

TOWARDS A DESIRABLE FUTURE FOR ALL PLACES

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Abstract: This article discusses the Territorial Agenda 2030 within the broader context of European spatial planning and policy integration. It traces the historical evolution of spatial planning in Europe, identifying foundational moments such as the Torremolinos Charter and the adoption of the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) in 1999. These developments set the stage for successive Territorial Agendas in 2007, 2011, and 2020, each reinforcing the EU's commitment to cohesive territorial development.

As disparities between European regions persist, the article emphasises the need for a nuanced understanding of territorial cohesion. It critiques the fragmented approach to policy that lacks synergy among various regional stakeholders and policies, potentially impeding cohesive development.

To achieve the objectives of the Territorial Agenda 2030, i.e. a (desirable) future for all places and people, the article argues for a contemporary understanding of cohesion that integrates economic, social, and territorial aspects to address emerging socio-economic challenges effectively.

In conclusion, it advocates a comprehensive and inclusive visioning process across the EU. It calls for a paradigm shift towards more integrated and synergistic policy frameworks that align with the evolving dynamics of European integration, regional diversity, and global challenges, aiming to ensure sustainable, inclusive development across all European territories. This approach underscores the importance of moving beyond traditional notions of cohesion towards a more dynamic and inclusive strategy that embraces the complex, multifaceted nature of regional development.

Key words: Territorial Agenda, cohesion, future for all places, Europe Towards a desirable future for all places

Towards a desirable future for all places

The Territorial Agenda 2030 sets out for a desirable future for all places and people in Europe. The origin of this aim of European spatial planning – and maybe for European policy making enlarge – can be traced back to processes closely related to the Torremolinos Charter, but also intimal linked to the EU objective and understanding of cohesion – especially territorial cohesion. After a short view back in time, this article looks at the present situation to reflect on the growing disunities and diverging policy objectives in Europe. Looking towards the future, the article argues for a strengthening of policy synergies and a more contemporary understanding of cohesion to help Europe to progress towards offering all places and people desirable future perspectives. Today, the key objective of the Territorial Agenda 2030 might be more relevant ever. Still, it remains a tall order to achieve, and maybe Europe needs a broad visioning process to jointly identify what desirable future(s) it wants and what it means by cohesion.

A short view to the history

European history is filled with paradoxes of integration and fragmentation which also concern European spatial planning, territorial development and the underlying objective to ensure a future for (all) places in Europe (Robert, 2014). Looking at the history post World War II, the considerations and declarations by Alterio Spinelli, Jean Monnet, Robert Schuman and also George Marshall are actually containing implicit seeds for a spatial idea of Europe (Böhme & Toptsidou, 2022).

Looking at documents which are more outspoken about planning and spatial visions for Europe, an important starting is the first meeting of the Conference of Ministers responsible for spatial planning (CEMAT) in 1970 in Bonn. Under the auspices of the Council of Europe, CEMAT noted that European integration could aggravate geographical differences if this were not accompanied by a common approach to regional planning (Williams, 1996). This led finally to the European Regional/Spatial Planning Charter, also known as the Torremolinos Charter, adopted by the spatial planning ministers at their meeting in Torremolinos in 1983. Later on, CEMAT presented its pan-European approach, setting out spatial planning guidelines for the entire continent of Europe in Hannover in 2000.

This pan-European approach to spatial planning, has stimulated but finally also been surpassed by activities within the European Union with approval of the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) in 1999 – following a ten year long intergovernmental policy process (cf. Faludi & Waterhout, 2002). The ESDP was followed by three Territorial Agendas (2007, 2011, 2020) (cf. Böhme & Schön, 2006; Eser & Schmeitz, 2008; Schön, 2022).

The key EU spatial planning documents in chronological order since 1999 are (Böhme & Redlich, 2023):

- **The European Spatial Development Perspective** (ESDP, 1999) outlined a policy guideline for the EU and national policies with spatial implications, aiming for balanced



and sustainable growth across Europe. It served as a point of reference for regional development cooperation and encouraged the connection of urban areas.

