



# POSITION PAPER

on the Thematic Action Plan on  
"Governance of new geographies"

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This paper has been drafted by the Central European Service for Cross-Border Initiatives (CESCI) within the framework of the stakeholder consultation triggered by the ESPON EGTC on the Thematic Action Plans preparing the next ESPON programme 2021-2027. The structure of the position paper follows a specific logic connected to the topic of cross-border functional areas and macro-regional strategies, using the orientating questions of the ESPON proposal on 'Governance of new geographies'.

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#### Questions of the Proposal referred to in the document

Q1	How to define functional areas in a way that any definitions correspond to actual policy processes? What kind of data and methodologies are needed?
Q2	How functional areas are embedded and integrated in governance practices? What are the benefits of cooperating within functional areas? How such benefits could be showcased to all parties involved?
Q3	Who are the main stakeholders and what types of governance mechanisms should be put in place? What are the tools to achieve effective implementation of different policies in functional areas?
Q4	How to unlock the potential of places in decline, peripheries, places undergoing marginalization? How to make such geographies more connected and as places that matter?
Q5	In your work with functional territories, do you see any knowledge gaps that prevent you from delivering a more effective policy response?
Q6	What could ESPON deliver to address any knowledge gaps?
Q7	What would be your specific evidence and knowledge needs in terms of the territorial application of the Green deal, in the context of just transition for all places concerned?
Q8	What is the stock of available scientific evidence (beyond the one accumulated at ESPON) concerning functional areas)?
Q9	What is the state of art in research work on governance of functional territories? Does this research has a territorial focus, demonstrate wide territorial coverage and is based on solid (verified) data and methodologies?
Q10	Are there any distinct evidence gaps on functional territories that the ESPON Programme would be suited to fill? What are the instruments to achieve it and how could this complement the work by other research bodies?
Q11	What are the current discourse questions and debatable aspects that might be further pursued by ESPON?



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## Functional areas – a new buzzword of European spatial planners?

### European spatial planning in the trap of territoriality

Q1            Q8            Q9

If not earlier, at least since the establishment of the CEMAT in 1970<sup>1</sup> and the adoption of the Torremolinos Charter in 1983, spatial planners in Europe have been challenging the Westphalian model of the distribution of geographic space. The Westphalian model means the monopoly of the nation states over their territories. The symbols of national sovereignty are not limited to the national anthem, currency, flag, official language, national parliament and legislation, etc., but its most apparent representation can be detected at state borders. As Agnew puts it: „[the border is] the face of the nation to the world“ (Agnew 2008, 185). Similarly, according to van Houtum (1998, 28) „[n]ations are the institutionalisation of a territory“. The model is called 'Westphalian' because it was the Treaty of Westphalia (1648) which for the first time put in practice the principle of territorial sovereignty demarcated by borders (Faludi 2018). The Westphalian model is exclusive: there are no two entities which may have sovereignty over one territory. To put it differently, territorial sovereignty produces a zero-sum game: a territory can belong to either one state or another (Anderson et al. 2003; van Houtum 2003; Faludi 2018). Agnew classifies this phenomenon as the territorial trap of a statist worldview (Agnew 1994).

In the 1990s new visions on a borderless world (or, at least, borderless Europe) were spreading among scholars and political decision-makers foreseen to eliminate the barriers created by the nation states (van Houtum 2003; Krasteva 2017). However, even in the case of the most integrated interstate integration of the world, i.e. the European Union, we can witness the strong persistence of the nation state paradigm.

Most saliently, different crises enhance re-bordering and re-nationalising tendencies, like the migration crisis and the terrorist attacks in 2015 or the recent COVID-19 pandemic. As an instinctive response, the national governments reacted to these crises with immediate closure of borders oftentimes without consulting with their neighbours (Medeiros et al. 2021). It is not incidental that the EU member states insist on their monopoly over their territory mirrored in the fact that the territorial development policy still falls in the competences of the national governments.

