

# Territorial cohesion and spatial planning in the context of European integration

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**Abstract:** The adoption of the ‘Territorial Agenda’ in 2007 marks a shift away from the harmonization of domestic spatial planning systems that started in 1999 with the ‘European Spatial Development Perspective’. The new priority of ‘territorial cohesion’ focuses mainly upon the horizontal coordination of cohesion policies and promotion of transnational cooperation. This turn despite its arsenal of moral and political connotations that potentially enhances the compensative and redistributive aspects of spatial planning has also the result to redirect efforts and resources towards more competitive goals according to the Europe 2020 strategy for smart, sustainable, and inclusive growth. The argument evolves in three steps. First, it defines the concept of territorial cohesion in the context of European integration. Second, it examines how territorial cohesion evolves in relation to the European spatial planning. Third, it underlines the implications of the above for the shifting role of spatial planning, especially during the debt crisis of the Eurozone.

## 1. Framing the concept of territorial cohesion

The concept of ‘territorial cohesion’ plays a key role in the ongoing process of European Integration. Nevertheless, territorial cohesion does not come with a fixed and directly identifiable theoretical and empirical content. Its introduction during the 1990s in the official EU jargon and its subsequent uses by the European spatial planning community of theorists, practitioners and policy makers testify, according to Faludi (1997), that this new emphasis of the EU cohesion policy needs to be further explored and better understood. This necessity is reflected in the quest of how the concept of territorial cohesion had been collectively forged by all those involved in its elaboration and practical deployment. Territorial cohesion came endowed with a positive symbolism, claiming the widening of the scope of economic and social cohesion, while retaining at the same time an adequate degree of flexibility and opacity in terms of its more specific meaning and practical use in order to ensure the consent of a variety of interests.

During the mid-1990s the elaboration of a compensative European cohesion policy favoring the less developed areas was treated with scepticism by many European

governments relying on different conservative and neo-liberal coalitions. Especially after the rejection of the Constitutional Treaty in 2005 the European Union has entered a period where the key role was played by the relative strength of its members in an increasingly intergovernmental process. Furthermore, the scale of the enlargement with many relatively poor new members made practically impossible to sustain the original concept of cohesion policy due to the multiplication of the costs to support the less developed economies of the new members. However, as European integration was generating impacts that do not automatically correspond to the political agendas of the affected territories, the EU had to eventually confront effectively the regional disparities caused by the operation of the Single Market.

In the above context territorial cohesion seems fit to reconcile the need for balanced and harmonious development with the need to increase competitiveness and exploit the strategic advantages of regions (Kafkalas, 2000). The term 'territorial' itself suggests that the issue of European cohesion is less an issue of the spatial structure of activities over the European territory than an issue of the development of different geographical tiers defined by criteria of administrative jurisdiction. In this sense, the promotion of territorial cohesion pushes the focus of European spatial planning as a distinct policy field towards the practical requirements of the implementation of the EU cohesion policy.

This is reflected in the ways in which the concept of 'territorial cohesion' is taking shape in the constitutional texts (founding treaties) and in the associated reports, opinions and studies referring to its theoretical content, empirical relevance and practical applications. It could be argued that through all this official consolidation and streamlining, the concept of 'territorial cohesion', as either a theoretical concept or as an agenda for action, is striving to become an effective top-down/bottom-up policy involving European, national, regional and local initiatives responding to any real or imaginative threats and opportunities of the process of European integration.

During a long period of almost six decades the vision of an integrated Europe has gradually evolved from the initial core of the European Economic Community of the six founding members in 1957 into an expanding European Union of 28 member states in July 2013. This historical trajectory consists of many intermediate steps and key turning points triggered by the shifting contingencies of internal forces and external pressures that are shaping the process of European integration.

European spatial planning evolves in parallel and in response to concerns about the impact of spatial inequalities upon the evolving experiment of European unification that Jacques Delors had once described as an unidentified political object and many prefer to describe as an Empire in the making (Zielonka 2006). Such concerns and responses that have been expressed at various stages led to the gradual recognition of the necessity of spatial planning in parallel with the gradual shifting of the scope

of regional policy towards territorial cohesion. The general climate is reflected in the following passage from the Delors Report on Economic and Monetary Union in the European Community (1989):

‘A particular role would have to be assigned to common policies aimed at developing a more balanced economic structure throughout the Community. This would help to prevent the emergence or aggravation of regional and sectoral imbalances, which could threaten the viability of an economic and monetary union.’

