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The EU Territorial Agenda. A renewed territorial cohesion narrative.

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Teaser:

This article debates the need for a renewed territorial cohesion narrative for an updated version of the EU Territorial Agenda. It proposes a more simplistic and practical vision for the territorial cohesion concept and the need to transform it into a measurable notion. It also advances alternative policy implementation avenues to achieve territorial cohesion policy goals at the national level. These include a policy investment focus on specific number of regional development hubs denominated “territorial cohesion cities” and the need for “territorial cohesion- related indicators”.

The notion of territorial cohesion resulted from a long process which was initiated as early as 1989, during the first informal ministerial meeting of ministers responsible for spatial planning (Böhme 2011: 18). It was, however, with the publication of the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) in 1999, that the concept of territorial cohesion was brought into the EU agenda (Vanolo 2010: 1305). Until it was formally included in the EU (Lisbon) Treaty in 2009, as an EU policy goal, alongside the goals of economic and social cohesion, territorial cohesion was an important line of enquiry in the first ESPON programme (2000–2006) (Abrahams 2014: 2136). It was also widely debated in the Second and Third Cohesion Policy reports, as well as in the first EU Territorial Agenda and had a dedicated EU Green Paper (EC 2008), which followed the ESDP vision for a more polycentric European territory.

Despite all these advances in gradually integrating the policy goal of territorial cohesion into the EU and national policy agendas, and the academic fascination for this EU concept that have prompted a range of commentators to produce a rich vein of theoretical reasoning, over the past

years, territorial cohesion remains an ambiguous concept. Here, the Territorial Agendas could have served as a conceptual clarifier by presenting a convincing case to supporting effective territorial cohesion policies in Europe. The crucial argument here is that this understanding of territorial cohesion policies should probably be simplified as a way to attract a wider share of stakeholders' audience, at all territorial levels.

The EU Territorial Agendas and the territorial cohesion narrative

No matter how we look at it, the prevailing vision of territorial cohesion has a common denominator which relates to a main policy goal expressed in all EU treaties: the aim of contributing to a more harmonious and balanced development of the EU (Janin Rivolin 2005: 21). This is also a central goal of the ESDP to which it added the goal of promoting a more polycentric urban system and a new urban-rural relationship. Indeed, this core-policy idea of polycentrism expressed in the first Territorial Agenda describes a key message on the ESDP (Faludi 2010).

According to Van Well (2012: 1556), the contribution of the EU Territorial Agendas, for furthering the debate on territorial cohesion, came from public consultations to EU institutions, national and some regional/local governments, as well as interest organisations and other partners. On a practical matter, the territorial cohesion agendas intended to act as action-oriented policy frameworks to highlight the need for increasing territorial development and territorial cohesion approaches to EU policies.

The first Territorial Agenda, released in 2007, directly translated the ESDP main goal of promoting a more polycentric EU territory. In between the publication of the second Territorial Agenda (in 2011), a major international financial crisis built up momentum, exactly in the year when the European Commission published the Green Paper on Territorial Cohesion (2008). In the following year, the territorial cohesion policy goal was formally introduced in the EU Treaty (Lisbon - 2009). In a complementary way, in 2010, the EU agreed on Europe 2020 as an overarching ten year policy strategy for the EU territory. It was under this "new EU territorial development context" that the Territorial Agenda 2020 was unveiled, which justifies placing in central stage the policy goal to support territorial cohesion in Europe (Figure 1). As a major shortcoming, however, the Territorial Agendas do not propose a clarification of the territorial cohesion concept by means of a clear identification of their main dimensions and respective components, as a way to allow for a more practical assessment of the effectiveness of territorial cohesion policies.

