OVERVIEW OF THE DYNAMICS OF THE EUROPEAN UNION BUDGET

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Abstract: This article presents a comprehensive analysis of the European Union (EU) budget, tracing its evolution and exploring its structural dynamics over recent decades. By examining the EU budget over the years, it provides a detailed account of the shifting priorities within the EU's budgetary allocations, particularly in areas such as cohesion policy, agricultural funding, research and innovation, and environmental sustainability. The article aims to offer a holistic view of the EU budget's role in promoting integration, supporting regional development, and fostering economic resilience, particularly among member states with slower growth. Utilizing both quantitative data from EU reports and qualitative analyses of policy frameworks, this research identifies key trends in budgetary policies, including the increasing focus on digital transformation, environmental objectives, and social inclusion.

Introduction

Purpose and Objectives

The European Union (EU) budget represents one of the most complex financial systems of any supranational entity, reflecting not only the economic policies and priorities of its member states but also the broader goals of European integration and global economic leadership. Since its inception, the EU budget has evolved significantly, accommodating the changing political, social, and economic landscape of Europe, while simultaneously addressing the needs of a rapidly expanding and increasingly diverse Union. This article provides a comprehensive overview of the dynamics of the EU budget, focusing on its evolution, current structure, and key challenges that lie ahead. The primary objective of this article is to examine the development of the EU budget from both a historical and contemporary perspective. The article aims to trace the changes in budgetary priorities and the shift in allocation between various sectors. A secondary objective of this article is to explore the role of cohesion policy, agricultural funding, and research and innovation within the EU budget, as well as the increasing focus on sustainability and digital transformation.

Scope of the Article

The article focuses on both quantitative and qualitative aspects of the EU budget. Quantitatively, it reviews the allocation of funds across different budget chapters, including Single Market and Innovation, Cohesion and Resilience, and Natural Resources and Environment. Using data from the Multiannual Financial Frameworks (MFFs) of 2007-2013, 2014-2020, and 2021-2027, the article highlights trends in budgetary increases and reductions. Qualitatively, it explores the political and institutional dynamics that influence the EU budget, with particular attention to the negotiations between member states, the European Parliament, and the European Commission.

Literature review

The EU budget has been extensively studied in both academic and policy-related literature, reflecting its significance for the political economy of the EU and its role in global governance. However, much of this literature addresses specific aspects of the budget, such as cohesion policy, the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), or the EU's responses to financial crises. This article aims to provide a more holistic view by integrating various strands of literature to highlight both historical trends and contemporary developments.

Evolution and Structure of the EU Budget

The evolution of the EU budget has been a topic of interest since the early days of the European Economic Community (EEC). Early studies, such as those by Ross (1995) and Taylor (1996), examined the political and institutional mechanisms that shaped the initial financial governance of the EU. Ross's *European Integration and the Coordination of National Economies* emphasized the role of member state contributions and the limited financial autonomy of the European Commission in the budget's early stages. Following the Single European Act (1986) and the Maastricht Treaty (1992), research began to explore the growing complexity of the budget. Hix and Høyland (2011) and Bache et al. (2014) highlighted the ongoing tension between supranationalism and intergovernmentalism in budgetary decision-making, as member states sought to maintain fiscal sovereignty while promoting collective financial policies. More recently, scholars like Cipriani (2014) and Heinemann (2020) have focused on the role of the MFF as a tool for long-term planning, ensuring predictability in funding, and addressing cross-border challenges such as migration and climate change.

Cohesion Policy and Regional Development

Cohesion policy is one of the most researched areas of the EU budget, designed to reduce economic disparities between member states and regions. Bachtler and Mendez (2016) provide a comprehensive overview of the evolution of cohesion policy and its impact on regional development. While cohesion funding has contributed to reducing disparities, particularly in Southern and Eastern Europe, criticisms have emerged concerning inefficiencies and unequal distribution of benefits. The financial crisis of 2008 and subsequent austerity measures significantly influenced cohesion policy. Bachtler and Mendez (2016) note that cohesion policy was used as a tool for political compromise between net contributors and beneficiaries. Begg (2010) also argues that cohesion policy has increasingly become a mechanism for balancing the interests of wealthier and less wealthy member states. Scholars like Molle (2007) and Piattoni and Polverari (2016) have explored the interaction between cohesion policy and other EU policies, particularly in relation to competitiveness and innovation.

