

2 Territorial Cohesion – Current Views of the Commission and the Member States of the European Union

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2.1 Territorial Cohesion – A New Concept Combining Territorial Policy and Cohesion Policy

Although the Constitutional Treaty of the European Union (which failed because of negative referenda in France and the Netherlands) and the EU Treaty of Lisbon (which at least temporarily failed after the negative referendum in Ireland) have not yet come into effect, these new treaties established “territorial cohesion” as a new basic goal of the European Union in addition to “economic and social cohesion”. In this context, EU ministers responsible for spatial development and territorial cohesion as well as the European Commission have started a debate on the meaning and interpretation of territorial cohesion and the elements, challenges, and strategies of a territorial cohesion policy.

Territorial cohesion, as the wording implies, combines cohesion policies and territorial policies complementarily. It adds the element of territory to cohesion policy and to economic and social cohesion, and it emphasises the aspect of cohesion within European spatial and territorial policies. In this spirit, one could suppose that, on the one hand, cohesion policy involves more than territorial cohesion and that, on the other hand, territorial policy includes more than territorial cohesion.

In this article I will explore what contributions EU ministers responsible for territorial cohesion and the European Commission have recently made to shaping and clarifying the policy object of territorial cohesion in Europe.

2.2 Territorial Cohesion and European Spatial Development Policy

2.2.1 The European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP)

20 years ago, at the first ministerial meeting in Nantes in 1989, EU ministers responsible for spatial and territorial development started their intense cooperation. Ten years later, in 1999, they agreed upon the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP)¹, which laid the grounds for the main themes, goals, and methods of European cooperation in the field of territorial development. With the

