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Challenges, policies and governance of the territories in the post-covid era

Desafíos, políticas y gobernanza de los territorios en la era post-covid

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Title: Inadvertent territorial cohesion policy? Exploring the territorial cohesion of proactive Covid-19 policies implemented in European regions and cities

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Abstract:

For decades, the term territorial cohesion can be found sprinkled about in countless EU documents, such as European Commission communications (ESPON, 2013), and since the Treaty of Lisbon, it has become institutionally embedded as a central objective of the EU (Davoudi, 2007). Medeiros (2016) therefore argues that territorial cohesion has emerged as an inescapable paradigm in constructing public policies for territorial development in the EU. Although the precise meaning of the term was highly contested at the onset (Faludi, 2005; Evers, 2008 and 2011; Servillo 2010; Medeiros, 2016), over time a common understanding of its basic elements seems to be emerging.

It is generally agreed that in order to reach territorial cohesion, tailor-made territorial development strategies are needed, and Cohesion Policy is the European Commission's preferred vehicle for achieving this objective (Nosek, 2017). This close link between the objective of territorial cohesion and the means by which to implement it have led some scholars (e.g. Elissalde and Santamaria, 2014; Colomb and Santinha, 2014; Artelaris and Mavrommatis, 2020) to note how the notion of territorial cohesion had evolved with the progressive shift within Cohesion Policy from convergence to competitiveness. A consensus also seems to be emerging on the aims of territorial cohesion, albeit very broadly. This is in part because territorial cohesion contains both substantive and procedural aspects: spatial justice (Jones et al., 2019; Madanipour et al., 2022), competitiveness and sustainability as well as territorial governance (Holder, and Layard, 2011; Medeiros, 2019). This heterogeneity is reflected in the definition given in the Territorial Agenda of the European Union 2020 (EU, 2011), which states that territorial cohesion aims at an To investigate harmonious, balanced, efficient and a more sustainable territorial development. It promotes equal opportunities for citizens and enterprises, wherever they are located, to make the most of their territorial potentials (Medeiros, 2017). More specifically, territorially cohesive policies aim at (i) smart growth in a competitive and polycentric Europe, (ii) inclusive, balanced development and equitable access to services, (iii) sustainable development, (iv) governance and coordination between actors (ESPON, 2012; Zaucha and Böhme, 2020). Given this conceptualization, one can ascertain the degree to which certain policy developments, like the European Green Deal or EUnextGeneration funds, or external shocks, such as the Covid-19 pandemic can be seen as working for or against territorial cohesion.

The Covid-19 pandemic, originating as a health crisis but quickly expanding to other social spheres (Chu et al., 2020; Bailey et al., 2020; Casti et al., 2021; Jeanne et al., 2022), has had consequences with varying degrees of spatial heterogeneity across Europe (McCann et al., 2021; ESPON, 2022), undermining Cohesion Policy goals seeking to enhance territorial cohesion. At the same time, a vast number of measures have been taken to limit the effects of the pandemic on socio-economic and territorial inequalities at different scales (Bourdin et al., 2022), in particular at the local and regional level (Bailey et al., 2021; Martin, 2021; ESPON, 2022). While most scientific work has sought to explain the reasons for the heterogeneous impact of the pandemic and highlight its harmful impacts, the pandemic has also been viewed as a window of opportunity. More precisely, it has stimulated the implementation of policies oriented towards achieving a just, green and smart transition. This raises the question: to what extent do these policies also contribute to territorial cohesion?

To answer this question, fourteen case study regions were selected to provide an in-depth and critical assessment of the contribution of proactive local and regional policies implemented in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic to the achievement of the EU

objective of territorial cohesion and the objectives of EU cohesion policy for the period 2021-2027. The results show there is potential synergy between the EU's aim to support a just transition, smart transition, and green transition and territorial cohesion. This opens up avenues for reflection on the implementation of post-2027 Cohesion Policy and the design of national and regional territorial development strategies in the light of the broader transition policies.

In addition to the obvious substantive contributions for policy, this research connects a rather fuzzy concept (Nosek, 2017) to one of the most acute emergencies we have seen in decades. In doing this, we can show that territorial cohesion can have real meaning and relevance and link up to policies now being implemented on the ground. Moreover, to our knowledge, most of the policies implemented at the European scale to promote territorial cohesion (most often it is the Cohesion Policy that is studied) are analysed through the prism of quantitative analysis seeking to measure the extent to which these policies contribute to regional growth and territorial cohesion (Bachtler and Wren, 2006; Mohl, 2016; Bourdin, 2019), or to propose indicators that make it possible to understand territorial cohesion and how it has evolved over the years (Dao et al., 2017; Zaucha and Böhme, 2020). This research takes a more qualitative approach to uncover potential synergies between two policy domains. In this way, it engages with debates and research on tailor-made territorial development strategies (McCann and Ortega-Argilés, 2013) as well as debates on the just and green transition (Artelaris and Mavrommatis, 2020).

Research design

To explore potential synergy between policy areas, the research first examined whether the Covid-19 pandemic presented a 'window of opportunity' for regional and local authorities to promote 'proactive' spatial planning and territorial policies towards more cohesive territories. Proactive policies can be defined as measures that try to make best use of the particular socio-economic circumstances to further specific regional policy and planning goals (ESPON, 2022). To this end, a comparative case study methodology was applied. This method allows for an in-depth descriptive and exploratory analysis of policy developments within their own contexts (Stake 1995; Yin 2003). In addition, as Weimer and Vining (2017) point out, a multiple case study design makes it possible to highlight the specificities of each area studied but also to build a theory to explain the policies analysed in all areas.

The proactive policy responses to the pandemic was broken down into three core thematic areas which also encompass crucial territorial cohesion components (Davoudi, 2005; Faludi, 2007; Medeiros, 2016) (i) just transition policies; (ii) green transition policies; (iii) smart transition policies.

Table 1 provides an overview of the types of policies that the case study research team explored in relation to each theme.

Table 1 Proactive Covid Policy Examples

Policy Theme	Type of Policies
Just Transition	Policy measures supporting youth, elderly, taxation and unemployment, poverty, social exclusion, housing and living conditions, education and training, culture and sports activities, wealth inequalities, health and working conditions, business support
Green Transition	Policy measures supporting mobility, public space and green areas, city centres and business districts management, land-use changes, waste management and the circular economy, green tourism, climate mitigation and adaptation
Smart Transition	Policy measures supporting digitalisation of public services, e-governance, start-ups, entrepreneurial innovation, e-learning, digital access and competencies, multi-locality working, big data, smart transport

Case study selection

For this research, 14 case study regions were selected to provide an in-depth assessment of the regional and local policy responses to the pandemic. The cases were selected to maximise variety in order to capture the territorial heterogeneity of Europe. This was deemed important because the intent is to investigate territorial cohesion in a diversity of different regional and local contexts. The criteria used for the selection were:

- A balanced geographical distribution (based on the United Nations geoscheme: Eastern Europe, Northern Europe, Southern Europe and Western Europe) as well as overseas territories.
- Differing territorial contexts, such as urban, rural, intermediate, cross-border and island regions.
- A variety of centralised versus decentralised national governance systems and different types of regional/local level governance structures .

In the end, the following cases were selected: Amsterdam, Athens, Azores, Barcelona, Corsica, Elvas, Hannover, Helsinki, Iasi, Malmo, Mayotte, Milan, Reunion, and Veszprem.

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