

# Towards a renewed territorial agenda for the EU

## SUMMARY

The main objective of the territorial agenda is to strengthen territorial cohesion, an EU principle that seeks to ensure the balanced development of the EU and reduce its regional disparities. Agreed in May 2011 and the culmination of a process begun many years earlier with the European Spatial Development Perspective, the Territorial Agenda 2020 is currently being revised with a view to establishing a continued role for this initiative within the EU's new cohesion policy framework beyond 2020.

Aimed at ensuring the implementation of the Europe 2020 strategy in line with the principle of territorial cohesion, the Territorial Agenda 2020 strives to promote the integration of the territorial dimension across many different policies. To deliver on this ambition, it has established an action-oriented political framework based around six territorial priorities and a series of implementation mechanisms to make EU territorial cohesion a reality. However, with the territorial agenda a low political priority in past years, implementation has remained weak, while the process itself has been beset by challenges, such as fragile intergovernmental cooperation and a low level of awareness. This situation has been compounded by the complex and abstract nature of the territorial agenda, making it difficult to communicate its aims and objectives.

Set up in 2018 during the Austrian Presidency, an intergovernmental taskforce is currently leading the work on the renewal of the territorial agenda, the aim being to conclude the process under the German Presidency, with the signing of a 2030 territorial agenda in December 2020. A draft version of the territorial agenda was published in December 2019, underpinned by two overarching priorities, a 'just Europe' and a 'green Europe', establishing a clear link with the European Commission's current priorities and its strategy for sustainable growth, the European Green Deal. While this structure could well help embed the territorial agenda more firmly within the EU's policy-making system, increasing its relevance and improving its visibility, the ongoing coronavirus crisis looks set to overshadow these discussions in the coming months.



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*This briefing has been drafted at the request of a member of the Committee of the Regions, under the Cooperation Agreement between Parliament and the Committee.*

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PE 649.355 – March 2020

## Introduction

A strategic policy document for Europe and its regions, the territorial agenda's primary objective is to enhance territorial cohesion within the European Union. While there is no single definition of territorial cohesion, it is generally understood to refer to a process that seeks to ensure the balanced development of the European Union, reducing the disparities that exist between developed regions and those that are lagging behind, helping each local area to make the most of its unique potential.

To deliver on this aim, the territorial agenda outlines a broad set of guidelines for spatial planning and enhancing the territorial dimension of all related policies at the various levels of governance, introducing an action-oriented framework to help policy-makers strengthen territorial cohesion across Europe. Agreed in May 2011 by the ministers for spatial planning and territorial cohesion, the territorial agenda is currently in the process of being revised with a view to ensuring a continued role for this initiative within the EU's new cohesion policy framework.

While the starting point for the discussions on the renewal of the territorial agenda is the Territorial Agenda 2020 (TA2020) signed in May 2011, this document itself is only the latest in a long line of strategic documents that have been developed as part of a predominantly intergovernmental process spanning the last twenty years.

## Background

Adopted in 1999, the [European Spatial Development Perspective](#) (ESDP) may be considered to be the first strategic EU paper focusing on spatial development, its aim being to establish a policy framework for sectoral policies with a spatial impact in order to ensure the balanced and sustainable development of Europe. With no reference to spatial development in the Treaties, the document was agreed by the ministers for spatial development and development, initiating a form of cooperation that has continued to the present day, helping to lay the foundations for the discussions that would eventually lead to the development of the Territorial Agenda 2020.

The ESDP was followed in 2007 by the [Territorial Agenda of the European Union](#). Drafted by the same group of experts as its predecessor, it established an action-oriented political framework for future cooperation to help contribute to sustainable economic growth and job creation as well as social and ecological development in all EU regions. Defining territorial cohesion as a permanent and cooperative process involving the various actors and stakeholders of territorial development, the document outlined six main priorities including the development of new forms of partnership and territorial governance between rural and urban areas or strengthening ecological structures and cultural resources. Strengthening polycentric development is a particular priority, with the territorial agenda seeking to promote the polycentric territorial development of the EU in order to make better use of available resources in EU regions. This concept, which draws on the EU's network of towns and cities and their role as regional centres promoting local development has continued to feature prominently in the subsequent discussions on the territorial agenda.