The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP)

The CAP has long been one of the most significant and controversial components of the EU budget. Even after multiple reforms, it continues to represent a substantial portion of EU expenditure. Research by Matthews (2012) and Swinnen (2015) has emphasized the historical dominance of the CAP within the EU budget and its evolution in response to both internal and external pressures. Matthews (2012) highlights the CAP's shift from a production-oriented policy to one that increasingly focuses on rural development and environmental sustainability, while Swinnen (2015) addresses the persistent tensions between agricultural lobbies and advocates for budgetary modernization.

Climate Change and Sustainability in the EU Budget

The role of the EU budget in addressing climate change and promoting sustainability has gained increasing attention in recent years. Scholars like Oberthür and Dupont (2020) have examined how the European Green Deal and the MFF's climate-related objectives reflect the EU's growing commitment to environmental issues. The EU budget is increasingly seen as a critical tool for financing the energy transition, reducing carbon emissions, and supporting green technologies. Egenhofer et al. (2021) and Gehring (2019) have also noted the challenges of aligning ambitious climate goals with the economic interests of member states, particularly those dependent on carbon-intensive industries.

The Impact of Crises on the EU Budget

The EU budget has had to adapt to various crises, including the financial crisis of 2008, the COVID-19 pandemic, and ongoing geopolitical tensions. Begg (2010) and Ioannou, Leblond, and Niemann (2015) explored how the 2008 financial crisis reshaped EU fiscal policy, leading to the creation of new instruments such as the European Stability Mechanism (ESM) and increasing scrutiny of national budgets. Fabbrini (2017) argues that crises often drive deeper fiscal integration, as exemplified by the NextGenerationEU recovery fund, which was introduced in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, the growing politicization of the EU budget in response to crises like the 2015-2016 migration crisis and subsequent security concerns is a notable trend. Monar (2014) and Laffan (2016) have explored how these events have led to an increased focus on border management, defense, and counterterrorism in the EU budget, highlighting the tension between swift financial responses and the divergent interests of member states.

Methodology

This article employs both qualitative and quantitative methodologies to analyze the evolution and structure of the EU budget over several MFF periods. Data on budget allocations, spending patterns, and policy outcomes have been sourced from official EU documents, including reports from the European Commission, the Court of Auditors, and the European Parliament's budgetary debates. Quantitative data on budgetary allocations and expenditures have been analyzed to identify trends and shifts in the EU's financial priorities over time. In addition to quantitative analysis, this article incorporates a qualitative analysis of the political and institutional dynamics that shape the EU budget. This includes an examination of the historical context in which budgetary changes have occurred and the role of key stakeholders, such as member states and EU institutions, in shaping these changes. By adopting a historical-comparative approach, this article aims to assess the ways in which EU budget priorities have evolved in response to internal and external pressures, with a focus on cohesion policy, agricultural funding, and climate-related expenditures.

The budget of the European Union

The Dynamics of the formation of the EU budget

The establishment of the EU budget has always been a challenge for ensuring stability and enhancing the level of integration among EU member states. Its composition and decision-making processes have undergone significant transformations over time. Starting with the creation of the ECSC (European Coal and Steel Community) and EURATOM, the budget has seen numerous changes and the adoption of policies and instruments aimed at progressing towards financial autonomy and the development of common policies (Sabău-Popa, 2010). Initially, the EU had separate administrative budgets, but the Treaty of Brussels (1965) and the Luxembourg Treaty (1970) reorganized these structures to include: the general budget of the European Community and the ECSC operational budget (Sabău-Popa, 2010). Until the 1970s, these were financed solely from member states' own resources, with differentiated quotas (e.g., 0.2% for Luxembourg, 7.9% for Belgium and the Netherlands, and 2.8% for France, Germany, and Italy). From 1970 onwards, the EU introduced its own resources to the budget to gradually increase financial independence. This change aimed to finance common policies, such as the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the European Agricultural Guidance and Guarantee Fund (FEOGA). The former aimed to reduce disparities between EU regions, while the latter embodied the principle of solidarity by collectively financing agriculture in other states.

