



# Regional diversity in experiences of cohesion policy: The cases of Emilia-Romagna and Calabria

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## Abstract

This paper aims to provide new evidence on the role played by the local contexts in the implementation of Cohesion Policy, by means of a comparative analysis of the experiences of the Italian regions of Emilia-Romagna and Calabria. Through a deep examination of the 2007–2013 programming period, focus groups with the Cohesion Policy practitioners complemented with document analysis, this work shows how political (in)stability, political entrepreneurship and administrative (in)capacity shaped the patterns of Cohesion Policy implementation in the two regions, thus supporting the idea that institutional arrangements of Cohesion Policy should better account for the diversity of local contexts.

## KEYWORDS

Cohesion Policy, governance, Local Managing Authority, multilevel governance, Partnership

## JEL CLASSIFICATION

R58; P48

## 1 | INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE

The European Union's Cohesion Policy (CP) has recently turned thirty. Over these years, scholars from different fields have paid increasing attention to CP, a sign of its evolution in terms of both size and scope. However, the huge

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amount of studies produced is largely inconclusive on the overall impact of CP in less developed regions (Crescenzi & Giua, 2018). Prompted by the place-based approach to development policy (Barca, 2009; OECD, 2009) and the increasing emphasis on local contexts, scholars have thus shifted their attention from the evaluation of the “total” impact of CP to the understanding of the conditioning factors that explain where, when and how policy is effective (Fratesi & Wishlade, 2017), such as quality of government (Rodríguez-Pose & Garcilazo, 2015) and territorial capital (Fratesi & Perucca, 2019).

CP is a complex and a long-term policy. A key issue for its success lies in the performances of both national and regional administrative bodies, which are primarily responsible for giving to the policy's two distinctive traits, multi-level governance and partnership, practical operationalization. However, the capacity of CP's crucial actors, namely, the regions, in becoming active partners have been widely different because of the differences in the administrative roles of their governments and a number of other domestic factors, providing *a posteriori* confirmation to scholars' early warnings on the importance of the local governance system (see Bailey & De Propriis, 2002; Hooghe, 1998).

This paper aims to understand how local factors such as political (in)stability, political entrepreneurship and administrative (in)capacity can shape the patterns of CP implementation. Above all, shedding light on these links is crucial considering the current historical and political contingency and the ongoing debate on the new programming period (2021–2027). Unlike other papers that focused on the relationship between the local mediating factors and the effectiveness of CP, this paper investigates how the mediating factors at regional levels affect the multi-level governance system (MLG) and the partnership principle (PP). Its originality stems also in the selections of the case studies: two very different regions, in terms of economic, political and social characteristics, belonging to the same country.

The capacity to adapt to the MLG system and PP can be differentiated at national or regional level as illustrated by the case of Italy. In its Northern regions PP and MLG could rely on the pre-existing networks and strong regional institutions yet, generally, in the *Mezzogiorno* the application of PP and MLG faced difficulties due to a lack of co-operative culture and limited administrative capacity (Kelleher, Batterbury, & Stern, 1999).

Italy as a country is an interesting case study because of the very different development patterns it displays across its regions, with a North/South division which has been deeply influencing the CP performance.

The evidence on the effect of local contexts on the delivery system of CP is collected through the analysis of the planning and implementation stages of CP in two *most similar yet dissimilar cases*: one – Calabria – embodying the problem *par excellence* of EU regional policy, Southern Italy (Manzella & Mendez, 2009), and one—Emilia-Romagna—that despite being considered as a benchmark among practitioners of CP has yet to receive attention from scholars.

Relying on several data sources, the study employs a qualitative analysis, whose bulk is provided by two focus groups with selected practitioners and experts of CP in the two regions.

The investigation over the implementation of the operational programmes (OP) in the 2007–2013 programming period makes it possible to see how different endowments of the same factors lead to different outcomes while at the same time allowing for the identification of parallel processes.

The paper is organized as follows: Section 2 presents the theoretical framework underpinning the analysis, the related literature and the research hypothesis; Section 4 offers a description of the two case-study regions as regards their socio-economic, political and institutional context; Section 5 presents and discusses the results of the qualitative analysis as well as details on the methodologies and data utilized; Section 5 offers concluding remarks and policy recommendations.

## 2 | THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS

The theoretical framework of this paper draws on the strands of literature that focus on: (i) the delivery system of CP; (ii) the broader processes of Europeanization in EU Member States; and (iii) the place-based approach to regional development. The common theme of these lines of study lies in the MLG system and the PP, two



cornerstones of CP whose theoretical basis are to be found in the subsidiarity principle that aims at fostering close co-operation between European, national and sub-national authorities and bodies involved in the entire policy process.

While vertical co-ordination (MLG) focuses on the co-operation between authorities at different tiers of government, horizontal co-operation (PP) refers to actors located at the same administrative level. Both dimensions involve a mix of formal and informal relations. Within the context of CP, vertical co-ordination is mostly based on relations of the first kind, as the co-operation between different levels tends to rely on formal structures with a hierarchized division of roles and principal/agent schemes whereby higher authorities set frameworks, rules and targets to be reached by lower tiers (Bachtler & Ferry, 2013; Dettmer & Sauer, 2019). Horizontal co-ordination, on the other hand, is more reliant on voluntary participation (Davoudi, Evans, Governa, & Santangelo, 2008) and aims at facilitating the integration of policies.

MLG system was first defined as “a system of continuous negotiation among nested governments at several territorial tiers, in which supranational, national, regional and local governments are enmeshed in territorially overarching policy networks” (Marks, 1993, 401–402). MLG has been widely debated among scholars. On the one hand, some believe it to favour co-operation between multiple territorial levels, to adjust more efficiently to the heterogeneity of preferences among citizens and to facilitate policy innovation and experimentation (Marks & Hooghe, 2004); others highlight its role in enhancing public control over the political processes, transparency in the project selection and effectiveness in the programme's implementation and monitoring (Kelleher et al., 1999; Leonardi, 2005). On the other hand, critics of MLG confute both its validity as a theoretical construct and its practical consequences, pointing to its definitional murkiness (Tortola, 2017). According to this group of scholars, instead of promoting participation and co-operation across different segments of society, MLG generates conflicts between parties involved (Stephenson, 2013).