Following the introduction of territorial cohesion as a specific EU policy objective under the Lisbon Treaty in December 2007 alongside economic and social cohesion, establishing it as a shared competence between the EU and the Member States, the EU published a [green paper on territorial cohesion](#) in October 2008. Seeking to turn territorial diversity into a strength by exploring how the assets of individual regions and places may be harnessed to contribute to the sustainable development of the EU, the document also promoted a more active role for the European Commission in the process and examined the impact of the new status of territorial cohesion for EU policy-making. In this light, the paper outlined a number of issues to be consulted further with the wider policy-making community in view of the possible launch of a white paper on territorial cohesion, yet no further action was taken in this respect. This arguably only served to further strengthen the importance of intergovernmental cooperation for the territorial agenda process, paving the way for the publication of the Territorial Agenda of the EU 2020 in 2011.

## Territorial Agenda 2020

Originally conceived of for the purpose of reviewing and updating the 2007 Territorial Agenda, the May 2011 [Territorial Agenda of the European Union 2020](#) (TA2020) establishes a policy framework to bolster territorial cohesion in Europe, as a new goal of the EU introduced by the Lisbon Treaty. Among its objectives, it aims to promote the mainstreaming of the territorial dimension across different policies and to ensure the implementation of the Europe 2020 strategy for smart, sustainable and economic growth, in line with the principles of territorial cohesion. It emphasises that the objectives of the Europe 2020 strategy may only be achieved if the territorial dimension of the strategy is taken into account owing to the differences in development opportunities that exist between Europe's regions. This point is significant as it establishes a clear link between territorial cohesion and the Europe 2020 strategy, helping to demonstrate how the territorial agenda can contribute to implementing the EU strategy for smart, sustainable and economic growth.

The document is divided into four sections. While Section I serves as an introduction, identifying the objectives of the territorial agenda, defining territorial cohesion and placing the territorial agenda within the context of the wider policy-making process, Section II outlines a number of key challenges for territorial development, including increased exposure to globalisation, EU integration, demographic and social challenges, climate change, energy and biodiversity loss. The main thrust of the territorial agenda is to be found in Section III, which identifies six territorial priorities for the development of the European Union. Defined as contributing to the successful implementation of the Europe 2020 strategy, the six priorities draw heavily on those outlined in the 2007 Territorial Agenda.

A number of messages stand out in TA2020. In particular, the document stresses that cohesion policy provides a key framework through which the EU can address territorial development challenges helping to unleash territorial potential at local, regional and national level and deliver balanced territorial development. To achieve this, it calls for greater involvement of the local level in the territorial agenda, urging regions and cities to contribute to common EU territorial priorities.

### Box 1 – Six territorial priorities for the development of the European Union

**Polycentric and balanced territorial development** is a key element for achieving territorial cohesion. According to the TA2020, it is when the most developed cities and regions cooperate as parts of a polycentric pattern that they add value and act as centres contributing to developing their wider regions.

**Encouraging integrated development in cities, rural and specific regions** recommends applying an integrated and multilevel approach in urban development and recognising urban-rural interdependence through integrated governance and planning based on broad partnership.

**Territorial integration in cross-border and transnational functional regions** considers that the integration of territories through territorial cooperation can lead to the better use of territories' potential such as natural, landscape or cultural heritage.

**Ensuring global competitiveness of the regions based on strong local economies** stresses that economic competitiveness can be enhanced by the development of globally integrated economic sectors and strong local economies.

**Improving territorial connectivity for individuals, communities and enterprises** argues that fair and affordable accessibility to services of general interest, information, knowledge and mobility are essential for territorial cohesion and supports effective inter-modal transport solutions.

**Managing and connecting ecological, landscape and cultural values of regions** emphasises that well-functioning ecological systems and the protection of cultural and natural heritage are important conditions for long-term sustainable development.

Lastly, Section IV identifies a number of governance and implementation mechanisms to make EU territorial cohesion a reality, including the territorial coordination of policies and territorial cohesion

implementation mechanisms. On this last point, the document sets out measures for strengthening territorial cohesion at EU level as well as strengthening Member States' contribution to territorial cohesion by encouraging them to integrate the principles of territorial cohesion into their own development policies and spatial planning mechanisms. The document concludes with a series of guidelines for future action, calling on the future EU presidencies and EU institutions to support the implementation of the TA2020, including a request for upcoming presidencies to identify the methods and actions needed to implement the TA2020, in cooperation with the Commission.