- **The Territorial Agenda of the European Union (TAEU, 2007)** emphasised the concept of territorial cohesion as an ongoing, cooperative endeavour among various territorial development stakeholders at different levels. It highlighted the significance of territorial governance.

- **The Territorial Agenda 2020 (TA2020, 2011)** addressed a critical gap in the 'Europe 2020' strategy (European Commission, 2010) related to territorial cohesion. It advocated for integrating territorial aspects into various policies across all scales, supporting place-based policies and territorial impact assessments.

- **The Territorial Agenda 2030 (TA2030, 2020)** outlines policy priorities for Europe focusing on a fair and green future for all regions and people, aiming to safeguard shared resources and manage social changes. It emphasises enhancing the territorial aspect of policies at every level of governance to foster inclusive, sustainable development and support the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals in Europe. Its main strapline is 'a future for all places'.

The intergovernmental character of these key documents is their charm but also their biggest potential and hinder. Since the launch of ESDP in 1999, it became clear that we are dealing with a policy carried by the cooperation between national ministries. This has been reemphasised in the Territorial Agenda of the European Union of 2007, the Territorial Agenda 2020 adopted in 2011 and also in the current Territorial Agenda 2030 agreed upon in 2020. They all are developed and governed by European intergovernmental cooperation on territorial cohesion. This intergovernmental focus implies that there are no direct implementation tools, funding or legal implications linked to policy documents. Indeed, they rather serve as a manifestation of a common understanding and reference point which everyone is asked to promote and apply where, how and when appropriate.

Besides this evolution of intergovernmental cooperation on territorial matters, there have been also some more formal steps by the EU. In 2007, the Treaty of Lisbon added territorial cohesion as a third fundamental goal of EU cohesion policy, complementing social and economic cohesion. This actually makes territorial cohesion – and some may argue planning ideas – a central aim of the EU. To better understand what that implies, the EU issued a Green Paper on Territorial Cohesion (European Commission, 2008). It focuses

on harmonious growth of various regions, ensuring that citizens benefit from the unique characteristics of these areas. It advocated for turning territorial diversity into an advantage for sustainable development in the EU.

In the 1990s, which might be described as the heydays of European spatial planning, there were also various initiatives for transnational spatial planning documents, e.g. for the Baltic Sea Region, the North Sea Region, and the CENTROP Region. They all were characterised by a forward-looking vision that sought to harness regional strengths, address joint challenges, and foster sustainable development through cooperation and integration across borders. The first, most prominent and still active one is VASAB “Visions and Strategies in the Baltic Sea Region”. Initiated in 1992, VASAB was a pioneering effort to promote cooperation among the countries in the Baltic Sea Region in spatial planning and development. It aimed to create a framework for harmonised development, focusing on areas such as transportation infrastructure, urban development, and environmental protection. In 1992, the first VASAB-conference in Tallinn led to the development of a series of spatial planning principles and initiatives tailored to the unique geographical, economic, and environmental context of the Baltic Sea Region. Since then, it has been renewed and updated various times. The VASAB Vision for the Territorial Development of the Baltic Sea Region in 2040 has been approved in 2023 (VASAB, 2023).

In the early 2000s, the EU embarked on a novel approach to regional development and cooperation through the creation of EU macro-regional strategies. This movement was initiated with the launch of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR) in 2009, marking the first concerted effort to address the challenges and opportunities of a specific geographical area through a comprehensive, integrated approach that involved multiple countries and stakeholders. This pioneering strategy aimed at improving environmental conditions, enhancing economic growth, and increasing connectivity within the Baltic Sea region. Inspired by its potential, the EU subsequently developed additional macro-regional strategies: the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) in 2011, focused on fostering connectivity, environmental protection, and economic development along the Danube River; the EU Strategy for the Alpine Region (EUSALP) in 2016, aimed at promoting sustainable growth and preserving the unique ecological and cultural assets of the Alpine area; and the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR) in 2014, which sought to stimulate maritime and economic development while addressing environmental challenges in the Adriatic-Ionian area.

