

A CONCEPTUAL OVERVIEW OF TERRITORIAL COHESION

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Abstract

Territorial cohesion is a complex concept that cannot be explained by a single definition. During the previous decades, territorial issues represented, undoubtedly, subjects of interest for various policy documents, actions and funding of the European Union, but the asymmetric impact of recent global crisis, doubled by the launch of the Green Paper (2008) and its inclusion in the Lisbon Treaty, in 2009, has underlined the importance of territorial cohesion, as one of the three main pillars of the new cohesion policy.

In this context, this article tries to create a holistic perspective on territorial cohesion by analyzing the available studies and to determine its relevance to the European objective of strengthening the regions, promoting territorial integration and producing coherent policies, thus contributing to the sustainable development and global competitiveness of the European Union.

Keywords: *territorial disparities, Europe 2020 strategy, Territorial Agenda, territorial cohesion*

JEL Classification: *F15*

1. Introduction

The Treaty of Lisbon has represented the moment when territorial dimension of cohesion was added to economic and social cohesion, thus becoming a political objective assumed by the European Union. Territorial cohesion involves, for the community policies, an increase in the importance of the territorial dimension, planning and integrated approach. Territorial cohesion is a complex concept that cannot be explained by a single definition.

Policy documents, actions and funding of the EU during the previous decades have already dealt with territorial issues, but the crisis from 2007 and its asymmetric territorial impacts have increased the importance of the territorial approach, reaching the idea that it should become the center of the new cohesion policy.

2. Defining territorial cohesion

At European level, the concept of “territorial cohesion” was mentioned for the first time in a report entitled “Regions and Territories in Europe”, stressing the need for a coordinated planning and underling its complementarity to economic and social cohesion, as a central objective of the European Union. Later on, the Amsterdam Treaty introduced the term, without offering a concrete definition.

A definition of the concept of “territorial cohesion” is still in debate at European level, but some items, accepted by everyone, like a balanced development of the territory, reducing territorial disparities and exploitation potential are common to different attempts to explain this syntagm.

As we have already mentioned it, territorial cohesion is a complex concept that cannot be explained by a single definition.

Territorial cohesion is, definitely, far from being a new objective, as D. Hübner underlined in its work, “*the concept was already implicit in the cohesion policy through the system of eligibility, the way the financial resources are distributed or the programming is organized. It is a fundamental objective of regional planning in the Union and*

provides the raison d'être for regional development policy. The Lisbon Treaty makes the territorial cohesion objective visible and explicit” [1].

Until nowadays, an important evolution of territorial cohesion has been observed [2], as synthesized in the table below:

Table 1 The evolution of territorial cohesion at European level

May 1999	European Spatial Development Perspective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Underlines spatial imbalances and territorial impact of policies • Defines three main objectives of the spatial policy: polycentric development; access to infrastructure and knowledge; efficient management of cultural and natural patrimony
January 2001	2nd Cohesion Report	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Underlines significant spatial imbalances in whole Europe, including geographical challenges; • Relates territorial cohesion to economic and social cohesion
February 2004	Budgetary proposals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Three objectives of structural funds are proposed: convergence, competitiveness and territorial cooperation
February 2004	3rd Cohesion Report	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relates cohesion to the objectives of Lisbon Strategy
April 2004	Interim Report of Territorial Cohesion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defines territorial cohesion as “balanced distribution of human activities throughout the EU” • Describes territorial imbalances and points out that its extension will deepen these imbalances
November 2004	Ministerial Meeting in Rotterdam	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sustains an up-down approach of territorial cohesion, underling the importance of territorial capital; • Suggests a definition using political terms;
October 2006	Adoption of the strategic lines of cohesion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Suggests that each Member State must find a meaning for territorial cohesion
May 2007	Territorial Agenda	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Specifies six territorial priorities for UE • Proposes an action plan to achieve these goals
September/October 2008	The Green Paper on Territorial Cohesion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enumerates the components of territorial cohesion
November 2010	The 5th Report on Economic, Social and Territorial Cohesion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concludes that inequalities between EU regions are diminishing; • Coordination between the policy of regional development and other European and national policies; • Relates cohesion to the objectives of Europe 2020 Strategy.

Source: Trasca D. L., Aceleanu M. I., Sahlian D., (2013), www.eprc.strath.ac.uk, www.ec.europa.eu

Although we can affirm that there is no uniform definition of territorial cohesion, the Green Paper published by the European Commission brings in agreement few elements considered to be its foundation [3]:

- Concentration and density i.e. better exploiting regional potential and territorial capital;
- Connecting territories: overcoming distance e.g. access to services of general economic interest or to energy;
- Cooperation: overcoming division i.e. promoting cooperation cross boundaries but also better consistency between various EU and national policies with a territorial impact, both horizontally and vertically;

- Regions with specific geographical features i.e. policy differentiation to accommodate the specific features of different territories.

Territorial cohesion is a European Union concept aiming at strengthening the European regions, promoting territorial integration and producing coherent policies so as to contribute to the sustainable development and global competitiveness of the EU, through a balanced distribution of economic and social resources among the European regions with the priority on the territorial dimension.

3. ‘Europe 2020’ Strategy and the Territorial Agenda 2020

The ‘Europe 2020’ strategy is the overarching European policy document focused on the recovery from the 2008 financial crisis and the strengthening of the development opportunities in the EU. It was designed to replace the Lisbon strategy trying to address some of the main shortcomings of its predecessor.