The notion of “a more balanced economic structure” refers to the regional imbalances in an economic sense, as a problem that could disrupt the integration of the single internal market. However, the spatial planning dimension is present due to the fact that the dominant, at that period, French approach of ‘L'aménagement du territoire’ directly links regional development and spatial planning. These views prevail during the 1990’s at the Informal Council of Ministers responsible for Spatial Planning that led first to the agreement on a ‘European Spatial Development Perspective’ (1999) and subsequently to the introduction of the concept of ‘Territorial Cohesion’. In this sense the efforts to establish a European spatial development and planning policy domain and the emergence of the concept of ‘territorial cohesion’, have been, from the very beginning, an integral part of the theoretical and practical controversies associated with the process of European integration.

## **2. Integrating territorial cohesion and spatial planning through structural funding**

Spatial planning appears only once in the Treaties, in the context of the environmental policy (Article 175) where the English text uses the term “town and country planning” and the French text uses the term “aménagement du territoire” (OJEU, 2006). As it was first stated in the Single European Act (1986), the decisions concerning certain environmental policy measures must be unanimous. These measures include among others those that affect the town and country planning and the use of land. This means that planning and regulation of land use are primarily considered to be national affairs and only by acting unanimously (which is extremely difficult and applicable only to certain cases) could spatial planning measures at a European level be applied.

Outside the official competences of the EU, the evolution of the concepts of European spatial development and spatial planning could be traced back to two interwoven sources or poles of activity. On the one hand there are the initiatives of the European Commission through the elaboration of policies, the drafting of special reports and the use of European Structural Funds according to regulations while on the other hand there is the intergovernmental activity of the Informal EU Council

of Ministers for Spatial Planning and Regional Policy and the supporting mechanisms such as the Committee of Spatial Development aiming to identify and coordinate common spatial planning frameworks and priorities at the European level (Giannakourou (2008)).

As far as the European dimension is concerned, economic and social cohesion were set already in the Single European Act (Article 158) in terms of “harmonious development” emphasizing the geographic dimension and the reduction of disparities between the various regions and the backwardness of the least favoured regions. The aim here is the convergence of GDP levels, competitiveness and employment. The existence of inequality has serious social consequences through the marginalization of sections of society through long-term unemployment, youth unemployment and poverty (EC, 1996, 12). The new dimension of territorial cohesion that was added to Article 158 further enriches the primary goal of balanced development of European space.

Despite the fact that spatial planning does not correspond to any Community competence, in the above context different ‘spatial planning’ interventions were implemented through structural funding. The first examples were the actions undertaken under Article 10 of the ERDF (spatial planning, urban policy and interregional cooperation) and subsequently the actions under specific Community Initiatives with spatial dimensions such as Interreg, Urban, and Leader concerning particular types of areas and forms of cooperation. In the programming period 2007-2013, urban and local development activities have been integrated in regional operational programs financed through the ‘Convergence’ and ‘Regional Competitiveness’ objective, while the new “European Territorial Cooperation” Objective replaces the Community Initiative Interreg (ERDF regulation nr. 1080/2006, Article 6), continuing its three main types of co-operation: the cross-border, transnational and interregional co-operation. In this respect it is important that the proposals submitted by regions must take into account, among others, the policy options and the recommendations of the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP), (Camhis, 2007, 130).

The distinction between the territorial, economic and social components of cohesion is also reflected in the priority objectives of the structural funds. For the programming period 2007-13 the following components are promoted:

- Territorial and economic components through the regional programs of the Objective “Convergence” and of the first part of the “Regional competitiveness and employment” Objective.
- Social components through the national programs for employment of the second part of the “Regional competitiveness and employment” Objective.
- New territorial components through programs of cross-border, transnational and interregional co-operation of the European territorial cooperation Objective.

The intergovernmental dimension, linking spatial planning and territorial cohesion, became operational at the Informal Council of Ministers. It is responsible for spatial planning and regional policy, and represents the second pole of activity promoting the links with territorial cohesion. Through successive informal councils assisted by the Spatial Development Committee, a new strategic approach on spatial planning was developed; this approach was reflected in the preparation and final adoption of “the European Spatial Development Perspective” (ESDP) in 1999 (EC, 1999). As far as the analytical part is concerned, the ESDP does not diverge from the findings of the reports of the Commission. It highlights the serious imbalances in European Space and identifies four territorial issues of European importance: the change of the urban system in Europe; the changing role and the functions of the rural areas; transport and networks; and the natural and cultural heritage.