1 CEC (1999): ESDP.

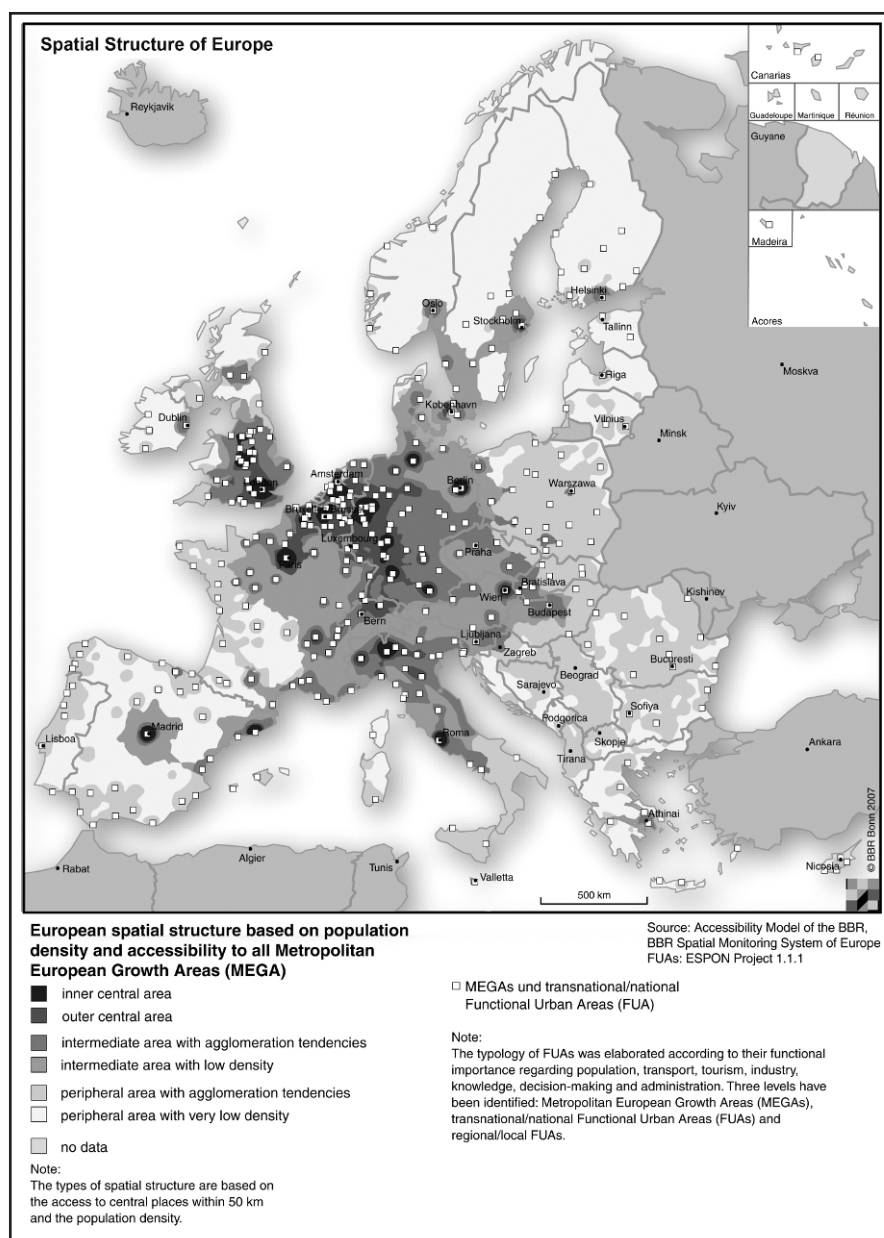


Fig. 1: Spatial structure of Europe. Source: BMVBS/ BBR (2007)

ESDP, the first milestone was created, which has provided the foundation and the orientation for political cooperation in the field of European spatial development until today. In a way, the ESDP has anticipated the European Union's Lisbon and

Gothenburg Strategies by sketching elements of European territorial development based on balanced competitiveness and sustainable development. Economic and social cohesion, conservation of natural resources and cultural heritage, and a more balanced competitiveness within the European territory were the three main underlying objectives of the ESDP. More specifically, three policy guidelines for spatial development were formulated and elaborated in 60 detailed policy options: a balanced and polycentric urban system and a new urban-rural relationship; parity of access to infrastructure and knowledge; and sustainable development, prudent management, and the protection of nature and cultural heritage. The bold message of the ESDP was that ‘territory matters’, and this message was reiterated and deepened in the discourse that followed, leading to the Territorial Agenda of the EU and the concept of territorial cohesion.

During the 1990s and in the beginning of the new millennium, some basic values, policy goals, and political strategies of European society were newly discussed and readjusted. This happened in the context of (and due to) intensifying globalisation, economic recession, unemployment and the bursting of the Internet bubble at the turn of the century, a new political awareness of climate change, energy provision, and demographic change and development, and, of course, in the context of the EU enlargement by twelve new member states and their integration into the European Union.

2.2.2 The Lisbon Treaty (2007)

With the **Lisbon Treaty** (2007), territorial cohesion was introduced as a new basic goal for the European Union. It strengthens and supplements the other two cohesion goals, and in the new treaty, economic, social, and territorial cohesion go together as one threefold goal of the EU. There are no specific paragraphs on territorial cohesion as such, but all specifications laid down in the treaty refer to all three cohesion goals at the same time. One of the central passages is Article 174 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU)². After the general reference to an “overall harmonious development” of the EU (“In order to promote its overall harmonious development, the Union shall develop and pursue its actions leading to the strengthening of its economic, social and territorial cohesion.”), the central aim is formulated as in previous treaties: “In particular, the Union shall aim at reducing disparities between the levels of development of the various regions and the backwardness of the least favoured regions.” This sentence obviously provides legal grounds for cohesion policies and the Structural Funds in general, and its main Objective 1 in particular. The next section of Article 174 TFEU is the most cited one when it comes to territorial cohesion and spatial development. It demands that particular attention be paid to specific types of regions, in the literature sometimes briefly referred to as ‘handicapped regions’. Article 174 TFEU

2 TFEU (2008).

includes an enumeration of such regions and in particular mentions rural areas, areas undergoing industrial transition, and regions with natural or demographic handicaps. In this way, it directs economic, social, and territorial cohesion towards