So, this is the model which has been challenged by European spatial planners (still representing diverse *national* schools of planning (Faludi 2009; Durand 2014) since the 1980s – in vain. Rich vocabulary can be compiled from the different terminological attempts of these planners to overcome the trap of territoriality, including among others *polycentric urban development*, *territorial cohesion*, *place-based approach*, *proximity*, *cross-border living areas (bassins de vie transfrontaliers)*, *soft spaces*, *new geographies*, etc., and now: *functional areas*. All these attempts have resulted in the adoption of a wide range of policy documents (most often without real

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<sup>1</sup> Two years after the DG XVI, the Directorate General dedicated to Regional (later: Cohesion) Policy of the Communities was set up.



political consequences, like in the case of the Territorial Agendas) and some principles have been built even into the Cohesion Policy regulations but still, notwithstanding rare exceptions (like the Öresund Bridge, the cross-border tramway between Strasbourg and Kehl or the state subsidies of Switzerland supporting integrated cross-border interventions around Basel and Geneva) the territorial policies are designed, managed and financed on a unilateral, national level.

Obviously, it does not mean that soft spaces, cross-border living areas or (cross-border) functional areas do not exist! There are many types of functions (e.g. jobs, health, education, culture, tourism, transport hubs, industrial and commercial centres, but also river basins, biogeographical regions, ecological networks, etc.) which create their influencing zones. At the same time, the development of these functional areas requires the development of appropriate governance solutions which are either neglected or even hindered by the governments. The phenomenon of nationally ruled territorial policies is still a business-as-usual model in the EU. The innovative neologies of European spatial planners cannot change this situation which is further aggravated by the paradoxical nature of European Cohesion Policy.

## European spatial planning and the paradox of Cohesion Policy

**Q1            Q4            Q9            Q10            Q11**

According to Andreas Faludi, the doyen of European spatial planning "*[w]ithout cohesion policy, the EU as we know it could well disappear*" (Faludi 2012, 15). It has to be acknowledged that the EU integration process owes a lot to the member states subsidising the catch-up of the countries lagging behind. At the same time, Cohesion Policy is (logically) subordinated to the global competitiveness goal of the EU.

In his dissertation, Stefan Telle (2018) draws the attention to the paradoxical duality of the Cohesion Policy which should ensure in parallel the EU's global competitiveness and the elimination of regional disparities. The first aspect necessitates the concentration of resources to the fields where global competition is taking place (thematic concentration). The second aspect requires the mitigation of differences between the European regions (boosting cohesion).

Well, as several leading spatial planners and researchers already highlighted, global competition has different effects in different contexts. When placing global competitiveness at the heart of Cohesion Policy, some regions will become losers of the interventions (Zonneveld & Waterhout 2005; EU 2011). This contradiction is echoed in a policy document published by the Polish Presidency in 2011: "*One may also doubt whether the creation of new research jobs or an increase in the number of patents can offer an answer to problems of all types of regions including those in rural and sparsely populated or those that are structurally weak and therefore lagging behind.*" (Böhme et al. 2011, 52) Consequently, the strong wish to keep the global competitiveness of the EU has been resulting in 'spatially or territorially blind' policies (Barca 2009; Böhme et al. 2011; Doucet et al. 2014; Faludi 2018). Taking into account that the EU has no territory (these are the EU member states which do have), this blindness should not be considered as an incident. But the effects of this blindness are far-reaching: "*Many of today's*

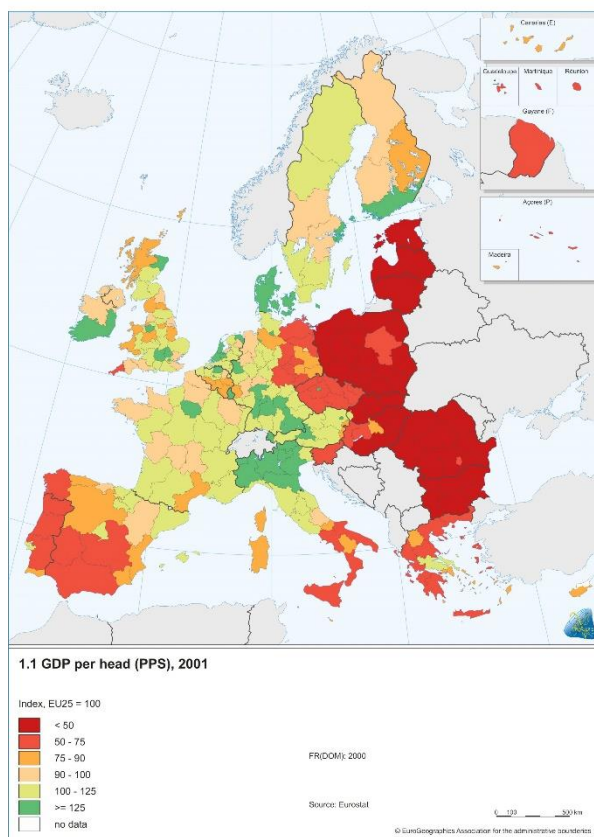


*challenges and crises of the European Union can be traced back to neglecting a spatial dimension in policy-making. Most prominently, the current risk of territorial fragmentation is a result of places feeling discontent or left behind. [...] This is a result of the fact that there is an increasingly diverse 'European geography of future perspectives'.[...] different cities and regions face different everyday realities and their inhabitants see different future perspectives, not all of them hopeful ones."* (Böhme et al. 2020, 158)