The European Spatial Development Perspective sets out for the first time a common framework of principles, objectives and policy options for spatial planning. The ESDP aims at the balanced and sustainable development of the Union Territory and promotes the three main goals of Community policy (economic and social cohesion, protection of the natural and cultural heritage and a more balanced competitiveness throughout the European territory). The ESDP is a non-binding policy framework and constitutes a reference framework for actions and measures of public and private decision makers. The spatial development strategy of ESDP is based on three pillars; each one of them has specific targets and policy choices:

*Polycentric spatial development and a new relationship between town and country, with four sub - goals:* polycentric and balanced spatial development at a European level, creation of dynamic, attractive and competitive cities at a national level, endogenous development of diversified and productive rural areas and rural-urban partnership in regional and local level.

*Parity of access to infrastructure and knowledge with four sub-goals:* integrated approach for improved connections and access to knowledge, polycentric development model as a basis for better accessibility, efficient and sustainable use of infrastructure, and diffusion of innovation and knowledge

*Wise management of the natural and cultural heritage, with five subgoals:* natural and cultural heritage as part of the development, preservation and development of natural heritage, water management, creative management of cultural landscapes, and creative management of cultural heritage.

The idea of a polycentric urban network in conjunction with an equally organized transport system that ensures accessibility is the core of ESDP spatial development model. On a national level, a polycentric network of settlements with the enhanced role of small and medium-sized cities and with proper organization and operation of services of general economic interest, which are installed at different levels of

the settlements, promotes the intensification of territorial cohesion.

The links between territorial cohesion, spatial planning and urban development are underlined in a series of documents. First, the Informal Council of Ministers responsible for spatial planning and urban development, following the trajectory that started with the ESDP, adopted in May 2007 in Leipzig two key documents: ‘Leipzig Charter for European Sustainable Towns and Cities’ and the ‘European Territorial Agenda: towards a more competitive and sustainable Europe of diverse regions’.

With the Leipzig Charter, the ministers agreed on a set of common principles and strategies in order to promote an urban development policy and put detailed proposals on two key pillars: provide an “integrated urban development” and focus on “deprived urban areas”.

In the Territorial Agenda, the ministers raised the question of future support of territorial cohesion, the new challenges on strengthening regional identity, best use of regional diversity, the territorial priorities for the development of the European Union and finally, ways of implementing the Territorial Agenda.

The Territorial Agenda is seen as a framework for future cooperation aiming at sustainable development and job creation and a means to support the Lisbon and Goteborg strategy. The Territorial Agenda envisions a polycentric territorial development of the EU, aiming at the better use of the available resources of the European regions and, in terms of regional solidarity, a better quality of life with equal opportunities regardless of where people live. This effort could be promoted through ‘territorial governance’, a process of cooperation and continuous dialogue among all stakeholders of territorial development.

The Territorial Agenda considers territorial cohesion as a prerequisite for achieving sustainable economic growth and for implementing social and economic cohesion (the foundation of the European social model). It is a vital issue and an act of solidarity to create the right conditions in all regions so as to provide equal opportunities for all citizens as well as development perspectives for entrepreneurship. Finally, the growing territorial impact of Community policies are underlined, particularly those concerning rural development, environment and transport as well as the cohesion policy.

In the above considerations and context, the Territorial Agenda proposes the following “territorial priorities” for the development of EU based on the three axes of the ESDP and the Guiding Principles for Sustainable Spatial Development of the CEMAT (European Conference of Ministers responsible for regional/spatial planning):

- Strengthening the polycentric development and the innovation through networking of city regions and cities

- New forms of partnership and territorial governance between rural and urban areas
- Promotion of regional clusters of competition and innovation in Europe
- Strengthening and extension of Trans-European networks
- Trans-European risk management including the impacts of climate change
- Strengthening the ecological structures and cultural resources as an added value for development.

In November 2007 the First Action Plan for the Implementation of the EU Territorial Agenda for the period 2007-2011 was released.

The First Action Programme follows five guiding principles: (i) solidarity between Regions and territories, (ii) multi-level governance, (iii) integration of policies, (iv) cooperation on territorial matters and (v) subsidiarity. These guiding principles (that involve sub-actions) concern: 1) Implementation of the Territorial Agenda in the areas of competence of the Ministers on EU level as well as on a national level, 2) Influencing EU key dossiers of the EU and Giving a territorial/urban dimension to sectoral policies, 3) Strengthening multi-level territorial governance in the EU, 4) Understanding the territorial state, perspectives, trends and impacts of territorial policies in the European Union and the member - states from the perspective of the territorial cohesion and the sustainable spatial development and 5) Coordinating and monitoring the First Action Programme implementation, the implementation and evaluation of the Territorial Agenda and the development of a communication and awakening strategy for territorial cohesion and sustainable spatial development.