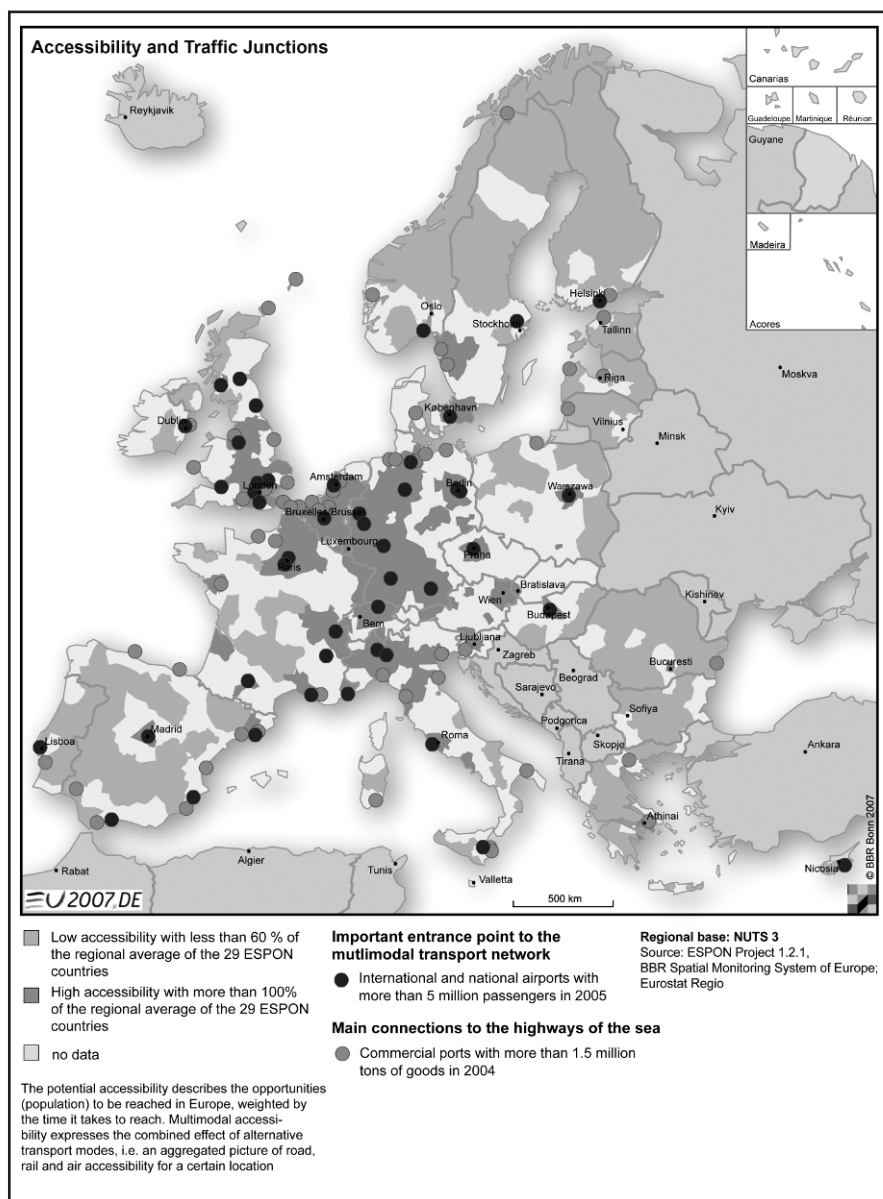


Fig. 2: Accessibility and traffic junctions. Source: BMVBS/ BBR (2007)

support for and attention to ‘handicapped regions’. In addition, the first half sentence “Among the regions concerned” puts them in the general context of the aim to support “overall harmonious development” and to reduce disparities between the levels of development in the various regions and the backwardness of the least favoured regions:

“Among the regions concerned, particular attention shall be paid to rural areas, areas affected by industrial transition, and regions which suffer from severe and permanent natural or demographic handicaps such as the northernmost regions with very low population density and island, crossborder and mountain regions” (Article 174 (3) TFEU).

