of wage taxes, and welfare spending, and led to the recognition that social policy is not only a tool for social redistribution but also plays an important role in the effective functioning of modern market economies.<sup>9</sup>

A key element of this contradictory process was the differing interpretations of social policy, which also largely determined the nature of the financing and management instruments used. Social policy as a policy area remained within the competence of the Member States for a long time. However, in the 1980s and 1990s, the need for EU-level social policy grew because of the single market, the European Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) and the coordination of economic policies. The debates arising from this dilemma were, on the one hand, between the welfare state model developed by most Member States, based on the concept of the welfare state, which is protective, redistributive, or the productive, economy-oriented social policy models represented by the EU, which are based on individual responsibility and support active participation in the labour market. On the other hand, the debate has been dominated by the search for

<sup>8</sup> CSATH et al. 2018; KAISER 2023a.

<sup>9</sup> ARANGUIZ 2022: 78; HACKER 2023.



common ground between the two.<sup>10</sup> In practice, the application of the two basic social policy models has led to a kind of division of labour between the EU and the Member States, as the Member States have adopted several elements of productive social policy while seeking to preserve the positions and achievements of their protective social policy systems.<sup>11</sup>

However, as a direct result of the 2010 European debt crisis, the decade of crisis management has been dominated since 2011 by the European Economic Governance and the Semester mechanism. The introduction of the Semester raised several previously controversial issues in the field of social and economic policy coordination, which was framed by the EU's new post-crisis governance architecture. The starting point for the criticism was that during the crisis management, the emphasis shifted clearly towards economic and financial coordination, which had serious social consequences (e.g. raising the retirement age, restructuring collective agreements). On the one hand, this led to the marginalisation of social policy actors in decision-making and, on the other hand, reinforced the coercive, prescriptive and uniform (one-size-fits-all) character of the Semester.<sup>12</sup>

However, other studies point out that CSR has gradually become more balanced, with social and employment policy issues and investment proposals gaining increasing importance.<sup>13</sup> According to authoritative estimates, the proportion of the latter rose from 50% to 64% between 2011 and 2016.<sup>14</sup> Another empirical study also highlights that between 2010 and 2016 there was a partial shift towards the “socialisation” of the Semester, which accelerated particularly from 2014, when the Juncker Commission took office.<sup>15</sup> This is demonstrated, on the one hand, by the growing number of social objectives in CSRs, but equally important is the increasing involvement of EU social and employment actors in the planning of reforms by Member States and in monitoring their implementation.<sup>16</sup> Under the Juncker Commission, CSRs have been streamlined and further socialised. In the spirit of streamlining, the Macroeconomic Imbalance Procedure Detailed Reviews and the staff working documents were integrated into a single Country Report, which was discussed by the Commission and the Member States concerned in bilateral negotiations before and after its publication. However, the most significant change was the reduction in the number and thematic focus of the CSRs and the introduction of a results-oriented approach, which also gave Member States greater leeway to plan the necessary measures. Social and employment policy issues have nevertheless retained their position in the new framework. This is also shown by the fact that in 2016, compared to 2015, the number of CSRs decreased from 102 to 89, while the number of social recommendations decreased only slightly, from 118 to 114.<sup>17</sup> This is also due to the

<sup>10</sup> TÓTH 2018; TÓTH 2024.

<sup>11</sup> ZIMMERMANN–GENGNAGEL 2023: 528.

<sup>12</sup> ZEITLIN–VANHERCKE 2018: 150–151.

<sup>13</sup> JESSOULA 2015; BEKKER 2016.

<sup>14</sup> CRESPIY–VANHEUVERZWIJN 2016: 77–78.

<sup>15</sup> According to an analysis by the European Trade Union Institute, between 2011 and 2014, approximately 40–47% of CSR reports published each year addressed social and employment policy issues (CLAUWAERT 2015: 11).

<sup>16</sup> ZEITLIN–VANHERCKE 2018: 152.

<sup>17</sup> ZEITLIN–VANHERCKE 2018: 164.



new, integrated nature of CSRs, as several previously separate social objectives have been incorporated into other policy areas, such as the labour market, education and taxation.