The “Green Paper on Territorial Cohesion” (2008) marks the beginning of an extensive consultation process with experts and representatives from all European countries. Besides the overall agenda concerning the promotion of a balanced and harmonious development, it places particular emphasis upon the following challenges:

- Concentration: overcoming differences in density
- Connecting territories: overcoming distance
- Cooperation: overcoming division
- Regions with specific geographical features (mountain regions, island regions, sparsely populated regions, all rural and almost all border regions).

The particular questions that the European Commission introduced in this debate include: the definition of territorial cohesion, the scale and the scope of territorial action, the context for better cooperation, better coordination and new territorial partnerships and the quantitative/qualitative indicators needed for the understanding of territorial cohesion.

Finally, the new Territorial Agenda of the European Union 2020 (adopted in 2011) links the ongoing debate with the Europe 2020 strategy towards an inclusive,

smart and sustainable growth. The Territorial Agenda 2020 poses six territorial priorities for the development of the European Union:

1. Promote polycentric and balanced territorial development
2. Encouraging integrated development in cities, rural and specific regions
3. Territorial integration in cross-border and transnational functional regions
4. Ensuring global competitiveness of the regions based on strong local economies
5. Improving territorial connectivity for individuals, communities and enterprises
6. Managing and connecting ecological, landscape and cultural values of regions.

The new Territorial Agenda focuses upon the challenges and potentials for territorial development posed by the increased exposure to globalization, the challenges of EU integration, territorially diverse demographic and social challenges, climate change and environmental risks, energy challenges, loss of biodiversity and vulnerable natural, landscape and cultural heritage.

### **3. Territorial cohesion and the shifting role of spatial planning**

During the 2000-2006 programming period, the objectives and the proposals of the ESDP as well as the concern on spatial planning were at the forefront of the European policy debate, mainly in the form of the territorial cohesion policy (Gianakourou 2008, 59). Furthermore, the concept of territorial cohesion is directly linked to the theoretical and political debate about the compatibility of the main objectives of the European regional policy, i.e. efficiency and equity, with the inherent logic of the Single Market. In this respect, regional policy – that started as structural aid of the less developed regions of the EU – goes in parallel with national policies, which mainly control the central redistributive mechanisms of social security and taxation (Andrikopoulou and Kafkalas, 2003). The role of regional policy in promoting social and territorial cohesion of the Union lies behind the concern, already visible in the Treaty of Amsterdam, over the position of 'services of general economic interest'. The idea here is not to create a redistribution mechanism on a larger scale but precisely to support services, especially in areas and sectors where this does not seem economically viable from the market point of view.

According to Peyrony (2007) the concept of cohesion can be converted to the perception of Rawls (1971) who perceives freedom and equality as the foundation of democratic societies. On that basis, the greatest possible equality is desirable, provided that it remains compatible with efficiency. It is significant that Rawls extended the principle of equality to sustainable development as the optimum balance between economy (efficiency), society (equality within a generation) and the preservation of the environment (equality of future generations).

In this context, Peyrony (2007) argues that polycentricity, which is a key-concept for ESDP and “territorial cohesion”, was built upon the idea of regional fairness or



equal treatment. Since spatial fairness is accepted, the question that arises concerning “territorial cohesion” is: which is the appropriate territorial point of reference (e.g. cities, regions, countries, European Union) and which multi-level governance framework will govern the relationship of these different tiers? European countries share an experience where the various territories (states, regions, towns) are agents of solidarity by providing the basis for policy formulation and implementation. This is the meaning of 'territorial capital' which contributes to efficiency by exploiting local resources and guaranteeing access to networks of public infrastructure. From this point of view, the concept of territorial cohesion implies the pursuit of territorial justice.

Since the emerging forms of integration in Europe are directed by the economic component of the single market, it is almost inevitable that their spatial effects will not automatically respond to the demands of different regions. In the long run, it appears that the functioning of the global market and the globalization process, characterized by selective and uneven penetration in sectors and regions, undermine the material conditions of territorial integration on a local level (Kafkalas, 1992). In any case, the overall process can be divided into two key components that demonstrate the unity of the 'economic' and 'political' element within the geographical area: the economic integration that incorporates the discipline of free market and the territorial integration (regional or local integration) that represents the political aspirations and demands for endogenous and stand - alone development.