## Assessing the 2020 Territorial Agenda

With the TA2020 document scheduling a possible review of the territorial agenda during the 2015 Latvian and Luxembourgish presidencies, a [report](#) was commissioned by Luxembourg in 2015 to assess the implementation of the territorial cohesion objective and the need to revise the territorial agenda. The report considered that the priorities, challenges and potentials outlined in the TA 2020 were still relevant in 2015, with the document concluding that there was no need to revise the territorial agenda. More specifically, it found that the objectives of the TA2020 were primarily addressed in regional and urban policies and, to a lesser extent, in environmental and transport policies.

However, the report also identified a number of shortcomings in relation to the territorial agenda. In particular, it highlighted that, with the exception of people working in the field of territorial development, there was generally a low level of awareness of the TA2020, at local and regional level and also in policy areas beyond regional and urban policies. Fragile intergovernmental cooperation was another issue, with the report noting that the successful delivery of TA2020 was not only dependent on levels of awareness but also on the resources and priorities of key players. In this context, the report highlighted that the implementation of TA2020 was often impeded by a lack of staff and funding. Lastly, the review found that the territorial agenda was complex and remained abstract, making it difficult to communicate the aims and objectives of the process in general.

The findings of the 2015 review of the TA2020 were reflected in the [conclusions](#) of the Luxembourg Presidency of the Council of the EU on the occasion of the informal ministerial meeting on territorial cohesion and urban policy of 27 November 2015. Ministers agreed that the TA2020 was still valid and thus should not be reviewed at that moment in time, calling instead for the improvement of implementation and governance mechanisms, many of which had not been implemented in practice, and the intensification of communication efforts in the years 2016 and 2017.

## Towards a renewed territorial agenda

### Overview of the renewal process

As the Luxembourg conclusions of November 2015 had invited the upcoming presidencies to start preparing the development of a post-2020 territorial agenda together with the EU institutions in 2018, with the aim of concluding the process by the year 2020, an intergovernmental taskforce was set up in 2018 during the Austrian Presidency.

As part of this process, a group of experts have met regularly to discuss the renewal of the territorial agenda. At a [meeting](#) of the taskforce in October 2018, it was agreed that discussions would continue on three previously identified blocks, with the first block covering work on narratives, the strategic scope and the political embedding of the post-2020 territorial agenda, the second focusing on modernising and updating the content of the territorial agenda and the third seeking to examine the governance and implementation mechanisms for the renewed TA2020. The overall aim being to formally adopt the territorial agenda 2020+ during the German Presidency in the second half of 2020, a timetable of action was drawn up, setting out a series of goals to be achieved during each successive presidency.

A number of meetings were held during the Romanian Presidency of the Council of the EU in 2019, with discussions covering the first block of discussions on the narrative, strategic scope and political embedding of the territorial agenda, leading to the adoption of the [Bucharest Declaration](#) in June 2019, which, among other things, links the territorial agenda to the urban agenda. This process continued under the Finnish Presidency during the second half of 2019, with developments including the creation of a dedicated [website](#) in September 2019, which provides details of all developments relating to the renewal process. At a meeting in Helsinki on 16 October 2019, the directors-general responsible for territorial cohesion agreed on the overarching objectives for spatial development for the decade ahead, with a meeting of the taskforce in early December leading to the formulation of a draft version of the territorial agenda for 2030 (TA2030), which sets out its objectives and priorities. Alongside these developments, the Finnish Presidency organised an online survey open to authorities and decision-makers at all levels of government and related stakeholders to support the formulation of the revised territorial agenda. Details of both the findings of the survey and the draft version of the territorial agenda are outlined below.

Work is also continuing during the Croatian EU Presidency. Scheduled events during the first half of 2020 include a meeting of the Network of Territorial Cohesion Contact Points (NTCCP) and a meeting of the directors-general responsible for territorial cohesion, with these meetings expected to discuss the wording of the provisions of the revised territorial agenda, its priorities and governance mechanisms.

## Framing the discussion

Prepared ahead of a November 2018 Austrian Presidency seminar for directors-general on the future of territorial and urban policies, the [background paper](#) on innovative governance mechanisms for territorial policies at European level provides a good overview of the state of the debate at the start of the renewal process and sets out a number of interesting pathways for future discussion.

