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A rightful place for territorial cohesion in the European Commission

by Derek Martin & Peter Schön

At all but the local level, it has always been quite difficult to find a logical place for ‘spatial planning’ – or preferably ‘spatial or territorial development’ – in any administration. The higher the governance level, the more difficult it is to organise territorial development administratively into a coherent and well-coordinated policy.

Taking national administrations, these are usually divided into ‘vertical’ – or rather sectoral – policy areas, with a few notable ‘horizontal’ – or ‘cross-sectoral’ – departments, in particular Finance, Justice, Internal Affairs or General Affairs, that have an (often important) involvement in the work of the sectoral departments. ‘Spatial development’ in most administrations is a sectoral policy department, often linked with another policy area such as Housing, Economy or Environment, whereas it is, essentially, a ‘horizontal’ policy area. After all, spatial development influences and is influenced by the policy work of most departments, directly or indirectly. As one amongst other sectoral departments, often equipped with only moderate financial and formal resources, spatial development has often been dependent on the willingness of other departments to collaborate and has had to ‘muddle through’ in political processes to get its policies effectively implemented.

Now there’s a fourth level of governance. European policy development during the past 25 or so years has shown that there is an irrefutable and increasingly important territorial dimension to policy-making at the European level, whether environment, regional economics, climate, agriculture & rural development or mobility & transport, just to mention the policy fields most directly linked to territory. Territorial development at the European level is quite simply a fact of policy life, recognised in the treaty as ‘territorial cohesion’.

However, as it is (almost) everywhere but nowhere within the European Commission, territorial cohesion has until now never really found a ‘home’, just ‘temporary lodgings’ in the most territorial of the sectoral Directorates-General (DG), i.e. that for regional and urban development. This is one of the reasons why the territorial dimension of European policy, despite its underlying presence, has never really achieved the recognition it deserves.

Recently an updated [‘Territorial Agenda’](#) for Europe towards 2030 has been published in which the need for good governance has been underlined. Moreover, the European Commission has recently launched a general dialogue to collect ideas from a broad range of citizens on the Future of Europe. In the light of these two new initiatives, now is a good moment both to find an effective ‘home’ for territorial development in the European administration and, more fundamentally, to push forward new policy specificities for territorial cohesion as an important part of the reappraisal of the EU that will hopefully emerge from the ‘Future of Europe’ discussions.

Both of these initiatives bring to light a rather underexposed but nevertheless increasingly important element of EU policy laid down in the Lisbon Treaty – the „**shared competence**“. Territorial Cohesion by its very nature is an outstanding example of a shared competence, as territory is relevant at all levels of governance and its sustainable, responsible and equitable development at the European level is only possible if all levels of governance are to some extent coordinated. What better than to use territorial cohesion to give practical form to this important opening in the Treaty. But first of all a better place has to be found for territorial cohesion within the European Commission.

The European Commission itself has recently undergone quite a considerable reshuffle. It now consists of six Commissioners’ Groups, reflecting the [six ‘horizontal’, or cross-sectoral, priority policy goals](#) of the Commission in a more matrix-like organisation, attempting to help ensure a better collaboration between the sectoral Directorates-General (and Executive Agencies and Service Departments) in the pursuit of those priority policy goals. Most Commissioners now have a title of responsibilities reflecting more the ‘horizontality’ than the ‘sectoral’. It is also somewhat more hierarchical, with the President at the top (with an overall coordinating role), three Executive Vice-Presidents (VPs) and five VPs^[1] with special thematic coordination roles at the second level, and then the ‘normal’ Commissioners at the third level who are responsible for a DG as well as being members of one or more thematic Commissioners’ Groups.