The dynamic development of the Community, marked by waves of integration of new member states with different economic conditions, led to financial and budgetary clarifications and adjustments in 1986 (Clipici, 2010). In that year, the Single European Act (SEA) was signed, which eliminated customs and economic borders and implemented regional development policy. Structural Funds (FEOGA, ERDF, and the European Social Fund – ESF) were also created, and the reform of financial systems continued with the Delors I Package. This introduced a principle of budgetary correction by establishing a new resource based on the Gross National Product (GNP) of each member state. It also limited agricultural spending to a capped increase of 74% of the EU's average GDP growth, while structural fund allocations were supplemented (Clipici, 2010). The year 1992 marked another significant moment for EU economic and budgetary matters, with the launch of the Delors II Package. Following the signing of the Maastricht Treaty, the Cohesion Fund was created, redistributing financial resources in favor of structural programs aimed at supporting economic convergence (Sabău-Popa, 2010). This fund supported infrastructure, transport, and environmental projects in countries with a per capita GDP lower than 90% of the EU average.

Through the Agenda 2000 program, the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) was integrated into FEOGA, the research and development component was expanded, and trans-European networks were promoted. According to Sabău-Popa (2010), the poor results recorded by the EU in the years 2000-2007 led to a focus on three main directions: Promoting sustainable development; Strengthening the concept of European citizenship; Promoting a coherent global role for Europe.

The accession of 12 new member states to the EU (2004 and 2007) resulted in further changes to the budget format. For the 2007-2013 period, objectives were reorganized into three categories: Convergence (ERDF, ESF, and Cohesion Fund); Regional

Competitiveness and Employment (ERDF and ESF); European Territorial Cooperation (ERDF).

Although the EU-28's fund absorption rate for the 2007-2013 period was 97.85%, there were significant differences among member states (Croatia absorbed 84%, Poland 100%, and Romania 88%). Data on the implementation of the 2014-2020 multiannual financial framework is still incomplete, as funds remain to be paid after the final reimbursement requests are received and assessed in 2024. However, by 2021, the EU-28's reimbursement rate stood at 65%. Among the top performers were Ireland (91.5%), Greece (79%), Portugal (78%), and Poland (74.6%), while Romania was among the bottom eight states with an absorption rate of 53.2%. The European Union's needs are constantly evolving, leading to the flexibility of its budgetary resources. The EU's long-term budget for 2021-2028 was set at €1.0743 trillion, with an additional €750 billion from the NextGenerationEU recovery instrument, resulting in the largest long-term budget in EU history, totaling €1.8 trillion.

The Budgetary Process

To understand how the European Union collects and spends its financial resources, as well as how these are allocated to key policies and objectives, it is necessary to briefly present the formation of the EU budget.

Sources of Revenue for the European Union

The sources of revenue include contributions from member states, import duties on products from outside the EU, as well as penalties imposed on companies that do not comply with EU legislation. Financing is 98% based on own resources (which must not exceed 1.20% of the EU's total GNP), supplemented by other types of resources accounting for the remaining 2% (taxes, revenues from the administration of institutions, etc.), and is based on the principle of balancing expenses with revenues (Sabău-Popa, 2010).

Own Resources

1. Traditional resources consist of customs duties, agricultural taxes, and the sugar tax – Article 2(1) of the Own Resources Decision (ORD 2014). According to Regulation 1308/2013, the sugar tax system was eliminated during the 2016/2017 budget cycle, with the last payment made in June 2018;

2. The VAT resource is calculated as a percentage of the harmonized VAT base in each member state. Own resources from VAT accumulate from applying a uniform rate for 2014-2020 (0.30% for all member states except Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden, which benefit from a reduction to 0.15%) to the national VAT base, with a call rate that cannot exceed 50% of the member state's GNP. In the 2021-2027 MFF, the VAT-based own resource was simplified to reduce the administrative burden;

3. Resources based on Gross National Product (GNP) account for approximately 70% of the EU's financial resources and provide the revenues needed to cover expenses that exceed the amount financed from traditional own resources, VAT-based contributions, and other revenues in any given year.