The legal and political debates, also initiated by many stakeholders of supposedly ‘handicapped regions’, have since then circled around some of these questions and positions:

- (1) On the one hand, among the least favoured regions, which are economically measured by an economic performance (GDP per capita) well under the EU average, island, cross-border, mountainous, and other historically or geographically ‘handicapped’ regions may have additional problems and challenges of many dimensions and thus need particular attention. But on

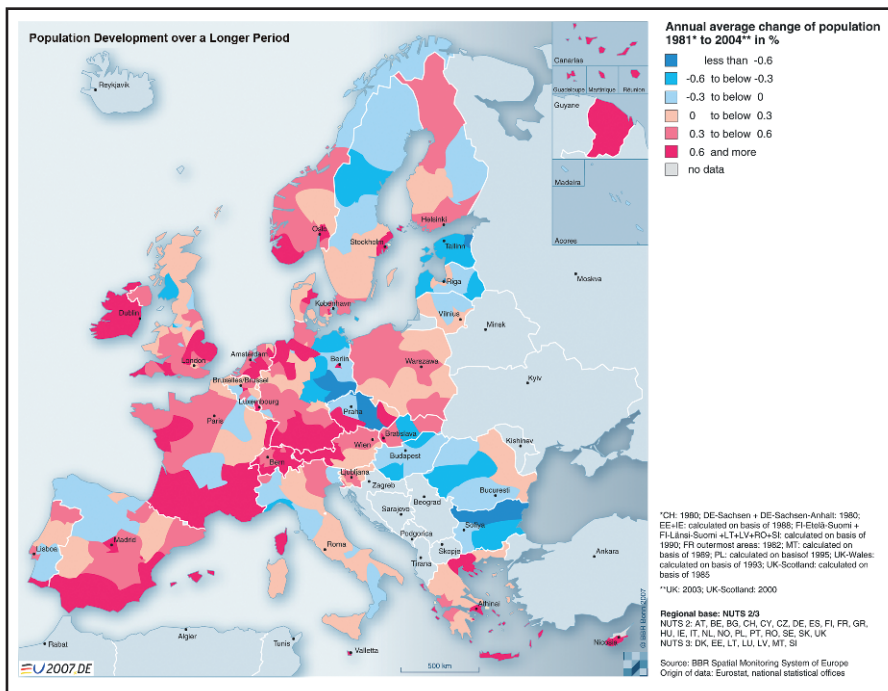


Fig. 3: Population development over a longer period. Source: BMVBS/ BBR (2007)

the other hand, many mountain and island regions of Europe, for instance, are among the most attractive and wealthiest regions in the European Union and do not seem to need much extra 'particular attention'.

- (2) 'Particular attention' does not necessarily mean more money and financial support from the European Union. Elements like good governance, integrated territorial development concepts, and making the best use of the region's own territorial capital, seem to be the crucial elements of a successful territorial cohesion policy.
- (3) Territorial cohesion is also a matter of territorial scale. Traditional EU cohesion policy is mostly based on medium range NUTS II regions. However, there is some evidence that below this level there are also territorial dysfunctions that threaten the overall harmonious development of the European territory. For instance, in their Leipzig Charter on Sustainable European Cities³ European ministers responsible for urban development argued that deprived neighbourhoods in European cities are one of the major challenges to sustainable development and territorial cohesion, and have thus demanded a policy of social integration to reduce inequalities and prevent social exclusion. At the same time, the EU Commission's Urban Audit has shown that disparities within cities sometimes tend to be larger than interregional disparities and that deprived inner-urban areas are among the least favoured areas of Europe.
- (4) Finally, with regard to their cooperation European territorial ministers have claimed that territorial cohesion and spatial development should not only support economically weak and lagging regions, but that it is also necessary to support the Lisbon Agenda themes of innovation and competitiveness through sound territorial policy approaches. This is an aspect not explicitly defined in the Lisbon Treaty, which leaves room for debate about the best territorial development strategies and their forms of organisation between cities and regions, Member States, and the European Commission. In his reflection on Article 174 of the TFEU, Fischer came to the conclusion that almost the entire EU territory is covered by the enumeration list of Article 174 and adds that it would have been more precise to identify those regions that do not need particular attention.⁴ It seems that it is the economically strong cities and metropolitan regions that (in this context) are not explicitly covered by Article 174 TFEU.

