

Call for contributions for the 35th FRU Sponsorship Award 2026:

European Cohesion Policy in the Face of Multiple Transformations

SUBJECT AND THEME

The European Cohesion Policy is at a crossroads in light of the multiple challenges currently facing Europe. There is a growing risk that spatial and social inequalities will increase, with disparities widening both within and between regions, between urban and rural areas, centres and peripheries, growing and shrinking regions. Spatial distributional conflicts are also likely to intensify.

At the level of the European Union (EU), negotiations on the design of the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) for 2028–2034 have already begun. The MFF sets the ceiling for the EU's overall budget and defines the financial framework for individual EU policy areas, including Cohesion Policy, for this period. At the same time, various EU sectoral policies shape the conditions and processes of spatial development, albeit not necessarily in a coherent manner. Additionally, the MFF outlines the priorities for achieving territorial cohesion and spatial justice within the framework of European Cohesion Policy.

A radical overhaul of EU Cohesion Policy is currently being discussed. Compared to the current funding period, stronger harmonisation of EU funding programmes and a greater focus on political priorities anticipated. Increasing pressure to allocate funds to green transformation, digitalisation, global competitiveness, resilience, and military defence raises fundamental questions about how territorial cohesion and spatial justice can be ensured in Europe in the coming years. This call for proposals builds on the theme of the 2026 ARL Congress, organized by the ARL – Academy for Territorial Development in the Leibniz Association; [ARL-Kongress | ARL-net](#)).

KEY ASPECTS AND ISSUES

The FRU particularly welcomes contributions that address key issues of spatial development and EU Cohesion Policy from different analytical and conceptual perspectives at various spatial levels. Interdisciplinary approaches are explicitly encouraged. We invite conceptually and methodologically sound studies that offer proposals for concrete solutions, as well as in-depth analyses of the structural causes behind implementation deficits in the following equally important thematic areas:

1. The future of EU cohesion policy and regional policy

We invite contributions that critically analyse the concepts and funding strategies of EU Cohesion Policy and more specifically Regional policy, and/or question their relevance for spatial development, and/or compare them with place-based approaches. The focus will also be on

current debates on the MFF of the EU and the future direction of the EU's Cohesion Policy, such as the question of its governance and control between nation states and regions, and its contribution to the European Green Deal. Contributions on cross-border, transnational, and interregional cooperation are also welcome.

2. Regional disparities and changing politics

Secondly, we welcome submissions focusing on spatial development under conditions of transformation, such as left-behind regions, growing disparities, path dependencies, goal conflicts, or various aspects of justice. Contributions on spatial resilience and the interrelationships between democracy, populism, and regional governance are also welcome.

3. Long-term perspectives for regional transformation

Thirdly, we welcome contributions on long-term issues of spatial development and the impact of Cohesion Policy, such as structural change, digitalisation, urban-rural relations, territorial justice, sustainability transformations, and multilevel governance. In addition, analyses of interactions between different policy areas, such as cohesion, innovation, and sustainability policies are welcome.

EXPECTATIONS FOR COMPETITION ENTRIES

This call is aimed at early-career researchers (Master's, doctoral, or postdoctoral stages) as well as young professionals who work in fields related to spatial, urban, and environmental development (e.g. public administration, planning offices, consultancies). It is open to all disciplines relevant to spatial and environmental issues. Theoretically oriented academic contributions are welcome, as are analytical studies or reflective practice-based reports on grounded in scientific approaches.

Interested applicants are welcome to contact the FRU support group (foerderpreis@fru-online.de) in advance to clarify if their proposed topic is suitable for the competition. Contributions may be prepared specifically for the FRU Sponsorship Award 2026, but exciting ongoing work - including project reports, theses, dissertations or studies - may also be submitted.

PRIZES AND AWARD CEREMONY

The FRU Sponsorship Award 2026 is sponsored by the Christel & Klaus Wolf Foundation and is endowed with a total of € 6,000. The jury intends to award a first prize of € 2,500, a second prize of € 2,000, and a third prize of € 1,500. Upon recommendation of the jury, the number of prizes may be reduced or the prize money distributed differently. Special prizes may be awarded to recognize exceptional contributions.

The award ceremony will take place during the 2026 ARL Congress on October 2 in Cologne, Germany. All prize winners will be invited to attend the Congress and present their work. The FRU will reimburse travel expenses in accordance with the German Federal Travel Expenses Act.

Summaries of the award-winning contributions will be published on the FRU website (www.fru-online.de) and in the ARL Journal. Winners will be asked to submit a one-page summary following the final decision of the jury.

TERMS AND CONDITIONS OF PARTICIPATION

The competition is open to students, graduates, and practitioners in the early stages of their careers (up to 12 years after graduation) working in teaching, research, and professional practice in all relevant fields. Team submissions of up to three authors are also eligible.

NEW submission deadline: July 4, 2026

Submission address: foerderpreis@fru-online.de

Submitted works must be written in English or German.

Please submit a meaningful summary of your work (maximum of 20 pages), which will serve as a basis for the jury's evaluation. A completed application form (available for download at www.fru-online.de) must be included.

Submissions must not contain any reference to the author(s). Only one submission per applicant is permitted. The prize will be awarded by an independent jury whose members are appointed by the FRU. The jury's decision is final.

By accepting the prize, winners agree to the publication of their submitted work, in whole or in part, by the FRU or the ARL, as well as to the publication of photographs taken during the award ceremony, if applicable.

For further information, please contact:

Dr. Sonja Deppisch, Chairwoman of the FRU

E-Mail: foerderpreis@fru-online.de