The Commissioner responsible for territorial development’s ‘temporary lodgings’ – ‘Cohesion and Reforms’ – (now Elisa Ferreira) is indeed a member of the Commissioners’ Groups responsible for the ‘European Green Deal’ and ‘An economy that works for people’ but her actual *responsibilities* are, as a ‘normal’ Commissioner, limited to her assigned portfolios. However, it must be said that these include many operational activities that make crucial contributions to EU territorial cohesion, for which she clearly has an important role to play. But the overarching aim to achieve more cohesion for the EU territory as a strategic, cross-cutting, coordinating activity is far too fundamental a policy aim for the EU for this level of responsibility. It needs to be (explicitly) assigned to a thematic cross-sectoral Commissioners’ Group and coordinated by, and under the responsibility of, a Commissioner at the second level.

There are two candidates, reflected in Ms Ferreira’s Commissioner Group membership.

On the one hand, the Executive VP for the European Green Deal (now Frans Timmermans) has many territorially very relevant sectors under his responsibility (climate, cohesion, environment, transport,

agriculture, energy, health) and is the ‘primus inter pares’ of the VPs, and exercises (most of) the President’s functions when she is prevented from doing so herself.

The second candidate is the Executive VP responsible for coordinating "An Economy that Works for People" (now Valdis Dombrovskis). This Commissioner, at least for the remaining time of the present Commission, would be the most appropriate place in the Commission to assign responsibility for territorial development, cohesion and coordination. There are two reasons for this conclusion.

Firstly, if Cohesion is to get a more central status in the policy aims of the EU, then in the initial stages of this process, attachment to its original roots – i.e. jobs and growth in disadvantaged regions – should be clearly evident. Broadening and increasing the central importance of cohesion in EU policy should not go too fast too soon. It has to gradually grow in status.

Secondly, in the mission letter to Valdis Dombrovskis for the present Commission period, President Ursula von der Leyen writes: *"You will support me in the implementation of the Recovery and Resilience Facility and refocusing the European Semester, supporting Member States’ investments and structural reforms aimed at speeding up economic recovery, **territorial cohesion** and inclusive and sustainable growth and integrating the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals."*^[2] In this respect, Valdis Dombrovskis has already been assigned a special responsibility for territorial cohesion, but without a clear mention in his portfolio nor in the Commissioners’ Group priorities. Nonetheless, what we advocate is that Valdis Dombrovskis takes this part of his mission seriously and gives territorial cohesion a central place in his coordinating function of the Commissioners’ Group on ‘An economy that works for people’.

In conclusion, it is important that there is a distinct movement towards improving the governance of territorial cohesion within the Commission. Improving territorial cohesion, in the broadest sense of the word, appears to be one of the most crucial cross-sectoral aims for the future of the EU. It is not overstated to say that the future success or failure of European integration largely depends on this question.

With the introduction of Commissioners’ Groups as an intermediate level of cross-sectoral thematic coordination, Ursula von der Leyen has given a promising impulse for a better delivery of the political priorities of the Commission by focusing on cross-cutting issues and shaping coherent policies.

At the end of this Commission’s term, in 2024, we will know how much this organisational innovation has worked in practice and how successful it has been. We will also know to what extent it has improved the delivery of coherent territorial cohesion as a foremost field of cross-cutting policy and shared competence. Success is vitally important, because, after 2024, territorial cohesion should be firmly and explicitly lodged in one of the priority policy Commissioners’ Groups in the next Commission, ideally assigned to an Executive Vice-President responsible for Cohesion.

^[1] Of particular importance for the aim of territorial cohesion are the three thematic Groups led by two of the three Executive VPs, the ‘European Green

Deal, 'An Economy that works for the people' and 'A Europe fit for the Digital Age'. The other five VPs are leading the groups 'Promoting our European way of life', 'A stronger Europe in the world' and 'A new push for European democracy' and, outside the six priorities, 'Interinstitutional Relations and Foresight' and 'Values and Transparency'.

[2] Furthermore it reads in the mission letter: *"Each Commissioner will ensure the delivery of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) within their policy area."* With this, Valdis Dombrovskis also has a particular role for the SDGs which are backed by the UN Habitat's, New Urban Agenda', which is much more than a pure „urban“ agenda, and very close to the thinking of the EU's afore-mentioned Territorial Agenda.