# TERRITORIAL FRAGMENTATION:

## A MAJOR EUROPEAN CHALLENGE

Kai Böhme
Derek Martin

with comments and support by Peter Mehlbye and Peter Schön

*Territorial Thinkers is an independent platform of experts, highly experienced in European, national, regional and local policy development with a territorial dimension.*

*Territorial Thinkers aim to support on-going policy development processes by presenting arguments, evidence, ideas, options and recommendations to policy makers.*

*Territorial Thinkers are convinced from experience that a clear territorial dimension in policy conception and in programme strategies and implementation releases a new innovative and cooperative dynamism which should be captured and used positively to achieve European policy objectives.*

*Find out more at: https://territorialthinkers.eu*

# Territorial Fragmentation:
# a major European challenge

*Given the increasing divisions, diversity and disparities between different types of territories, territorial fragmentation has become a major and complex challenge throughout the whole of Europe. Territorial fragmentation is at the very heart of today´s challenges (e.g. related to shrinking cities and regions) and needs to be recognised as such if we want to avoid that areas turn away from Europe. Yet, paradoxically, it is a widely unknown, often misunderstood and largely unrecognised issue. This paper explains what 'territorial fragmentation' is, why is it a real challenge at the heart of the European project and how EU policies could possibly be adapted to face that challenge.*

## What is 'territorial fragmentation' and why is it a major challenge?

Man's natural habitat – land – is very diverse and has always been broken down into different sorts of territories:

- <u>geographically</u>: the enormous variety of natural environments, from low to high, cold to hot, wet to dry, steep to flat, fertile to barren, maritime to continental, resource-rich to resource-poor etc.;

- <u>demographically</u>: the great variation in population density both at the European level and at a lower geographical level between (more) urbanised, rural, sparsely populated and natural areas;

- <u>politically</u>: the division of territory into controllable or governable areas in order to rule or govern it effectively, which has led to the all-powerful national state and, within those, regional and local authorities;

- <u>economically</u>: the gap between more prosperous and less prosperous areas and between those areas of economic growth and those of increasing economic decline.

These 'layers' of divisions are inherently interrelated and have been superimposed one on the other in the course of European history. The political (with some underlying economic) divisions have in the past led to conflict and extreme hardship. Two of the most widely recognized and constructive results of the European project is the stability it has brought in the political divisions and the increased economic well-being across the whole of the EU. These have, in recent decades, reduced the negative impact the divisions have had in the past to the benefit of European society as a whole.

The present-day challenge is that the divisions are becoming once again stronger and more visible. That is why we now need to refer to 'fragmentation', i.e. growing apart, rather than 'disparities'. There is a re-emergence of territorial fragmentation, starting with the economic dimension, but now spilling over into the political one. There are rapidly growing disparities between those territories offering economic development and opportunity, and those that do not. Although the EU as a whole has enjoyed decades of increasing economic well-being, there are, in more recent years, territories offering their inhabitants such vastly better futures than others, that it has become not only a major social and economic issue, but also a politically sensitive one. While some parts of society and some territories see a bright future

with new possibilities, other parts of society and territories face an increasingly less optimistic future perspective. Many regions face severe challenges and suffer from demographic and economic decline. More and more regions are on the verge of falling structurally behind, resulting in a high degree of discontent amongst the inhabitants of those regions. This is not only linked to actual or perceived changes in 'everyday realities', such as the declining provision of public services, but their inhabitants see sombre different future perspectives[1]. They see themselves living in 'places that do not matter', and so the problem is also closely linked to a lack of recognition or action by those in government to address the problems and discontent.

This, in turn, is a fundamental driving force for anti-globalisation sentiments and increasing EU-scepticism. The old promise of the EU as a stronghold of peace is still largely kept, but the general feeling is that the EU reneges on the promise of prosperity and welfare for all. In this respect, territorial fragmentation goes way beyond regional-economic disparity issues and has political implications that are essentially related to the present-day crisis facing Europe of rising populism and discontent with the 'elite'.

The paradox here is that this discontent is being exploited by elements in what is often referred to as the national 'elite', not just the politicians, but also the other powerful groups and people in the world of the media, finance and business, to bring back power to their own sphere of influence: the nation state. Whereas the root cause of that discontent is the increasing territorial disparities between richer/developing and poorer/declining areas as a result of the forces of globalisation and internal neoliberal policies, it is exploited by those in power to reinforce their influence in their own national territory. One clear manifestation of this is that the powerful groups blame the EU for 'telling us what to do' and 'opening our borders to immigrants'. The new polarisation is not so much between the traditional 'left' and 'right', but between those wanting to 'pull-up the drawbridge' around one's national territory, and those wanting to 'let down the drawbridge' and continue to collaborate with their fellow European neighbours and beyond.[2] The split goes right through our territories, and is reinforced by the split between people who come from 'Somewhere', i.e. rooted in a specific place or community, usually a small town or in the countryside, socially conservative, often less educated, and those who could come from 'Anywhere' I.e. footloose, often urban, socially liberal and university educated.[3]

This has been fully exposed by the Brexit process. From the right, powerful political, business and media groups have (almost) succeeded in pulling up the drawbridge in an effort to enable their country to become the neoliberal 'Singapore of Europe'. By a process of manipulation of democratic processes, media spin and lies, they have managed to exploit the discontent of the 'Somewheres'. especially in disadvantaged areas of the UK, by blaming the EU for all their perceived problems of relative futureless poverty and loss of community, whereas their goal – exiting the EU – will hit those people the hardest.