Both perspectives are correct. It is the paradox of shared responsibility that makes the MLG's key strengths also its main weaknesses (Bovens, 1998; Milió, 2014): the inclusion in policy-making of actors that had been previously uninvolved increases political participation, yet higher plurality makes attribution of responsibilities more opaque, with negative consequences for the overall accountability of the political system (Leonardi, 2005; Papadopoulos, 2007). What seems uncontested, though, is that far from being only a technical matter, both MLG and partnership have strong political repercussions, whose starting and ending point are largely dependent on the local contexts (Bache, 2010): the same processes of construction, diffusion and institutionalization of formal and informal rules, driven from the European side down to the sub-national level, can lead to opposite outcomes.

The second strand focuses on Europeanization, a process defined as “the reorientation or reshaping of politics in the domestic arena in ways that reflect policies, practices or preferences advanced through the EU system of governance” (Bache, 2008:32). The principles of CP have deeply impacted on local institutions: if the discourse on MLG emphasizes power-sharing and the dispersion of authority, the one on Europeanization focuses on the dynamics of mutual adjustments made by institutions as a result of multi-level interactions (Stephenson, 2013), dynamics whose nature, timing and tempo, the literature suggests, are influenced by mediating factors determined at domestic level (Bache, 2008; Cowles, Caporaso, & Risse-Kappen, 2001).

Finally, the focus on the local factors and the mechanisms enabling the active participation of regional interests in the policy process provided the linkage between the literature on MLG and that on Europeanization (Stephenson, 2013), as well as a connection between these two strands and the place-based discourse, which eventually accentuated the territorial turn in regional development policies. The place-based approach (Barca, 2009) led to focusing on regions' specific assets and the capacity to fully mobilize them, thereby putting additional emphasis on local contexts.

The centrality of domestic factors calls for in-depth analyses of local experiences of CP. Unfortunately, being these processes complex and multi-faceted, empirical works are scarce (Kull & Tatar, 2015); yet, the few available studies, which focus on a single case-study or on units of analysis sharing institutional or historical traits, provide interesting insights on the mediating effects of domestic factors on the implementation of CP.



A pioneering study of Piattoni and Smyrl, (2003), focused on the political contexts of selected regions in Northern and Southern Italy, show how the behaviour of the political classes impacted on the efficiency in the use of Structural Funds. The importance of the political conditions is also highlighted by Milio, (2007), who found political stability to be a major driver of administrative capacity within the regional authorities managing the Structural Funds' implementation in Sicily and Basilicata.

Beside the great within-country variability that is traditionally associated with any economic and social phenomenon, what makes the Italian case of particular interest is the parallelism between Europeanization and the devolution process that took place in the 1990s: Graziano, (2010) shows how CP exerted a major role in reshaping the space of local politics in the Southern regions, making political parties more regionalised and favouring the involvement of local stakeholders. The outcomes of this process, as argued by Milio, (2014), varied from place to place according to the different endowments of the local mediating factors.

A second group of studies looks at countries and regions with a socialist legacy. Focusing on the implementation of the PP in three Eastern European regions, Dąbrowski, (2014) shows how the initially interest-driven involvement of stakeholders tends to evolve into a full internalization of the PP through the processes of thick learning spurred by joint collaborations. Similar results are found by Potluka and Liddle, (2014), who study the performance of partnership in the ESF Czech Republic's National OP. Other studies have focused on the implementation stage, highlighting how the partnership can be hindered by the highly technical, practical and financial standards required for active participation (Perron, 2014) and by practitioners' practices and past experiences (Sbaraglia, 2016). Surubaru, (2017, p. 853), while analysing how administrative capacity and political factors influence CP implementation in Romania and Bulgaria, argues that "domestic political arrangements facilitate, or hinder, the development of domestic administrative capacities and could have a positive stimulus for the policy processes affiliated to the absorption of EU funds."

Our work contributes to enrich this research line by bringing new empirical evidence on the functioning of the MLG system and PP. In particular, it shows that political (in)stability, administrative (in)capacity and political entrepreneurship strongly affect the structure and the evolution of both MLG and PP.

Political stability positively influences MLG and PP as it ensures continuity, coherence and sustainability of both policy actions and administrative procedures. Moreover, as underlined by several authors (Bachtler & McMaster, 2008; Milio, 2008; Smyrl, 1997), political stability can also affect the region's administrative capacity, thus ensuring the continuity and coherence required for a successful implementation of CP.

Following Milio, (2007) and Surubaru, (2017), we define administrative capacity as a mix of institutional, bureaucratic and human resources capabilities that countries or regions can leverage on in order to manage SFs policy and resources. Such a concept thus encompasses many key factors of the countries' ability to adopt EU policies (Hille & Knill, 2006) and to manage EU financial resources (Bachtler & Ferry, 2013; Dąbrowski, 2012; Horvat & Maier, 2004). Indeed, administrative capacity can positively affect MLG and partnership by facilitating co-ordination between the actors and the bodies involved with CP, and by making bureaucracy understandable and effective.

Finally, we sustain that political entrepreneurship is positive for the effectiveness of MLG and PP as it facilitates the networking and the involvement of the regional social and economic stakeholders, while also encouraging the adoption of innovative approaches.

Following Smyrl, (1997), we consider political entrepreneurship as the ability of political leaders to give European programs public priority and adequate amount of administrative and political resources. A political entrepreneur is thus that politician/bureaucrat from the public sector which successfully adopts innovative approaches to encourage entrepreneurship and whose goals are growth, employment and common good (Karlsson, Silander, & Silander, 2016).

The contribution of this paper is twofold: the first stems from the approach in the selection of the case-studies. The only thing that Emilia-Romagna and Calabria have in common is the institutional framework that derives from being part of the same country, yet the local contexts could not be more diverse. This allows for the identification of the specificities of the local contexts and the isolation of their mediating effects.



