



WHAT IS WRONG WITH THE **ESPON PROGRAMME?**

Contribution to the mid-term evaluation of
the European Spatial Planning Observation Network
Operational Programme 2014-2020



The ESPON programme can be considered as a result of the first comprehensive analytical spatial document of the European Community, the *European Spatial Development Perspective*¹ and the process started with the approval of the *Torremolinos Charter* in 1983², what was completed by a new instrument dedicated to represent territoriality at the European level policy-making. Since 2002, the launching of the ESPON programme, many further documents and reports have been drafted and published, even more, in 2007, territorial cohesion became the third dimension of Cohesion Policy. Now, we already have Territorial Agenda, a requirement of Territorial Impact Assessment relating to EU regulatory processes and an INTERREG programme stronger than ever.

But still, territorial evidence is hardly taken into account by the European decision makers and it is hardly reflected in the Cohesion Policy regulations and the respective Cohesion Reports. In this perspective, the ESPON programme should have a crucial role in highlighting the significance of territorial aspects since it is the only programme which follows and analyses territorial processes within the EU³ and which should influence the design of the future Cohesion Policy. It is not the case. The ESPON documents are applied in policy making and during the major decisions, very rarely.

From the outsider's point of view, ESPON seems to be a „secret“ game for a few and it is not a coincidence.

¹ ESDP. European Spatial Development Perspective. Towards Balanced and Sustainable Development of the Territory of the European Union. European Commission, 1999.

² European regional / spatial planning Charter. Torremolinos Charter. Council of Europe, Strasbourg, 1983.

³ See the mission statement of the programme: [**„The ESPON 2020 Programme aims at promoting and fostering a European territorial dimension in development and cooperation by providing evidence, knowledge transfer and policy learning to public authorities and other policy actors at all levels.“**](#)

The weakness of territoriality in the territorial programme

According to the introduction of the programme:

*„The objective of the ESPON 2020 Cooperation Programme is to support the reinforcement of the effectiveness of EU Cohesion Policy and other sectoral policies and programmes under European Structural Investment (ESI) funds as well as national and regional territorial development policies, through the production, dissemination and promotion of territorial evidence covering the **entire territory of the 28 EU Members States**, as well as 4 Partner States of Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland.“⁴*

However, when considering the spatial distribution of the contracted consortia one can recognize striking imbalances (see Figure 1).

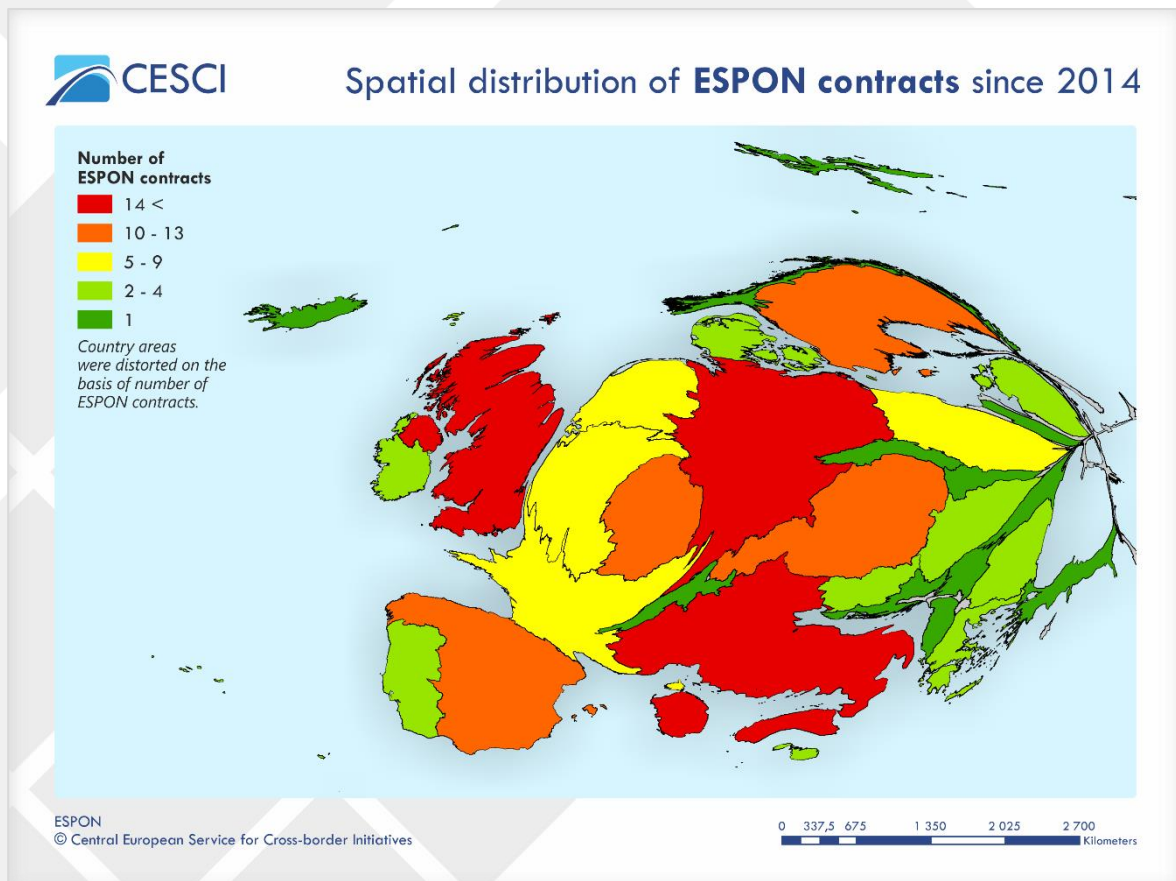


Figure 1: Spatial distribution of ESPON contracts since 2014⁵

⁴ Ibid, emphasis added.

