

Event report: Turning the tide – A multi-stakeholder dialogue towards a water resilient Europe

On 14 April 2026, the MEP Group on ‘Climate Change, Biodiversity and Sustainable Development’ organised an event on the Water Resilience Strategy in the context of the ongoing revision of the EU Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF).

MEP Dimitris Tsiodras, Co-Chair of the MEP Group, highlighted the timely nature of the event, especially given the rising pressure on European water systems. As underlined, the annual investment gap in water infrastructure of €23 billion shows that the upcoming 2028–2034 MFF is a critical moment ahead.

Challenges surrounding water are especially pressing in the Mediterranean, as MEP Tsiodras highlighted. Reactive instruments currently in place should be complemented by forward-looking tools focused on prevention, preparedness, and long-term adaptation, with strong involvement of local and regional authorities. Furthermore, access to funding needs to be simplified and made more accessible. Water policy also requires smart management and a cross-sectoral approach; it is not only an environmental issue, but also one essential to agriculture, the energy industry, and urban development. By placing water resilience at the heart of MFF negotiations, MEP Tsiodras stressed, we can protect ecosystems, strengthen economies, and secure long-term well-being for citizens.

Following the MEP’s opening remarks, **Mr. Nicola de Michelis**, Director for “Smart and Sustainable Growth & Programmes Implementation” at DG REGIO, highlighted how the mid-term review of the Cohesion Policy reallocated €3.1 billion (EU amount) to water resilience and water management, on top of the €13 billion already dedicated under 2021-2027 programmes.

As pointed out, efforts are underway to improve water management across EU countries, with a focus on implementation in cooperation with Member States. Looking ahead to the next MFF, water resilience will be a key objective within the National and Regional Partnership Plans, with close attention to how Member States link investments and reforms.

Mr. de Michelis added that water resilience requires not only investments in new technologies, but also stronger governance to ensure that all funding is translated into efficient and effective investments. Moreover, instead of reactive crisis management, European water authorities should move towards a proactive, digitally integrated, data-driven approach, supported by investments in skills and administrative capacity.

Moving to the panel discussion, **Mr. Ilias Grampas** asked on behalf of the MEP Group Secretariat what the most urgent priority for European water resilience should be.

MEP Jutta Paulus (Greens/EFA) welcomed the Performance Regulation introduced in the MFF as a single framework covering all funds with common indicators. She argued that the current “real market system” is too narrow, treating water resilience as secondary. despite its role in underpinning climate and biodiversity goals, and suggested making it a standalone objective. She also proposed adjusting funding rules under the MFF to penalise environmentally harmful investments. More generally, she called for a coherent approach where spending in one sector reinforces outcomes in another.

Mr. Oliver Loebel, Secretary General at EurEau, emphasised that the top priority is the full implementation and protection of EU water legislation, warning that deregulation would increase treatment costs and reduce investment capacity for innovation and climate adaptation.

In response, **Ms. Eleni Marianou**, Cohesion Policy Attaché of the Cyprus Presidency of the Council of the EU, stressed that the key challenge is not funding availability but preparedness, coordination, and governance, ensuring that existing resources and legislation are effectively implemented on the ground.

From the perspective of the water sector operators, **Mr. Renato Giacon**, Director of Public Finance at ACEA, described the water sector as facing a “perfect storm” of challenges, including droughts, PFAS pollution, and ageing infrastructure. While recognising the points made by other speakers, he stressed that investment remains essential. Italy, he noted, demonstrates how the Recovery and Resilience Facility can significantly boost investment outcomes, alongside instruments such as InvestEU and cohesion funds. He also suggested that involving experienced operators more directly in implementation could improve the effectiveness of EU investment programmes.

From the local and regional perspective, **Mr. Joško Klisović**, Member of the ENVE Commission of the European Committee of the Regions, stressed that EU water policy must reflect regional diversity and that affordable access to clean water is the key priority. To achieve this, local and regional authorities need simplified access to EU funding.

Shifting to the Parliament’s perspective, a question was raised by Mr. Grampas on how water resilience can become a real investment priority rather than a secondary objective. In response, **MEP Paulus** argued that water resilience should be elevated as a distinct category in performance regulation to increase visibility and importance, noting that awareness of water challenges is still low despite their growing relevance across regions. Furthermore, she stressed that water is fundamental to the economy and warned against prioritising short-term industrial interests.