Noting that the discussions surrounding the territorial agenda beyond 2020 revealed a certain consensus regarding the continued relevance of the challenges, aims and priorities of the TA2020, the document suggested that the territorial agenda simply required a slight modification rather than a wholesale revision. The general assumption was that, in order to ensure the effective implementation of the territorial agenda post 2020, it was vital to develop a governance mechanism for the territorial agenda i.e. to focus on the 'how' rather than on the 'what'. With this in mind, the document identified four different options for discussion in the debate on the governance of territorial policies and the territorial agenda. Firstly, 'business as usual but better', putting into practice the Luxembourg conclusions; secondly, 'leadership by the Commission with a white paper on territorial cohesion', implying a shift of leadership away from the Member States; thirdly, 'remaking the European Spatial Development Perspective', a new concept that would focus discussions on content instead of on governance and; lastly, 'strengthening territorial policies through innovative governance mechanisms', which would draw on the positive experiences of the implementation partnerships under the urban agenda and macro-regional strategies.

Highlighting that the assessment of the TA2020's implementation reveals a need to strengthen governance mechanisms, the background paper largely focuses on the last of these four options, innovative governance mechanisms. Accordingly, one of the main issues addressed by the document is the extent to which implementation partnerships similar to those existing under the urban agenda could be appropriate for the territorial agenda beyond 2020.

The document makes a number of interesting findings in this respect. Firstly, implementation partnerships need clear and strong ownership and leadership from participating partners or institutions, with the participation of the Commission crucial. In terms of organisation, it stresses a need for a management unit for partnerships that combines expertise with project management skills, jointly governed by the main participants. Meanwhile when it comes to the actual operation of the partnerships, the document suggests there should be a limited number of participants to guarantee an effective working environment. In addition, the paper considers that there should also

be a limit on the number of topics covered at the same time and suggests giving careful consideration to the issue of how many partnerships are launched at the start. Among the various options considered, the paper also puts forward the concept of policy labs, temporary thematic working units that bring together expert support, interest groups, European Commission's Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy (DG REGIO) and others, as well as pilot regions, whereby certain functional regions with specific problems would be invited to develop innovative solutions. Under this scenario, pilot regions would effectively act as regional policy labs, with the document noting that such a combination of policy labs could create added value.

Lastly, the paper suggests closing the gap between the territorial and urban agendas. Noting that the introduction of implementation partnerships under the territorial agenda could facilitate the launch of overlapping partnerships or policy labs with the urban agenda, the authors consider that closer coordination when selecting topics and priorities as well as overlapping or even joint partnerships or policy labs could be interesting new options.

## European territorial reference framework

Aiming to outline a vision that can help frame the political discussion on the territorial dimension of EU strategic policies and cohesion objectives, including the renewed territorial agenda, the [European territorial reference framework](#) prepared by ESPON was developed over a period of 18 months from November 2017 to May 2019, with the input of expert stakeholders, institutions and networks.

The authors consider that there is a need for a new narrative in view of the changes in the last decade, to help support thinking and action beyond administrative boundaries and to appeal to a broader group than experts already active in the field of territorial cohesion. In light of these changes, the document identifies three key challenges to be addressed by the renewed territorial agenda: increasing territorial and societal fragmentation, where inequalities between places are driving people and Europe apart; growing interdependencies between places, where developments in one place affect development potentials in another and, lastly, the mismatch between the impact of social and economic developments and the geographical jurisdiction of decision-making. The study puts forward a number of specific proposals for the territorial agenda. It provides a framework for action, underpinned by two pillars: pan-European action to develop bottom-up territorial visions and, secondly, a renewed cooperation agenda across people, policies and places. The study emphasises that this process will require a mix of initiatives guided by both 'bottom-up' and 'top-down' approaches to cooperation and that the renewed territorial agenda should be underpinned by a policy framework that can promote engagement through action and projects that support cooperation efforts across Europe. It also includes a list of examples that set out how to mobilise cooperation efforts at all levels of government and how to involve various types of actors. In particular, the authors consider that the renewed territorial agenda should focus on effective governance with a view to fostering a strong territorial dimension for policy-making, noting that the territorial agenda can play a key role in encouraging political leadership to support efforts to bring the EU closer to its citizens.