The genesis of these macro-regional strategies can be traced back to the EU's evolving Cohesion Policy and the recognition of the need for a more tailored, region-specific approach to tackle the complex, transboundary issues facing these diverse areas. By integrating various funding streams, policies, and governance levels, these strategies aim to create synergies and leverage the unique strengths of each macro-region to achieve sustainable development, economic growth, and improved quality of life for their inhabitants. The macro-regional strategies are a sort of evolution in European spatial planning and regional policy, emphasizing cooperation, integration, and innovation across borders.

Summing up, European spatial planning and territorial cohesion ideas have been around in different formats, at least since World War II. Nevertheless, the various attempts and

initiatives appear to be rather patchy and never generated sufficient momentum for a strong spatial vision for Europe, that could guide policy making and territorial development. What that could have looked like if they had gained momentum has been outlined in a book chapter “What if there had been a spatial vision for Europe?” (Böhme & Toptsidou, 2022).

As things stand, we rather may refer to Jacques Robert:

“The territorial integration of the European continent can be considered a long process likely to lead, in the long run, to a fabric of economic, social and cultural functional relationship corresponding to those of a modern European society in living on a single territory, by respecting diversity in all its dimensions.” (Robert, 2014, p. 181).

As for the present – growing disunity

In any case, we are where we are and have to deal with what we have at hand. There is the Territorial Agenda 2030 aiming high at sustainable future for all places and people. Certainly, there is also the EU objective of territorial cohesion and Cohesion Policy.

In principle they all aim at a more harmonious territorial development in the EU or a form of territorial cohesion. The Territorial Agenda has pinned it by referring to “a future for all places and people”, which surely should be a desirable future.

Despite this high-flying policy aim, it appears we are far away from a state of territorial cohesion in the EU – not at all considering Europe in a wider geographical meaning. This is at least illustrated by the large body of European analysis and policy papers underlining that places and people in Europe are increasingly drifting apart. In spring 2024, the 9th Report on economic, social and territorial cohesion (European Commission, 2024b) highlighted that socioeconomic disparities in the EU persist and a growing number of regions risk struggling with new challenges in a range of regional development fields.

That spatial disparities of various kind challenge cohesion ambitions is nothing new. Indeed, Europe’s changing economic geography is accompanied by an increasing fragmentation of society and places (cf. ESPON, 2019; European Commission, 2022a; Eurostat, 2021; Lavalle et al., 2017). Both in the EU and in most member states there are persistent regional asymmetries e.g. related to access to basic public services, employment and unemployment rates, competitiveness, and productivity (European Commission, 2023a). Basically, regional development analysis points at growing disparities at various geographical levels, and an increasing complexity of disparities related to a range of thematic spheres beyond traditional GDP and job figures. The growing disparities and increasing fragmentations, which the studies point to, affect the prospects of economic, social and territorial cohesion in the EU, and the EU itself.

The increasing territorial and social fragmentation of society, are discussed in terms of concepts such as ‘places left behind’ or ‘places that do not matter’ (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018; Mattilaa, Purkarthofer & Humer, 2023), ‘places of discontent’ (Dijkstra, Poelman & Rodríguez-Pose, 2020;

Rodríguez-Pose, Dijkstra, Poelman, 2023) or ‘diverse European geography of future perspectives’ (Böhme, Lüer & Toptsidou, 2019) and can lead to ‘spatial antagonism’ (Böhme, 2024).

All of the concepts acknowledge the importance of people’s perception of how the place they live in develops in relation to others. This means, they include two relative dimensions: change over time (both looking backwards and into the future), and comparison between places (Böhme, 2024). In that sense it is not necessarily about lagging behind or poor places, but merely about a place’s dynamism and capability to attract policy attention or to attract sufficient public and private investments. The report on ‘the geography of EU discontent and the region development trap’ (Rodríguez-Pose et al., 2023) shows how fragmentation in the EU becomes visible at the ballot box and fuels Euroscepticism. It notes a substantial increase in support for ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ Eurosceptic parties, which many people expect to also manifest in the 2024 elections to the EU Parliament.

