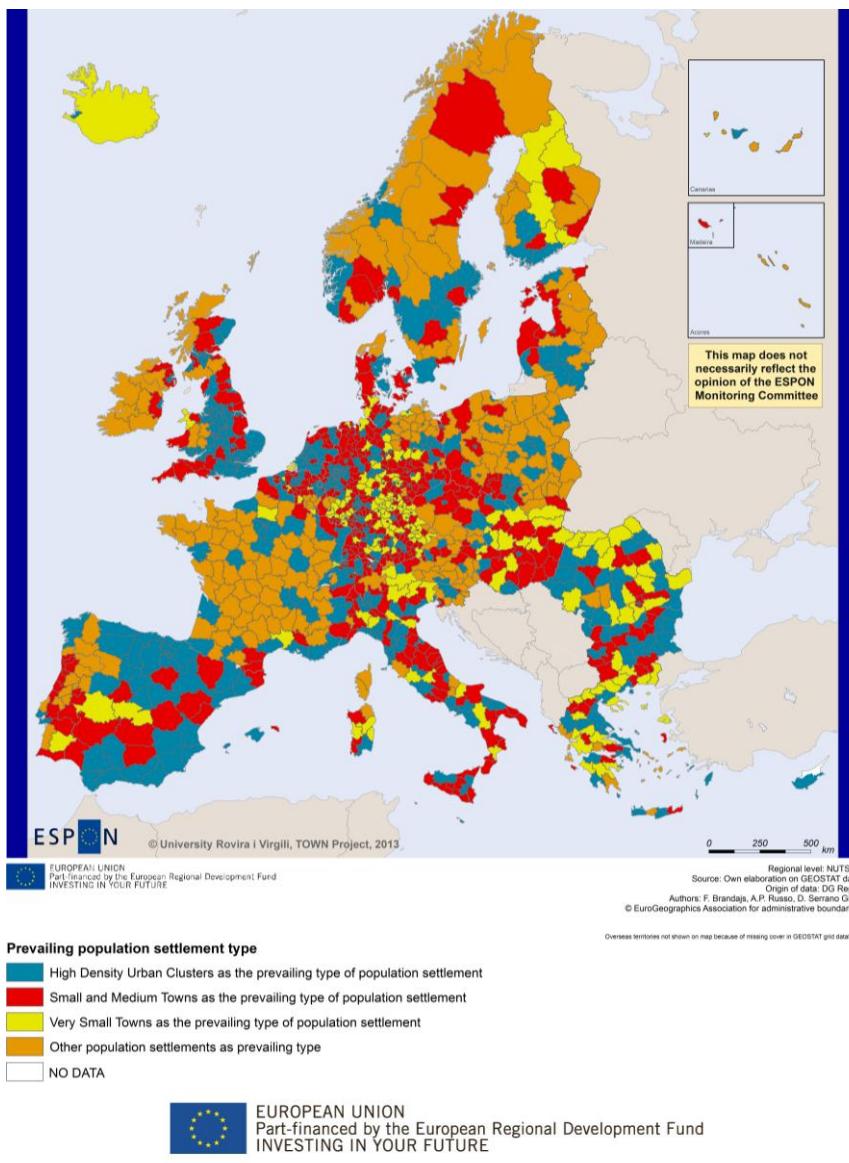


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European Towns and Territorial Cooperation

The current European policy dialogue related to territorial cohesion and the development of the European territory is focused on the towns of Europe. The Latvian EU Presidency is also concentrating on this important element in the European settlement structure, taking the approach that towns have a variety of development potentials and challenges depending on their territorial context.



Towns across Europe show a diverse settlement pattern

ESPON provided new territorial evidence on the urban system in Europe. In this context, small and medium sized towns as well as very small towns play an important role for territorial development. As the map shows, three main types of urban areas and towns can be identified in Europe:

- High-density Urban Clusters (HDUC) with more than 50.000 residents;
- Small and Medium Sized Towns (SMST) with between 5.000 – 50.000 residents;
- Very Small Towns (VST) with less than 5.000 residents.

In terms of the distribution of population settlements across Europe, three groups of countries are visible:

1. Countries with a rather balanced distribution of population between high-density urban clusters and small and medium-sized towns, like Austria, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Italy, Latvia, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Sweden and Slovenia.
2. Countries with an overrepresentation of population living in smaller settlements like France, Hungary, Ireland, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Norway and Slovakia.
3. Countries in the central part of Europe, with high-density urban clusters as well as a large number of small and medium-sized towns, stretching from the south of England across the Benelux countries and west of Germany to north and north-east Italy.

The global trend shows that more and more people are moving from small settlements to big cities. However a majority of the EU population still lives in small and medium-sized towns or very small towns. These towns play a crucial role both in the central regions of Europe, which are home to a large part of the EU population and have the largest share of GDP in the EU; as well as in regions with a wider distribution of population, e.g. in central Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, central Spain, and large parts of Italy.

European towns should increase territorial cooperation

Territorial cooperation involving towns can bring a number of potential benefits for all parties concerned (i.e. towns, nearby cities, rural hinterland). By engaging in partnerships, towns can pool their existing strengths and resources more efficiently, but also address their common challenges in a more coordinated manner. Cooperation allows them to create a relevant critical mass for ensuring sustainable accessibility to activities and services, which can have a positive impact on the local and regional attractiveness.