---

[1] Kai Böhme, Christian Lüer, and Maria Toptsidou, 'Towards a European Geography of Future Perspectives: A Story of Urban Concentration', in *Territorial Cohesion: The Urban Dimension*, ed. Eduardo Medeiros (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019), 173–91, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-03386-6_9.

[2] The Economist, 'Drawbridges up. The New Divide in Rich Countries Is Not between Left and Right but between Open and Closed', *The Economist*, 30 July 2016, sec. Globalisation and politics.

[3] David Goodhart, *The Road to Somewhere: The Populist Revolt and the Future of Politics* (London: Hurst & Company, 2017).

The left would like to pull the drawbridge up to protect their objective of a more egalitarian state somewhat freed from the influence of the 'free-market EU' and 'protect the wages of their working people from being undercut by immigrants from the EU', but a little less enthusiastically as they realise that European collaboration has meant jobs and well-being for the less well-off.

To underline just how far-reaching its political implications are, touching the heart of Europe's existentialist crisis, it can be argued that territorial fragmentation in fact poses two quite fundamental challenges to European society and economic development.

- The European model of society[4] is shaped by a basic desire not only for democracy and human rights but also, contrary to the US, for a reasonable level of solidarity, social and territorial equality that at least cuts out excessive inequalities. It is not by chance that the top 5 of 'happiest countries to live in'[5] are five strong representatives of the 'European social model'. The level of societal and territorial fragmentation we are currently experiencing is threatening to seriously endanger the European model of society or even put an end to it.

- For Europe to prosper and compete successfully in the global economy, the concentration of development towards densely populated, large, strong urban areas at the expense of sparsely populated areas, declining areas, rural areas and small country towns is generally considered to be imperative, following the idea of 'cities as engines for development'. If, however, these territorial inequalities continue to reinforce the hand of the 'drawbridge uppers', and the 'drawbridge downers' lose out, European disintegration may very well put an end to the very open economy which fuels the innovation and prosperity of large urban centres. In that sense, if territorial fragmentation is allowed to go too far and its excesses not corrected, in the long term the competitiveness of our strongest economic motors could suffer and with it the prosperity of Europe.

Governments are trying to find a balance between the two, to reconcile what is actually in essence irreconcilable. For the sake of Europe's future, it would seem that a clearer choice has to be made. So, in short, territorial fragmentation is a challenge at the very heart of the present existential problem facing the EU; it needs to be recognised as such and cannot be ignored. Powerful action needs to be taken.

<u>**How to address territorial fragmentation**</u>

Given the seriousness and far-reaching implications of territorial fragmentation to the European project and the future well-being of its citizens, the obvious next question is: what could be done to intervene in the above line of developments and avoid increasing fragmentation or at least reduce its negative consequences?[6]

---

[4] see e.g. Andreas Faludi, 'The European Model of Society', in *Territorial Cohesion and the European Model of Society*, ed. Andreas Faludi (Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, 2007), 1–22.

[5] John F Helliwell et al., *World Happiness Report 2018*, 2018, https://s3.amazonaws.com/happiness-report/2018/WHR_web.pdf.

[6] See some of the ideas around on changing Europe's economic system or the mind set of Europe's population: Klaus Burmeister et al., *Deutschland Neu Denken: Acht Szenarien Für Unsere Zukunft* (München: Oekom Verlag, 2018); Kai Böhme and Christian Lüer, 'Europe's Territorial Futures between Daydreams and Nightmares.', *Europa XXI. Territorial Uncertainty as a Challenge for Regional Policy in Europe* 2016, no. 30 (2016): 5–22; Jørgen Randers, *2052: A Global Forecast for the next Forty Years* (White River Junction, Vt.: Chelsea Green Pub., 2012); Hartmut Rosa, Katja Kipping, and Niko Paech, *Anders wachsen! von der Krise der kapitalistischen Wachstumsgesellschaft und Ansätzen*

There are **practical pathways** available which could centre around three key features:

(a) acknowledging the interdependencies of places and enforce territorial cooperation

(b) making those interdependencies more visible with a forward-looking and strategic overview

(c) empowering places which are left behind.

***Acknowledge interdependencies and cooperate to combat fragmentation.*** The challenges brought about by fragmentation are also linked to the fact that today's development challenges and potential can no longer be mastered by decision-makers in charge of individual territories, be they municipalities, regions or countries.[7] The high levels of territorial interdependency and interaction imply that for almost any development issue, territorial impacts extend beyond administrative borders, and decisions at different administrative levels and in different territorial units need to be joint ones.[8] Such interdependencies, ranging from urban to rural, cross-border to macro-regional and transnational, shape territorial development in Europe. Overall there is more need for functional and integrated approaches. Challenges increasingly overlap and need to be addressed by several administrations together and at different levels.