Classic explanations for why votes for ‘soft’ Eurosceptic parties grow focus on individual, geographic, and economic determinants. Accordingly, Eurosceptic voting could be reduced by higher regional levels of employment, more people with tertiary education, better government quality, a higher share of residents born in another EU member state, higher population densities and higher voter turnout. On the other hand, lower GDP per head, more industrial jobs, more net-migration, ageing processes, and residents born outside the EU are correlated with higher levels of Eurosceptic voting.

Newer explanations refer to the risk, intensity, and length of a development trap (Rodríguez-Pose et al., 2023). Regions facing development traps have on average lower GDP growth, productivity, and employment per capita compared to the EU, the country the region is located in, and the region itself in a previous period. However, not only the presence of a development trap matters but also the risk, intensity, and length of it. In principle, all regions can be at risk of a development trap, but the risk is highest in what in Cohesion Policy is known as transition regions (i.e. regions with a GDP/capita between 75 and 100% of the EU average), followed by more developed regions (i.e. regions with GDP/capita above EU average). The risk is lowest in less developed regions (i.e. regions with a GDP/capita below 75% of the EU average), but these are not immune to falling in a development trap.

Exacerbating spatial fragmentation

These increasing fragmentations and development traps will not disappear by themselves. Foresight studies suggest that rather the opposite will be the case. Both existing development trends and major socio-economic transitions risk to exacerbate spatial fragmentation.

Social, technological, economic, environmental and political trends will probably exacerbate spatial and societal fragmentation, as well as interdependencies and policy mismatches. In many regards the trends point to a risk of increased concentration on urban areas with growing territorial imbalances and inequalities, which may translate into social fragmentation and more discontent. This also risks increased perceptions of uncertainty and vulnerability in a world of disruptive changes leading to ‘pervasive uncertainties’ (Böhme, 2023a). Trends

that may have the strongest impacts on territorial development and cohesion include exogenous technological trends (e.g. digital society, post-carbon and circular economy), social change (e.g. migration, aging, fluid social institutions and shifts in values), environmental trends (e.g. adapting/mitigating climate change and managing scarce resources), and economic trends (e.g. slowbalisation, peak of everything, working from anywhere). Political trends also play an important role, both developments in Europe, as well as in other parts of the world which affect development prospects in Europe. (Böhme, 2023a)

Besides the overall development trends, the EU has engaged in major transitions to strengthen its future perspectives. At the forefront are the green and digital twin transitions in terms of a more connected Europe, a more social and inclusive Europe, a Europe closer to its citizens and with better governance (European Commission, 2022b). In addition, addressing the challenges of demographic change, the EU has engaged in a transition concerning the access to skilled labour and harnessing talent (European Commission, 2023b). These transitions will likely create new disparities and challenge growth and cohesion. This is partly due to the spatial logic of innovation and disruptive changes, and partly due to the financing of the transitions. Firstly, technological 'revolutions' and transitions tend to generate network effects which often lead to economic and spatial concentration. This implies increasing cohesion challenges in the years to come. Only after a technological 'revolution' a phase of technology diffusion can be expected which is associated with convergence between economic players and places. Secondly, although their goals are set at EU level, financing largely depends on member states, which leaves execution of the strategy to the national level (Zuleeg & Lausberg, 2023).

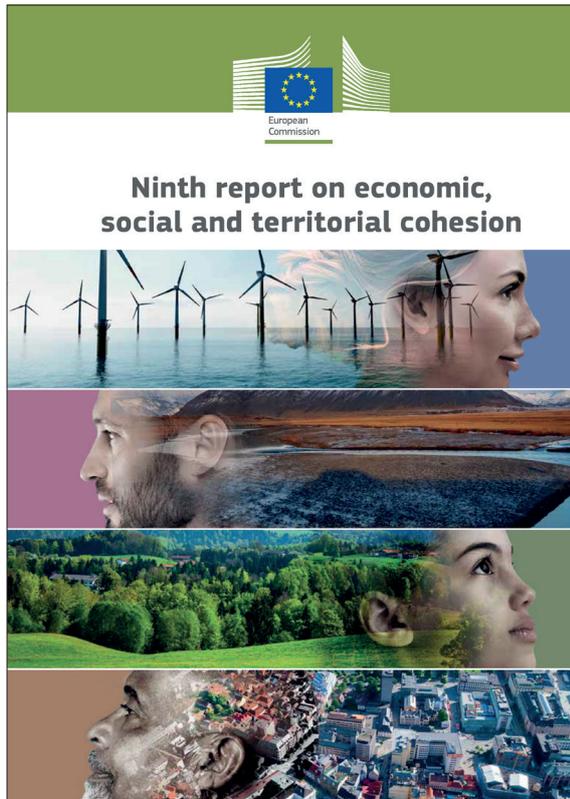
All in all, places in Europe face divergent development prospects, including asymmetrical effects of major trends and the green, digital and demographic transitions.

