

**Fiorella Lavorgna**

Welcome back to *Call Simone*. I'm your host, Fiorella Lavorgna, and in today's episode we take a closer look at one of the most important political debates unfolding in the European Union: the negotiations for the next Multiannual Financial Framework for 2028–2034, also known as the next EU budget.

If this sounds technical or bureaucratic, don't worry—we're here to walk you through it. Behind these big numbers lies a real conversation about Europe's future. How much do we invest in cohesion and agriculture? How serious are we about moving toward a more competitive model? What is Europe doing on defence? How prepared are we for a possible historic enlargement? And how much influence will cities and regions have in shaping the Europe of tomorrow?

We are discussing this at a moment of real tension—not only geopolitical. The Council is already debating draft negotiating boxes, the European Parliament is sharpening its position, and national governments and interest groups are pushing hard to protect their priorities long before any final deal is close.

To help us make sense of all this, we are joined by someone who truly understands how EU budgets are built from the inside out: Jan Olbrycht. He is a former Member of the European Parliament and one of the most respected voices on the EU budget. Over the years, he has been at the centre of several MFF negotiations and is known for his calm, methodical approach, as well as his strong commitment to ensuring that regions, cities and local communities are not overlooked in high-level Brussels debates.

Before entering European politics, he served as a mayor and later as a regional leader in Poland, giving him a grounded understanding of how policy affects people's daily lives.

Mr Olbrycht, welcome to *Call Simone*.

---

**Jan Olbrycht**

Good morning. I would just like to add that, in my time as mayor, I was also one of the vice-presidents of CEMR, which makes me very close to this organisation.

---

**Fiorella Lavorgna**

That's true—and we're very happy to have you here. I don't think podcasts existed when you were vice-president of CEMR.

---

**Jan Olbrycht**

No, they didn't.

---

**Fiorella Lavorgna**

Before we dive into the current state of negotiations, I have a question for you. If you had to speak with “Europe” today, who would you call?

---

**Jan Olbrycht**

This is not an easy question. The EU today is increasingly based on relations between Member States. After the Lisbon Treaty, most decisions are effectively taken by the European Council—by prime ministers and heads of state.

So, I would call at least three people, in order of importance. First, António Costa, President of the European Council, to understand the position of the Member States. Second, Roberta Metsola, President of the European Parliament, to understand the position of the co-legislator. And third, Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, which acts as the executive body.

Decisions are politically agreed by Member States, then defined by the co-legislators—Council and Parliament—and finally implemented by the Commission.

---

**Fiorella Lavorgna**

So it’s a complex puzzle. Has it become more complex in recent years?

---

**Jan Olbrycht**

Not more complex—just different since the Lisbon Treaty. Before Lisbon, summits of prime ministers were informal. Now we have the European Council as a formal institution, meeting frequently and taking key political decisions.

Importantly, the European Council does not vote—it reaches consensus. These political agreements are extremely powerful and shape everything that follows. Over the past five years, due to geopolitical crises, its role has become even more central.

---

**Fiorella Lavorgna**

So it sets the political direction but does not legislate directly.

---

**Jan Olbrycht**

Exactly. If heads of state agree politically, ministers will follow. Parliament, however, is

different—it is stable for five years and cannot be dissolved, which gives it a distinct role.

---

### **Fiorella Lavorgna**

Let's turn to the main topic. Where are we now in the negotiations for the next EU budget? Are Member States already drawing red lines?

---

### **Jan Olbrycht**

Let me briefly explain the system. The EU has an annual budget, co-decided by Council and Parliament. But this sits within a multiannual financial framework—a seven-year structure that sets ceilings and priorities.

The key difference is that the MFF requires unanimity among Member States, while the annual budget is decided by qualified majority.

The process starts with a proposal from the Commission. That proposal is now on the table. The Council is working on it and has produced a “negotiating box” (Nego Box), while the Parliament has already reacted with its own position.

