

# To Rome and back: A peculiar case of institutional Europeanization in Italian Regional Policy

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## Abstract

The importance of EU Cohesion Policy for European integration remains particularly crucial in times of economic downturn. However, the impact of its resources varies across regions; in the case of Italy, severe delays and disappointing levels in spending have long been an issue for all involved actors in a multi-level governance context.

An institutional reform has recently attempted to tackle part of these problems through the creation of an Agency for Territorial Cohesion, whose main function is to provide territories with direct technical support in their operational functions; an additional clause allowing the institution to assume “substitutive powers” in severe and circumscribed cases of non-fulfillment represents an innovation in the landscape of Cohesion Policy, given its strong emphasis on the “partnership” principle traditionally conferring crucial importance to sub-national governance levels.

The reform is therefore analyzed from a Europeanization perspective, investigating the factors of policy change that have led to its ideation, formulation and adoption over the time span between November 2011 and October 2013. In fact, by relying on a process-tracing technique corroborated by interviews with some of the main policy actors involved, results show that the primary factor of change was the newly appointed Minister of Territorial Cohesion: his extensive and high-level experience both at the domestic and at the European level together with his distinctive policy entrepreneurship can indeed be seen as an illustration of Putnam’s “two-level game” theory.

The compliance pressures exerted by the European Union have also been a contributing factor of change, sharing and strongly encouraging the direction set by the Ministry, and resolving the apparent contradiction between the “partnership” principle and the reinforcement of central coordination within the multi-level governance framework of Cohesion Policy. On the other hand, Governors of Italian Regions across a diversified political spectrum have emerged as a mediating factor, conditioning the final outcome of the reform to a slightly diluted –although fundamentally preserved – version of the Agency’s scope and power.

The analysis concludes with an overview of future implementation challenges faced by the new institution in the constantly evolving Italian political landscape.