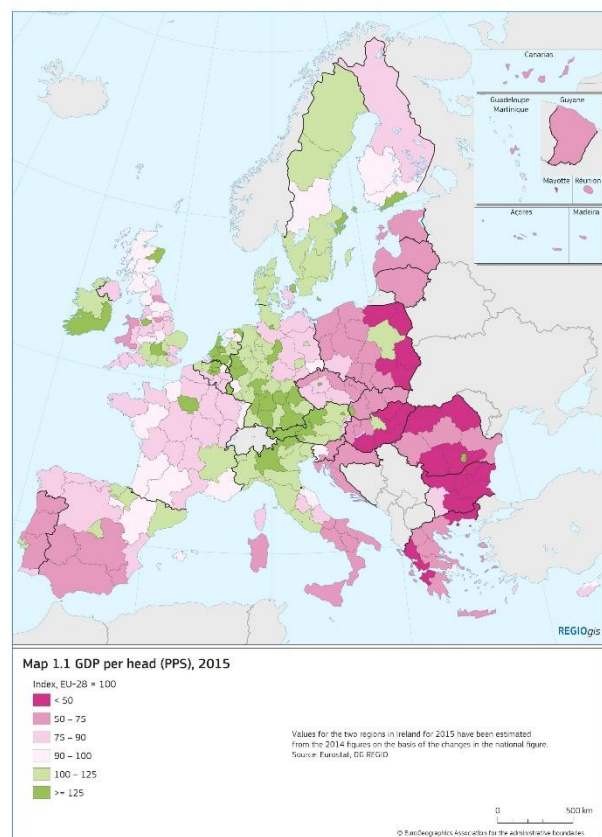
Not calling the achievements of the Cohesion Policy into question, we have to stipulate that the regional pattern of the development level has not been changing too much during the last decades.

Figure 1 - Development level of European regions in 2001 and 2015

Third report on economic and social cohesion  
GDP per head (PPS), 2001 [Map 1.1]



Seventh report on economic, social and territorial cohesion  
GDP per head (PPS), 2015 [Map 1.1]



Source: EC 2004, 5.; EC 2017, 3.

As Bachtler et al. (2017, 2) underlines, the gap between the leading (so-called 'frontier') and lagging regions "has grown by 56 percent between 1995 and 2014. [...] These differences cannot be addressed by compensatory policies relying on income transfers. The adaptation to the specific shocks on regional economies generated by globalisation and market integration require differentiated (or place-based) strategies." Unlike these place-based strategies suggested many times by the European spatial planners (and summarised in the famous Barca Report (2009) in an encyclopaedic manner), the funding rules of Cohesion Policy follows the thematic concentration principle reflected in the rigid system of specific objectives and indicators. However, "[u]niform indicators covering the entire EU territory usually fail to offer information



*about more complex regional differentiations”* (Böhme et al. 2011, 52). The launch of interreg-specific indicators does not profoundly improve the situation.

The complexity of the funding is another negative feature of Cohesion Policy. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the interoperability of the ESIF funds was facilitated through provisional rules. However, this alleviation remained an exception. As an everyday practice, the actors of the functional areas are forced to apply for different fundings according to different rules and, regardless of the interdependencies of their development aims, they are deprived from the opportunity of integrated interventions. The tools, such as the integrated territorial investment (ITI) and the community-led local development (CLLD) are designed to compensate for these shortcomings but the complicated coordination measures generated by the different rules of the different funds and the useless administrative burdens do not make these tools attractive. It is even true in a cross-border context. It is not incidental that there was only one example of cross-border ITI during the last programming period, namely the Italy-Slovenia Interreg V-A programme but in this case, ITI was applied within the programme, not involving further Italian or Slovenian operational programmes. Similarly, only one example is known for a cross-border CLLD which – in reality – is not an ideal typical CLLD but rather a small project scheme applied within the framework of the Italy-Austria Interreg V-A programme. The managements of the ALCOTRA Italy-France and the Slovakia Hungary Interreg V-A programmes have rather developed their own territorially integrated tools (the Integrated Cross-Border Plan in the former case and the Territorial Action Plan in the latter one) in order to avoid the difficulties and administrative burdens which characterise the application of the above EU tools. Obviously, when remaining within the frames of the very limited budget of a CBC programme, the subsidised functional areas cannot generate remarkable changes in the borderland in question.

