ISCTE IUL
REPOSITÓRIO
INSTITUTO UNIVERSITÁRIO DE LISBOA

Repositório ISCTE-IUL

Deposited in *Repositório ISCTE-IUL*:
2026-07-07

Deposited version:
Accepted Version

Peer-review status of attached file:
Peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:
Medeiros, E., Potluka, O., Demeterova, B. & Musiakowska, I. (2024). EU cohesion policy towards territorial cohesion?. Regional Studies. 58 (8), 1513-1517

Further information on publisher's website:
10.1080/00343404.2024.2349736

Publisher's copyright statement:
This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: Medeiros, E., Potluka, O., Demeterova, B. & Musiakowska, I. (2024). EU cohesion policy towards territorial cohesion?. Regional Studies. 58 (8), 1513-1517, which has been published in final form at https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00343404.2024.2349736. This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance with the Publisher's Terms and Conditions for self-archiving.

Use policy

Creative Commons CC BY 4.0
The full-text may be used and/or reproduced, and given to third parties in any format or medium, without prior permission or charge, for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes provided that:

- a full bibliographic reference is made to the original source
- a link is made to the metadata record in the Repository
- the full-text is not changed in any way

The full-text must not be sold in any format or medium without the formal permission of the copyright holders.

Serviços de Informação e Documentação, Instituto Universitário de Lisboa (ISCTE-IUL)
Av. das Forças Armadas, Edifício II, 1649-026 Lisboa Portugal
Phone: +(351) 217 903 024 | e-mail: administrador.repositorio@iscte-iul.pt
https://repositorio.iscte-iul.pt

EU Cohesion Policy towards Territorial Cohesion?

Eduardo Medeiros [*1], Oto Potluka [*2], Barbara Demeterova [*3], Ida Musiałkowska [*4]

1- RESILIENCE, Instituto Politécnico de Setúbal, Setúbal, Portugal / DINÂMIA'CET – IUL, Instituto Universitário de Lisboa (ISCTE-IUL), Lisboa, Portugal

2- Department of Management, Prague University of Economics and Business, Prague, Czechia

3- SRF - Research Unit Urban and Regional Research, TU Wien, Vienna, Austria

4- Department of European Studies, Poznań University of Economics and Business, Poznań, Poland

Orcid:

Eduardo - 0000-0002-8877-5606
Oto - 0000-0002-9558-9473
Ida - 0000-0002-7054-7648
Barbara - 0000-0002-7087-2117

Abstract:

Despite being one of the main European Union (EU) policy goals, expressed in the EU treaty and expected to be fostered by EU Cohesion Policy, territorial cohesion is still an under-researched scientific concept and policy process. Against this background, this special issue provides novel theoretical and practical perspectives on the relationship between EU Cohesion Policy and territorial cohesion, particularly through the analysis of EU Cohesion Policy impacts and its contribution to territorial cooperation processes, regional and urban development strategies, as well as sustainable transitions.

Keywords: Territorial Cohesion, EU Cohesion Policy, territorial cooperation, regional development, sustainable transitions
JEL: O2, C1, O22

Since its reform in 1988, EU Cohesion Policy has been a key building block of the EU project, aiming at reducing socioeconomic gaps between the EU regions, following a principle provided in the preamble of the Treaty of Rome (Berkowitz et al., 2020; Crescenzi & Giua 2020, Idczak, Musiałkowska & Kociuba, 2024). As one of the financially largest EU policies, covering the entire EU territory and respective regions, EU Cohesion Policy has been systematically scrutinised in its main impacts (Crescenzi & Giua, 2024; Fratesi & Wishlade, 2017; Gagliardi & Percoco 2017; Medeiros, 2017), in several policy areas, including: (i) territorial cooperation (Demeterova et al., 2020; Medeiros et al, 2021); (ii) regional development (Dąbrowski et al., 2018; McCann. & Ortega-Argilés, 2015); (iii) administrative capacity (Mendez & Bachtler, 2022; Polverari, Domorenok & Graziano, 2022; Potluka & Medeiros, 2021; Surubaru, 2017); (iv) environmental sustainability

(Nekvasil & Moldan, 2018; Valente & Medeiros. 2022); and (v) economic competitiveness (Percoco, 2017; Rodríguez-Pose & Dijkstra, 2021).