3 LC (2007).

4 Fischer (2008), p 310.

2.2.3 The EU Member States' Territorial Agenda of the European Union (2007)

In 2004 the new territorial cohesion objective induced the Dutch EU Presidency to take a new political initiative that aimed to reach a new understanding of spatial development policy with stronger links to the Lisbon Agenda (competitiveness, knowledge, innovation, and governance) and the Lisbon Treaty (territorial cohesion). This process eventually led to the adoption of the Territorial Agenda of the European Union (TAEU) and the Leipzig Charter on Sustainable European Cities (LC) in 2007. Both political documents were adopted at the Informal Ministerial Meeting on Urban Development and Territorial Cohesion held in Leipzig on 24/ 25 May 2007. Based on this, the First Action Programme for the Implementation of the Territorial Agenda of the European Union was adopted at the Informal Ministerial Meeting on Territorial Cohesion and Regional Policy held in Ponta Delgada (Azores) on 23/ 24 November 2007 (TAEUAP).

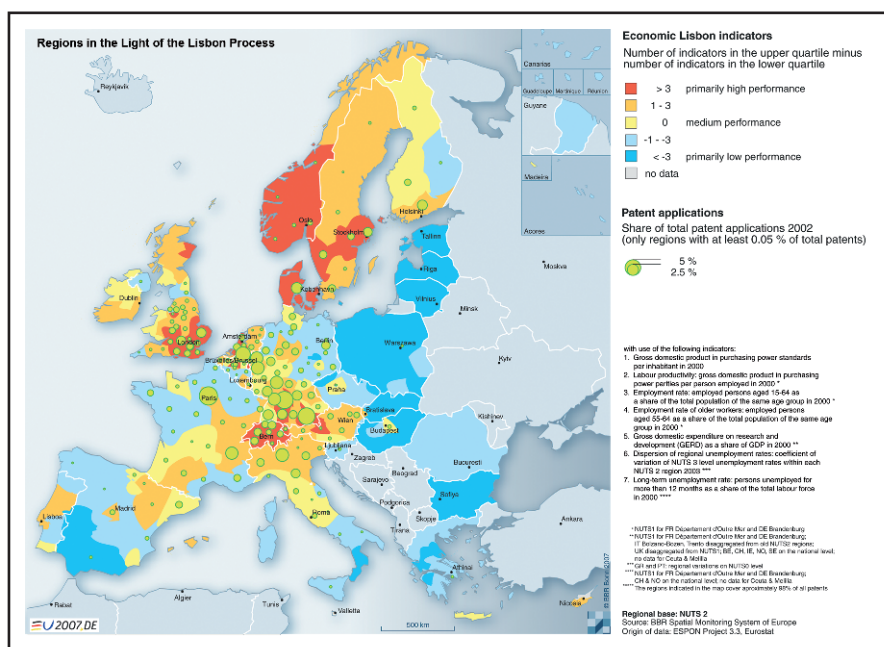


Fig. 4: Regions in the light of the Lisbon process. Source: BMVBS/ BBR (2007)

The Territorial Agenda of the EU brings two new aspects into the discussions: firstly, territorial governance and territorial cooperation, and secondly, the adoption of an “evidence-based” policy approach. In this spirit, the objective of “territorial cohesion” should be understood as a permanent process of political, organisational,