This is particularly important at a time when many towns/municipalities, regions and countries experience significant cutbacks in public expenditures and subsequent reductions of public services and activities. For example, territorial collaboration among towns can contribute to overcoming competition between neighbouring local authorities. Furthermore, it can enhance the economic growth of functional urban areas through daily commuting patterns, as well as territorial de-concentration of firms and residents.

Ultimately territorial cooperation promotes a balanced and polycentric development at regional, national and European level, and can contribute to achieving common European objectives. ESPON scenario work underpins this. If European Cohesion predominantly targeted small and medium sized towns and rural regions, territorial cohesion in Europe would increase by 2050.

Various types of networking and cooperation already exist among towns in Europe, both within countries as well as across national borders. Overall, territorial cooperation can take different forms, either involving towns that are geographically distant or towns close to each other. The following different approaches can be distinguished:

- Cooperation among neighbouring towns on a specific matter such as sharing public services (e.g. rubbish collection, hospitals, schools) to create economies of scale and a critical mass to operate public services more efficiently.
- Collaboration of neighbouring towns, potentially including a larger city, with the aim of joining forces to explore comparative strengths and achieve better territorial development for all parties involved. As with the cooperation among neighbouring towns mentioned above, such a cooperation approach can be limited to particular themes, for instance to provide better transport services or create synergies between enterprises in the region.
- Cooperation among towns following an administrative reform creating larger geographical entities, such as combining several municipalities into one. This can then have profound influence on specific forms of interaction, such as provision of services.

In many cases these collaborations are formalised in different types of territorial cooperation arrangements. However, the cooperation among towns, nearby larger cities and/or their rural hinterland should not be seen as a standalone policy activity. It needs to be an integrated part of a wide range of policy initiatives involving the relevant actors at different policy levels that can support the implementation.

Governance as a key for successful cooperation

A meaningful and sustainable collaboration of towns requires involvement of the appropriate stakeholders and sector policies. Such cooperation can go across traditional administrative borders to involve towns, cities and/or rural regions in greater functional areas. They can also go beyond national borders, given that numerous towns in Europe are located in border regions.

In any case, the territorial specificities and comparative advantages of the cooperation area as well as the institutional setting are key factors that require thorough consideration in networking endeavours. Since geographical and institutional contexts differ greatly across Europe, there is no one-size fits all approach for achieving good governance in establishing partnership among towns, cities and rural regions. However, the following five dimensions are vital at all geographical levels for implementing territorial governance:

- Coordinating actions of actors and institutions;
- Integrating policy sectors;
- Mobilising stakeholder participation;
- Being adaptive to changing contexts;
- Realising place-based/territorial specificities and impacts.

The relevance of the governance system for the performance of towns (as well as other types of territories) in cooperation is related to the distribution of decision-making and resources between the state and sub-national authorities (regions or provinces, counties and municipalities). As part of this, it is important to pay specific attention to the mobilisation capacity of the individual towns to provide resources and administrative support. Here an efficient mixture of European, national and regional sources could be supportive.

Starting territorial cooperation with other towns

When taking the step to enter into cooperation arrangements with neighbouring towns there are some experiences to learn from:

- The wide variation between towns across Europe and within countries makes it important to avoid a simplistic ‘one-size fits all development approach’. The cooperation has as basic idea to explore comparative advantages for achieving a higher critical mass and attractiveness by acting together.
- The diversity of towns require the application of a strategic and place-based approach that analyses and situates towns in their local and regional context, whilst being aware of relevant relationships and interactions with other levels of government (national and international). Specific common development aims can be targeted at the level of towns, others in combination with rural areas or larger cities or policy initiatives at higher scales.
- Well thought out and designed development strategies can simultaneously enhance the quality of a place and its attractiveness for both residents and tourists, and stimulate the economic development of towns. In cooperation terms, this requires specific attention to the economic profile as well as initiatives to support the local skills and production and stimulate innovation.

Territorial cooperation involving towns has proven to be vital for the development of small and medium sized towns, particularly when it comes to the provision of services of general interest. However, local authorities engaged in territorial cooperation for towns need to have the necessary drive and capacity to be able to succeed and achieve added value in the collaboration with the relevant stakeholders.

Further information

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ESPON Article “European Towns and Territorial Cooperation”

More information

The ESPON 2013 Programme is part-financed by the European Regional Development Fund, the EU Member States and the Partner States Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland.

It shall support policy development in relation to the aim of territorial cohesion and a harmonious development of the European territory. ESPON shall support Cohesion Policy development with European wide, comparable information, evidence, analyses and scenarios on framework conditions for the development of regions, cities and larger territories. In doing so, it shall facilitate the mobilisation of territorial capital and development opportunities, contributing to improving European competitiveness, to the widening and deepening of European territorial cooperation and to a sustainable and balanced development.

The Managing Authority responsible for the ESPON 2013 Programme is the Ministry of Sustainable Development and Infrastructures, Department for Spatial Planning and Development of Luxembourg.

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