Turning to the issue of National and Regional Partnership Plans (NRPPs), MEP Paulus called for clearer criteria and warned against renationalising the EU budget, arguing that strong EU-level programmes are needed to ensure fair access to funding, particularly where national governance may be uneven or unequal.

When asked what the biggest investment needs are that EU policy currently underestimates, **Mr. Loebel** explained that the biggest challenge faced by EurEau members is infrastructure renewal and maintenance. Secondly, compliance with existing regulations such as the Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive and the Drinking Water Directive remains essential. He warned that weakening the extended producer responsibility scheme (EPR) within the Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive would lead to a lack of funds for leakage reduction, with costs then falling on operators.

Mr. Loebel also argued for shifting from reactive fixes to long-term strategic planning for water resilience, emphasising that EU funding, especially under the MFF through cohesion, regional development, and competitiveness funds, should be directed towards strengthening water infrastructure and resilience, including protection against future security threats.

When asked what regulatory or governance changes would most help water utilities deliver resilience, Mr. Loebel again urged maintaining extended producer responsibility (EPR) to prevent

financial shortfalls, while stressing stronger pollution prevention at source, particularly when it comes to PFAS. He also called for simplified procurement and permitting rules, faster infrastructure delivery, and better use of EU funds through improved administrative capacity and training at local and regional levels.

Providing the perspective of the Council Presidency on the main barriers to accessing and using EU funds for water infrastructure and ecosystem restoration, **Ms. Marianou** explained that water resilience, especially in Mediterranean regions, should be treated as a cross-cutting priority rather than only an environmental concern, given structural challenges such as infrastructure decay. She stressed that ongoing negotiations on EU funding frameworks, including NRPPs and related regulations, provide an opportunity to elevate water resilience across sectors, and called for stronger engagement to ensure it is better prioritised, coordinated, and embedded in future funding and legislation.

More broadly, she emphasised that active advocacy using concrete experience is needed to demonstrate that water resilience is a cross-cutting issue, and that engagement of Member States, regions, and local authorities is essential for proper integration at different levels.

When it comes to using EU cohesion funding for water infrastructure, **Mr. Giacon** highlighted the important role of long-term and large-scale funding capacity, allowing various projects to be financed, as well as place-based planning that improves coordination across regions, municipalities, and water agencies. He also highlighted strong alignment with the acquis and EU directives. In addition, co-financing models were seen as improving governance and project success stories. However, he also pointed to key bottlenecks, including slow bureaucracy at EU and national levels, complex procurement rules, uneven administrative capacity, and heavy reporting and audit requirements, all of which contribute to low absorption of funds.

When asked how local and regional authorities can be better involved in the design of EU funding instruments as well as implementation of those, **Mr. Klisović** argued that cities and regions are currently excluded from early-stage policy and funding design, despite being responsible for most part of their implementation, and should instead be treated as equal partners from the outset. He warned that increased centralisation of EU funds risks politicisation and weaker implementation, and called for stronger multi-level governance and the inclusion of implementation chapters in National and Regional Partnership Plans.

Practical steps to improve the role of cities and regions include a permanent consultation platform, which can be put in motion not only by governments but also by local authorities. He also called for regulatory certainty and simplified access to EU funds, as well as for a common EU digital permitting system for green transition projects, as well as improved data sharing and early warning systems for disaster preparedness.

Wrapping up the panel discussion, Mr. Klisović also argued that cities and regions should be recognised as central drivers of competitiveness and innovation within the European Competitiveness Fund, since they generate most global GDP and lead in innovation and research. He stressed that limited public funds should be used strategically to unlock much larger private investment, making projects bankable and enabling cities and regions to act as catalysts for large-scale investments.

MEP Sakis Arnaoutoglou (S&D), commenting on the discussion, emphasised that public responsibility must remain central in water provision, stressing that citizens need reliable access to clean water as a basic public good. He highlighted severe inefficiencies in Greece, including

major water losses and drought impacts, and argued that priority should be given to fixing leaks and upgrading existing infrastructure before investing in new large-scale projects or expanding privatisation. He further stressed that a balance should be found in private sector involvement in the water sector, ensuring citizens remain the primary beneficiaries.

Delivering the closing remarks, **MEP Dimitris Tsodras** (EPP) re-emphasised the need for both increased funding to close the investment gap and better governance, planning, and coordination between national and regional levels. He stressed that water should remain a public good, that investments must be used effectively, and that water policy should be treated as a cross-cutting issue linked to public health, food security, and overall European resilience ahead of the next MFF.