EU Cohesion Policy has the ultimate goal of promoting a more balanced and harmoniously developed EU territory and respective regions (EC, 2022, EC, 2024). Put differently, EU Cohesion Policy aims at achieving EU territorial cohesion at the EU and national levels (Faludi, 2013; Monzon et al., 2019). In this context, it would be expected that literature would have deeply analysed the contribution of EU Cohesion Policy to achieving territorial cohesion trends in the EU. That is not the case. Firstly, territorial cohesion is still considered a too vague and misunderstood concept (Dao et al., 2017; Van Well, 2012). This means that there is not an overall accepted understanding of the meaning of territorial cohesion, even though it is commonly agreed that this is a multidimensional concept embracing key policy development domains such as economic competitiveness, social cohesion, environmental sustainability, territorial governance, and spatial planning (Medeiros, 2016; Medeiros & Rauhut, 2020).

Indeed, the measurement of territorial cohesion is largely dependent on an understanding of this concept and, thus, on the selected analytical dimensions and respective components. In this respect, in past years, only a few attempts have been made to measure territorial cohesion trends in Europe, at different territorial scales (Medeiros, 2016; Zaucha, J. & Böhme, K. 2020). Crucially, a relatively recent study, supported by the Star Model of territorial cohesion concludes, EU Cohesion Policy has not sufficiently contributed to achieving territorial cohesion trends at the national level in the EU, reducing regional disparities by directly or indirectly contributing to attain higher levels of development in the less developed regions in a specific Member State vis-à-vis the more developed regions (Medeiros, et al., 2023). Overall, the concept of territorial cohesion is understood as a process 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, et al., 2023).

What seems clear from available literature linking EU Cohesion Policy and its overall impacts on territorial cohesion trends in the EU at several territorial levels, is the need for further studies with detailed regional analyses in each EU Member State, using similar, comparable methodological approaches and sets of indicators. Moreover, further studies are needed to better understand the contribution of EU Cohesion Policy to more balanced, harmonious, and cohesive territories via financial support in specific policy areas, such as urban development strategies, territorial cooperation processes, just and sustainable transitions, and regional resilience. In this regard, this special issue advances updated conceptual and practical analysis of the relationship between EU Cohesion Policy investment and the targeted policy areas toward territorial cohesion trends.

Crucially, this special issue contributes to deepening the debate on the relevance of EU Cohesion Policy to territorial development and cohesion trends in Europe, contrasting with past decades marked by an academic focus on the EU 'policy smart growth' rationale. Moreover, it collects perspectives both from academics and policymakers, in particular from the European Commission, thus providing the reader not only an academic flavour of the effects of EU Cohesion Policy in several policy areas but also a policymakers' perspective on how this policy is being implemented.

From a scientific novelty standpoint, this special issue presents a detailed conceptual relation between territorial cohesion and territorial cooperation concepts. Here, it is important to highlight that European territorial cooperation is one of the two main policy goals of EU Cohesion Policy, and has been in the making in the EU, via the Interreg Community Initiative, since the beginning of the

implementation of EU Cohesion Policy (Medeiros, 2018; Reitel, 2018). At the same time, disparities in the level of development of cross-border regions are on the rise again, threatening the general cohesion process (Jakubowski and Wójcik, 2023). Moreover, the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic had severe consequences for cross-border regions and need to be analysed with a territorial cohesion analytical prism. In all, this special issue contributes to the literature and debate on regional studies and EU policy studies, by analysing the effects of EU Cohesion Policy across several EU regions, in several policy areas. In detail, this special issue:

- Presents a conceptual approach to better understand on how territorial cooperation processes can contribute to promoting territorial cohesion trends in a given territory;
- Advances detailed analyses on the relevance of EU Cohesion Policy-related urban development strategies in achieving the main goals of this policy;
- Assesses regional capabilities-oriented approaches for European just and sustainable transitions
- Presents an impact analysis of EU Cohesion Policy 2014-2020;
- Analyses the COVID-19 pandemic impacts on the territorial cohesion trends in Europe.