The above-mentioned changes – an integrated approach, streamlining, a focus on results, encouraging social investment, extended consultation obligations between the actors concerned – were nevertheless aimed at strengthening Member States' commitment to reforms (“ownership”) and the effectiveness of implementation. The traditional hierarchical mode of governance of the Semester has been replaced by a more interactive approach, in which the CSRs have become less uniform and prescriptive, particularly in the areas of social and employment policy, thus better adapting to the specific circumstances of the Member States.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that the proposals set out in the Semester, which covers economic, social and employment policy coordination, are only recommendations, and their implementation at national level is entirely up to the Member States. The partial “socialisation” of the Semester can be seen as a response by the Commission and other EU institutions to widespread social dissatisfaction with austerity policies. The most tangible consequence of this can be seen in the “socialisation” of CSRs, but more broadly in the fact that by the middle of the decade, the idea of a Social Europe had returned to economic and political discourse at the EU level.

The first major milestone in this process was the adoption of the EPSR in 2017, with which the EU clearly expressed its intention to move away from a period of unilateral economic governance and austerity. This is also reflected in the fact that the Semester now incorporates the objectives of the EPSR, whose implementation and performance at Member State level is monitored by means of the Social Scoreboard. Although the implementation of the EPSR is not binding on Member States, but rather serves as a guiding framework or “compass”, it has nevertheless become a point of reference and a catalyst for new legislative and other initiatives in the discourse on the realisation of a Social Europe.<sup>18</sup> Although it incorporates certain parts of the EU's social acquis (e.g. gender equality, anti-discrimination), it also covers new areas that fall within the competence of the Member States (e.g. education, wage and pension policy). The Commission has referred to the principles of the EPSR in several legislative initiatives, including among others the Council Recommendation on the introduction of a child guarantee in 2021 and the adoption of the Minimum Wage Directive in 2022.<sup>19</sup>

The first serious test of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) came with the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020. The management of the health, economic and social consequences of the pandemic has enhanced and placed in a new context the relationship between the Semester and the EPSR, with particular regard to its social dimension.<sup>20</sup> This is also reflected in the May 2021 Social Summit in Porto, where the European Council expressed its strong commitment to the EPSR, setting the goal of

<sup>18</sup> BEKKER 2022; HACKER 2023.

<sup>19</sup> Official Journal of the European Union 2021a; Official Journal of the European Union 2022.

<sup>20</sup> CORTI-VESAN 2023.



revitalising the social dimension of EU integration.<sup>21</sup> This led to the Porto Declaration, which defined the EPSR as a tool for post-crisis recovery that respects the values of a fair and social model.<sup>22</sup>

## **Strengthening the social dimension: Instruments of integrated approach and modes of governance**

When examining the social dimension of economic governance in the European Union, it is particularly important to understand the theoretical and practical frameworks within which European social policy is shaped.<sup>23</sup> These conceptual differences are closely linked to the various governance instruments and policies.<sup>24</sup> In the context of European social policy, there are three main types of instruments: rule-based (e.g. guidelines, minimum standards), coordination-based (such as the Open Method of Coordination, policy guidelines and the CSRs) and monetary-based instruments (such as the European Social Fund and the RRF). All three types of instruments define the division of responsibilities between Member States and EU actors in different ways, influencing the achievement of social policy objectives.<sup>25</sup>

However, these instruments rarely work in isolation. They are typically part of governance architectures that seek to address complex problems as long-term, strategic institutional arrangements. During the Covid-19 crisis, the EU has developed several strategies along the priorities of green, digital and inclusive growth. The RRF, which can be seen as a new generation of financial instruments, fits into this framework. On the one hand, it originally provides a combination of grants (€338 billion) and loans (€385.8 billion), and on the other hand, it links the financing of planned investments to the fulfilment of specific conditions. Accordingly, a certain level of expenditure must be allocated to green and digital objectives (37% and 20% respectively), the “do no significant harm” principle must be applied in line with the EU’s environmental objectives, and it must be demonstrated that Member States’ efforts contribute to the implementation of the EPSR, with particular regard to the reforms and challenges proposed in the 2019 and 2020 CSRs. Socially relevant investments had already appeared in the CSRs, but the social dimension became even more prominent in 2020. The CSR emphasised the role of traditional social protection: extending social protection coverage, strengthening healthcare and reviving social dialogue.<sup>26</sup> The reference to CSRs means that coordination-based elements play an important role in the monetary-based management of the

<sup>21</sup> The action plan for implementing the EPSR set three main objectives: achieving an employment rate of at least 78%; ensuring that at least 60% of adults participate in training; and reducing the number of people at risk of social exclusion or poverty by at least 15 million (European Commission 2021).