Europe 2020 represents, undoubtedly, the current key-reference document of the European Union, approved by the European Council in June 2010, aiming at stimulating smart (*developing an economy based on knowledge and innovation*), sustainable (*promoting a more resource efficient, greener and more competitive economy*) and inclusive growth (*fostering a high-employment economy delivering social and territorial cohesion*).

Although the notion of “territorial cohesion” appears several times in the strategy, it does not propose any concrete guidelines for the territorialisation of its priorities, the Commission suggesting that the EU targets should be translated into national targets and trajectories to reflect the current situation of each Member State. As a remark, the idea that the references made to territorial cohesion in the document could have been more evident has been sustained by some practitioners.

The **Territorial Agenda 2020** is the result of a collaboration between the national authorities responsible for spatial planning and territorial development in the European Union, not formally adopted by any EU body.

The above mentioned document pleads for “*a more strategic approach to enhance territorial cohesion*” defending the ideas of “*deepening the territorial dimension of Cohesion Policy where appropriate: strengthening mechanisms which can ensure the territorial coordination of its interventions; improving the territorial dimension of all steps of strategic programming, evaluation and monitoring activities; ensuring scope for integrated place-based programmes and projects, and integrating different funds in regional strategies.*”[4]

It aims to provide strategic orientations for territorial development, fostering integration of the territorial dimension within different policies across all governance levels while overseeing implementation of the ‘Europe 2020’ strategy in accordance with the principles of territorial cohesion [5].

Six main “territorial priorities for the development of the EU” have been set out in the TA 2020:

- ✓ **Promoting polycentric and balanced territorial development** as an important precondition of territorial cohesion and a strong factor in territorial competitiveness.
- ✓ **Encouraging integrated development in cities, rural and specific regions** to foster synergies and better exploit local territorial assets.
- ✓ **Territorial integration in cross-border and transnational functional regions** as a key factor in global competition facilitating better utilization of development potentials and the protection of the natural environment
- ✓ **Ensuring global competitiveness of the regions based on strong local economies** as a key factor in global competition preventing the drain of human capital and reducing vulnerability to external development shocks
- ✓ **Improving territorial connectivity for individuals, communities and enterprises** as an important precondition of territorial cohesion (e.g. services of general interest); a strong factor for territorial competitiveness and an essential condition for sustainable development
- ✓ **Managing and connecting ecological, landscape and cultural values of regions**, including joint risk management as an essential condition for long term sustainable development

Despite the good reflection of territorial challenges and potentials within the EU, a main disadvantage of the Agenda remains the fact that its implementation remains dependent to the decision of different bodies and national actors due to a too general connection to European policies.

Europe 2020 strategy and the Territorial Agenda 2020 are thought to be inspired from different political processes, and to have a different political status, but, in practice, there is a strong belief that they should be used to support each other. Table 1 below shows a concrete correspondence between TA 2020 and “Europe 2020”, by identifying common issues to both documents.

Table 2 The issues linking “Europe 2020” and Territorial Agenda 2020

		<i>“Europe 2020” objectives</i>		
		Smart growth	Sustainable growth	Inclusive growth
TA 2020 priorities	<i>Supporting polycentric and balanced territorial development</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • investing in education • interactions between metropolises at the EU scale • interactions between the main national growth poles 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Services of general economic interest (sparsely populated areas)
	<i>Integrated development of urban, rural and specific regions</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on territory-bound factors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compact cities (sustainable cities) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enlargement of local labor markets
	<i>Territorial integration in cross-border, transnational functional regions</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Critical mass of means through territorial cooperation • Trans-border accessibility 		
	<i>Global competitiveness based on strong local economies</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Global accessibility • European accessibility • Focus on territory-bound factors • Local innovation systems& networks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Territorial/local related characteristics for energy production 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Revitalisation of cities
	<i>Improving territorial connectivity for individuals</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National and daily accessibility between metropolises • Accessibility to the main, and secondary, centres (and between them) • E- connectivity • Access to energy networks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public transport • Sustainable transport (incl. modal split & intermodal change) • Access to energy networks (macro-regional and national grids for renewable energy transmission • Renewable and local energy production 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accessibility to the main and secondary centers (including access to services of general economic interest) • Public transport
	<i>Connected ecological structures & cultural networks and joint risk management</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wise management of cultural and natural assets 		

Source: Bohme K., Doucet P., Komornicki T., Zaucha J., Swiatek D. (2011), *How to strengthen the territorial dimension of the “Europe 2020” and the EU Cohesion Policy*, pp. 44-48

Smart, sustainable and inclusive growth can be achieved if policy making takes into account the territorial diversity of development potentials and challenges within Europe. To avoid Europe 2020 simply reproducing the Lisbon strategy failure, due attention must be paid to the territorial dimension of, and potential for, smart, sustainable and inclusive growth.

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, territorial cohesion is the expression of a balanced, coherent and harmonious development of the territory in terms of economic and social activities, endowments, accessibility and environmental quality, the existence of living and working conditions equal for all citizens, regardless their localization. Territorial Cohesion policy should aim at reducing disparities in development between geographical regions, between urban and rural areas, between center and periphery, and to prevent a possible amplification of territorial discrepancies.

At the European Union level the territorial cohesion represents a shared responsibility of both the Union and Member States, concerning not only the territorial dimension of the Cohesion Policy, but covering flows and connectivity, spatial nodes, maritime and terrestrial macro-geographic space use and organization, territorial assets.

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