Secondly, unlike other papers that shed light on the relationship between the local mediating factors and the effectiveness of CP, this paper investigates how the mediating factors at regional levels affect MLG and PP, thus allowing us to disentangle the impacts of local contexts on policy implementation.

The following section serves the purposes of introducing the case-study regions, providing a general background for the comparative analysis as well as additional arguments for the validity of such an approach.

### 3 | CASE-STUDIES' PRESENTATION

#### 3.1 | Regional development policy in Italy and devolution process

Since the unification of the country in 1861, Italy has been marked by territorial socio-economic inequalities. The Italian economic boom from the 1950s to the late 1960s helped reduce the economic gap between the richer North-West of the country and the poorer North-East and centre areas, but the failure in bringing the industrialization process to the Southern regions (the so-called *Mezzogiorno*) led the central government to enact the first regional development Italian policy through a rigid top-down approach. The *Intervento Straordinario* (Extraordinary Intervention, 1950–1992) in Southern Italy was characterized by a peculiar institutional setting: an *ad hoc* agency was created, the *Cassa per il Mezzogiorno* (Fund for the South).

The *Cassa per il Mezzogiorno* largely failed in its mission to reduce the divide. As the incentives were being funnelled to large, capital-intensive projects, the policy became a mere tool to compensate firms for the external diseconomies related to the unfavourable location. Such a centralised, top-down policy setting gave room to opportunistic behaviours by both local and national political actors, with funding being used to gain electoral consensus (Triglia, 2012). Within this framework, civil society and private partnership were seen solely as beneficiaries of misused economic resources, with no space for any form of multi-level or multi-actor governance, or for any focus on subsidiaries or partnership (Milio, 2014).

Europeanization abruptly changed this picture. In 1992, in order to adapt the domestic institutions and regulations to the new CP framework, the *Intervento Straordinario* and its agencies were suppressed. A new development strategy was enacted which aimed at propelling a bottom-up mechanism for development. Such approach culminated in the Community Support Framework 2000–2006, aimed at improving the material and immaterial infrastructures and increasing the historically scarce social capital of Southern regions (see Putnam, Leonardi, & Nanetti, 1993) by fostering endogenous development and valorising the local actors.

However, as underlined by La Spina (2012), among the supposed beneficiaries of the new strategy there was the same local political class who had profited from the previous “rainfall subsidy” to reinforce its political power. Within the new framework, still, these local elites were able to maintain their role of mediator in the allocation of public resources. The change of paradigm had in the hostility of the local political context its main obstacle: the new strategy could not be fully enacted and, instead of promoting the new approach to development policy, the European resources functioned as replacements of national funding, with substantial neglect of the additionality principle.

#### 3.2 | Case-studies' regions: current polity and socio-economic context

Emilia-Romagna, in the North-East of Italy, and Calabria, in the South of Italy, are regions with ordinary status (*regioni a statuto ordinario*<sup>1</sup>): initially endowed only with administrative powers, they received more legislative and executive autonomy following the devolution process that was fostered by the adoption of CP (La Spina, 2003). From a formal point of view, the governance of CP in Emilia-Romagna and Calabria is very similar (Table 1).

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<sup>1</sup>The institution of the regions with special status (“*regioni a statuto speciale*”) dates back to the aftermath of World War Two and was justified by either historical-geographic or ethno-linguistic reasons. These are: Sicily, Sardinia, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Valle d’Aosta, Trento and Bolzano.

**TABLE 1** ROP authorities in Emilia-Romagna and Calabria

	Managing authority	Certifying authority	Audit authority
Emilia-Romagna	Directorate-general for culture, education and employment (ESF) directorate-general for industry, trade and tourism (ERDF)	Directorate-general for financial resources	Directorate-general for territorial and negotiated planning, agreements, European relations and international relations
Calabria	Department for labour, family policies, vocational training, co-operation and volunteer work (ESF) Department for National and Community Programming (ERDF)	Budget and asset department - general accounting sector	Presidency of the regional cabinet

In this type of setting, regional governments have full responsibility over the implementation of the Structural Funds, and the role of the central government is limited to general co-ordination of the Funds, higher level Commission negotiation, inter-ministerial co-ordination and evaluation of good practice.

With respect to the institutional framework, the analysis of the cases of Calabria and Emilia-Romagna thus follows a most similar system design (Della Porta & Keating, 2008).

However, when focusing on the local contexts and on the regions' endowments of the key factors that impact on the implementation of CP, Calabria and Emilia-Romagna are well-suitable for the most dissimilar system design perspective, starting from their socio-economic features (Table 2): the former is a convergence region belonging to Southern Italy, it ranks among the most underdeveloped regions with a GDP *per capita* below the European Union's average and is characterized by a weak and fragmented productive system; the latter is a competitiveness region located in the developed Northern Italy, with a *per capita* income that is among the highest in Italy and in the 25% of the richest European regions, a dynamic and export-oriented economy.

The two regions' reaction to the economic crisis was very different. Between 2007 and 2016 Emilia-Romagna's rate of GDP growth doubled Italy's one, while Calabria's was negative. Despite a significant increase in the period of observation, the unemployment rate in Emilia-Romagna in 2016 was still below the European and Italian average, and equal to a third of Calabria's one.

The different socio-economic situations and needs are reflected in the regions' different development strategies.

The policies differ in terms of both financial resources and type of projects to be implemented.

In the 2007–2013 programming period, the main goals of Calabria region—as stated in the Regional Operational Programmes (ROPs)—were to foster growth and employment by investing in new transport, environmental and energy infrastructures, and to increase participation in the labour market by enhancing human capital.

Hence, the initial budget allocated more resources to the ERD. (just below three billion euros) than to the European Social Fund (ESF) (about a billion euro), for a total of about four billion (Table 4).

**TABLE 2** Regional indicators on socio-economic cohesion

Region	PPS per inhabitant (2016)	GDP per inhabitant in % of the EU avg (2016)	Population (million, 2016)	Employment rate (2016)	Unemployment rate (2016)	GDP growth (2007–2016)
Emilia-Romagna	35,300	119	4.45	68.4%	7%	9.33%
Calabria	17,100	58	1.97	39.6%	23.2%	–0.6%
Italy	28,200	95	60.67	57.2%	11.7%	4.41%
EU-28	29,200	100	510.28	66.6%	8.6%	14.7%

Source: Eurostat.