<sup>22</sup> European Council 2021.

<sup>23</sup> FÁSI–SZŰCS 2024.

<sup>24</sup> For example, the issue of pensions can be interpreted from both a budgetary (expenditure) and a social (old-age security and livelihood) perspective, but it also raises serious dilemmas (e.g. how to reconcile budgetary restraint with the fight against poverty).

<sup>25</sup> BEKKER 2022: 4.

<sup>26</sup> European Commission 2020.



RRF.<sup>27</sup> However, conditionality is not the same as top-down governance. Unlike previous crisis management mechanisms, the RRF is based on a demand-driven process aimed at strengthening national ownership and commitment to reforms. In practice, national governments are responsible for preparing NRRPs, which shows that they have significant leeway in the process, creating opportunities for the application of certain elements of participatory governance. The plans must be consistent with the recommendations set out in the CSRs, which is one of the most important elements of the Commission's assessment and approval.

The RRF also introduces a new performance-based approach, linking the disbursement of financial support to compliance with an “operational agreement” between the Commission and national governments. In practice, this means that the Member State concerned must meet quality milestones and quantitative indicators within a specified timeframe. At the same time, the plans were developed in close consultation and negotiation with the Commission, resulting in a kind of contractual relationship between the Commission and the Member States. Although it was necessary to coordinate the planned reforms and investments with the CSRs, the RRF milestones and targets are not imposed by the Commission but proposed by the Member States. On the other hand, the plans are not declarations of intent on the part of the Member States, but commitments to achieve the objectives. To this end, Member States must establish effective implementation and monitoring structures.

Overall, financial support is closely linked to coordination instruments, so the RRF itself constitutes a hybrid governance structure. The three architectures presented – EPSR, Semester, and RRF – are good examples of how EU social policy objectives can be promoted through a combination of different instruments. While the EPSR primarily fulfils a political and normative function, the Semester applies a coordination logic, and the RRF operates with financial incentives. These structures are becoming increasingly interconnected in practice, providing opportunities to exploit synergies, but at the same time, the growing complexity poses new challenges for the effectiveness and legitimacy of EU governance.

The links between the architectures are multifaceted. The EPSR, for example, is integrated into both the Semester and the RRF. The EPSR contributed to the “socialisation” of the Semester, while the Semester supports the monitoring of Member States' social performance in line with the EPSR through the Social Scoreboard.<sup>28</sup> This indicator system uses metrics to monitor how well Member States are performing against social objectives, thereby supporting the integration of the social dimension into EU economic governance. The link between the EPSR and the Semester is clearly visible in the RRF regulation.<sup>29</sup> The preamble states that the Semester, which also incorporates the principles of the EPSR, provides the framework for national reform priorities and their implementation. In practice, this means that the NRRPs must consider the CSRs set out in the Semester and the principles of the EPSR, as well as the consultations carried

<sup>27</sup> The recommendations cover a wide range of social policies, such as vulnerable labour market groups and the self-employed.

<sup>28</sup> European Commission 2026a.

<sup>29</sup> Official Journal of the European Union 2021b.



out with social partners, local authorities and civil society organisations. The Commission will assess the NRRPs taking these aspects into account. This multi-level and multi-instruments approach allows Member States to shape their social policy reforms in line with EU expectations, but in accordance with their own priorities. The Semester and the CSRs set constraints and conditionalities for Member States' reforms, but the soft mechanism of the Semester leaves sufficient room for national considerations and the selection of appropriate policies. On this basis, the RRF provides the necessary funding for implementation.

However, within this extremely complex set of conditions, the RRF does not clearly specify what governance structures it expects Member States to put in place during the implementation. Although the role of the European Commission and Member State governments proved to be crucial during the planning phase, a new coordination logic emerged, linking multiple modes of governance and creating opportunities for Member States and social partners to play an active role in shaping European social policy.<sup>30</sup> Based on the above, the conditionality applied in the RRF like linking access to funds to specific reforms – is not the same as the strict governance represented by the troika (European Central Bank, IMF, European Commission) during the previous crisis. Instead, a more balanced and flexible model is emerging, which, through synergies between architectures, can strengthen the achievement of EU-level social objectives while maintaining flexibility at the national level. However, assessing the success of this system requires looking beyond the governance architecture to the actual allocation of resources. The following analysis investigates whether the RRF's performance-based logic has strengthened social cohesion or if administrative constraints have led to a “cannibalisation” of funds. We will test this by comparing the nominal volume of social investment against the actual strategic focus (primary objectives) of Member States, thereby determining if the “socialisation” of the Semester is translating into practice or remains a bureaucratic exercise.

