Council of the European Union

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NOTE

From:	Presidency
To:	Permanent Representatives Committee/Council
Subject:	Making simplification work for beneficiaries *- Exchange of views*

At the meeting of the General Affairs Council dedicated to Cohesion Policy of next 23 November, on the basis of the Presidency paper set out in annex to this note, Ministers in charge of Cohesion Policy are invited to discuss the topic "Making simplification work for beneficiaries".

ANNEX

Discussion Paper

for the General Affairs Council dedicated to Cohesion Policy

"Simplification for Beneficiaries: Shaping a More Accessible and Effective Cohesion Policy for the 2028–2034 Programming Period”

Discussion Paper

As preparations advance for the next programming period, the European Union has an opportunity to reflect on how its long-term investment policies can deliver even greater impact while remaining accessible to those they are intended to serve. Cohesion Policy has consistently demonstrated its value as a long-term investment policy, supporting regional development, strengthening competitiveness and supporting strategic Union priorities, promoting social inclusion and addressing territorial disparities across the Union. To preserve its success in the next programming period, cohesion policy funding must remain accessible to its beneficiaries in a timely and effective manner to deliver tangible results for citizens and communities, based on its core principles and focused on delivering its Treaty mission.

The 2021–2027 programming period has provided important experience in responding to increasingly complex economic, social and geopolitical challenges. During this period, Member States and regions have worked to successfully deliver investments while adapting to a changing environment. This has shown the policy’s flexibility, while underscoring how important it is to balance flexibility and predictability. Throughout this, the policy’s planning and implementation has remained rooted in partnership and multi-level governance. At the same time, many beneficiaries, particularly smaller organisations, local authorities, and community groups have called for further simplification measures allowing wider access to EU funds.

Simplification is not just an administrative consideration. It is a strategic objective that can enhance the effectiveness, efficiency and visibility of EU investments. A more user-centred approach can help ensure that beneficiaries spend less time navigating procedures and more time delivering tangible results for citizens and communities. Efforts undertaken during 2021–2027, including wider use of digital systems, simplified cost options, financing not linked to costs schemes and streamlined implementation arrangements, have demonstrated the potential benefits of reducing the administrative burdens while maintaining robust standards of accountability and financial management. These experiences provide valuable insights as discussions continue on the design of the 2028-2034 framework.

Against the backdrop of broader efforts across the Union to strengthen competitiveness, improve public administration and reduce unnecessary regulatory burden, delegations are invited to consider how the lessons of the current programming period can inform a more accessible and more effective Cohesion Policy framework for 2028–2034.

Questions for Discussion

1. Which simplification measures introduced under the 2021–2027 programmes have been most effective in making EU funds easier to access and use for beneficiaries, and should be carried forward into the proposed 2028–2034 framework?

2. What concrete simplification measure would have the greatest impact on making Cohesion Policy more accessible, particularly for smaller organisations, local authorities and first-time applicants?