The picture in Emilia-Romagna region (Table 3) was completely different: the initial budget amounted to about one billion (€347 million for the ERDF and €806 million for the ESF), and the keywords of its development strategy were innovation, development, knowledge, social cohesion and job qualification.

However, in 2013 a change in the overall budget occurred in both regions as a consequence of the economic crisis, whose effects in Italy lasted longer than in other EU countries following a severe second wave of recession in 2011. Emilia-Romagna used to have a production and employment system framework that was, on average, more competitive than other Italian regions and well placed in the European context. That scenario changed dramatically between 2007 and 2013, when the unemployment rate, which had traditionally been at frictional levels, rose from 2.8% to 8.4%. To face the economic and social consequences of the crisis, the regional government opted to leverage on the ERDF ROP to support the productive system and on the ESF ROP to strengthen the social welfare. In agreement with the EU authorities, the local managing authorities (LMAs) were allowed to extend the range of interventions and the audience of beneficiaries. A special fund was also set up with the aim to help companies overcome the credit crunch. The second shock was the earthquake of May 2012, which struck one of the region's most productive areas. In this case, the changes concerned the ERDF ROP structure and involved actions aimed at maintaining the competitiveness level of the economic system, in order to avoid delocalization and facilitate the reinstatement of business activities. The financial allocation was also increased (Table 3), with 36 million euro coming from the

**TABLE 3** Emilia-Romagna: Overview of political elections, turnover of involved practitioners, ROPs financial implementation

Legislature	President of Emilia-Romagna	Political party	Head of the MA (ERDF)	Percentage of certified expenditure over OP's commitment ERDF	Total amount ERDF (mln €)	Head of the MA (ESF)	Percentage of certified expenditure over OP's commitment ESF	Total amount ESF (mln €)
04/2005 VIII	Errani	PD	-	-	-	-	-	-
01/2007			Diazzi	-	347	Balboni	-	806
03/2008				-			-	
05/2010 IX	Errani	PD		6.3%			9.7%	
05/2011				20.4%			23.7%	
05/2012				35%			48%	
05/2013				54%	383		58%	847
05/2014				72.6%			70.3%	
07/2014 IX	In 2012, Errani is under investigation for fraudulent misrepresentation: the impeachment is for providing misleading information to the investigating magistrate. In 2014 Errani is sentenced to one year of imprisonment. Following this condemnation he resigns as president of the region. On 21 June 2016 he was definitively acquitted by the Court of Appeal of Bologna							
07/2014 IX	Saliera	PD						
12/2014 X	Bonaccini	PD		77.8%			80.6%	
05/2015				82%			83%	
02/2016						Diazzi		
ERDF and ESF share the same managing authority (decision of the regional government 285/2016)								
07/2016				110%			102%	
03/2017				132.8%			103%	

Source: Own elaborations based on information on legal documents and data from OpenCoesione.



**TABLE 4** Calabria: Overview of political elections, turnover of involved practitioners, ROPs financial implementation

	Legislature	President of Calabria	Political party	Head LMA ERDF	Percentage of certified expenditure over OP's commitment ERDF	Total amount ERDF (mln €)	Head MA ESF	Percentage of certified expenditure over OP's commitment ESF	Amount ESF (mln €)
04/2005	VIII	Loiero	PD		-	-	-	-	-
01/2007				Orlando	-	2,998.24	Marino	-	860.50
03/2008					-		Carnevale	-	
05/2010	IX	Scopelliti	PDL		6%			6.4%	
06/2010				Tavano	6%			6.4%	
07/2010					6%		Calvetta	6.4%	
05/2011					8.93%			11,7%	
05/2012					16.7%	2,918.24		25.4%	
12/2012					24.4%	2,544.74		41.5%	800.50
05/2013				Rizzo	24.4%	2,545.06		48.2%	
08/2013				Praticò	31.3%	1,998.83		56%	
04/2014	IX	Scopelliti is arrested (April 2014). and convicted (April 2018). for forging official documents.							
05/2014	IX	Stasi	NCD		36.5%		Caserta	59.5%	
12/2014					59.6%			75.8%	690.65
01/2015	X	Oliverio	PD		59.6%			75.8%	
03/2015					59.6%		De Marco	75.8%	
05/2015					59.6%			75.8%	
09/2015					62.5%		Praticò	91.4%	573.67
ERDF and ESF share the same managing authority (decision of the regional government n.346 24/09/2015)									
10/2015					62.5%			91.4%	
07/2016					69.1%			91.4%	
03/2017					103%			93.2%	

Source: Own elaborations based on information on legal documents and data from OpenCoesione.

“solidarity contribution”. The same happened to the ESF ROP, that received an additional over 40 million euro from other competitiveness objective regions of Italy.

Therefore, while Emilia-Romagna saw an increase in the allocation of resources to the ROPs, Calabria, on the other hand, experienced a significant a reduction (Table 4). Between September 2012 and December 2013 three major amendments were carried out with the aim to avoid the decommitment of the financial resources.<sup>2</sup> On the one hand, they aimed at increasing the efficiency of the ERDF ROP by moving resources from less performing axes to more performing ones; on the other, they solved the problem of the lack of national resources by decreasing the national co-financing rate down to 25%. With the EU co-funding being kept unvaried in absolute terms, the overall funding of the ERDF ROP was reduced by about 1 billion euro, for a final size of approximately 2 billion euro.

Despite the amendments, at the end of 2014 Calabria had still spent just over half of its ERDF resources and two

<sup>2</sup>(C(9693) of 17 December 2012, C(2871) of 27 May 2013, C(8724) of 17 December 2013).





thirds of the ESF budget. The newly-elected President decided to enforce a special action plan (*Piano d'Azione per l'Efficienza della Spesa*<sup>3</sup>), aimed at inducing efficiency-oriented structural changes in the governance and in the implementation of the programs.