## **The position and prospects of the social and territorial cohesion pillar in the context of the RRF and cohesion policy**

While supporting recovery, resilience, crisis management, as well as increasing the competitiveness of Member States, the RRF has a key role in fostering economic, social and territorial cohesion in the EU. Accordingly, one of its six pillars is specifically designed to promote social and territorial cohesion. Member States must demonstrate in their NRRPs that the proposed investments and reforms have social and economic impacts on various social groups in line with the principles of the EPSR.

However, geopolitical events, the Russian–Ukrainian war, high inflation, supply chain disruptions and occasional natural disasters have made it difficult for Member States to implement certain reforms and investments set out in their NRRPs. In light

<sup>30</sup> BEKKER 2022; RAINONE 2022; LADI–POLVERARI 2025.



of the changing and uncertain environment, Member States were allowed to amend the relevant measures under Article 21 of the RRF Regulation if objective circumstances made it impossible to achieve the original milestones and targets.<sup>31</sup>

The €723 billion mentioned at the beginning of the paper represented the maximum amount of RRF grants (€338 billion) and RRF loans (€385 billion) under the RRF Regulation.<sup>32</sup> The amended RRF Regulation made additional support available to Member States under the Emissions Trading System (€20 billion) and the Brexit Adjustment Reserve (€2 billion). As a result of these changes, the total financial envelope of the RRF stood at €577 billion at the end of February 2026, divided into €360 billion in grants and €217 billion in loans.<sup>33</sup>

The above-mentioned changes to the structure and allocation of the financial envelope had an impact on the RRF thematic priorities as well as its estimated expenditure.<sup>34</sup> The priorities are structured around six pillars, namely green transition, digital transformation, smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, social and territorial cohesion, health, economic, social and institutional resilience, and policies for next generation. Each NRRP must cover these pillars, taking account of domestic demands as well as its European relevance. However, each measure of the NRRPs contributes towards two of the six policy pillars as the primary and secondary objective of the measure. Therefore, the total contribution to all pillars amounts to 200%, and not to 100% of the RRF funds allocated to Member States.<sup>35</sup>

Taking into account these specific elements and requirements of the RRF Regulation, the estimated costs of each policy pillar have increased in absolute terms, compared to the plans drawn up prior to the amended regulations. Among them, the measures contributing to Pillar 1 (green transition) and Pillar 3 (smart, sustainable and inclusive growth) have been particularly strengthened, and a larger share of the RRF financial envelope currently contributes to these two objectives (Table 1).

The reasons behind these changes can essentially be attributed to two factors. Firstly, the planning process – and in particular the development of the institutional capacities required for implementation and monitoring – entailed higher costs than anticipated. As a result, when amending their NRRPs, Member States began to prefer development measures that were already partially prepared in their national plans, as their implementation entailed less administrative and financial burden for them. Secondly, as the two coexisting EU funding instruments (RRF and cohesion policy) with two different approaches (performance-based and costs-based) largely overlap, it has become necessary to delineate the planned measures from one another in the light of the aforementioned constraints and requirements for implementation.

<sup>31</sup> Official Journal of the European Union 2021b.

<sup>32</sup> Official Journal of the European Union 2021b.

<sup>33</sup> European Commission 2026b.

<sup>34</sup> Both the thematic priorities of the green transition and the digital transition exceeded the targets set in the original legislation (European Commission 2026b).

<sup>35</sup> See details in Annexes VI and VII of the RRF Regulation (Official Journal of the European Union 2021b).