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*Territorial Action Plan for Employment (TAPE) is an integrated tool of the Slovakia-Hungary Interreg V-A programme co-developed by the Joint Secretariat of the programme and CESCO. Within the framework of a TAPE 3 to 8 projects can be submitted in a group, based on a territorial analysis of the subregion responding to its employment challenges. The projects have to be designed in a synergetic and complementary manner which requires the joint planning of the interested SMEs, educational institutions, municipalities and civil associations. The SK-HU programme supports the implementation of nine TAPEs between 2014 and 2023.*

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Furthermore, regardless of the application of *functional urban areas* in the relevant EU documents, an even deeper gap can be detected between the urban and rural policies of the EU. The adoption of the Rural Pact<sup>2</sup> as an echo to the Pact of Amsterdam clearly demonstrates this divergent evolution generating separate funding systems and regulative background targeting the urban/rural territories. The four complementary areas for action of the Rural Pact cannot be separated from urban policy; and vice versa, European urban policy cannot be

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<sup>2</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/en/newsroom/news/2021/12/20-12-2021-long-term-vision-for-rural-areas-launch-of-rural-pact](https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/newsroom/news/2021/12/20-12-2021-long-term-vision-for-rural-areas-launch-of-rural-pact)



unbound from the interventions of rural development. The access to services, the development of transport links, the diversification of economic activities, and social resilience presuppose the existence of lively and organic connections with the urban and peri-urban areas. When developing divergent urban and rural policies, the EU fails to replace territoriality with spatiality. As a consequence, regardless of the recognition of the existence of new geographies and functional areas, Cohesion Policy still remains in the trap of territoriality: without creating the evidence and governance of these functional areas, the production of new and new buzzwords will never end and will never have a real impact upon spatial processes.

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*The 'cohesion-based cross-border planning' developed by the CESCO team is applied in the strategic planning of cross-border structures and programmes. The method is based upon the challenge & response model where the challenges are the factors enhancing or weakening cross-border economic, social and territorial cohesion across the border, while responses are the interventions by which the cross-border cohesion can be strengthened. Accordingly, the cohesion analysis does not take into account every spatial factor being present in the borderland but only those where the cohesion aspect is seen relevant. This way, the method can contribute to the development of more cohesive cross-border soft spaces.*

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## The unfulfilled promise of the ESPON programme

### To ensure territorial evidence

Q5

Q6

Q11

In the spirit of the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) (EC 1999), the ESPON programme was launched in 2002 with the purpose of providing territorial evidence for the EU policies. Since that time, the experts of the ESPON projects have been delivering several dozens of detailed state-of-play analyses and policy recommendations, as well as developing a comprehensive set of tools to be applied for analysis and forecasting of the spatial processes. Some of these analyses have been included in policy-shaping and policy documents. However, the definitive impact which was foreseen in 2002, cannot be detected even on the EU Cohesion Policy.

One reason for the merely partial impact of the ESPON on EU policies can be found in the challenges of territoriality and global competitiveness, discussed above. At the same time, there are further shortcomings within the ESPON programme itself which reduce its impact, especially in a cross-border or macro-regional context.