Other Types of Resources

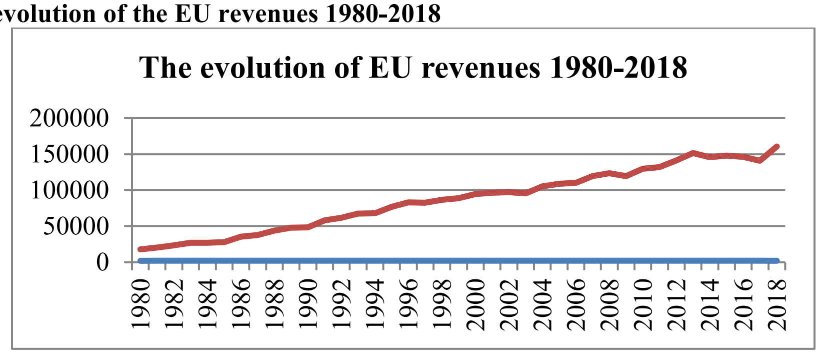
The common customs tariff is the revenue derived from EU tariffs on non-agricultural products (Ardy & El-Agraa, 2011);

***Correction mechanisms,* which** are compensation measures for certain EU member states that have contributed excessively compared to other member states (for example, the UK rebate – the United Kingdom is reimbursed 66% of the difference between its contribution and the amounts it receives back from the budget).
The own resource based on non-recycled plastic packaging waste – introduced as a new revenue source for the EU budget for the 2021-2027 period, is based on the amount of non-recycled plastic packaging waste. The establishment of the EU budget must also adhere to several *community budgetary principles*, such as**: the principle of budgetary unity and truth; budget universality; annuality of the budget; budgetary balance; budgetary specialization; good financial management and the principle of budgetary transparency; unit of account:** The annual budget is established in advance through the multiannual financial framework (MFF). The EU countries and the Commission share responsibility for managing approximately 80% of the budget, and if improper payments have been made, they seek to recover the involved sums.

The Evolution of European Union Revenues

Several events that occurred between 1979 and 1987 led to challenges in the budgetary process. Tensions between member states and EU institutions, the continuous exceeding of budget estimates until 1986, delays in adopting the budget in many cases, the accession of Greece, Spain, and Portugal between 1981 and 1986 (states that were initially net beneficiaries of the general EU budget), and the introduction of regional policy necessitated a reform of the community's financial framework. This reform led to the first community exceptions, specifically the creation of structural funds (FEOGA and ESF), which shaped the characteristics of the EU's own revenue resources and established the principle of correcting budgetary imbalances. One of the main innovations was the introduction of a new resource based on the Gross National Product (GNP) of member states, aimed at reflecting each state's ability to contribute (Sabău-Popa, 2010). Figure 1 shows the evolution of the European Union's actual revenues from 1980 to 2018. Between 1980 and 2007, there were changes in the allocation of the EU's traditional revenue resources to address transformations in the European economy, mainly driven by the accession of an increasing number of member states to the EU. As the EU economy expanded, the VAT-based resource in budget financing decreased from 1.4% in the 1980s to 0.3% from 2007 onwards and remains so today (2021-2027). Furthermore, the distinction between agricultural levies and customs duties was eliminated and during 2007-2013 period, the maximum VAT rate varied by country (0.22% for Austria, 0.15% for Germany, and 0.1% for the Netherlands and Sweden). All these changes, however, led to increased complexity in own resources and a decline in the transparency of EU revenues.

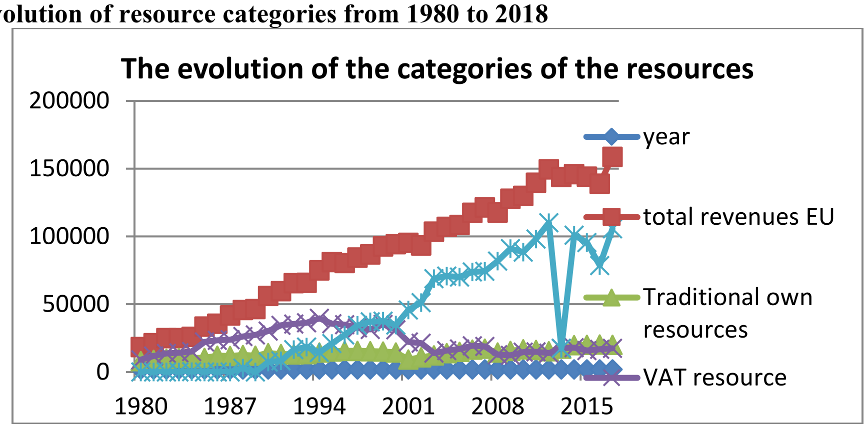
Figure 1 The evolution of the EU revenues 1980-2018