***A European multi-level set of territorial strategies.*** There needs to be some sort of overview of territorial interdependencies that is forward-looking and strategic. Many challenges of fragmentation are intrinsically connected to the lack of a shared vision for a European perspective on territorial development. As has already been stated above, some parts of society and some territories see a bright future with new possibilities, whilst other parts of society and territories face an increasingly less optimistic future perspective. Hence, one major task for the EU in the coming years is to bring Europe closer to its citizens, making sure that all places and parts of society are heard, as part of its commitment to social, economic and territorial cohesion enshrined in the Treaties. A first step to this direction has been taken through the new policy Objective 5 envisaged in the regulations proposed for the 2021-2027 programming period. The Territorial Agenda post-2020 should contribute to this task by arguing for bottom-up visions (or territorial strategies) that are developed at local and regional level. To bridge the gap between the municipalities and regions, and the European level the development process needs to be supported by, and taken on board at, the European level. Altogether this input should be used as an opportunity to obtain a new understanding of Europe and its future development perspectives.

***Empower places left behind.*** As stressed by the ESPON study on a European Territorial Reference Framework, local and regional players not used to engaging in European policy debates need to be empowered to actively contribute to and conjointly work on future and alternative perspectives for their

*einer Transformation*, ed. Maximilian Becker and Mathilda Reinicke (München: oekom, 2018); Hans Rosling, Ola Rosling, and Anna Rosling Rönnlund, *Factfulness: Ten Reasons We're Wrong about the World--and Why Things Are Better than You Think*, First edition (New York: Flatiron Books, 2018); ESPON, 'Territorial Reference Framework for Europe. Discussion Paper No. 5 in Preparation of the Meeting of the Strategic Advisory Forum on 12 March 2019. Version 05/03/2019. Unpublished Draft', 2019; Lewis Dijkstra, Hugo Poelman, and Andrés Rodríguez-Pose, 'The Geography of EU Discontent', Working Papers (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2018); Andrés Rodríguez-Pose, 'The Revenge of the Places That Don't Matter (and What to Do about It)', *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society* 11, no. 1 (2018): 189–209.

[7] Böhme, Lüer, and Toptsidou, 'Towards a European Geography of Future Perspectives: A Story of Urban Concentration'.

[8] Peter Mehlbye and Kai Böhme, 'More Territorial Cooperation Post 2020? - A Contribution to the Debate of Future EU Cohesion Policy', Spatial Foresight Brief 8 (Luxembourg: Spatial Foresight, 2017).

regions and municipalities. Local stakeholders have tacit knowledge needed for this, i.e. they know best what their place-specific strengths and weaknesses are. Therefore, they need to be involved in the process as key players. However, they need pro-active support, incentives and investment to become involved, to develop a shared vision and prepare an implementation process to generate the necessary policies and action.

**Four practical proposals:** Although European Structural Investment Funds (ESIF), in particular the Regional Development Fund, have been addressing the problem of territorial fragmentation for many years now, its present fundamental structural character and its political implications mean that investment alone cannot provide the full solution. If these three 'pathways' are to be translated into more specific lines of policy and action, four rational, pragmatic and realistic proposals can be distinguished?

- *Make cross-border cooperation at all levels – local, regional, national – a key focus of European Cohesion Policy*. Proposals with strong arguments have been made[9] to 'mainstream' territorial cooperation investments, i.e. to make a given proportion of investments in a region or city conditional on involving cooperation with neighbouring or other regions or cities. Emphasis could be placed on cooperation between more and less developed areas. This would encourage authorities to pool resources, make investments more effective and construct a longer-term culture of cooperation for all policies involving 'places, spaces and links'. Separate programmes like Interreg are no longer sufficient. If this proposal is not introduced in the 2021-27 period, then Interreg should be used at least to promote the making of these strategies.

- *Enhance existing mainstream investments*, such as those aimed at encouraging the smart- and circular economy, *with alternative new policy and technological innovations and initiatives*, specifically aimed at offsetting the trends of concentration/decline and enabling viable investment in rural areas/small towns.

- *EU governance reforms*. However Brexit ends up – no deal, a softer version such as the Norway model, or revoking Article 50 altogether – the whole process will have underlined the political implications of territorial fragmentation. This will inevitably lead at some point in time to *reforms of how the EU is governed*. One fundamental issue will be the need to have a far greater, pro-active and integrated involvement of 'agencies of territories' - i.e. regions, provinces, agglomerations, cities etc. - in EU policy-making.

- *A new European media offensive,* which will necessarily have to reflect the issue of territorial fragmentation.

Such proposals are clearly long-term. What is important in the short term is the broad recognition of the validity and the gravity of the territorial and social fragmentation challenge. The aim of this paper is to ignite the debate.

---

[9] ESPON, 'European Territorial Review. Territorial Cooperation for the Future of Europe' (Luxembourg: ESPON, 2017), https://territorial-review.espon.eu/.