In sum, the main scope and focus of this special issue is on the analysis of EU Cohesion Policy in selected policy areas (territorial cooperation, regional resilience, urban development, just and sustainable transitions) towards a more cohesive EU territory. Ultimately, this special issue aims to further clarify the understanding of territorial cohesion in regional policy and governance-related contexts.

The six papers in this special issue concentrate mostly on the EU-level dimension. They balance, however, the proposal of novel conceptual and various methodological approaches to analysing specific policy areas financed by EU Cohesion Policy, with a more practical perspective. As such, the special issue papers make contributions to both academic and policy research in six areas and enrich current discussion on the future of Cohesion Policy with multidimensional and multidisciplinary lenses (Dotti, Musiałkowska, De Gregorio Hurtado & Walczyk, 2024, EC, 2024).

To begin with, for the first time, Medeiros et al. (2024, in this issue) present a conceptual proposal to detail the main linkages between the territorial cooperation analytical dimension of the territorial cohesion concept. Here, in this first paper, a coalition of authors, including two academics, several officials from the European Commission (DG REGIO) working on European Territorial Cooperation (Ricardo Ferreira, Pascal Boijmans, and Nathalie Verschelde) and four secretary generals of European border regions' associations (Martin Guillermo-Ramírez, Ocskay Gyula, Jean Peyrony and Anthony Soares), identify six main components which should be regarded as critical domains to assess the contribution of EU territorial cooperation to territorial cohesion trends: (i) territorial integration (via the reduction of border barriers); (ii) territorial innovation (via the promotion of knowledge exchange); (iii) territorial networking (via the forging of cross-border urban networks); (iv) territorial governance (via the setting-up of cross-border and transnational entities); (v) territorial planning (via the establishment of cross-border and transnational planning agreements); and (vi) territorial functionality (via the reinforcement of cross-border and transnational functional regions).

In the second paper Demeterova (2024, in this issue) analyses the strategic rationale of several EU key policy documents on territorial cohesion and sustainable development, influencing the strategic implementation of EU Cohesion Policy for just and sustainable transitions. Applying the framing analyses approach, she analyses past and present versions of the European Common Provision Regulation, the European Territorial Agenda, and the European Environmental Action Programme. Her analysis concludes that even though, spatial justice and capacity-building focus is on the rise, European strategies are not sufficiently contributing to reducing presenting social, environmental,

and territorial challenges and that are responding inadequately to actual regional challenges. Moreover, the author concludes that these strategies should emphasise a more context-sensitive, sustainable, and spatially just policy response, to also support long-term spatial transition processes.

The third paper, written by a wealth of authors, Bourdin et al. (2024, in this issue), is dedicated to summarizing the results of an ESPON report on the main impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in EU regions and cities. In detail, the authors alert to the significant and asymmetric impacts across Europe of the mentioned pandemic, which potentially undermined ongoing territorial cohesion processes in the EU. The analysis concludes that the COVID-19 pandemic led to the introduction of new short-term social policies to reduce socio-economic disparities produced by COVID-19 and accelerated the implementation of green and smart policies. In short, the socioeconomic cohesion and environmental sustainability policy dimensions of territorial cohesion ended up being protected by EU policy measures in all EU Member States, limiting the expansion of territorial disparities. Moreover, territorial governance agreements were reinforced across the EU territory as a means to implement regional and local resilience measures, thus supporting another key analytical dimension of territorial cohesion: territorial governance. In sum, the authors conclude that there is strong evidence to link EU proactive policies introduced to combat the effects of COVID-19 in EU regions and the objectives of territorial cohesion in the EU.