### Misleading data

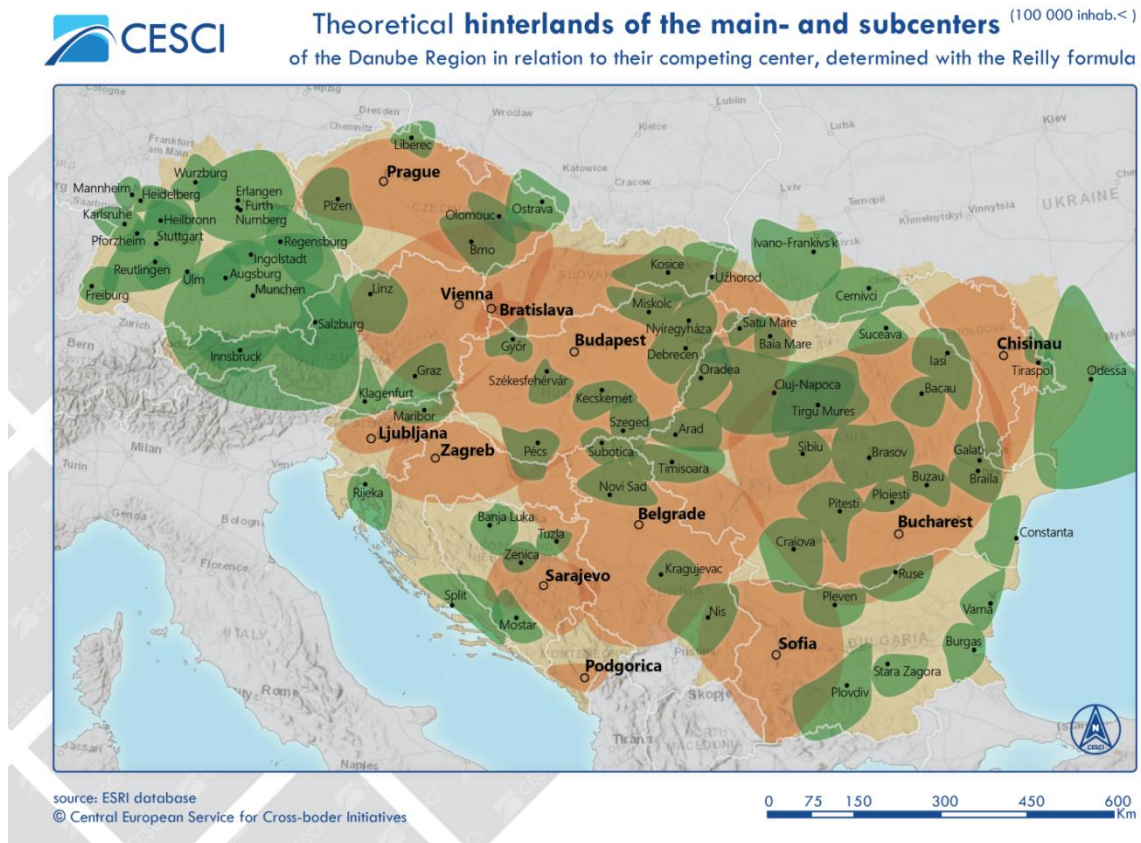
The ESPON analyses are based on the Eurostat data basis consisting of statistical data gathered at NUTS I, NUTS II and NUTS III levels. From the perspective of functional areas, the above-mentioned territorial units do not provide adequate frames for analysis. The soft character of the functional areas would require access to statistical data at a lower level, in a more detailed and more dynamic format. Especially when analysing the spatial processes in functional urban areas, cross-border agglomerations or industrial supplier chains, even the NUTS III level statistics are misleading. The TIA CBC ESPON project is an example, why data from lower territorial units should also be collected and systematically processed. It should be noted that thanks to the contemporary digital solutions, the conditions for data gathering in these contexts are remarkably improved.

Capital cities are usually analysed and assessed independently from the NUTS III regions bordering them because of their higher productivity level. At the same time, the maps representing productivity and development, do not refer to the highly developed metropolitan influencing areas and the internal semi-peripheries surrounding the capital city within the same NUTS III units.

As a consequence, the conclusions drawn from the statistical data will be completely misleading. The vast majority of the ESPON projects implemented so far used NUTS II and NUTS III level data which are not relevant for the analysis of spatial functionality. Processing of LAU I and LAU II level data are necessary for a more reliable result. It is even true in a cross-border context because national statistical offices do not collect data on cross-border flows. In the Danube Region for instance, the average size of the countries is very small, consequently

many urban centres have a cross-border influencing area whose flows are not reflected in the statistical data of national administrative units.

Figure 2 – Theoretical hinterlands of the urban centres of the Danube Region



Source: CESC

In reality, nobody knows what happens in cross-border metropolitan areas unless analysing place-based data. Notwithstanding some exceptional cases (e.g. the Greater Region<sup>3</sup>, Örestat<sup>4</sup>, Geneva<sup>5</sup>), these data are to be produced by the analysts themselves which is a time-consuming and expensive process – if they even have an access to appropriate and comparable (harmonised) data.