## Voices in the discussions on the renewed territorial agenda

### European Committee of the Regions

The European Committee of the Regions (CoR) has played an active role in the discussions on the renewal of the territorial agenda, adopting an [opinion](#) in October 2019 on the Committee's contribution to the renewed territorial agenda, with special emphasis on community-led local development. Echoing other voices in the discussion, the CoR considers that the territorial agenda post 2020 should not be a brand new document, as the existing challenges for territorial development, as endorsed by the TA2020, remain in general the same. Overall, the CoR sees the renewed territorial agenda as an opportunity to present a new and positive narrative for the future of the EU and the balanced development of the regions, with the Committee asking also that the

new territorial agenda strengthen the territorial dimension in a wider range of policy fields and calling for closer links between cohesion policy and the territorial agenda.

When it comes to the priorities of the new territorial agenda, the CoR considers that it should focus more than hitherto on rural areas, regions affected by industrial transition and those that suffer natural or demographic handicaps, in order to achieve equal living conditions in all regions. It emphasises that the new territorial agenda should continue to support the role of regional capital cities in providing equal opportunities for the development of their functional areas and support the role of small and medium-sized cities in achieving balanced, polycentric development across the EU, reflecting the importance given to polycentric development by other players. It also emphasises that the territorial agenda should not only support the United Nations (UN) 2030 sustainable development goal relating to cities (SDG 11) but promote a broader territorial development perspective, calling also for the post-2020 territorial agenda to strengthen both rural-urban linkages and the different types of territory generally. Meanwhile, when it comes to cities, the CoR stresses that the territorial agenda can help to mitigate urbanisation trends and the related challenges for large cities in Member States.

With the visibility of the TA2020 a problem, the CoR calls for a list of 10 to 12 key messages, written in easily accessible language, to be communicated by all Member States in order to familiarise the public with the new territorial agenda. Similarly, with a view to improving communication and organisation in general, the CoR underlines the need to clearly define the role of a territorial agenda secretariat or back office that could be created, with the territorial agenda identifying the objectives, tasks and budget of this body.

## Conference of Peripheral and Maritime Regions

The Conference of Peripheral and Maritime Regions (CPMR) has long called for the effective rollout of the territorial agenda. Its October 2019 [manifesto](#) entitled 'Regions at the heart of a reformed European Union', a key policy document adopted at its annual general assembly, argues that the EU needs a long-term strategy in order to achieve balanced territorial development through Europe, in line with the UN 2030 sustainable development goals, and to make the territorial agenda a reality and thus unlock potential at regional level. More specifically, the CPMR's February 2019 [technical paper](#) outlined three key messages regarding the renewal of the territorial agenda: there is a need to strengthen the territorial dimension of EU policies; all EU territories should be provided with equal opportunities for territorial development and, lastly, regions should be fully involved in shaping and supporting the territorial agenda. In particular, when it comes to providing all EU territories with equal opportunities for territorial development, the CPMR emphasises that the territorial agenda should be about balanced territorial development, and support a broad territorial development perspective that also takes account of less dynamic or less populated areas of peripheral regions.

On the issue of the involvement of regions in shaping and supporting the territorial agenda, the CPMR highlights the need for greater political ownership of the objectives of the territorial agenda at regional level. Noting that much of the failure of the TA2020 is down to the lack of political ownership of the strategy's objectives at local and regional level, it also draws attention to a number of other structural problems such as the weak implementation of the territorial agenda in EU policies as well as its low visibility on the EU agenda. In particular, it considers that the way in which work on the territorial agenda is organised creates its own difficulties. Firstly, the territorial agenda process is impacted by the vision and approach of the country holding the EU presidency, which can vary greatly depending on its geographical location within the EU and its spatial planning history. Secondly, not only has territorial cohesion been relatively low down on the list of European Commission priorities in recent years, the importance accorded to this issue is also dependent on the influence of the commissioner and directors-general in charge of the relevant Commission directorates-general. Both of these factors mean that the broad direction of the territorial agenda process can change significantly depending on who is leading the work, something that can make long-term visioning difficult.

## Territorial Thinkers

Territorial Thinkers, an independent platform of experts, also considers that the objectives of the TA2020 continue to be valid, noting in its November 2018 [briefing](#) 'Towards a Territorial Agenda post-2020' that the new territorial agenda should reiterate the need to work towards the six objectives of the TA2020 and update references to key documents. Recognising, however, that the challenges underpinning the original objectives have changed in recent years, the document also identifies the need for a new vision for the European territory, a policy design to provide a direction and framework for territorial cooperation.

