

## **The European territory risks falling apart**

**by Peter Mehlbye & Kai Böhme**

Cohesion – be it economic, social or territorial – is the glue that prevents the EU from falling apart. Cohesion is mentioned in the Treaty as one of the main objectives of the EU. All policy areas and policy makers involved at all administrative levels, European, national, regional and local, should contribute and strive towards this aim, in good and in bad times.

Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic accelerates pre-existing tendencies of disintegration in Europe, between territories, member states and groups of society. It deepens territorial inequalities and imbalances and the divide between rich and poor. These trends pointing in the wrong direction is a serious challenge to the future of Europe. Without the EU reviewing and clearly formulating its long-term aspirations for cohesion and how to deliver on it, the EU and its territory risks falling apart.

## **Anti-cohesion tendencies from the Covid-19 pandemic?**

First analysis suggests that anti-cohesion tendencies are inevitable in the way the COVID-19 pandemic impacts European societies and in need of policy responses.

- Various waves of infections, hospitalisations and deaths all have had a territorial dimension, where some areas are considerably more severely impacted than others. In some situations, particular regions or urbanised areas are less affected giving other regions and rural territories a cohesion disadvantage.
- National, regional and/or local restrictive measures taken to master the pandemic and launch the recovery processes have created remarkably diverse circumstances for places around Europe. Periodical closure or limitation of certain activities (such as shops, schools, restaurants, theatres, factories, offices, etc.), local restrictions of movements (e.g. curfews, local travel limitations and limitations in number of visitors), are highly diverse from region to region and from city to city. As well, restrictions for international travel and the closure of borders display great differences from country to country.
- Legal restrictions have been accompanied by self-imposed restrictions and behavioural changes of individuals and businesses, including restraining from travelling or social activities, extensive use

of tele-working and a shift towards online shopping and delivery services, that all affect places in term of cohesion.

The diversity of policies to limit the spreading of the virus as well as the behavioural change obviously have considerable territorial footprints, dependent of the geography of infections and of the geography of the restrictive measures or lockdown policies. However, the concrete territorial impact depends on a variation of factors, not least linked to a place's economic and societal structure. While most of the debate rightly focuses on places facing particular negative consequences, like infections, deaths and social and economic lockdowns, some areas also experience positive effects and new opportunities, such as a boom in digital industries and the current relative advantage for domestic tourism. Both negative and positive impacts are crucial in defining the short to medium term responses promoting cohesion in the recovery.

The European Commission and member states should agree a coordinated effort to keep the EU territory together. In implementing policies related to current areas of concern and demand, sensitivity to the needs of particular places. To ensure territorially balanced, pro-cohesion solutions is a must. At this stage of the pandemic, the following main recommendations emerge:

- The substantial public financial rescue plans stimulating economic development, keeping small businesses floating and unemployment low, strongly requires to be targeted to the concrete needs of individual regions and local communities.
- Allocation of additional financing of public services (health services and distance learning) must benefit all parts of the EU with particular attention to hard-hit regions and low-income neighbourhoods. The growing need for tackling mental health problems, require more attention.
- Telecommunications infrastructure and opportunities for hybrid teleworking arrangements, online shopping and virtual interactions need to be well distributed on the European territory, also to poorer and less densely populated areas.
- Tourism destinations inside each EU member state heavily affected by the pandemic need particular support to recover.
- Cross-border interactions and cooperation, limited by border restrictions, are especially important to re-establish and enhance for EU integration.

## **The EU needs to be clear and visionary on cohesion**

The societal and economic impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic are ongoing and not fully known yet. Member states and the EU institutions need nevertheless already now to increase their efforts to keep Europe together and deliver cohesion, even in bad times.

A true cohesion spirit in all policy areas needs to reverse the current lack of joint action. All sector policies and their policy makers need to ensure and bring concrete proof that their contribution to recovery from

the COVID-19 pandemic delivers cohesion. If Europe does not live up to cohesion in bad times, people are right to wonder what European cooperation is worth.

Cohesion is not just about spending money. An important part is ensuring good governance of places and policy sectors, which is a precondition for sensible and wise investments and public spending. Thinking beyond the territorial boundaries of the own jurisdiction is part hereof.

At present, the management of the pandemic is substantially improving (vaccination, etc.). In parallel, unprecedented amounts of money are made available to cushion the impacts of the pandemic and support the recovery (e.g. NextGenEU). The EU money is vital for counteracting anti-cohesion tendencies within the EU. However, there is a real risk that easy and fast spending is prioritised in member states over strategic, long-term orientated investments for the EU.

Therefore, it is an urgent challenge that Europe bring forward long-term visions on how the EU should look like and what to offer citizens where in terms of economic, social and territorial cohesion in 10-20 years from now. In parallel, corresponding, mandatory cohesion-related criteria for the distribution and spending the large sums of recovery money in the short term would be essential to ensure.

Without a clear and visionary perception on cohesion, the EU process will not deliver cohesion. The pandemic will only deepen existing inequalities and Europe might fall apart.