*EGTC Monitor is an online tool developed by CESC which gives a comprehensive overview on the legislative and policy background of the Hungarian EGTCs including maps representing the diverse socio-economic conditions within which these groupings are operating. The scope of statistical data is limited to those which are comparable in Hungary and the neighbouring countries.*

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.sig-gr.eu/fr.html>

<sup>4</sup> <https://utveckling.skane.se/publikationer/rapporter-analyser-och-prognoser/pendlarstatistik-i-oresundsregionen/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.ge.ch/statregio-francosuisse/presentation/espaces.asp>

## Difficulties of data harmonisation

When digging deeper in data sets in a cross-border context, the analyst faces another challenge which is hard or impossible to overcome: i.e. the difficulty of data harmonisation. This is the reason why LAU I and LAU II data are not collected by Eurostat. First, there are **differences between the administrative grids** of the neighbouring countries, the lowest administrative units can differ in size and population. E.g. in Hungary and Slovakia the smallest units are more or less identical with the settlements while a Romanian *comuna* can unite 4 to 6 settlements, a Croatian *općina* even 15.

Figure 3 – Differences in administrative grids in neighbouring countries

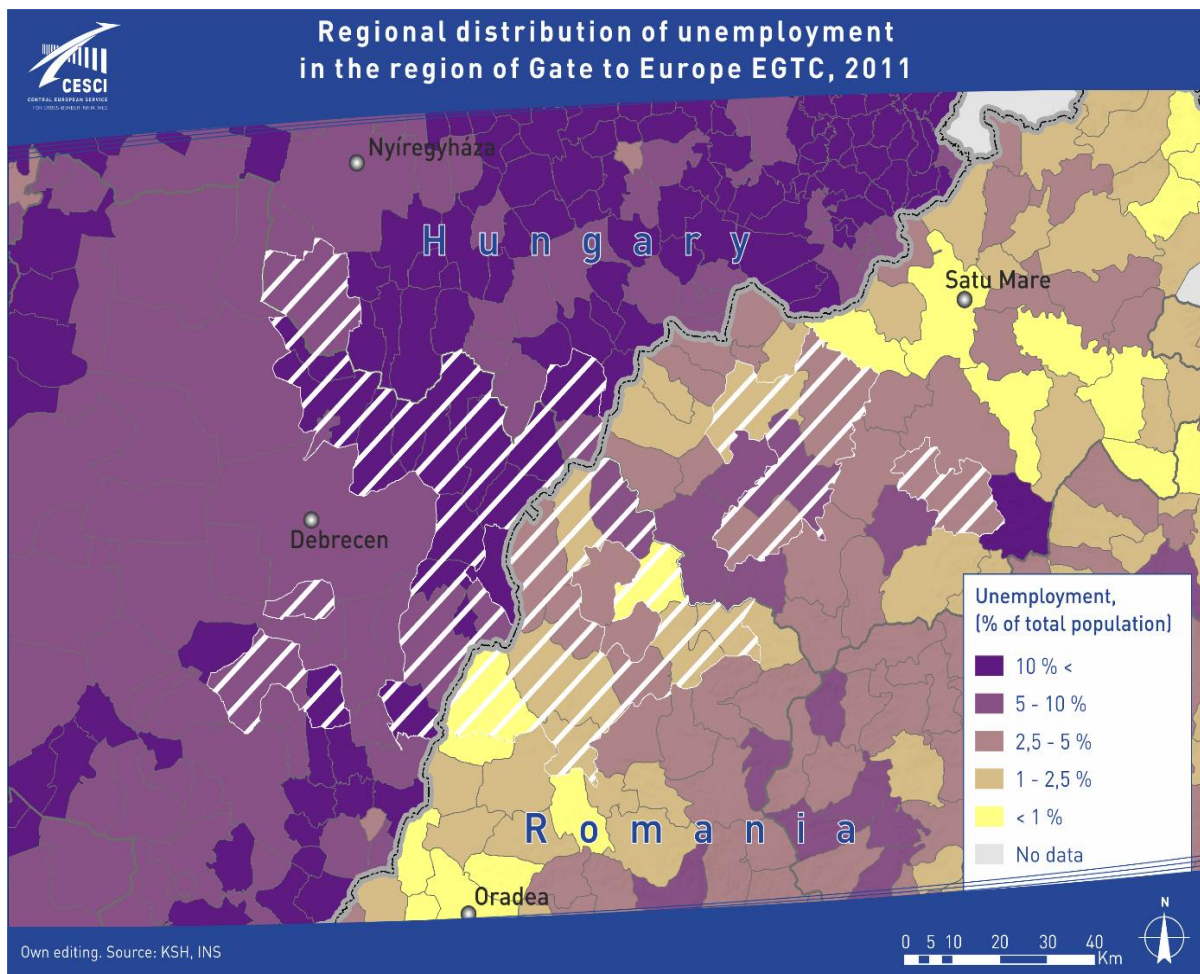


Source: CESCO

Second, in spite of the fact that the European Union defines the methods and **timing of gathering** the most important data, there can still be observed big differences between the practices followed by the Member States. In certain countries, the number of population is defined at the beginning (e.g. Romania), in others at the end (e.g. Hungary) of the year. It means that the data on the population of a certain year are produced with a one-year difference. Third, there can be **differences between the applied methodologies** in producing statistical data. For instance, in Romania the small farmers are encountered as employed in spite of that they are not employed by any company or institution. As in Hungary the system is different, the results plotted on maps will necessarily be false.



Figure 4 – Differences in data processing methods



Source: CESCO

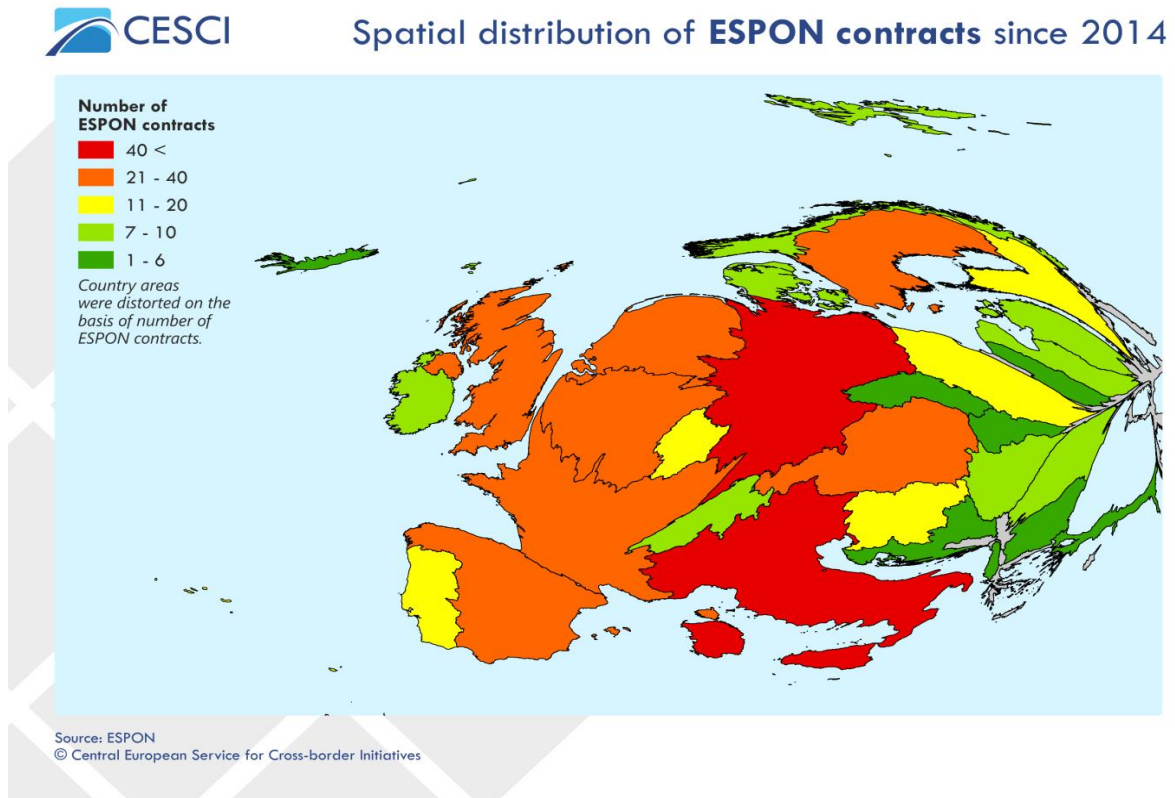
In compliance with its original mission, ESPON programme should be the tool for collecting and analysing lower-level data and cross-border flows by which it could provide evidence for better design and implementation of functional development activities across the administrative borders.