Figure 1: Comparative analysis of the Territorial Agendas

	TA 2007	TA 2011
Main theme	- Towards a more competitive and sustainable Europe of diverse regions	- Towards an inclusive, smart and sustainable Europe of diverse regions
Main goal	- Promote a polycentric territory of the EU	- Support territorial cohesion in Europe
Territorial cohesion rationale	- Promote polycentric development - Secure better living conditions and quality of life - Promote territorial governance	- Better integrate territorial cohesion into cohesion policy - Promote a place-based approach - Promote integrated functional area development - Promote a multilevel governance approach - Promote sustainable and efficient use of territory and resources
Priorities for territorial development and cohesion	1 - Strengthen polycentric development and innovation through networking of city regions and cities. 2 - New forms of partnership and territorial governance between rural and urban areas 3 - Promote regional clusters of competition and innovation in Europe 4 - Strengthening and extension of trans-European networks 5 - Promote trans-European risk management 6 - Strengthening ecological structures and cultural resources	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

Source: Own elaboration based on the Territorial Agendas 2007 and 2011

Simplifying the theoretical understanding of territorial cohesion for a novel EU Territorial Agenda

One of the few undeniable truths related to the territorial cohesion concept is the certainty that there will never be a common accepted universal definition for it. This is not a major problem in our view. What is important is to define the main territorial development dimensions and components that should be tackled in order to achieve the policy goal of territorial cohesion. In this light, we propose a simplified, yet comprehensive model (the Star Model – Figure 2), in which territorial cohesion is understood as “the process of promoting a more cohesive and balanced territory, by: (i) supporting the reduction of socioeconomic territorial imbalances; (ii) promoting environmental

sustainability; (iii) reinforcing and improving the territorial cooperation/ governance processes; and (iv) reinforcing and establishing a more polycentric urban system” (Medeiros 2016: 10).

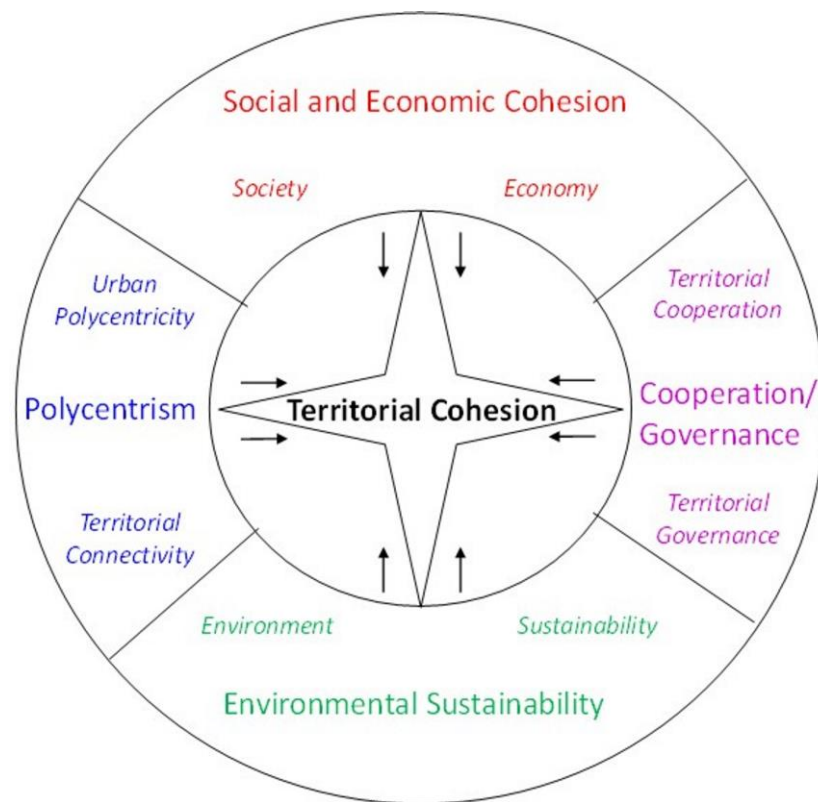


Figure 2: The star of territorial cohesion. Source: Medeiros 2016

Unlike the Territorial Agendas, this model places the territorial cooperation as a key pillar to achieving territorial cohesion processes, alongside socioeconomic cohesion, polycentrism and environmental sustainability. But the main advantage of modelling territorial cohesion is to simplify its understanding and consequently to better associate a set of concrete indicators which can effectively measure it in a given territory (see Medeiros 2016). Here, a simple territorial cohesion index can be quite useful to show territorial cohesion or/and territorial exclusion trends. One example is the simplified territorial cohesion index produced for the European territory, using one indicator associated with each one of the “star model” territorial cohesion dimensions (Figure 3). Despite its simplicity, it allows to detect the crucial importance of EU cohesion policy to achieve a more cohesive European territory, over the past 15 years. The same is not true, however, for what happened at the national level, when using more detailed indexes (see Medeiros 2016 and 2018a).