Table 1: Current contribution of the RRF to each policy pillar

RRF pillars											
Green transition		Digital transformation		Economic cohesion, productivity and competitiveness		Social and territorial cohesion		Health, economic, social and institutional resilience		Policies for the next generation	
Share of expenditure (%)		Share of expenditure (%)		Share of expenditure (%)		Share of expenditure (%)		Share of expenditure (%)		Share of expenditure (%)	
Total: 50.7		Total: 24.41		Total: 56.78		Total: 41.03		Total: 17.04		Total: 9.99	
Primary objectives: 37.9	Secondary objectives: 12.79	Primary objectives: 20.18	Secondary objectives: 4.22	Primary objectives: 17.76	Secondary objectives: 39.02	Primary objectives: 11.06	Secondary objectives: 29.58	Primary objectives: 6.35	Secondary objectives: 10.09	Primary objectives: 6.29	Secondary objectives: 3.70

Source: compiled by the author based on European Commission 2026b

As a matter of social cohesion, despite the fact that the RRF does not set a mandatory quota for social spending, the revised NRRPs continue to provide significant support for social and territorial objectives in the areas of education and childcare, employment and vocational training, social policies, and health and long-term care.<sup>36</sup> Most of these fall under the following three RRF pillars: policies for the next generation, social and territorial cohesion, and health, economic, social and institutional resilience. The European Commission's guidance emphasises that measures under the fourth pillar should strengthen cohesion at all levels – local, regional and national – including urban and rural areas.<sup>37</sup> The growing importance of the social dimension is also reflected in the fact that the RRF Regulation empowered the Commission to adopt additional regulations establishing a methodology for social spending, defining common indicators and developing a recovery and resilience scoreboard (hereinafter referred to as the RRF Scoreboard).<sup>38</sup>

Following the review of the NRRPs, 31% of social spending in the broad sense will go to education and childcare, with a further 32% going to investments and reforms in health- and long-term care, 21% to employment and skills, and the remainder to social policies in the narrower sense. Based on this, the estimated total of approximately €162.3 billion in the NRRPs will be spent on social policy measures, accounting for approximately 25% of total estimated expenditure.<sup>39</sup>

The fourth pillar (social and territorial cohesion) accounts for 41.03% of the approved RRF financial envelope, which is the third largest contribution after the first

<sup>36</sup> Member States had to justify how they would contribute to strengthening growth potential, job creation and institutional resilience, including in the areas of education and childcare, employment, social policy and health (European Parliament 2024a).

<sup>37</sup> Social and territorial cohesion are two policy areas covering an extremely broad spectrum. Although Article 3 of the RRF Regulation lists the six pillars of the instrument, it does not specify exactly what types of measures fall under the fourth pillar, i.e. social and territorial cohesion.

<sup>38</sup> Official Journal of the European Union 2021b; Official Journal of the European Union 2021c.

<sup>39</sup> European Commission 2026b.



pillar (green transition) (50.7%) and the third pillar (economic cohesion, productivity and competitiveness) (56.78%). As mentioned earlier, all measures were assigned to two pillars – as the primary and secondary objectives of a measure. Remarkably, measures targeting social and territorial cohesion as their primary objective account for only around 11.46% of the total RRF resources under the fourth pillar.

To illustrate the diversity of national implementation strategies, it is instructive to look at contrasting examples of financial allocation. Poland, for example, appears to have the highest commitment to the fourth pillar with 67.10% of total expenditure; however, a closer look reveals that only 16.44% is tied to primary social objectives.<sup>40</sup> This highlights a significant difference between nominal tagging and actual strategic focus. In contrast, Member States such as Portugal and the Netherlands demonstrate a stronger alignment between their plans and social goals, allocating a relatively large share of expenditure to primary objectives.<sup>41</sup> These cases are included to demonstrate that high social expenditure figures in the NRRPs can mask significantly different levels of substantive commitment to social reform.

This shows that, despite the strong links between the Semester, the EPSR and the RRF, the social impact remains below initial expectations. The data suggests that the RRF has not effectively acted as a strategic tool for social rights. A large portion of funds relies on secondary objectives. This indicates that social goals are often treated as side effects of other projects, such as “hard” infrastructure, rather than the main focus. Consequently, while the total amount of money is high, the depth of actual social reform is limited. Member States preferred low-risk, tangible assets over complex social policies to meet strict deadlines.

Theoretically, the Member States’ commitments and choices among the primary and secondary objectives can be attributed to several factors, such as the diversity of social and development policy models and paradigms represented by Member States, differences in territorial development, or the differing domestic priorities of recovery strategies. However, this study examines only one, albeit key, factor, namely the relationship and interplay between the RRF and EU cohesion policy.