In reference to the ESDP as a key document for understanding the concept of territorial cohesion, two leading figures, Hall (2005) and Faludi (2004) seem to agree that the ESDP's gestation occurred because the French planning system exported itself to Brussels. DATAR, the French national planning service, sent some of its key people to the European Commission's DG-XVI, now DG-Regio, in the late 1980s, and what they did was to map a long-standing French planning debate onto a much vaster European canvas. This fact seems to promote a social philosophy according to which the State has the right and the obligation to intervene in order to correct the social and economic territorial injustices caused by the market.

Furthermore, Faludi (2004) stresses that Article 16 of the Treaty of Amsterdam highlights the position of 'services of general economic interest' in the EU common values and in the role they play in promoting social and territorial cohesion of the Union. The idea here is precisely the need for government support for services even in areas where this is considered anti-economical. Below, in the same Article, Faludi states that territorial cohesion is not just a redistribution rule but it reflects what was already expressed in the early 1980s interest of the Union for the social and institutional dimensions of the regions' lack of development.

In a later Article, Faludi (2006) underlines the absence of an official definition for

the concept of “territorial cohesion”. What is commonly used as a definition is that territorial cohesion complements economic and social cohesion in order to achieve a balanced and harmonious development of the Union. He claims that the DG for Regional Policy tends to adopt the concept where the 'territorial cohesion' is seen as a continuum of older policies emphasizing cooperation and networking of regions as well as the efficiency and coordination of policies. Essentially it is a concept which highlights the contribution of territorial cohesion in the Lisbon Strategy which aims at the sustainable and competitive development of the Union.

The implications for spatial planning in particular are that ‘territorial cohesion’ shifts the focus towards the distinct tiers of administrative jurisdiction linked to the formulation and implementation of public policies and governance rather than towards the more standard concerns of spatial patterns of location and interaction of activities. This shift highlights the need for rethinking the evolving relationship between the concept of ‘European territorial cohesion’, the emerging field of ‘European spatial planning’ and the domestic spatial planning traditions of the member states.

#### **4. 2014 and beyond: The need for the reorientation of spatial planning and cohesion policy**

The concept of 'territorial cohesion' within the context of European integration seems to remain adequately flexible in order to accommodate the different uses associated with its application. This is evident for example in the general approach adopted by the Treaties or the more targeted official uses associated with the implementation of cohesion policy, but also in the alternative views in the ongoing debate concerning the scope of a European regional planning and spatial development policy. Nevertheless, as either a conceptual tool or a guide for action, territorial cohesion contributes to our understanding of the changing nature of planning and territorial governance under the pressures and the impulses provided by EU policies and European integration in general.

In the new programming period 2014-2020 two parallel trends seem to define the reorientation of cohesion policy. On the one hand it emphasizes territorial cooperation, as a continuation of the Interreg initiative, partially linked also to the cooperation on issues of spatial planning. On the other hand, it focuses on urban sustainable development through ERDF’s operational programs and measures which address the economic, social, demographic and climate change challenges in the urban areas. Furthermore, under the EU's 2014-2020 budget, Cohesion Policy includes elements such as (EC, 2013): (a) investing in all EU regions and adapting the level of support and the national contribution (co-financing rate) to their levels of development and (b) investments under the European Regional Development

Fund (ERDF) will be concentrated on 4 key priorities: innovation and research, the digital agenda, support for small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs) and the low-carbon economy, depending on the category of region (Less Developed: 50%, Transition: 60%, and More Developed: 80%). In that sense, the cohesion policy as one of Europe's most powerful financial transfer tool (corresponding to almost one third of the European Communities budget) abolishes its redistributive character and becomes an integral part of Europe 2020 strategy for smart, sustainable, and inclusive growth.

Thus, cohesion policy shifts away from the classic regional policy approach that aims at the decrease of regional imbalances and becomes a major tool for the competitiveness of Europe and the regions with strong comparative advantages. This turn might put the weaker regions at the greater risk, as they may remain excluded from a large part of cohesion funds due to the strict regulations of the Europe 2020 strategy that despite their rhetoric do not facilitate adaptation to regional specificities. Especially after the outbreak of the world economic crisis and the ongoing debt crisis of the Eurozone the weaker regions are facing the multiple economic, social and environmental impacts of the crisis. Under such contingencies, there is need for a serious reorientation of cohesion policy taking into account territorial cohesion and spatial planning goals and priorities. Without such a reorientation the increasing inequalities will create tensions that eventually will undermine the entire Europe 2020 strategy.

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