In particular, it highlights the importance of convincing key decision-makers that increasing the territorial dimension of policy-making is actually in the interest of all levels of governance and policy sectors. This could be achieved by ensuring the new territorial agenda finds political support beyond ministers responsible for spatial planning and by strengthening links with the urban agenda for the EU. It also notes that the territorial dimension should not only focus on thriving territories but must also reach out beyond the usual stakeholders to get new players and 'ordinary' people on board as only then will it be able to work towards overcoming territorial and social fragmentation in Europe. Specific measures include the creation of a stable coordination body at EU level for European territorial development, involving the participation of all Member States.

The importance of reinforcing the principle of territorial cohesion to prevent places from drifting further apart is also underlined in a Territorial Thinkers [briefing](#) from November 2019. To help achieve this, the Commissioner for Cohesion and Reforms, Elisa Ferreira, should make sure that territorial cohesion and the objectives of the new territorial agenda become a leading and guiding policy foundation for all policies with a strong territorial dimension. However, as noted in the document, if the territorial agenda is to have any real teeth, it is vital to ensure that policy-makers are fully committed to its implementation. With this in mind, the authors urge the Member States to make the 2030 territorial agenda for the EU an important strategic instrument with a strong commitment for powerful application. Territorial Thinkers also calls specifically on the European Parliament's Committee on Regional Development (REGI) and on the Committee of the Regions to take an active part in the EU's 2030 territorial agenda.

Taken together, all of these documents and participants have helped feed into the process of developing the revised version of the territorial agenda.

## Content of the draft territorial agenda

Published in December 2019, the [draft version](#) of the territorial agenda 2030 (TA2030) is divided into four sections, providing a framework for action towards territorial cohesion. According to the **Preamble**, the main objective is to provide strategic orientations for spatial planning and to strengthen the territorial dimension of all relevant policies at all governance levels, thereby helping to achieve the UN's 2030 sustainable development goals in Europe.

Entitled **Why do we need to act now**, Section II identifies two key challenges for local and regional development. In a Europe where people and places are drifting apart, the first challenge relates to the existence of increasing imbalances and inequalities across the EU. With Europe's widening disparities taking on an increasingly spatial dimension, the draft territorial agenda emphasises that it should highlight these challenges and bring them to the attention of policy-makers. The second challenge concerns the increasing pressures of sustainable development and climate change. Global challenges in the area of sustainable development are highly relevant for local and regional development in Europe, with the transition to sustainable development providing both opportunities and challenges for towns, cities and regions.

These two challenges provide the foundation for the overarching objectives of the renewed territorial agenda: a **just Europe** that offers future perspectives for all places and people, and a **green Europe** that protects our common livelihoods and shapes societal transition processes. These are developed further in Section III on **territorial priorities for Europe**, with the two objectives

broken down into a total of six priorities for the development of the European territory as a whole, as set out in the box below.

Figure 1 – Two overarching objectives and six priorities of the draft TA2030



Source: Territorial agenda [website](#).

Currently under development, the fourth section, **Putting priorities into action**, will outline a number of governance and implementation mechanisms for delivering the territorial agenda, including pilot actions to strengthen the territorial coordination of policies and territorial cohesion.

#### Box 2 – Territorial priorities for Europe

**Balanced Europe** seeks to encourage all levels to cooperate on enhancing the quality for working, living and investing in all places and to strengthen EU economic prosperity. Policy-makers will be invited to promote polycentric development models that provide a role for all towns with action taken to encourage decision-makers to harness the potential of territories with specific geographies.

**Functional regions** examines how cities and towns can drive intraregional growth and benefit surrounding communities and rural areas. It seeks to establish a dialogue with decision-makers in all types of cities to apply an integrated multilevel governance approach and engage with local decision-makers to strengthen cooperation and create functional links between neighbouring areas.

**Integration beyond borders** is about how cooperation between places in different countries can harness development potential. It involves action to embed stable cross-border cooperation in national, regional and local development strategies and boost dialogue with policy-makers at all levels to coordinate national sector policies between countries and reduce barriers to cooperation.

**Healthy environment** supports the development of nature-based solutions and green infrastructure networks in spatial planning and commits to strengthening the resilience of all places to climate change. It will also focus on increasing awareness and empowering local communities to protect and reutilise their environments, landscapes and cultures.

**Circular economy** seeks to ensure strong and sustainable local economies in a globalised world by supporting Europe's transition to a circular economy and to develop place-based industrial symbiosis and foster the creation of local and regional circular economy strategies. Action will also be taken to encourage the diversification of local economies and to boost innovation capacity in the regions.