Our starting point is that the RRF significantly increases the share of EU-funded public investment with a cohesion policy profile in the Member States. The diversity of financing instruments gives Member States a high degree of discretion in choosing which instrument to use to finance a given investment. The need to strategically choose between the financial instruments also makes it necessary that it is explicitly prohibited to receive funding from RRF and cohesion policy at the same time. Under these circumstances, the decision may be influenced by several factors, which may point in the direction of “cannibalisation”, demarcation and synergies.<sup>42</sup>

The six pillars of the RRF show a high degree of overlap with the five thematic objectives of cohesion policy for 2021–2027: a more competitive and smarter Europe;

<sup>40</sup> European Commission 2026b.

<sup>41</sup> In case of Portugal, the estimated budget for the fourth pillar is 32.01%, of which 20.38% can be allocated to primary objectives and 11.63% to secondary objectives. Similarly, the Netherlands’ estimated budget for the fourth pillar is 32.12%, of which 20.37% is allocated to primary objectives and 11.75% to secondary objectives (European Commission 2026b).

<sup>42</sup> LOPRIORE 2022; BATCHLER–MENDEZ 2023; BATCHLER et al. 2024.



a greener, low-carbon economy transitioning towards net zero carbon emission; a more connected Europe by enhancing mobility; a more social and inclusive Europe; and a Europe closer to citizens by fostering the sustainable and integrated development of all types of territories. The common ground is formed by the green and digital transitions, smart and inclusive growth, and the link to the EPSR. The interaction between the RRF and cohesion policy is particularly evident in the fourth pillar of the RRF (social and territorial cohesion), which is linked to both the fourth and fifth objectives of cohesion policy (a more social and inclusive Europe; a Europe closer to citizens by fostering the sustainable and integrated development of all types of territories). The realisation of this process would require intense coordination and reconciliation between cohesion policy, the RRF and other territorial development strategies at national level, as well as fine-tuned capacity building in terms of institutions, knowledge and expertise.<sup>43</sup>

The interaction between NRRP and Cohesion Policy governance varies widely across countries in terms of administrative coordination, synergies, resource competition, governance structures and flexibility.<sup>44</sup> Experience to date with the planning and implementation of the RRF and cohesion policy, as well as mid-term evaluations, suggest that Member States are likely to favour investments financed through the RRF due to time pressure and more favourable financing conditions.<sup>45</sup> This is particularly so because, although the two instruments are being implemented in parallel, the eligibility period for the RRF ends in August 2026, while the 2021–2027 multiannual financial framework ends in December 2029. In addition, RRF measures or reforms are 100% financed from the EU budget, while national or regional co-financing applies in the case of cohesion policy.

The short-term “cannibalisation effect” of the RRF is reinforced by the existence of a “single project pipeline” at Member State level, i.e. a limited number of projects that Member States intend to implement in the coming years and for which national administrations have limited capacity. In addition, in many countries, the same authorities are responsible for implementing both cohesion policy and the RRF, which increases the pressure on their administrative capacity.

The Czech Republic has seen competition between the frameworks for similarly focused projects and administrative resources. In Romania, the NRRP has overshadowed Cohesion Policy, leading to concerns about ministerial ability to manage both frameworks effectively. Poland’s organisational changes following the NRRP’s launch have also drawn resources away from Cohesion Policy. In Germany, more favourable state aid conditions under the RRF are perceived to have led to some shifts in investment away from Cohesion Policy.<sup>46</sup>

The coexistence of performance-based (“what have we achieved with our money?”) and cost-based (“how much have we spent?”) approaches to the RRF and cohesion policy has further exacerbated this situation. In case of cohesion policy, the co-financing requirement and, in case of the RRF, the focus on investments have placed a heavy burden on Member States’ absorption capacity.

<sup>43</sup> KAISER 2023b: 17.

<sup>44</sup> BATCHLER–MENDEZ 2023: 20.

<sup>45</sup> European Commission 2024a; European Commission 2024b.

<sup>46</sup> BATCHLER et al. 2024: 25.