By the end of March 2017, the deadline for submitting reimbursement requests, the LMA managed to reach 100% of the initial allocation. However, this figure was inflated by the use of the so-called *retrospective projects*, which eventually amounted to 44% of the total financial allocation (Corte dei Conti, 2017). These projects consist of the practice of a managing authority of awarding a EU grant to a project which has already incurred significant expenditure or has already been completed, and has received support from national funds. The regulations do not explicitly prohibit retrospective projects, but their use is viewed as a clear sign of the lack of capacity planning and incapacity to absorb European Funds (European Commission, 2011).

How were these adjustments influenced by the regions' governance systems? What do the trajectories of Emilia-Romagna and Calabria teach us about the influence of local context on the implementation of CP? The next section presents the results of this analysis and tries to answer these questions.

## 4 | QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

### 4.1 | Data sources

The in-depth analysis and qualitative research is based on two main data sources and information. The first is document analysis, that is, primary and secondary source documentation related to the regions' 2007–2013 programming period. National, regional and European official reports were analysed<sup>4</sup> and complemented with two focus groups with selected practitioners and experts of CP in Emilia-Romagna and Calabria (Aiello, Reverberi, & Brasili, 2019).

The focus group<sup>5</sup> were held in February 2017, with the participation of eight people both in Calabria and in Emilia-Romagna. They aimed to explore the perceptions of the policy practitioners of the multilevel governance system and the effectiveness of Cohesion Policy. In Calabria most participants covered managerial functions within Calabria Region. Among these were an official of the monitoring sector and a project manager of an in house providing financial institute. In Emilia-Romagna the participants were five members of the LMA working at departments or institutions heading the Emilia-Romagna region, two members of CP beneficiaries and one director of a company providing consultancy services to Structural Funds beneficiaries.

As shown in the previous section, Emilia-Romagna and Calabria shared the same institutional framework. Within this framework, the different endowments of the local mediating factors—political (in)stability, political entrepreneurship and administrative (in)capacity—acted and impacted on the performances of the OPs in the regions, whose patterns started to diverge in the early stages of the programming period and drifted even further as a consequence of the external shocks that occurred in the regions.

### 4.2 | Multi-level governance

With respect to the case of Emilia-Romagna, relevant opportunities to analyse the functioning of the MLG system were offered by two major shocks that took place during the 2007–2013 programming period and severely put to test the economic, social and political resilience of the territory. In both circumstances, CP was the main tool used by the regional government to cope with these exogenous factors, and the promptness and smoothness of the process by which the ROPs were adjusted, we argue, are clear signs of good vertical and horizontal co-ordination.

<sup>3</sup>Delibera Regionale 26 24/02/2015.

<sup>4</sup>Analysed documents for both regions: ROP ERDF (2007-2013), ROP ESF (2007-2013), evaluation reports of the ROPs, Monitoring Committee Reports, resolutions of the Regional Governments, minutes of the Regional Councils.

<sup>5</sup>The focus group were held as part of the PERCEIVE project (H2020 - Reflective Society 2015 - PERCEIVE: Perception and Evaluation of Regional and Cohesion policies by Europeans and Identification with the Values of Europe. Grant agreement nr. 693529) activities. Between February and March 2017, eight focus groups were organised by partners of the PERCEIVE consortium.



The regional government was thus successful in leveraging on the ROPs to deal with the aforementioned emergencies, by taking advantage of the room for manoeuvre allowed within the existing constraints and negotiating with other European and national authorities.

The domestic factors that characterize the Emilia-Romagna context are strictly connected to the Emilian model (Brusco, 1982) that has shaped the local political and economic spaces, which has in the stability and the co-operative decision-making style of the regional government two of its main features. Emilia-Romagna's administrations took advantage of the decentralized bottom-up approach to regional development that was prompted in 1970 with the constitution of the regions in order to consolidate their control over the local political space. For almost 50 years no elections have been held in which the political supremacy could actually be contested, and this enabled the ruling party to establish strong networks and alliances with different social and economic actors, who were won over by administrative efficiency and good services offered by public bodies (Rinaldi, 2005).

Even during the 2007–2013 programming period the political context of Emilia-Romagna was rather stable (Table 3): the two legislatures spanning over those years saw the same president in charge, and the regional elections held in 2014 brought to power a new president from the same political party.

In the whole period there were no changes in the directors of LMAs, while the ERDF and ESF absorption rate followed a constant trend. At the official closure of the programming period, the resources had been entirely spent.

As stated by a regional stakeholder, Europeanization and CP proved to be a good opportunity to reinforce the Emilian model that traditionally had been relying on pre-existing networks and co-ordination mechanism:

*I can say that this is a Region that has consolidated assets, a network of pre-existing relationships and services that have been long experiencing collaboration and co-ordination mechanisms. So this certainly made the implementation of the programmes much easier [INT\_11].*

With respect to vertical and horizontal co-ordination, the governance of CP could benefit from the cohesiveness of the ruling leadership class that emerged as a result of the political and administrative stability.

As reported by a LMA's representative, the decision-making process of Emilia-Romagna is one where the political faction acts as a driving force that paves the way for the technical faction:

*There is preparatory work where the synergy between the political faction and the technical faction is total and starts three years before we see the programmes. (...) The technical faction usually handles programme negotiation (...) on political documents that have been released and see a strong involvement of the Conference of Regions [INT\_12].*

The Emilian model includes elements of both the neo-corporatism and virtuous clientelism described by Piattoni and Smyrl, (2003) with respect to Tuscany and Abruzzo: the leadership classes' commitment towards Europe development policies is motivated by a real interest to provide public and collective goods capable of fostering the territory's development; at the same time, the incentives and the support schemes funded through European programmes provided local politicians with new opportunities for consensus-building.

This was made apparent when discussing the influence of the political faction over the different stages of policy delivery. According to the focus group participants, despite their leverage over the definition of the policy goals in the programming phase, the role of politicians gets even stronger during the implementation, when public calls, expressions of interest and the proposals' evaluation criteria are to be defined.