The fourth paper presented by García et al. (2024, in this issue) is dedicated to scrutinising urban development strategies in the EU, based on data from the Urban Data Platform, to assess in which measure different EU procedural arrangements can contribute to shaping urban development strategies and specifically their degree of thematic integration. In conclusion, the authors found that the analysed strategies which are based on more diversified EU funds, and are delivered via decentralised instruments, and targeting several urban areas presented a more integrated policy implementation approach, and thus contributed to promoting territorial cohesion trends in the respective territories.

In the fifth paper, European Commission's Officials, Crucitti et al. (2024, in this issue) present a challenging academic exercise of assessing the main impacts of the 2014–2020 European Structural Funds on territorial cohesion in the EU. By using a robust macro econometric policy evaluation tool (RHOMOLO) used to quantify the indirect and direct effects of the EU policy investments in EU NUTS-2 regions, within a 20-year time frame. The authors conclude that the impact of EU Cohesion Policy is sizeable, in particular in the less developed EU regions. As such, socio-economic disparities at the EU regional level are shown to decrease thanks to the EU policy intervention. Put differently, based on econometric data, the authors present a case that EU Cohesion Policy has been contributing to achieving territorial cohesion over the past 20 years.

In the last paper, European Commission's Officials from the Joint Research Centre, Lorenzo Gabrielli et al. (2024, in this issue), present a survey on the use of non-traditional data in the context of regional policy, which is linked with the analysis of a case study analysing real estate markets of three European countries. These case studies highlight perspectives and limitations of Computational Social Science in regional analysis in terms of data quality and availability. After exploring data for three countries (Austria, France, and Italy) and respective regions, with the goal of infer intra-national mobility and residential patterns correlated with the COVID-19 pandemic effects, the authors conclude that there are significant different levels of pre-processing and aggregation of the data sources. In detail, France makes use of a totally disaggregated dataset, whereas Italy follows a min-max approach. Furthermore, there are different levels of ‘out-of-the-box’ usability of the information

among all case-studies, which present critical challenges to assess territorial development and cohesion trends in the EU.

In conclusion, EU Cohesion Policy has contributed to foster territorial cohesion processes, particularly at regional (promotion of more balanced and harmonious development trends within a region) and national (promotion of more balanced and harmonious development trends within a country) levels, by supporting less developed regions and Member States. However, the impact varies significantly across different areas and is influenced by numerous factors, including policy design, implementation efficiency, and the broader socio-economic context. Therefore, continued efforts to refine and target EU Cohesion Policy interventions are essential to better address existing disparities, spatial inequalities and emerging challenges effectively.

References:

Berkowitz, P.; Monfort, P. & Pieńkowski, J. (2020) Unpacking the growth impacts of European Union ECP: transmission channels from ECP into economic growth, *Regional Studies*, 54(1): 60-71.

Bourdin, S.; Moodie, J.; Gassen, N.; Evers, D.; Adobati, F.; Amdaoud, M.; Arcuri, G.; Casti, E.; Cottereau, V. & Eva, M.; Hajnalka Lőcsei, Corneliu Iaţu, Bogdan-Constantin Iba˘nescu, Philippe Jean-Pierre, Hermet, F.; Levratto, N.; Löfving, L.; Coll-Martinez, E.; Psycharis, Y.; Salenius, V. & Remete, Z. (2024) COVID-19 as a systemic shock: curb or catalyst for proactive policies towards territorial cohesion?, *Regional Studies*, DOI: 10.1080/00343404.2023.2242387

Crescenzi, R. & Giua, M. (2020) One or many Cohesion Policies of the European Union? On the differential economic impacts of ECP across member states, *Regional Studies*, 54(1): 10-20.
Crescenzi R. & Giua, M (2024) The Economic Impacts of Cohesion Policy in (eds.) Dotti, N., Musiałkowska, I., De Gregorio Hurtado, S. & Walczyk, J. (2024) *EU Cohesion Policy. A Multidisciplinary Approach*. Edward Elgar Publishing, DOI: 10.4337/9781802209402.00019