### Uneven participation in ESPON analytical projects

Finally, let us mention the spatially uneven participation of the countries and planners in ESPON projects. The project partners (stakeholders and contractors) of ESPON applied research as well as targeted analysis projects are showing a rather over-centralised spatial configuration.



Figure 5 – Geographic share of ESPON projects (applied research and targeted analysis)



Source: ESPON; CESCI

It is salient that some countries play a prominent role in delivering spatial analyses and territorial evidence for EU policies while others are in a marginalised position. It is a relevant question, how can ESPON shape pan-European policies in an appropriate and reliable manner if large parts of the EU (especially from EU-13) do not take part in the ESPON projects...?

If we study the ESPON contracts at institutional level, the above-mentioned over-centralisation is more striking.







principle of subsidiarity have been producing many tools and models for governing soft spaces within its multi-level governance structure.

However, here again, we are facing the sovereignty claim of the nation states. On the one hand, the most advanced tool for governing soft spaces is the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC). Regardless of the fact that the implementation of the EGTC tool is ruled by a regulation, the member states interpret the legal status of the groupings in very diverse ways which hampers the realisation of their spatial advocacy role. Furthermore, the EGTCs miss competences, they are limited to carry out tasks (Peyrony 2021).

Similarly, macro-regional strategies represent a very important coordinating level between countries in larger functional or quasi-functional areas – without new regulations, new funds and new formal structures. It means that if the bodies established within the macro-regional strategies do not perform well, this has no consequences (as it is the case in some priority areas of the EUSDR, for example...). This is a shortage which reduces the effectiveness of these governance models.

On the other hand, even the best management of cross-border bodies cannot guarantee the real representation of these functional areas because - notwithstanding some exceptional cases like the Forum of civil society actors at the Lille-Kortrijk-Tournai EGTC or the Citizens' Convent in the Strasbourg-Kehl Eurodistrict - the civil society and the public do not participate in the development and activities of these structures. The EGTCs are rather elitist, managerial institutions without applying the procedures of democratic participatory governance.

Finally, the room for manoeuvre of the soft governance structures is further limited by the still persisting legal and administrative obstacles. As the [Cross-Border Review](#) project launched by the Commission in 2015 and the Communication '[Boosting Growth and Cohesion in EU Border Regions](#)' published as the result of the project in 2017 highlighted, if only 20% of the obstacles were eliminated, the GDP of the border areas would increase by 2%. Unfortunately, the proposal on a European Cross-Border Mechanism (ECBM) dedicated to the systematic elimination of these obstacles (initiated by the Luxembourg presidency of the EU in 2015) has been refused by the member states in the Council. What is more, the way of the negotiations and the refusal of the new tool very well illustrate the persistence of the nation state paradigm, as the major counter-argument to ECBM was the endangered territorial sovereignty of the member states...

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*[Legal accessibility](#) is an initiative launched by CESCO in 2015 aiming to unfold and resolve cross-border legal and administrative obstacles between Hungary and the neighbouring countries. In addition, similarly to the [Freedom of Movement Council of the Nordic Council of Ministers](#), CESCO intends to expand the initiative to the territory of the Visegrad countries.*

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As a consequence, through spatial governance analyses the ESPON should support those efforts made by the local actors targeting the access to competences and the application of participatory governance methods, as well as, the political representation of soft spaces. Furthermore, the negative impacts of legal and administrative obstacles on the



competitiveness and productivity of certain borderlands and on the limited integration of cross-border functional urban areas should also be assessed – for a better EU Cohesion Policy.

## **To improve the effectiveness of the ESPON programme through new governance solutions**

**Q3**

**Q6**

**Q10**

**Q11**

The ESPON Programme could contribute to an improved multi-level governance system of the EU through its own structure and projects. As it was stated above, the uneven representation of the different countries and regions in the implementation of the ESPON projects hinders the access to appropriate local/regional information and data necessary for a better EU Cohesion Policy. The development of a platform of territorial observation at macro-regional level would not only improve the conditions for this access and a better environment for spatial analyses, but this solution would also enable the analysts to ensure capacities for on-the-spot data gathering and processing actions in functional areas and in more remote peripheries. These activities would enable the participation of civil society actors in policy design through participatory processes, contributing to the reduction of the elitist nature of the ESPON programme and the democratic deficit of the Cohesion Policy design process.

Finally, through the systematic analysis of the integrated tools applied within the Cohesion Policy, ESPON could contribute to the simplification of the utilisation of these tools and making them more attractive for the relevant stakeholders.





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