Some Member States – including Belgium, Latvia, France, Germany and Portugal – have developed specific demarcation strategies, and the literature has identified various approaches in this regard.<sup>47</sup> In thematic demarcation, certain areas of funding are reserved exclusively for the RRF. For example, in Germany, the RRF has restricted the scope of Cohesion programmes, with a clear division established between RRF and Cohesion Policy funding in areas like energy efficiency and hydrogen. This type of demarcation is significantly influenced by the regulatory framework, as the RRF can also support sectors that do not typically fall within the scope of the cohesion policy, such as the justice sector. In case of territorial demarcation, the RRF and cohesion policy focus on different types of geographical regions, demarcation based on the type of beneficiary establishes priorities between, among others, public and private organisations, and temporal demarcation refers to the timing of the use of resources between the RRF and cohesion policy. Belgium is a good example of a mixed approach, where Flanders aligns themes between Structural Funds and the NRRP, while Brussels and Wallonia develop complementary but different programme guidelines.<sup>48</sup>

As far as synergies and complementary effects are concerned, national authorities are responsible for ensuring the harmonious cooperation of the two instruments within the RRF regulatory framework. Estonia has aligned both frameworks, particularly in green and digital investments, using shared management systems. Cyprus is addressing absorption targets by coordinating projects under both frameworks. While the Finnish RRP and Cohesion Policy programmes were designed to address different areas of support, (e.g. broadband will only be supported by the RRP), synergies between instruments are still evident.<sup>49</sup>

As the partnership agreements ensuring the implementation of cohesion policy were still at an early stage of development, the NRRPs could only provide a brief description of how the developments planned under the RRF and cohesion policy complement each other. In addition to the tight planning timeframe, other challenges included the priority given to RRF implementation, discrepancies between the economic rationale and governance structure of the two instruments, the marginal territorial dimension of the RRF, and the aforementioned limitations of institutional and absorption capacities.

The number of reforms and investments related to the pillars of the RRF (Table 2) provides a useful analytical framework for analysing the relationship between the RRF and cohesion policy based on the previously mentioned three options: demarcation, cannibalisation and synergy.

<sup>47</sup> LOPRIORE 2022: 2–3.

<sup>48</sup> BATCHLER–MENDEZ 2023: 21.

<sup>49</sup> BATCHLER–MENDEZ 2023: 20–21.



Table 2: The overall number of reforms and investments related to the pillars of the RRF

RRF pillars	Reforms	Investments
Green transition	682	2,000
Digital transformation	515	1,500
Smart, sustainable and inclusive growth	1,200	1,800
Social and territorial cohesion	877	1,600
Health and economic, social and institutional resilience	2,000	682
Policies for the next generation	231	353

Source: compiled by the author based on European Commission 2026b

A good example is a comparison of the second and fourth pillars. Investments in social and territorial cohesion rank third in terms of volume, close to digital transformation. However, if we compare the number of investments with the budget shares in Table 1, it appears that the digital transformation pillar achieved this volume with a smaller budget (24.41% vs. 41.3%), but with a much higher proportion of expenditure allocated to primary objectives (20.18% vs. 11.46%). To understand this, it is worth considering that the primary objectives mentioned earlier are related to the reform/investment in general, while secondary objectives are intended to achieve spillover effects for specific target groups or for a specific branch of the primary objectives. It can therefore be concluded that Member States generally preferred “hard” infrastructure projects as primary objectives, that had already been prepared in advance.<sup>50</sup> As a result, even within the relatively short project timeline, the strictly defined milestones and objectives established in the NRRPs can be achieved with relatively low risk.

This demarcation methodology between primary and secondary objectives can be observed in both pillars under examination. However, digital transformation – due to the high funding rate of the primary objectives – may also involve the “cannibalisation” of some of the digitisation developments that are potentially eligible for support under the cohesion framework. The eligible actions under the social and cohesion pillar, projects in the investment area of territorial infrastructure and services account for around 66% of the overall costs of the pillar.<sup>51</sup> Given the small proportion of funds allocated to primary objectives (11.06%) and, in contrast, the relatively large number of investments (1,600), the much higher budget share of secondary objectives suggests that Member States tend to link RRF-funded developments to cohesion policy objectives, programmes and projects. In other words, in this case, rather than “cannibalisation” and demarcation, interactions and synergies may form the basis for planning. This is also shown by the fact that, according to the Commission’s assessment, only nine Member States’ NRRPs identify more than three development components that are fundamentally linked to the social and territorial cohesion pillar.<sup>52</sup> The case of Poland is particularly instructive in this respect. Here, the ratio of expenditure under the primary and secondary objectives is 69.80%, but only 17.85% of this is linked to the primary objectives. However, the

<sup>50</sup> BOKHORST–CORTI 2024: 726–727.

<sup>51</sup> European Commission 2026b.

<sup>52</sup> European Parliament 2024b: 14.