**Sustainable connections** will support inclusion by inviting relevant players to a dialogue on the need for adequate access to high speed internet and mobile telephone networks in all places. Action will also be taken to improve the link between regional planning and trans-European networks, with spatial and transport planners invited to explore new models for local and regional mobility.

Pilot actions will contribute to delivering the priorities of the territorial agenda, and test out working methods that can be rolled out on a larger scale at a later stage. Discussions thus far have supported a flexible definition, which allows for a variety of different forms of pilot action. They are expected to involve a range of partners in addition to the lead organisation; the resulting partnerships could include partners that are public or semi-public bodies from various administrative levels (multilevel), different countries (international) and from across policy sectors (cross-sectoral) and may include one NTCCP member, where appropriate.

Four pilot actions are to be launched in December 2020. Contributing to the 'balanced Europe' and 'functional regions' priorities, the first pilot action, **A future for lagging regions**, will seek to foster the implementation of spatial strategies by examining how these strategies can be incorporated into sectoral plans to improve their implementation. This will include focusing on such issues as services of general interest and quality of life in sparsely populated areas with limited access to services. The pilot action on **Understanding how sector policies shape spatial (im)balances** will consider how sector policies can support more balanced territorial development in Europe and how spatial planning can help deal with the impact of sector policies, contributing in the process to the 'balanced Europe' and 'integration beyond borders' priorities. The **Small places matter for spatial development** pilot action will examine how small places can play a greater role in territorial development and how the territorial agenda can become more relevant for them, contributing to the 'balanced Europe' and 'functional regions' priorities. Lastly, **Spatial visions for a cross-border functional region** will identify possible scenarios for a climate-neutral functional cross-border region in 2050, focusing on the functional cross-border region of Luxembourg and contributing to the 'integration beyond borders' and 'healthy environment' priorities.

## Consultation on the territorial agenda

Open from December 2019 to the end of January 2020, the online survey prepared by the Finnish Presidency on the priorities and objectives for the renewed territorial agenda elicited over 300 responses from all levels of government and a variety of stakeholders. There was broad support for all priorities of the territorial agenda, with respondents considering the 'balanced Europe', 'functional regions' and 'healthy environment' priorities to be of special relevance. In addition, these were also the three areas in which respondents identified the greatest need for innovative and inspiring policy approaches. New initiatives relating to circular economies also drew support, highlighting the need to consider how best to link up environmental, economic and social concerns.

When it comes to the issue of what action is needed to deliver on the territorial agenda's objectives and priorities, cooperation between sectors, administrative levels and territories was the most popular answer given by respondents, followed by capacity building, networking and sharing of best practices, with adequate funding also important. Asked to identify what obstacles have hampered the implementation of the TA2020 thus far, respondents cited a lack of political ownership at different administrative levels, a failure to acknowledge territorial and place-based approaches in policy-making as well as a lack of awareness and knowledge of the very existence of the TA2020.

The results of this process will be included in the next draft of the territorial agenda, scheduled to be discussed at the April 2020 meeting of directors-general responsible for territorial cohesion.

## Preliminary assessment of the draft territorial agenda

With the TA2030 very much a work in progress, it is arguably still too early to carry out any far-reaching assessment of its content, which is currently in draft form. It is nonetheless possible to draw a number of preliminary conclusions regarding the current shape of the territorial agenda and to examine the extent to which the voices of the various participants in the discussion have been taken into account thus far.

First, it would seem that the authors of the renewed territorial agenda have taken note of the general consensus among stakeholders regarding the importance of avoiding any large-scale revision of the TA2020. Not only do both documents outline exactly the same number of territorial priorities – six – but closer examination of the priorities under the 2030 territorial agenda's 'just Europe' objective reveals a number of striking similarities with the first three priorities of the TA2020. Accordingly, 'polycentric and balanced territorial development' has been transformed into 'balanced Europe' which, among other things, seeks to promote polycentric development models. Meanwhile, 'encouraging integrated development in cities, rural and specific regions', which recognises rural-urban interdependence through integrated development is now 'functional regions', which examines how cities and towns can drive intraregional growth and benefit surrounding communities and rural areas. Similarly, it is hard not to draw parallels between the third priority of the TA2020, 'territorial integration in cross-border and transnational functional regions', and 'integration beyond borders – living and working across borders', which examines how cooperation between places in different countries can harness development potential.