As for the present – diverging policy objectives

The struggles of the EU – and its member states – to achieve cohesion, is linked to the complexity and ambiguity of the concept of cohesion (Böhme & Toptsidou, 2024) and on the importance of external drivers and mega-trends which affect territorial cohesion (ESPON, 2019). However, it has also to do with the commitment of policy makers to the cohesion objective and the coordination of policies.

Ensuring cohesion or a desirable future for all places must draw on a broad policy mix, combining various EU and national policies affecting local and regional development and reflecting the places' development potential and aspirations (Böhme & Toptsidou, 2024). In this respect the 9th Cohesion Report underlines the necessity to reflect on how EU and national policies affect cohesion and how they could better reinforce each other for tailoring support to different types of territory (European Commission, 2024b).

Accepting cohesion and the delivery of desirable future prospects for all places, as a shared challenge for policy makers across the EU from the local to the pan-European level, the focus of the debate shifts. The complexity and ambiguity of the overall cohesion objective and



the role of external driving forces do not disappear, but the importance of policy makers' commitment to the aim comes to the forefront.

This plea for a broad commitment, has already been made several times. Not at least in 2020, ministers responsible for spatial planning, territorial development and/or territorial cohesion, stressed that achieving a future for all places relies on multilevel cooperation between a wide range of players. They mention explicitly member states, sub-national authorities, the European Commission, the European Parliament, the European Committee of the Regions, the European Economic and Social Committee, the European Investment Bank and other relevant players (TA2030, 2020). In that sense the Territorial Agenda could be seen as a framework to promote territorial cohesion in Europe, based on a shared recognition it requires cooperation and coordination between different places, as well as between

different levels of government and societal groups (Bachtrögler et al., 2020).

Putting things differently, given the limited implementation instruments of the Territorial Agenda 2030, the approach taken follows what Mazzucato (2021) describes as a mission economy, applying bold and experimental approaches in the face of multiple major challenges. It basically aims at bringing together a wide range of different players from various sectors, fields of society, policy areas and countries, behind a shared mission or objective. In the case of the Territorial Agenda 2030, this mission concerns ensuring a future for all places and people in Europe through the transition to a green and just Europe.

First results of an ESPON study reviewing the application of the Territorial Agenda 2030 might even confirm this (ESPO, 2024). Reviewing the application of the principles and priorities put forward in the Territorial Agenda 2030, it highlights that an essential feature indicative of the implementation of the Territorial Agenda 2030 involves the adoption of place-based strategies and methodologies, with a focus on recognising distinct regional and local attributes and responding to evolving needs. These seem to have generally experienced an increase or stability in usage over the past three years. Also the stakeholder involvement across sectors, governance levels and national borders seem to have increased over the past years. Along the same lines, also the priorities of the Territorial Agenda largely seem to be on track and steadily increase their application.

This could suggest that Europe is on track for slowly and steadily moving towards more cohesion. However, zooming out of the circles working with cohesion and the Territorial Agenda, suggests that this might just be a sort of an 'island vision'.