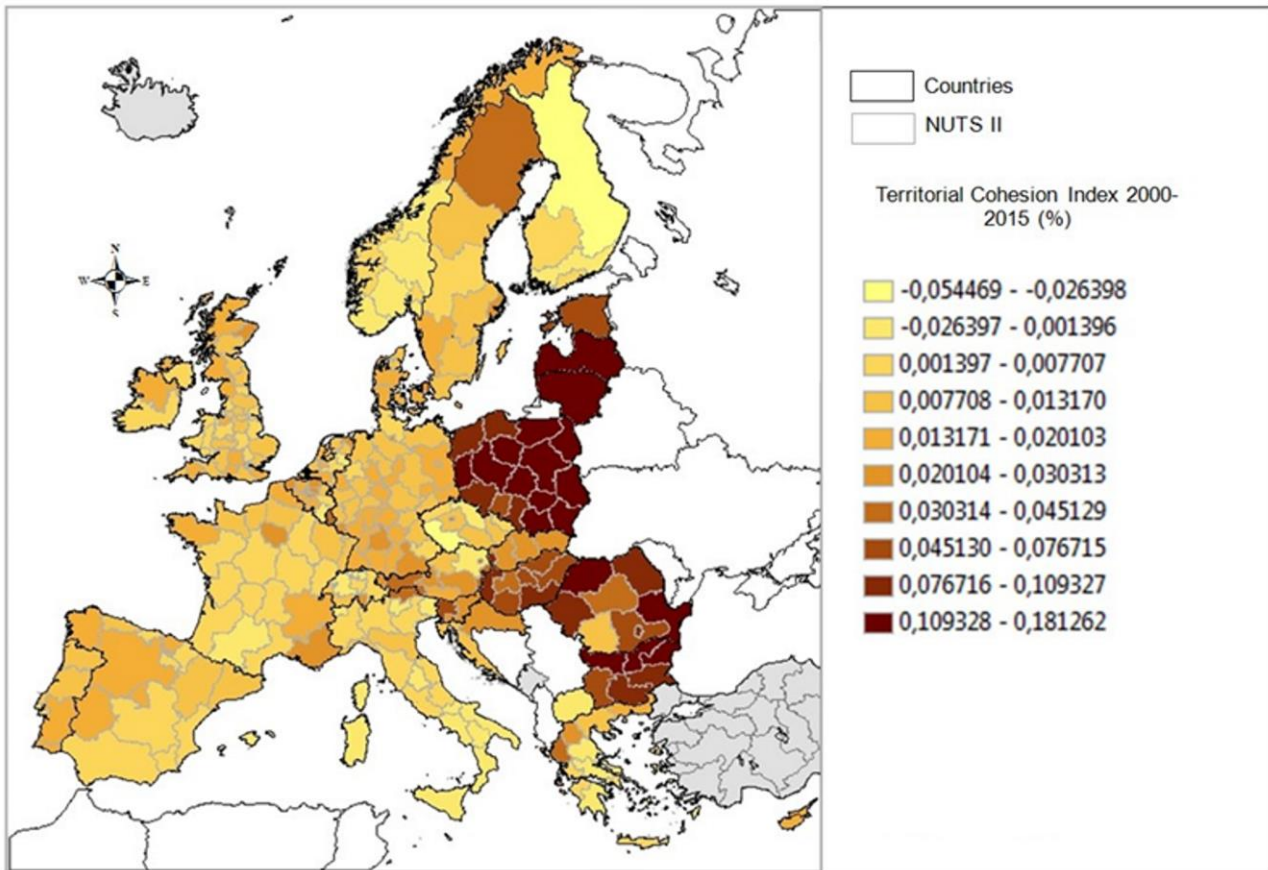


Figure 3: Territorial cohesion index in Europe NUTS II – 2000/2015. Source: own elaboration

Novel policy visions for achieving territorial cohesion

Alongside the need to clarify and simplify the presentation of the territorial cohesion vision, by proposing distinct analytic dimensions and respective components, and also measurable indicators, a novel Territorial Agenda should, in our view, present concrete potential policy approaches to effectively achieve this ultimate goal of all public policies.