Source: Own representation based on data obtained from the European Commission (https://ec.europa.eu/budget/graphs/revenue_expenditure.html) and annual reports of the European Court of Auditors for the period 1980-2000.

The following figure (Figure 2) shows the evolution of revenue categories within the EU budget from 1980 to 2018. It is evident that EU revenues increased from €15.903 million in 1980 to €158.6426 million in 2018, while the volume of traditional own resources decreased with the expansion of the EU and GNP-based resources saw significant growth. Regarding the own resource system for the 2014-2020 period, the Council adopted rules allowing the EU to collect own resources for payments up to a ceiling of 1.20% of the total gross national income of all member states. For the 2021-2027 MFF, the VAT-based own resource was simplified to reduce the administrative burden. Moreover, with the elimination of sugar levies in 2017, customs duties on imports from outside the EU remained the only traditional own resources for the EU budget. During the 2021-2027 period, member states will retain 25% of the customs duties collected to cover collection costs and simultaneously encourage member states to ensure diligent collection of the amounts owed.

Figure 2. Evolution of resource categories from 1980 to 2018



Source: Own representation based on data obtained from the European Commission (https://ec.europa.eu/budget/graphs/revenue_expediture.html) and annual reports of the European Court of Auditors for the period 1980-2000.

To simplify existing own resources while respecting the fiscal sovereignty of member states, the EU is considering potential new own resources, including: a border adjustment mechanism based on carbon emissions, a digital tax (derived from digital economic activities) and an own resource based on the EU Emissions Trading System (EU-ETS).

EU Budget Expenditures

Initial orientation of EU budget expenditures

The allocation of budget expenditures follows the development of European policies. For a long period, expenditures were focused on agriculture, so much so that by the 1980s, the allocation of revenues to the Common Agricultural Policy had increased significantly. However, it later stabilized due to reforms and spending limits imposed in this area (Ardy & El-Agraa, 2011). Over time, the EU's budget has reflected the key stages of European integration, with developments such as the single market, enlargement, Europe's global outlook, and the development of cohesion policy. Thus, the year 2008 marked the beginning of a new stage in budgetary expenditure evolution, with policies aimed at economic growth and job creation (Sabău-Popa, 2010). Furthermore, allocations for research increased, reflecting the desire to enhance the EU's competitiveness (Ardy & El-Agraa, 2011). Direct payments and market management continue to dominate agricultural and fisheries expenditure, while rural development spending has grown. As for the structural funds, they are provided for redistributive policies that encourage economic solidarity. Thus, structural funds, aimed more at regional than national development, together with those allocated to the CAP, accounted for over 75% of the total EU budget by 2008. Additionally, funding for other policies (research, security, justice, internal policy, and education) was initially very limited, with only 7.3% of the budget allocated in 1988, increasing to approximately 14% by 2006 (Sabău-Popa, 2010). The EU's funding operates on the principle of setting a long-term budget that establishes the upper limit on how much the EU can spend over a period of at least five years. The purpose is to create predictability and efficiency for the programs established within the EU, with enough flexibility to respond to emergencies or crises.

Evolution of EU Budget Expenditures

The EURATOM and EEC treaties, effective in 1958, established the foundation for the European budget and its decision-making structure. The process set at that time remains in place today: the European Commission proposes the annual budget, the European Parliament provides consultation, and the Council finalizes it. Initially, the budget covered mostly administrative costs, but by 1962, the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) became a significant area of expenditure, and the multiannual budgetary system was introduced.