Looking at a grander scale, it seems that the 'mission' of cohesion or desirable future perspectives for all places is not really shared. This is not at least visible from the rather defensive report of the high-level group on the future of Cohesion Policy 'Forging a sustainable future together: Cohesion for a competitive and inclusive Europe' (European Commission, 2024a). The report makes a strong statement for the need of cohesion to ensure the longevity of the EU and for the need of place-based policies and high-quality multilevel governance. Also the report on the future of the Single Market (Letta, 2024) underlines the importance of cohesion in the EU for the functioning of the Single Market. Indeed, it even refers to it as "a key condition for the success of the Single Market".

Still, it appears the objective and shared mission to ensure cohesion and a desirable future perspectives for all places is experiencing declining policy commitment. For example at EU level, it appears that external drivers such as climate change, energy and migration crisis, digitalisation, demographic change, geo-political conflicts etc. diverge attention in policy making. Increasingly they focus policy debates and instruments towards single purpose approaches instead of integrated approaches which reconcile the territorial cohesion dimension with the specific policy objectives.

This is part of a wider trend of increasing divergence in policy objectives in the EU, and among its member states. It reflects also a complex interplay of national interests, economic disparities, and political beliefs. Besides the cohesion debate, this divergence is evident in areas such as fiscal policy, where economically stronger nations advocate for stricter budgetary controls and fiscal responsibility, while others, burdened by higher debt levels, push for flexibility and growth-oriented spending. Environmental and energy policies also highlight divisions, as some members prioritise ambitious climate targets and renewable energy transitions, contrasting sharply with others that depend heavily on traditional energy sources and exhibit reluctance towards rapid changes. Additionally, the migration crisis has further exacerbated policy rifts, with differing views on border controls and the distribution of responsibilities for asylum seekers. These divergent policy directions not only challenge the unity of the EU but also complicate the formulation of cohesive strategies to address pan-European and global issues.

More directly linked to cohesion, is the (perceived) competition between Cohesion Policy and the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF). The introduction of RRF amidst the COVID-19 pandemic has sparked discussions about potential competition with the EU's longstanding Cohesion Policy. Traditionally, Cohesion Policy has been aimed at reducing disparities between EU regions, fostering economic, social, and territorial cohesion. In contrast, the RRF is designed to promote a rapid post-pandemic recovery through large-scale financial support for national programs that focus on green and digital transitions. Some stakeholders perceive a competition between the two, fearing that the substantial financial injections from the RRF might overshadow or divert resources from Cohesion Policy, potentially altering funding priorities. This perceived competition raises concerns about the long-term commitment to regional development and equality, as the more targeted, short-term goals of the RRF might shift focus away from the broader, integrative objectives of Cohesion Policy.

At EU-level all is expected in the debate about the future budget, the Multiannual Financial Framework for the period after 2021-2027. It very well may see a reduced overall

EU-budget which faces an increased number of EU policy objectives, incl. green, digital and demographic transitions, security and defence, industrial autonomy, EU-enlargements. Given that Cohesion Policy has a considerable share of today's EU budget – e.g. in the current 2020-2027 period it disposes over EUR 392 billion –, it risks to be among the policies from where to redistribute to new policy objectives.

All in all, diverging and proliferating EU policy objectives may risk to further reduce the commitment to cohesion and desirable future perspectives for all places. To strengthen the idea of cohesion being an EU-wide objective all policies should buy into, two things are currently discussed: increased focus on synergies and modernising the understanding of cohesion.

A future for all places needs policy synergies

That cohesion is too big a task to be delivered by a single policy has been outlined many times before (Böhme et al., 2021; e.g. Böhme & Tóptsidou, 2024; European Commission, 2024b, 2024a).

This implies – in particular in a time declining public resources – that synergies between policies need to be identified and better exploited. While the Territorial Agenda 2030, mainly because of its lack of own resources, has put a strong emphasis on the collaboration between a wide range of players, EU Cohesion Policy has a more complex relation with other policies.

Certainly, Cohesion Policy operates in conjunction with other policies. It plays a vital role in realising EU objectives and contributing to a range of broader EU objectives. Very early on, it contributed to sustainable development and to reaping potential in regions, strengthening their resilience to emerging challenges and accompanying them in transitions. Cohesion Policy contributions to transport policy objectives, innovation, climate change adaptation and digitalisation are just some of the examples.