Second, while acknowledging the continued relevance of many of the territorial priorities under the TA2020, the renewed territorial agenda also recognises that a number of new challenges have emerged since the adoption of the previous version of the territorial agenda in May 2011. In this context, the 2030 territorial agenda makes specific reference to the three challenges identified in the territorial reference framework prepared by ESPON and incorporates them directly in the document. Whereas the challenges of growing interdependencies between places or the mismatch between the impact of developments and the geographical jurisdiction of decision-making have helped feed into the content of the 'functional regions' territorial priority, the challenge of increasing fragmentation driving people and places apart is reflected in Section II of the draft 2030 territorial agenda alongside sustainable development, where it is highlighted as one of the two main challenges facing Europe.

Third, in light of these emerging challenges, the draft version of the TA2030 clearly recognises the need for a new narrative or vision for the territorial agenda, a point that was also explicitly called for by numerous stakeholders including ESPON, the Committee of the Regions and Territorial Thinkers, among others. This is reflected in the structure of the renewed territorial agenda, with its two overarching objectives of a just Europe and a green Europe and, in particular, in the three priorities of the latter, which tie in directly with the objectives of the new Green Deal for Europe, the EU's new strategy for sustainable growth in the period beyond 2020. Where the TA2020 established a link with the Europe 2020 strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, the renewed territorial agenda is seeking to place territorial cohesion within the context of arguably the two main challenges facing Europe today, keeping the EU together and ensuring its sustainable development, which has the potential to increase its relevance within wider EU policy-making.

## Outlook

As highlighted above, the draft version of the TA2030 has clearly taken on board many of the ideas put forward by the various stakeholders and institutional bodies involved in the debate. These range from the specific, such as the Committee of the Regions' call for the renewed territorial agenda to support the role of small and medium-sized cities in achieving balanced, polycentric development – reflected in the reference to the crucial role of small and medium-sized towns for the economic and social wellbeing at regional level and the invitation for policy-makers of all levels to promote polycentric development that offers a role for all towns and cities – to broader ideas such as the need for a new vision.

However, it is also worth noting that a number of ideas put forward by stakeholders to improve the territorial agenda and around which there has been some consensus have yet to be taken up. Significantly, many of these proposals relate to long-standing issues. For while the TA2030 has evolved to reflect some of the new challenges facing Europe, it arguably still fails to address some of the key challenges inherent in the implementation of the TA2020 and highlighted by the various

participants in the discussion. These include issues such as how to ensure greater political ownership of the territorial agenda, how to improve its communication and visibility, as well as more specific problems such as the need to establish a stable unit or back office to coordinate work on the territorial agenda.

The issue of implementation and governance mechanisms, the importance of which was highlighted by the Luxembourg Presidency conclusions, has only been partially resolved. While the recent announcement of the four pilot actions is a positive development, the details of the partners involved or how these partnerships would function in practice have yet to be established. Crucially, the current text of the TA2030 does not contain any rules regarding the implementation of the pilot actions or the operation of the partnerships, leaving open for now the question of whether or not these partnerships will be the main implementation mechanism for the territorial agenda.

While it is likely that many of these shortcomings stem largely from the fact that Section IV of the TA 2030 'Putting priorities into action' has yet to be completed, it is important to monitor future drafts of the text of the territorial agenda closely as the details of the mechanisms put forward to ensure the delivery of the TA2030 will arguably be of crucial importance for the successful rollout of the renewed territorial agenda.

This whole process, however, looks set to be overshadowed in the months ahead by the ongoing coronavirus crisis. With much of Europe in the grip of the novel coronavirus, the crisis may entail consequences way beyond the future of the territorial agenda. The next draft of the territorial agenda is scheduled to be discussed at the April 2020 meeting of directors-general responsible for territorial cohesion in Zagreb, yet the timetable for this work could well be disrupted by the confinement measures currently in place in many countries.

It is perhaps ironic therefore that, as was recently [highlighted](#) by the analyst and academic Christian Lüer, with many of the policy responses implemented to contain the spread of the virus having a strong territorial dimension, the crisis might also offer a better understanding of the need for a stronger territorial dimension in policy-making. In a Europe of increasing interdependencies between places and increasing misalignment between administrative divisions and the spatial impact of developments, the territorial cooperation and multilevel governance put forward in the territorial agenda are arguably more relevant today than ever.

## MAIN REFERENCES

[Draft version of the Territorial Agenda 2030](#), December 2019.

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