Commission's assessment also questions this, stating that none of the six development components identified in the Polish NRRP under the social and territorial cohesion pillar contribute significantly to the objectives of the pillar.<sup>53</sup>

## Conclusions

Assessing the social situation in the European Union has become a key issue, particularly in times of crisis. Economic shocks – from the 2008–2009 financial crisis to the Eurozone debt crisis of 2010–2015 and the Covid-19 pandemic – have strongly highlighted that social protection is not only a national but also an increasingly EU challenge. It was in this context that the EPSR emerged as a new orientation framework which, although not legally binding, has nevertheless created new priorities in the social dimension, particularly in the areas of employment, social inclusion and welfare services. The EPSR is not a revolutionary breakthrough in itself but rather offers a longer-term social narrative for the EU. In response to the complex effects of Covid-19, the NGEU was established in July 2020, and the most important innovative feature of the RRF is that it links access to grants and loans to forward-looking reforms and investment plans aimed at promoting the EU's economic, social and territorial cohesion and supporting the green and digital transitions.

The Semester, i.e. the linking of the EPSR and RRF governance architectures, has created an opportunity to give European economic governance a more social dimension, primarily through the European Semester mechanism. This has had a positive impact by facilitating Member States' ability to comply with the CSRs of the Semester through pre-financing provided in the context of the recovery from the pandemic. Approximately 25% of the RRF budget is allocated to social measures. Within this, the social and territorial cohesion pillar is the third largest expenditure after the green transition and smart, sustainable and inclusive growth pillars.

Budgetary expenditure and general objectives will be assessed during the implementation process. In other words, can the new EU financial instrument (additional EU funding) contribute to the EU's social and territorial cohesion, and if so, to what extent? Mid-term evaluations of the implementation of the RRF show that, during the planning process, Member States successfully coordinated the rule-based and monetary-based instruments of the EPSR, the Semester and the RRF. At the same time, the implementation of the RRF has placed a greater than expected burden on the institutional, administrative and absorption capacities of Member States, particularly at local and regional levels. However, the lack of a territorial dimension to the RRF raised concerns about increasing regional disparities between Member States, particularly if investments are more likely to flow to regions with stronger institutional frameworks and growth potential.

<sup>53</sup> The counterexample is Italy, where 11 of the 16 development components identified under the social and territorial cohesion pillar are significantly linked to the pillar's objectives, according to the Commission's assessment (European Parliament 2024b: 12).



Another contradiction arises from the fact that the performance logic of the RRF makes Member States interested in meeting their commitments on time, but rigid timetables that are unable to respond to changes in external circumstances tend to shift the implementation process towards compliance with formal criteria. In the near future, it will also be necessary to clarify the relationship between the RRF and cohesion policy, which is urgent and relevant in view of the preparations for the EU budgetary period after 2027.

Our analysis shows that despite the integrated approach of the Semester, the EPSR and the RRF in terms of their perspectives and governance architecture, the weight, influence and expected impact of the social and territorial dimensions in Member States' implementation fall short of initial expectations. This is largely due to the unclear relationship between the RRF and cohesion policy, which could lead to cannibalisation, synergies and complementary effects, or thematic and temporal demarcation. According to the NRRPs, investments under the social and territorial cohesion pillar show that Member States have preferred infrastructure and service developments related to "hard infrastructure" that can be implemented with relatively low risk, while other developments are more dependent on the implementation of cohesion policy.

These issues have also emerged in the debate on the future of cohesion policy. The design and implementation of the RRF raise several questions related to the management and disbursement of EU funding and the role of structural reforms. Given the temporary nature of the RRF, it is particularly important to identify which innovations can be applied and inspire the next EU budgetary programming period. To this end, further research is needed to examine the implementation of Member States' NRRPs, in particular the extent to which they have integrated the principles of the EPSR, whether they have aligned detailed social programmes with the green and digital transitions, or whether they have merely made formal references without any substantive commitment. A limitation of this study is that, as Member States are at different stages of implementation, we can only assume that the depth and quality of social investments and reforms vary across countries and only partially follow the EPSR indicator system or objectives.

In conclusion, we believe that it is crucial for the future that the link between the EPSR and the EU's development policy RRF does not remain a symbolic reference, but that it is given a real strategic steering role in European economic and social coordination processes. To this end, more effective monitoring of social indicators and the effectiveness of reforms, closer links with national budgetary and policy-making processes, and the provision of sustainable financial resources for social and territorial investments in the post-NGEU period appear necessary.

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