Territorial cohesion cities

One of the main lessons that can be drawn from the implementation of EU cohesion policy, along the past 30 years, is its overall positive impacts in promoting territorial development in all EU Member States (EC 2017; Molle 2007; Medeiros 2013, 2017a). Conversely, this policy has not been able to invert territorial exclusion trends which characterise less developed EU regions, vis-à-vis the most developed ones (Medeiros 2017b). Put differently, EU cohesion policy funding has not been sufficiently capable to achieving territorial cohesion at the national level, despite the bulk of its investment (more than 70 percent) being allocated into less developed regions. There are several

reasons for that, including financial limitations when considering the development needs of these regions, and the private investment preference for the more developed regions.

One theoretical way we propose to invert these trends in the EU is to selected a few number of territorial development hubs, normally the capital cities of less developed regions, to concentrate national and EU development and cohesion funding, counter to the current criteria-less scenario of allocating funds to all EU territories. We call these hubs “territorial cohesion cities”, and “secondary territorial cohesion cities”, which have a specific criterion to be identified in a given territory (see Medeiros/Rauhut 2018).

In brief, this policy rationale advocates that, by allocating the bulk of EU, national and regional development funding in territorial cohesion cities, this would strengthen the coherence and efficiency of these investments. Firstly, it would avoid a dispersion of investments on several lagging regions that, despite being supported by national and EU funding for decades, have continued to lose population and socioeconomic relevance within a national context. Secondly, we would expect that these lagging regions would benefit more from the hinterland development spillovers resulting from the increasing territorial development trends from the surrounding territorial cohesion city. Thirdly, at the national level, it would lead to a more balanced and polycentric urban network, by reinforcing the role of medium-towns.

Such a vision to promote territorial development based in second ranked cities is not novel by itself. It was, for instance, supported by several ESPON reports. One in particular, the ET2050 - Territorial Scenarios and Visions for Europe (2013: 11), suggested an integrated and equilibrated urban system based on the development of second rank cities for the EU territory, that would cooperate with “first rank cities in providing quality services and allowing the latter to avoid strong diseconomies of scale that can be of detriment to growth”. The territorial cohesion cities’ rationale, however, defines clear criteria to select the cities which would function as regional development hubs with a national perspective to ultimately achieve the territorial cohesion goal at the national level.

The need for territorial cohesion indicators

As previously mentioned, the novel Territorial Agenda, more than referring to broad policy goals, should propose and create a set of key indicators to measure territorial cohesion, to properly assess if territorial cohesion is being achieved (Dao et al. 2017: 638), and for its operationalisation as a concrete and viable policy instrument. Indeed, this need for a greater evidence-informed performance monitoring, and empirical understanding of the achievements of territorial

development and cohesion policies aims at ensuring greater optimisation and coordination (González et al. 2015: 1597).

In this regard, the ESPON INTERCO (2011) report proposed 32 territorial indicators to measure territorial cohesion trends, associated with four development dimensions: (1) strong local economies ensuring global competitiveness; (ii) innovative territories; (iii) fair access to services, market and jobs; (iv) inclusion and quality of life; (v) attractive regions of high ecological values and strong territorial capital; and (vi) integrated polycentric territorial development. Instead, we suggest that the new Territorial Agenda indicates a more simplified and realistic set of indicators, which could be selected with the collaboration of the Eurostat and the national statistical institutes, to measure territorial cohesion trends in a given territory (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Proposed indicators for the territorial dimensions/components – simplified

Socioeconomic Cohesion	Environmental Sustainability	Polycentrism	Territorial Cooperation / Governance
- Tertiary education in %	- Renewable energy production	- Population density	- INTERREG projects PC
- Physicians PC.	- CO ² emissions PC	- Road density	- Terr. cooperation entities PC
- Criminality rate	- Protected areas PC	- Rail density	- Election participation in %
- Productivity rate	- Envir. protection € PC	- Internet access in %	- NGOs PC
- Available income PC	- Waste treatment kilogrammes? PC	- City hierarchy rank	- Administrative capacity index
- Employment rate	- Selective waste kilogrammes? PC	- City compactness index	- Online public services index

Source: Own elaboration based on Medeiros, 2013 (PC – Per Capita / Prod – Production Per Capita

In the end, the novel Territorial Agenda should be a more targeted and concrete document to attract a wider audience of policymakers and to make a more positive territorial impactful transformation towards a more harmonious and cohesive European territory.

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