However, synergies are not just about what Cohesion Policy can do to support the objectives of other policies. Synergies are also about what other policies can do to support the EU aim of economic, social and territorial cohesion. All EU policies impact local and regional development, influencing cohesion within a territory. Therefore, the European Commission introduced the 'do no harm to cohesion' principle in 2022 (European Commission, 2022b). It calls on other policies to be aware of their impacts and contribute to – or at least not harm – cohesion where possible under their own objectives. However, the magnitude of development and cohesion challenges require more from other policies than just not harming cohesion. While the objective of Cohesion Policy is to reduce territorial inequalities between regions, achieving cohesion solely through this policy is an overwhelming task (especially given the available resources). This is asking too much from Cohesion Policy, in terms of 'repairing' the very asymmetric impacts of space-blind policies (such as macro-structural ones) on different territories (Barca, 2009).

Therefore, defining synergies and complementarities between policies and Cohesion Policy is essential, especially concerning aspects of Cohesion Policy that other policies require.

The need to strengthen synergies between policies concerns e.g. the single market, industrial policies, research and innovation, transport, security and rural development policies. For example, complementarities between Cohesion Policy and the new EU Industrial Policy must be defined, particularly the Net-Zero Industry Act. This policy – as with many other EU policies – risks creating additional economic, social, and territorial imbalances because, when translated into territorial impact, it primarily supports thriving places in countries that can afford substantial state aid.

As outlined on the 9th Cohesion Report, synergies with other policies are not limited to EU policies and EU economic governance (European Commission, 2024b). They also concern member state policies, both financial and non-financial.

A future for all places needs a contemporary understanding of cohesion

To achieve synergies, the above mentioned commitment to cohesion as a shared objective laid down on the EU Treaty, but also followed up as a shared mission is important. Is it possible that the failure to collect the necessary players behind the mission is related to the understanding of cohesion as a flanking policy or something that corrects failures of other developments, rather than a desirable objective in its own rights?

For most parts, the understanding of cohesion derives directly from the Treaty on the European Union (TEU). Article 3 lays down cohesion as an aim of the European Union (EU). Following the Treaty, the Union shall promote cohesion. More specifically, economic, social and territorial cohesion and solidarity are introduced as aims of the EU. However, often references to this by other policies than Cohesion Policy have the character of general declarations of intention or even lip service (Böhme et al., 2021).

Often the EU is merely pictured in terms of stability and integration, security and prosperity, boosting its citizens' living standards (Grajewski, 2020). Desirable future prospects for all places are often perceived as a side-effect of effective sector policies in other fields (Sapir et al., 2003). In that sense, cohesion is mainly depicted as limiting (the devastating effects of) disparities and fragmentation. More specifically, territorial cohesion would primarily be promoted by integrating territories, as discussed by Robert (2014) in terms of improved accessibility, critical mass for development, reduced economic, social and environmental fragmentation, and mutual trust and social capital.

Lately the importance of cohesion for the functioning of the European integration and the Single Market have been stressed in various policy documents (European Commission, 2024a; Letta, 2024; Toptsidou et al., 2024). Understanding cohesion as the glue that helps keeping the EU together and to oil the machinery of the Single Market underlines the importance of this EU Treaty objective. This also puts more emphasis on the question what we actually mean by cohesion: What does the aim of economic, social and territorial cohesion laid down in the Treaty on the European Union (Article 3, TEU) mean in the light of today's societal challenges? Is the limitation of the cohesion debate to economic, social and territorial cohesion still opportune?

Shifting the focus from an abstract concept such as cohesion to the idea of a future for all places and people, the Territorial Agenda 2030 pushes for a timely debate about the meaning of cohesion (Böhme & Gløersen, 2023; Böhme & Redlich, 2023). It also goes beyond the various attempts to operationalising territorial cohesion (cf. Bradley & Zaucha, 2017; Camagni, 2007; Dao, Cantoreggi & Rousseaux, 2017; Medeiros, 2012; Medeiro, 2017; Zaucha, 2017; Zaucha & Böhme, 2019; Zaucha, Komornicki, Böhme, Świątek & Žuber, 2014).