A representative of the LMA stated:

*The scheduling of public calls is done during the implementation phase (...). There are some rules, of course, which are those written in the programme (...), but after a while it is linked to how that thing is outlined within the public calls, and in that, in my opinion, the policy's role also comes to 70:30 when compared to the previous 60:40 [INT\_13].*



This opportunistic behaviour reflected also on the governance of CP. For the 2014–2020 programming period, the integration of the two LMAs that had operated until 2013 was successfully achieved. Yet the two operational programmes were kept separate, as doing otherwise would have led to the four regional ministers (*Assessori*) entrusted with drawing on Structural Funds being deprived of some of their discretionary powers:

*The Region has kept the programmes separate, while there are regions that have, instead, done a single ROP. This is because, in any case, let us say that there is a very particular history, of a prevalence for ESF over ERDF, and therefore it would have been impossible for those who used the ERDF for competitiveness to join with the ESF, and probably also renounce one's own visibility [INT\_12].*

Nonetheless, the region's development policy can be judged as an integrated one indeed, which in turn is an additional proof of good horizontal co-ordination. Emilia-Romagna's regional development policy is laid down in the Single Programming Document (SPD), a comprehensive programme encompassing all the tools available to the regional administration in the 2007–2013 programming period. At the time, less than half of the Italian regions were equipped with this programming instrument which gave, but was not limited to, full implementation to the principle of additionality of funds (Bruzzo & Carretta, 2009). In fact, the SPD made it possible to ensure the coherence of regional policies with the guidelines set out at the Community and national level, and to ensure the complementarity of the OPs. Such a comprehensive approach was fostered by the entrepreneurial approach of some of the leading class members that fostered a leap in quality in the implementation of CP, as stated by a regional stakeholder:

*The importance (...) of sharing expertise and experiences, because that is a university professor who has participated in the formulation and the use of the ERDF programme for all the area in innovation and industrial research, who has found himself in the post of Deputy Mayor of Piacenza, (...) a case to be studied because there was a local administrator there who had specific knowledge on the operation and even on funds, which is not obvious, but has made a difference [INT\_11].*

The concerted use of ROPs resources, a strong political direction, collaboration and co-ordination mechanisms between regional departments and the synergy between the political and the technical parts were the elements that distinguished the 2007–2013 programming period in the Emilia-Romagna region.

If the key domestic factors of Emilia-Romagna had a positive influence on the functioning of the MLG system in Emilia-Romagna, on an opposite side stands the case of Calabria, where CP was transplanted on a completely different scenario.

For Calabria, the burden of past failures is still visible today, as it is shown by the experience of 2007–2013, when the programme's performance proved to be weak from the very beginning of the programming period, as stated by an LMA's representative:

*The programme cycle wasn't particularly linear, it was a bit difficult, with a start sort of characterised by leaps forward and steps backwards, then there was a more ordinary phase and then an acceleration toward the end [INT\_4].*

The economic crisis caused substantial delays in the implementation of OPs throughout all European regions, yet Italy was a bad performer compared to the rest of EU and the regions of *Mezzogiorno* were Italy's worst performers. In Calabria, the outbreak of the economic crisis in 2008 exacerbated the weakness of the productive sector, in particular with respect to the firms' capacity to access the credit. However, the decrease in the demand for support to business activities was not sufficient in itself to explain the programme's difficulties, which instead were to be found "in the loose and often conflicting multilevel governance and the ever more complicated legal and administrative web in which public action is either paralyzed or heavily delayed without much benefit for transparency" (EEN, 2014, p. 17).

These issues became apparent already in the programming phase, as the lack of horizontal co-ordination within the LMA inhibited the programme's consistency with other regional development interventions. As stated by an LMA representative, there was no organic view of the policies and it was difficult to connect the various actions:



*The programming was too ambitious, so to say, in the sense that you thought you could codify all the passages. Too ambitious in the sense that everything was defined within that operation, that is the ROP was given the task to realize everything. You can't do that, because then community programmes become a part of the programme that need to be linked also to other tools [INT\_5].*

As soon as the implementation phase began, the institutional weakness reflected in the lack of administrative capacity that has been chronically affecting Calabria and all the Italian convergence regions (EEN, 2014): each regional department managed autonomously both the writing and the publication of the calls for tenders, causing a programme defect and a management deficit. As reported by an LMA representative, the weaknesses in the administrative capacity lied at all levels: first, within the managing authority, who was not in a position to carry out its role of guidance and surveillance:

*The activities clashed with the weakness of the administrative machine that very often wasn't able to manage the amount of interventions financed [INT\_6].*

And, second, within the other parties involved, such as local public bodies and agencies:

*There's the benefiting parties' scarce administrative capacity especially with reference to the management of the contract phases, so delays from that point of view, especially when it had to do with managing community calls for tenders, so above threshold. And then certainly the offices' scarce administrative capacity in not providing adequate indications or support to the benefitting party [INT\_4].*

Administrative capacity and fragmentation of the interventions are two endemic weaknesses of CP in *Mezzogiorno* (Viesti & Luongo, 2014).<sup>6</sup> The presence of a large number of small projects entails a higher proportion of fixed costs, whereas programmes that involve a smaller number of larger projects would incur lower administrative costs (SWECO, 2010).

The case of Calabria resonates closely that of Puglia and Sicily discussed by Milio, (2007), thus bringing further evidence to the role of political instability in hindering the administrative performance. The region experienced three changes of government and political majority, which translated into administrative discontinuity, with the LMA of the ERDF being headed by four different directors during the programming period and the LMA of the ESF by six different directors (Table 4). As pointed out by Gandolfo, (2014), the head of the LMA is a figure with key responsibilities for the implementation of the programme: the head of the LMA prompts and supervises complex and delicate processes, and according to a study of the Italian Senate (Senato della Repubblica, 2009), a change in the top of the organization causes an average one-year delay in the programme's implementation. The political/administrative instability and the difficulties in spending the financial resources clearly are clearly seen in Table 4, which shows how political turnarounds were followed by changes in the head of the LMAs and by slowdowns in resource spending.

All the risks of political instability identified by Milio, (2007) are apparent in the Calabria case: imprecise management, incoherent programming, and poor monitoring and evaluation activities are both results and causes of the administrative capacity issue that the region have been long experiencing and which was at the core of the *Piano di Rafforzamento Amministrativo* (PRA), a set of actions aimed at strengthening the administrative capacity of the LMA to be enforced within the 2014–2020 programming period.