⁵ Source: www.espon.eu/applied-research, www.espon.eu/targeted-analyses. The two figures represent the spatial share of the contracts signed within the framework of Applied Research and Targeted Analyses axes of the ESPON programme.

The biggest rate of contracts can be identified in the case of Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom, Luxemburg, Spain, Austria and Sweden. Let us underline: we are speaking about a programme dedicated to spatial analysis of the EU28. Now, regardless of the mission targeting the entire territory of the EU, the analyses are carried out by some countries, only. The most striking is the weak representation of the EU13 (and the East in general). This phenomenon logically raises some questions.

- Is it really a „pan-European” programme?
- Are the results of the studies always reliable regarding the entire territory of the EU28?
- Is it enough to identify territorial processes at NUTS III level (the smallest territorial unit the Eurostat gathers data from)?
- What should the spatial planners and the decision-makers from the East think about the results of these projects and studies?

The second figure (see Figure 2) represents an even more interesting and embarrassing picture: it shows which companies are contracted the most by the ESPON programme (the size of the name represents the number of contracts signed since 2014, the starting date of the current programme).

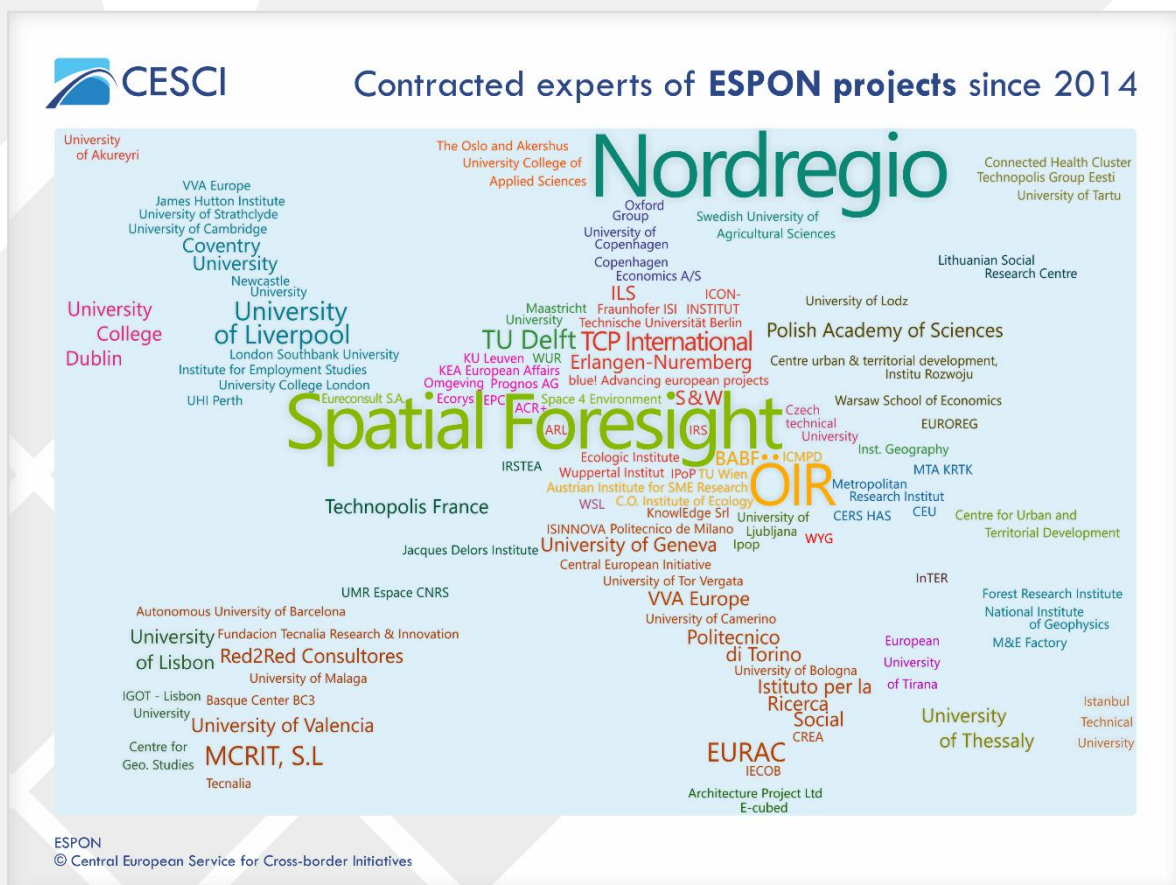


Figure 2: Spatial distribution of the contracted experts of the ESPON programme

Obviously, there are some companies who used to be contracted very often. The biggest ones are from Luxemburg, Sweden and Austria. There are other Member States, like Latvia, Finland and Cyprus which are not represented at all on the figure, while many others managed to delegate one institution into one of the selected consortia.

- How could we ensure ownership of the programme in the remaining countries?
- How could we convince the policy makers on the benefits of the ESPON programme where three larger companies carry out the major part of the analyses?
- Why can ESPON be seen as a game for a few?
- Is it surprising or irrational conclusion if a vast majority of the spatial planners questions the results of the tenders and do not consider the programme as theirs?
- How could we avoid malign rumours around the programme?

Territoriality matters – not only in theory

Based on our own experiences (gained during cross-border activities, so having a limited scope), regardless of the numerous declarations, reports and different coloured papers, the spatial turn is still remains an issue to be addressed. However, among the cross-border stakeholders there are many who could develop a strong alliance for this turn, for a more place-based approach⁶ – together with other territorial actors. In this alliance, the ESPON programme could be the „standard-bearer“. For this purpose, the programme should be deprived from its sectorian characteristics and become more territorial – in practice, as well...

⁶ For more information, [please read the following paper](#).