According to Sabău-Popa (2010), CAP payments rose from 13.98% of the budget in 1965 to 70.2% by 1985. Since 1988, however, CAP expenditures have steadily decreased, from 66.82% in 1988 to 32% in 2013, and further to 20% in the 2021-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF). Regional policy spending saw a modest increase between 1965 and 1988, but it grew sharply following the 1986 Single European Act, which emphasized economic and social cohesion. This spending rose from 3.5% in 1965 to 25% in 1990 and reached 40% by 2008. Cohesion policy now accounts for about one-third of the EU budget, with €377.8 billion allocated for 2021-2027. Additionally, internal expenditure on programs related to youth, energy security, research, and technological development has gradually increased, from 2.6% in 1977 to 8.5% in 2008. The figures below illustrate the main expenditure categories from 1988-1992 to 2021-2027, showing how the EU's investment priorities have evolved.

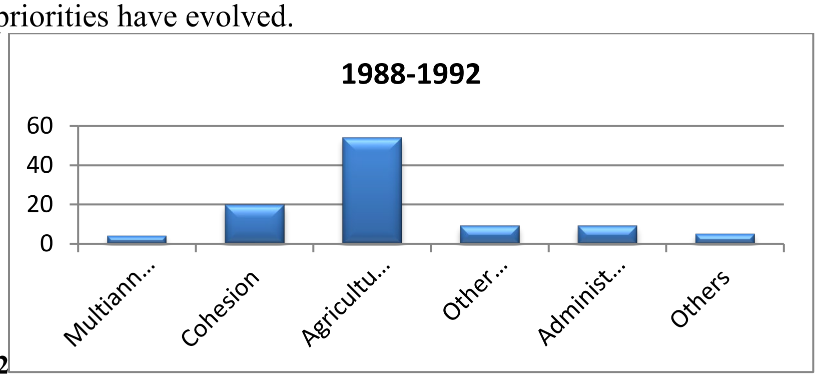
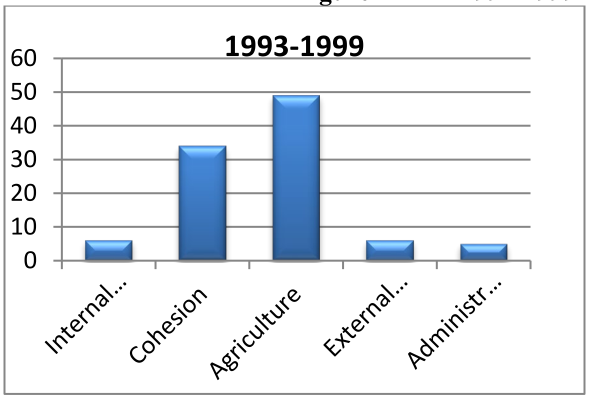


Figure 3 MFF 1988-1992

Figure 4 MFF 1992-1999 Figure 5 MFF 2000-2006



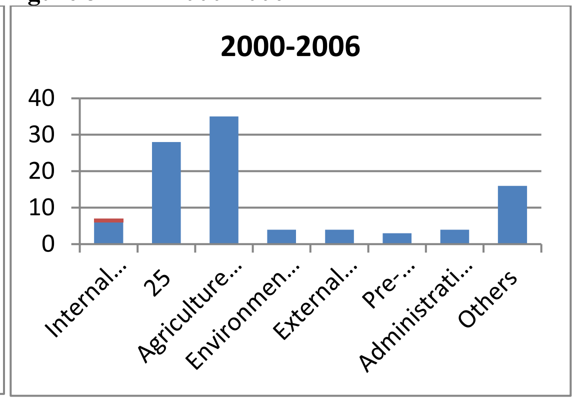
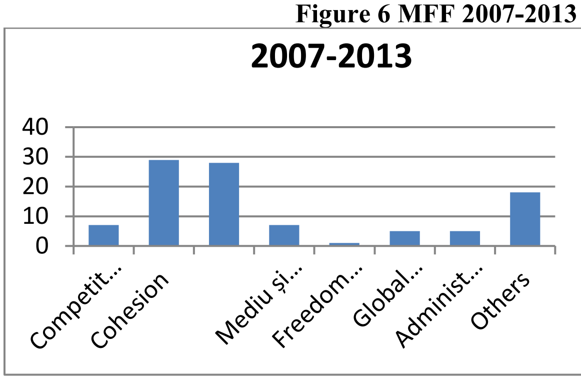