### 4.3 | Partnership

"Inclusiveness" is the second key factor of the "Emilia-Romagna model." The extensive use of negotiated programming applies to all fields of the regional government, who looks at it as "a tool that is still very innovative for

<sup>6</sup>For a discussion over the Italian anomaly, that would go beyond the purpose of this paper, see also Leonardi (2014), Provenzano (2015) and Giannola (2015).



development policies and has proven to “empower” the territories, to strengthen the social capital, and to be more virtuous in terms of economic efficiency.”<sup>7</sup>

The negotiations usually undertaken by the regional government with economic and social stakeholders typically assume the formula of agreements, the so-called pacts, that may aim at concerting a medium-long term shared political agenda or responding to social and economic downturns.

Negotiated programming in Emilia-Romagna's CP entailed the sharing of objectives and tools with beneficiaries, recipients and stakeholders. Partnership activities were embedded along the whole operational programmes in the existing system of negotiation tables, each of them regulated by specific regional laws. It can therefore be stated that concertation underpinned a consolidated network of formal relations and widespread consultation practices, and the same adoption of the Partnership's European Code of Conduct established for the 2014–2020 programming period was viewed by focus group's participants as a formalisation of practices already in place.

Within this framework, the actors acting both as facilitating institutions and groups of power are, along with elected politicians, the intermediary bodies which the Emilia-Romagna model bases the collection of the territory's demands and needs on.

Therefore, political stability, administrative capacity/stability and political entrepreneurship laid the foundation for the creation of a stable and effective network among politicians, bureaucrats and stakeholder.

A prominent role is played by trade unions and business associations, whose organizations include departments and staff exclusively dedicated to promote EU-funded opportunities among their associates and to assist them in the projects' implementation.

*The association (business) is daily experiencing this activity of assessing needs, including through tools that are specific, dedicated, computerised, etc. Therefore, these needs are collected and then channelled into different themes that are then routed to policies. Therefore, it is a direct and constant link [INT\_17].*

Nonetheless, this system leaves some grey zones, as those who do not belong to the intermediary bodies traditionally involved in concertation practices might feel the consequences of what has been defined the distinction between joiners and non-joiners of policy-making (ESPON, 2006). A consultant on EU funded schemes stated:

*In my personal experience, I see a difference in the access to information, in the support to the presentation of projects, and possibly even in the evaluation phase [INT\_18].*

Such a bias in the empowerment of stakeholders is at the root of the concentric partnership issue described by Perron, (2014). A selective application of the PP, with a limited set of partners being invited to tables, receiving technical assistance and so on, not only causes a problem of representation, but it can also endanger the ultimate goal of the policy itself. CP in Emilia-Romagna is aimed at fostering the innovation of the economic system, a very fragmented one where the percentage of small and medium-sized enterprises is higher than the national level (Rinaldi, 2013). Concentric partnership might lead to the policy disregarding those who are actually more in need of support. This holds true especially with respect to CP, whose complexity of the funding schemes and procedures make the opportunities hardly accessible by certain segments of the target population. As a final result, this approach to the partnership might have the consequence of exacerbating, and not reducing, the existing inequalities in opportunities. With the aim of mitigating this risk, the Region has gradually broadened the round tables and expanded the inclusiveness of the policy-making to other segments of the economic system, such as representatives of self-employed professionals. Still, the selective nature on which the process is grounded allows us to question its compliance with the policy's ultimate goals.

The issue of the receptivity of the target territory/population and its familiarity with inclusive policy-making gets compelling with regards to the case of Calabria. The approach of the *Intervento Straordinario* did not foster processes

<sup>7</sup> 2007-2013 Single Programming Document, p.4.



of co-operation between local actors. Within this framework, the emergence of regional interest was hampered by the dominance of the regional political parties (Graziano, 2010).

However, the Europeanization of regional development policy in Italy's Southern regions created the space for a dialogue between political authorities and regional stakeholders. As shown by Milio, (2014) and Graziano, (2010), in the cases of Puglia, Sicilia, Campania, this transition was hampered by different factors: the lack of organisation of interest groups at the regional level; the politicians' unwillingness to listen to societal interests and, until the mid-1990s, the "perfunctory" involvement of civil society in the SFs (Piattoni, 2007).

The evidences offered by the experience of Calabria are in line with their conclusions. The programming phase was characterized by the lack of commitment from the political leadership and the partners' incapacity to convey their needs and instances. The actors involved looked at the partnership as a sort of miraculous tool capable of making up for all the previous lack in regional planning. Being the only opportunity for dialogue, the Economic and Social Partnership became a place where all the regional issues were to be discussed, an LMA's representative stated:

*The partnership meetings were meetings in which sometimes we were shot down, because we took the big issues, the region's big pressing needs arrived on the table of the ROP because back then, maybe today less, but back then, 10 years ago, it was considered the tool capable of solving all problems at 360° [INT\_4].*

Yet, despite the over-expectations, members of the partnership were not an active part in the programming and implementation of the policies, and their contribution was deemed as almost exclusively formal, as stated by an LMA representative:

*The partners weren't within the processes, and their contribution couldn't be but formal, so also a lack of a partnership structure and of information that the partnership had on the processes that were being realised [INT\_8].*

The partnership was considered a place where to obtain information or to create debates between the social parties and policies, and not as a tool of a shared regional development strategy. That led the operational approach of the Economic and Social Partnership to be more oriented toward the task than to the result:

*The participation in the partnership aimed at collecting information and going beyond that phase, that table, so it wasn't aimed at a true enhancement of the experiences that the various bodies could express [INT\_8].*

However, the same LMA, in the PRA, recognises its responsibility in the partnership management following its failure in providing adequate models of participation and involvement, thus failing to set a framework for acting in an inclusive and transparent manner with the partners. Difficulties in horizontal and vertical relationship among Calabrian institutions, lack of connections among civil society, institutions and entrepreneurial world, are also identified as regional weakness.