Trying to move the goalpost along the lines stressed by the Territorial Agenda 2030, the European Committee of the Regions launched several studies and a debate about cohesion as an overall value of the EU (Böhme, Toptsidou, Zillmer, Lüer, Valenza, Schuh, Gaugitsch, Amichetti, Bettini, Hrelja, Gaupp-Berghausen & Hat, 2021; European Committee of the Regions, 2021). It sketches the idea of 'Cohesion Spirit' to underpin policy making.

Following that line of thought, the 'Cohesion Spirit' of the Territorial Agenda 2030 seeks to inspire decision making across policy sectors and levels in the EU and beyond. In line with the 'Cohesion Spirit' debate of the European Committee of the Regions (2021), it extends the cohesion idea to the interpersonal, ecological and digital dimension, acknowledges mutual interdependencies and thrives for justice rather than equality or equity (Böhme & Redlich, 2023). This is not at least expressed in the subtle extension of the strapline 'a future for places' to 'a future for all places and people' in the main text of the Territorial Agenda. Throughout the text, it stresses the importance of people in addition to places, and thus moves the cohesion understanding beyond territorial cohesion to also cover interpersonal cohesion. Going one step further, Evrard and Schmitt (2023) underline that the policy objective of 'A Just Europe' shows the Territorial Agenda's ambitious policy response to an ongoing policy discourse.

Could the broadened understanding of cohesion underpinning the Territorial Agenda be a steppingstone towards a wider debate which can generate more commitment to the idea of cohesion – in the sense of a future for all places – and forge the necessary synergies between policies?

A short view to the future

Defining cohesion based on broad societal consensus across the EU and supporting the identification and exploitation of policy synergies cross government levels, across policy sectors and across administrative borders is not an easy task. It actually requires a shared understanding of the desirable direction of travel, also accompanied by the ability to navigate under uncertainty.

The desired direction of travel, could also be pictured as a shared vision. This may not necessarily be in form of a spatial vision as we know them e.g. from transnational cooperation. Above I mentioned the example of the "Visions and Strategies in the Baltic Sea Region" (VASAB, 2023). It could also be a vision in terms of shared mission (Mazzucato, 2021) or a visioning process supporting institutional change (Kivimaa, 2023). In principle, such a shared vision should offer a future for all places and people in Europe (TA2030, 2020) and guide a wide range of policies and investments.

The idea of such a vision, which helps to strengthen policy coordination and focus on potential synergies between policies, comes very close to what Kivimaa (2023) describes as shared visioning and institutional change. In her sustainability transition research, she identifies key capabilities needed to support transitions and change socio-technical systems: Shared visioning and institutional change. This requires explicit and inclusive vision building processes, substantial and ambitious legislative and organisational changes, political ambition, long-term political commitment and resources for multiple socio-technical pathways. This requires also changes in governance cultures including more open approaches to policy learning, unlearning, uncertainty, risks, transformation willingness and the capability to navigate under uncertainty (Böhme, 2023a). Basically, it implies a more foresight-oriented approach to policy making. That is characterised by critical, lateral thinking concerning long-term developments to inform decision making, and the capacity to react and think about possible alternatives and new scenarios and how to achieve them (Böhme, 2024).

As we have no blueprint of the future and developing a shared vision involves a lot of different players and perspectives, we need to balance diverse semi-independent networks and players to test their paths to the vision (Duit et al., 2010) with a full on 'mission economy' where all efforts are aligned to the envisaged future (Mazzucato, 2021).

Such an experimental take on the future might sound daring, especially as today, change is rarely driven by positive future visions or dreams. Suckert and Schommertz (2021) describe this state as 'future fatigue' in society, i.e. an emotional exhaustion and desensitisation resulting from an overwhelming focus on, and anxiety about, the uncertainties and challenges of the future. Still to work towards the Territorial Agenda 2030 objectives of desirable future prospects for all place and people, we need to nourish our future literacy skills and avoid dystopian thinking and the 'tragedy of the time horizon' (Böhme, 2023b).

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