Figure 6 MFF 2007-2013 Figure 7 MFF 2014-2020



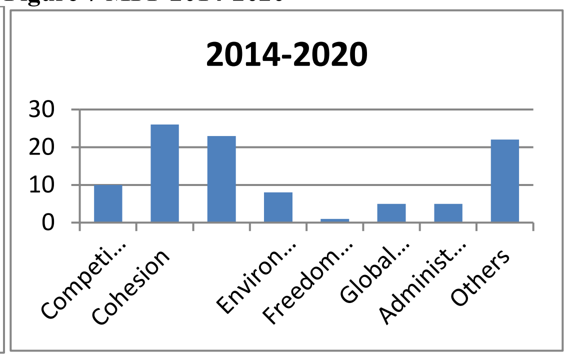
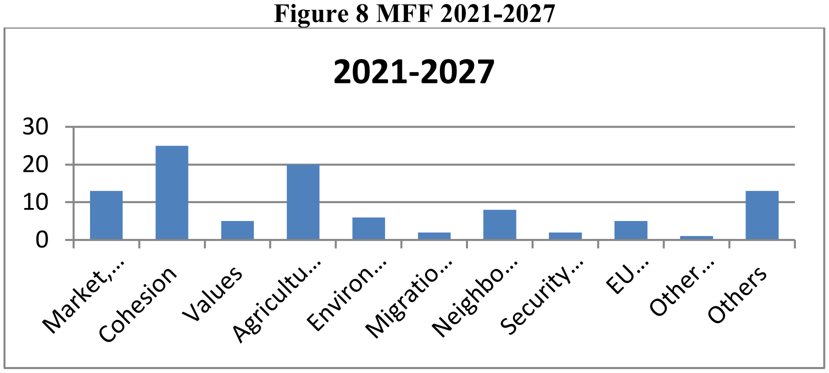


Figure 8 MFF 2021-2027



Between 1988 and 1992, the EU budget prioritized agriculture and cohesion policy, laying the groundwork for the internal market transition. By 1993, the budget expanded to boost cohesion funding in anticipation of the euro area's launch in the late 1990s. The 2000-2006 financial framework focused on preparing for the integration of ten new member states, increasing allocations for internal policies, research, and development, while reducing agricultural expenditures.

The 2007-2013 MFF continued this trajectory, with a slight increase in cohesion policy funding after three additional member states joined the EU. Resources were also directed toward enhancing competitiveness and addressing regional disparities, while funding for agriculture and rural development further declined. The MFF 2014-2020 reinforced these trends by boosting spending on competitiveness, research and job creation while maintaining the shift away from agriculture. Migration policy also gained increased attention during this period. Comparing these budgets reveals the EU's shifting priorities from agriculture to cohesion policy and environmental protection. The accession of 12 new member states between 2004 and 2007 reshaped the Union's economic structure, reflecting the need for policies that addressed regional development and sustainability.

Conclusions

The evolution of the European Union budget reflects not only the EU's financial needs but also the broader political, and socio-economic transformations that have occurred over the past several decades. From its early focus on agricultural policy and regional development to its current emphasis on sustainability, digital transformation, and crisis recovery, the EU budget has proven to be a dynamic and flexible financial instrument. One of the key findings of this article is the shifting nature of the EU's budgetary priorities in response to both internal demands and external pressures. The gradual reduction in agricultural funding, the rise of cohesion policy and the growing focus on research, innovation, and climate change reflect a long-term reorientation of the EU budget toward fostering economic competitiveness, social inclusion, and sustainability.

The MFFs from 2007 to 2027 have played a crucial role in stabilizing the EU's financial management and providing a predictable framework for achieving the Union's long-term goals. The introduction of the NextGenerationEU recovery fund, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, marks an unprecedented step in EU fiscal policy, combining long-term planning with crisis management. Looking forward, the EU budget will continue to be a key tool for addressing emerging challenges. Whether related to climate change, digital transformation, or geopolitical instability, the ability of the EU to adapt its budgetary policies will be crucial in determining the future trajectory of European integration and its role in the global economy.

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