So where are we? We are in ongoing negotiations—within the Council, within Parliament, and among stakeholders like CEMR and Eurocities. Everything is still open.

---

### **Fiorella Lavorgna**

And what exactly is a Nego Box?

---

### **Jan Olbrycht**

It's essentially a structured summary of the negotiation: the proposed budget structure and the amounts involved. Today, two main issues dominate.

First, the size of the budget—around €2 trillion in the Commission proposal—but this depends on new own resources. Without them, the budget will have to be reduced.

Second, the structure. The Commission proposes a major shift: moving away from separate policies like cohesion and agriculture toward broader, integrated budget categories.

This structural change is highly controversial.

---

---

**Fiorella Lavorgna**

So we're moving from a €1.2 trillion budget to potentially €2 trillion, but without certainty on funding—especially given the need to repay NextGenerationEU.

Another major change is the introduction of national and regional partnership plans. Do these plans really simplify things, or do they centralise too much power?

---

**Jan Olbrycht**

The original idea was to give Member States more responsibility. But this raised concerns, so the Commission introduced safeguards.

Now, certain elements are mandatory: funding for farmers, support for less developed regions, and minimum shares for climate and social spending.

So there are two layers: national flexibility and Commission-imposed constraints. The result is a hybrid system—partly centralised, partly decentralised.

---

**Fiorella Lavorgna**

Does this approach account for the diversity of European territories?

---

**Jan Olbrycht**

Partially. Some elements are fixed, but others remain open to national decisions. The key question is how governments will use that flexibility—especially regarding cohesion, social policy and territorial balance.

---

**Fiorella Lavorgna**

What are the main fault lines in the negotiations?

---

**Jan Olbrycht**

There are three main ones.

First, the size of the budget—some countries oppose any increase.

Second, the structure—especially the relationship between cohesion and agriculture.

Third, implementation—particularly the role of cities and regions. A key red line is whether they will be true partners in designing and implementing plans, or merely consulted.

---

**Fiorella Lavorgna**

Are there countries pushing more strongly for local involvement?

---

**Jan Olbrycht**

Yes. Poland, Spain and Croatia are examples where decentralisation is stronger. But this varies widely, and in many cases, regional involvement is not guaranteed.

---

**Fiorella Lavorgna**

Let's move to the broader objective: making Europe more competitive and resilient. Does the current proposal deliver?

---

**Jan Olbrycht**

The competitiveness part is stronger and more flexible, which is positive. But we must not lose the strengths of cohesion policy, which has proven effective.

The key is stability. Without clarity on structure and priorities, implementation will suffer.

---

**Fiorella Lavorgna**

Do you expect an agreement by 2026?

---

**Jan Olbrycht**

I hope so—but realistically, it may slip into 2027. And delays have real consequences: if the budget is late, investments are delayed.

---

**Fiorella Lavorgna**

Let's touch on enlargement. Do current proposals account for countries like Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia?

---

**Jan Olbrycht**

Enlargement today is not just economic—it is geopolitical and about security. Financially, the shock may be manageable, but the political and administrative challenges are significant.

Importantly, enlargement is decided unanimously by Member States. So it depends as much on current members as on candidate countries.

---

**Fiorella Lavorgna**

Finally, on Global Europe. Is the EU doing enough as a global actor?

---

**Jan Olbrycht**

The budget alone is not enough—but the EU plus Member States together are a global player. The key is coordination. Without unity, Europe cannot act effectively on the global stage.

---

**Fiorella Lavorgna**

Last question: in 10 years, if you had to call “Europe”, would it still be three people?

---

**Jan Olbrycht**

Yes. The EU is not a single-state system. It is a union of 27 countries. Even in 10 years, I don't believe there will be one single leader. The strength of Europe lies in acting together.

---

**Fiorella Lavorgna**

Thank you very much—it's been a real pleasure speaking with you.

---

**Jan Olbrycht**

My pleasure.