and technical cooperation between all actors of spatial development (TAEU, Chapter I, No. 4) rather than a fixed and clearly defined objective (e. g. the reduction of regional disparities) that has to be followed. In the Agenda, the EU ministers refer to this cooperation process as “territorial governance”: The economic sector (especially local and regional entrepreneurship), the scientific and administrative sector (mainly local and regional authorities) and non-governmental organisations have to cooperate, and sectoral policies have to be aligned in order to fruitfully use the urgently required investments in European regions (TAEU, Chapter I, No. 5). This broad cooperative and interactive approach has already been applied in the writing process of the TAEU. During a stakeholder conference at the end of June 2006 in Amsterdam, a Europe-wide debate was initiated by Federal Minister Wolfgang Tiefensee. This debate included an Internet-based dialogue and an exchange of opinions with European institutions, non-governmental organisations, and companies. It actively involved European regional development actors in the working process. The approximately 100 stakeholders involved in the Internet dialogue were composed of (European) non-governmental organisations, local and regional authorities, universities, foundations, local umbrella organisations, and chambers from a variety of EU member states. Their comments had an influence on the discussion and the final version of the TAEU document.

Apart from this dialogue-oriented procedure of identifying the most urgent themes and policy challenges for European spatial development and territorial cohesion, an evidence-based planning method was applied as a second crucial element in the TAEU process. The contribution of scientific evidence to the political debates has indeed been a desideratum from the beginning of the ESDP process.⁵ This necessity to know more about urban and regional development processes in Europe, which served as a source of input for policy formulation, led to the establishment of the European Spatial Planning Observation Network (ESPON), the most important joint effort to provide scientific evidence in this policy field. The result of this evidence-based method was a background document for the TAEU named *Territorial State and Perspectives*.⁶ This TSP document was written by a group of European researchers who were all involved in ESPON activities in one way or another and in close contact with those who prepared the TAEU document for the Ministerial Meeting. For the Ministers’ meeting itself, in May 2007, the Federal Office for Building and Regional Planning, on behalf of the German EU Council Presidency, prepared the collection entitled *Maps on European Territorial Development*⁷, which in a short and concise form illustrated the main priorities of the Territorial Agenda: polycentric cities and regions, structures of urban-rural partnerships, accessibility and infrastructure, hazards and risk management, ecological structures, and cultural resources.

5 See above. Cf. also Böhme, Schön (2006).

6 TSP (2007).

7 See BMVBS/ BBR (2007). Some of these maps are reproduced in this article (Fig. 1-4).

2.2.4 The Green Paper on Territorial Cohesion of the European Commission (2008)

It was the explicit political will of EU Member States, as expressed in the Territorial Agenda and the Leipzig ministerial meeting that, irrespective of the further ratification process of the new Lisbon Treaty, the territorial cohesion objective should be further developed. Based on this wish, the European Commission prepared and published a Green Paper on Territorial Cohesion with some accompanying and background documents⁸ and launched a debate on this subject. With its subtitle, the Green Paper suggests a general orientation toward turning territorial diversity into strength. In a section entitled “Towards more balanced and harmonious development” the Green Paper,⁹ which is only ten pages long and is accompanied by a background paper¹⁰ presenting some indicators and maps, provides input for four aspects of the discussion: how to deal with demographic and, even more, economic concentration in EU territory, how to better connect territories and overcome distances, how to support cooperation and overcome divisions, and how to pay attention to regions with specific geographic features (mountain regions, island regions, sparsely populated regions, etc.). In a further working document¹¹ created by the Commission’s staff four maps summarise the thinking of the current Commission. These four maps show (1) a globalisation vulnerability index (based on estimated regional labour productivity, employment rate, and high and low educational levels in 2020), (2) a demography vulnerability index (based on the estimated regional share of older people, population decline, and the share of the working age population in 2020), (3) a climate change vulnerability index (based on the estimated regional population affected by flooded rivers, the size of the regional population living in areas less than 5m above sea level, regional drought hazards, and an agriculture and a tourism indicator), and (4) an energy vulnerability index (based on the energy consumption of households, industry, and transport).

The European debate ended in February 2009 and led to a report on the results of this debate. Some observers and stakeholders hope and expect that the further process will lead to a white paper from the European Commission with more concrete strategies and suggestions for a European territorial cohesion policy. This may also depend on the further ratification process of the Lisbon Treaty, however, where territorial cohesion has an important legal and political basis and justification.

8 See CEC (2008a-d).

9 CEC (2008a).

10 CEC (2008b).

11 CEC (2008c).

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