Crucitti, F.; Lazarou, N.; Monfort, P. & Salotti, S. (2024) The impact of the 2014–2020 European Structural Funds on territorial cohesion, *Regional Studies*, DOI: 10.1080/00343404.2023.2243989

Dao, H.; Cantoreggi, P. P.; Rousseaux, V. (2017) Operationalizing a contested concept: indicators of territorial cohesion, *European Planning Studies*, 25(4): 638-660, DOI: 10.1080/09654313.2017.1281230

Dąbrowski, M.; Musiałkowska, I. & Polverari, L. (2018) EU–China and EU–Brazil policy transfer in regional policy, *Regional Studies*, 52(9): 1169-1180, DOI: 10.1080/00343404.2018.1431389

Demeterova, B.; Goodwin-Hawkins., B. & Fischer, T. (2020) Conceptualisations of Territorial Cohesion in Central European border regions, *European Planning Studies*, 28(12): 2287-2306, DOI: 10.1080/09654313.2020.1716692

Demeterova, B. (2024): Assessing regional capabilities-oriented approaches for European just and sustainable transitions, *Regional Studies*, DOI: 10.1080/00343404.2023.2242894

Dotti, N.; Musiałkowska, I.; De Gregorio Hurtado, S.; & Walczyk, J. (2024) Introduction to EU Cohesion Policy. A Multidisciplinary Approach in: (eds (eds.) Dotti, N., Musiałkowska, I., De Gregorio Hurtado, S. & Walczyk, J. (2024) *EU Cohesion Policy. A Multidisciplinary Approach*. Edward Elgar Publishing, DOI: /10.4337/9781802209402.00010

EC (2022) *Eight report on economic, social and territorial cohesion. Cohesion in Europe towards 2050*. European Commission, Brussels.

EC (2024) *Forging a sustainable future together Cohesion for a competitive and inclusive Europe : report of the High-Level Group on the Future of Cohesion Policy*, February 2024, Publications Office of the European Union, https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2776/974536

Faludi, A. (2013) Territorial Cohesion and Subsidiarity under the European Union Treaties: A Critique of the 'Territorialism' Underlying, *Regional Studies*, 47(9): 1594–1606.

Fratesi, U. & Wishlade, F. G. (2017) The impact of European ECP in different contexts, *Regional Studies*, 51(6): 817-821.

Gagliardi, L. & Percoco, M. (2017) The impact of European Cohesion Policy in urban and rural regions, *Regional Studies*, 51(6): 857-868.

García, M.; Pazos-Vidal, S. & Rodríguez, R. (2024) Urban development strategies in the EU: the relationship between the procedural and substantive dimensions, *Regional Studies*, DOI: 10.1080/00343404.2023.2224835

Idczak, P., Musiałkowska, I.& Kociuba, D. (2024) The origins of the EU Cohesion Policy: from regional economic development to the place-based approach in (eds.) Dotti, N., Musiałkowska, I., De Gregorio Hurtado, S. & Walczyk, J. (2024) *EU Cohesion Policy. A Multidisciplinary Approach*. Edward Elgar Publishing, DOI: 10.4337/9781802209402.00012

Jakubowski, A.; Wójcik, P. (2024) Towards cohesion at the interface between the European Union states? Cross-border asymmetry and convergence. *Regional Studies*, 58 (1): 194–207. DOI: 10.1080/00343404.2023.2187767.

McCann, P. & Ortega-Argilés, R. (2015) Smart Specialization, Regional Growth and Applications to European Union Cohesion Policy, *Regional Studies*, 49(8): 1291-1302, DOI: 10.1080/00343404.2013.799769

Medeiros, E. (2016) Territorial Cohesion: An EU Concept, *European Journal of Spatial Development*, 60 – http://www.nordregio.org/publications/territorial-cohesion-an-eu-concept.