This description of Calabria's experience with the PP is in line with the evidence of Graziano, (2010) and Milio, (2014), according to which the main obstacle to partnership stems from the social actors' weakness in collecting preferences and elaborating feasible proposals. By adopting the framework used by Graziano to analyse the developments of regional interest representation in the Southern regions, it can thus be stated that while Emilia-Romagna is characterized by a co-operative decision-making style with a strong partnership based on "quasi-corporatist committees," Calabria's decision-making can be classified as an "exclusive" one, with partners acting only perfunctorily through mere "window-dressing committees" (Piattoni, 2007).

Nonetheless, patterns of learning by practices emerged clearly. Despite the negative performance, Calabria's LMA was able to draw on lessons learnt, with regards both to policy programming and implementation, in order to spur significant changes in the 2014–2020 programming period.



*The 07-13 programme allowed us to think a lot about the activities, it taught us important lessons also for the new programme, it made us think over what didn't work and what can work better. So it was an important tool because it allowed us to address our policies toward more practical and more targeted actions in solving issues that the fragmented policy of the previous programme couldn't solve [INT\_8].*

Participants highlighted the role of CP in enforcing a different, more evidence-based, more results-oriented approach to policy-making, thus corroborating the findings of Graziano (2010), of the Mezzogiorno on-going transformation of the regional space.

*So community rules that allow to rationalise interventions, to follow them, to monitor them, to make them become practical indicators of realisation, so with a perspective view, often ordinary policies don't set this perspective view, so a change that... A tool such as the CP, through the regional operational programme, can give the region practical directions for the territory's cultural change, not only economic [INT\_8].*

As a matter of fact, following the Piano d'Azione per l'Efficienza della Spesa and the PRA, Calabria's performance has improved. At the end of 2017, the region shows the highest expenditure performance among Italy's convergence regions in the 2014–2020 programming period<sup>8</sup>. Moreover, despite the turnover of four different directors, the PRA is slowly giving the first results, as the comparison with the programming period 2007–2013 shows that the bureaucratic timing has been reduced.

This is a proof of what has been suggested by Milio, (2014): pre-existing working arrangements and modes of co-ordination, such as the ones of Emilia-Romagna, make the partnership more successful and the intervention more effective compared to a situation, such as the one of Calabria, where the partnership is artificially created.

## 5 | CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Our study highlights the relevance of context specificities in the practical experiences of CP by providing evidence from two regions of Italy, Emilia-Romagna and Calabria, whose experiences with CP implementation are characterised by a common institutional framework and widely differing domestic factors' endowments.

The qualitative analysis of the 2007–2013 programming period, runs through direct observation, document analysis and the focus groups conducted at the regions' LMAs, provides new insights on the impact of context specificities on the functioning of the MLG system and the PP, the two lynchpins of the European way of policy-making.

First, it confirmed their relation with several factors which are determined at domestic level. Supporting Piattoni and Smyrl's, (2003) arguments of the supremacy of politics over institutions, two factors of political nature emerged as key variables to explain the trajectories of the two case-studies, namely, political (in)stability and political entrepreneurship. The cohesiveness of the Emilia-Romagna ruling class, a result of over forty years of prevalence of left-wing coalitions in the regional and local governments, impacted positively on the efficiency in the usage of Structural Funds, as the region was able to tackle the external shocks and to promptly adapt CP to the changing circumstances.

In contrast, in Calabria, the fragmentation of the political system has negatively impacted on the region's administrative capacity that, in turn, negatively affected the performance of the operational programmes.

Second, the analysis supports the view that facilitating institutions play a key role for MLG and partnership. In implementing this approach, Emilia-Romagna could leverage on pre-existing networks and intermediary bodies that were created to enforce the co-operative decision-making that defined the Emilia-Romagna model. In Calabria, attempts to detach from the centralism and paternalism that traditionally underpinned the Southern regions' development policies have just begun to sprout.

That highlights the importance of learning processes. The political and administrative stability of the Emilia-Romagna system contributed to increase trust among the socio-economic actors, thus facilitating co-operation at

<sup>8</sup><http://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/notizie/2018-02-22/fondi-ue-36-miliardi-spendere-entro-fine-anno-224056.shtml?uuid=AE0kEG3D>



both vertical and horizontal level. The 2007–2013 programming period in Calabria still suffered from the legacy of the centralist tradition of development policy in Italian Southern regions.

Our findings confirm the results from Smyrl, (1997) in identifying the entrepreneurial approach and the existence of territorial policy community as factors of success in the implementation of CP. Political stability together with administrative capacity, supported by political entrepreneurship, give the necessary continuity to manage the CP in a framework of MLG and PP that guarantees an effective development policy.

Policy recommendations can be drawn from these results which can contribute to the debate over the future of CP. In light of the critical role played by domestic factors, a certain degree of flexibility in the governance schemes of CP should be introduced at the sub-national level. In line with other works in these fields, our analysis shows that decentralization emphasizes the relevance of quality of government on the efficiency and the effectiveness of policies. In countries characterized by high regional disparities such as Italy, different schemes shall be put in place in order to adapt to the different political and institutional endowments of the local contexts.

The importance of learning processes calls for the continuity of the procedures and of the administrative bodies. It is thus important to foster co-operation and exchange of best practices among colleagues and peers through technical assistance programmes and funds enabling transfers of knowledge from better endowed regions to authorities with poorer administrative capacity.

The case of Emilia-Romagna also suggests that CP can function as a reaction to exogenous shocks, which in turn calls for allowing a certain degree of flexibility for what concerns the policy's objectives. Several things can happen in seven years which can deeply alter the context on which the initial strategy of the operational programmes are built. It seems preferable to introduce more flexibility within the operational programmes. This would increase the accountability of managing authorities in the usage of European funding, and the perception of CP as a policy effective in tackling the regions' and the citizens' needs.

From a policy design point of view, the centrality of political stability, political entrepreneurship and administrative capacity turns into the request for higher flexibility in the institutional architecture of Cohesion Policy, the rationale beyond this being that where these factors are not available to a satisfying extent, flexibility is detrimental to policy implementation.

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