Medeiros, E. (2017) European Union Cohesion Policy and Spain: a territorial impact assessment, *Regional Studies*, 51(8): 1259-1269

Medeiros, E. (ed.) (2018) *European Territorial Cooperation. Theoretical and empirical approaches to the process and impacts of Cross-Border and Transnational Cooperation in Europe*. The Urban Book Series. Springer, Cham

Medeiros, E.; Rauhut, D. (2020) Territorial Cohesion Cities: a policy recipe for achieving Territorial Cohesion? *Regional Studies*, 54(1): 120-128 - https://doi.org/10.1080/00343404.2018.1548764

Medeiros, E., Zaucha, J. & Ciołek, D. (2023) Measuring Territorial Cohesion trends in Europe. A correlation with EU Cohesion Policy, *European Planning Studies*, 31(18):1868–1884 - https://doi.org/10.1080/09654313.2022.2143713

Medeiros, E., Guillermo-Ramirez, M., Dellagiacoma & C.: Brustia, G. (2021) Will reducing border barriers via the EU's b-solutions lead towards greater European territorial integration?, *Regional Studie*s, 56(3): 504-517.

Medeiros, E.; Scott, J.; Ferreira, R.; Boijmans, P.; Verschelde, N.; Guillermo-Ramírez, M.; Gyula, O.; Peyrony J.; & Soares, A. (2024) European territorial cooperation towards territorial cohesion?, *Regional Studies*, DOI: 10.1080/00343404.2023.2226698

Mendez, C. & Bachtler, J. (2022) The quality of government and administrative performance: explaining Cohesion Policy compliance, absorption and achievements across EU regions, *Regional Studies*, DOI: 10.1080/00343404.2022.2083593

Monzon, A.; Lopez, E. & Ortega, E. (2019) Has HSR improved territorial cohesion in Spain? An accessibility analysis of the first 25 years: 1990–2015, *European Planning Studies*, 27(3): 513-532, DOI: 10.1080/09654313.2018.1562656

Nekvasil, M. & Moldan, B. (2018) Could Cohesion Policy push EU climate efforts?, *Climate Policy*, 18(1): 129-139, DOI: 10.1080/14693062.2016.1251878

Percoco, M. (2017) Impact of European Cohesion Policy on regional growth: does local economic structure matter?, Regional Studies, 51(6): 833-843.

Polverari, L., Domorenok, E., & Graziano, P. (2022). Empowerment via delegation? The administrative capacity-building potential of Cohesion Policy urban development strategies. *Regional Studies*. DOI: 10.108000343404.2022.2058698

Potluka, O.; Medeiros, E. (2021) Administrative and Organisational Capacities of Civil Society in EU Cohesion Policy, *Regional Studies*, https://doi.org/10.1080/00343404.2021.1986626

Reitel B., Wassenberg B., Peyrony J. (2018) *The INTERREG Experience in Bridging European Territories. A 30-Year Summary*. In: Medeiros E. (eds) European Territorial Cooperation. The Urban Book Series. Springer, Cham, pp. 7-23.

Rodríguez-Pose, A. & Dijkstra, L. (2021) Does Cohesion Policy reduce EU discontent and Euroscepticism?, *Regional Studies*, 55(2): 354-369, DOI: 10.1080/00343404.2020.1826040

Surubaru, N. (2017) Administrative capacity or quality of political governance? EU Cohesion Policy in the new Europe, 2007–13, *Regional Studies*, 51(6):, 844-856, DOI: 10.1080/00343404.2016.1246798

Valente, B. & Medeiros. E. (2022) The impacts of EU cohesion policy in sustainable tourism: the case of the PO SEUR in Algarve, *Sustainability*, 14(19): 12672, https://doi.org/ 10.3390/su141912672

Van Well, L. (2012) Conceptualizing the Logics of Territorial Cohesion, *European Planning Studies*, 20(9): 1549-1567.

Zaucha, J. & Böhme, K. (2020) Measuring territorial cohesion is not a mission impossible, *European Planning Studies*, 28(3): 627-649, DOI: 10.1080/09654313.2019.1607827