

TERRITORIAL COHESION AND MEDIUM TOWNS

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Abstract:

This article debates the role of medium towns as crucial anchors to achieving the policy goal of Territorial Cohesion. Specifically, it highlights the need to counterbalance the market trends to favour the continuous channelling of investment and people into the major agglomeration areas, by means of pro-active measures focused in attracting both to medium towns, as an alternative to disperse public and private investments in all lagging territories. In concrete terms, the Iberian case is examined in more detail in order to illustrate the possibilities and challenges in using Iberian medium towns as development hubs in lagging regions, in order to achieve Territorial Cohesion at the national level.

Keywords: Territorial Cohesion, Medium Towns, EU Cohesion Policy, Territorial Development, Lagging Regions.

1. Introduction

Despite being mentioned within the EU Political Agenda for almost two decades, Territorial Cohesion is still a very much misunderstood and illusive concept, both for politicians and academics (Medeiros, 2016, Faludi, 2009). Indeed, its inclusion in the EU Treaty, by 2009, as a major goal of EU policies, alongside the eternal goals of promoting economic and social cohesion, was not, in our view, effectively translated into concrete EU strategic policy designs, which place a priority emphasis on measures aiming to achieving Territorial Cohesion.

On the contrary, EU Cohesion Policy rationale has been gradually shifting towards a growth and investment agenda, following from the EUROPE 2020 main goals (EC, 2010), and the overall economic context facing EU territories, in present times. In this light, the rise of the ‘Territorial Cohesion narrative’ faces crucial challenges. For one, the lack of a common understanding on its real meaning makes it difficult for the ‘pro-cohesion Member States guardians’ to defend the need to allocate EU funds to more cohesive policy actions. Secondly, the ‘pro-growth and investment Member States faction’ use the argument that investments on ‘perennial EU lagging regions’, mostly of rural nature, can be a waste of EU funds, as they are, for the most part, less efficient than the investments placed in competitive, and demographic and socio-economic dynamic territories.

In this framework, medium towns, seen as development anchors of less populated EU territories, can play a vital role in this ‘territorial cohesion debate’, namely in shifting the ‘Territorial Cohesion sceptics’ position, as the concentration of EU investments in these towns have the potential to increase its efficiency in EU lagging regions and, at the same time, reduce the path towards ‘territorial exclusion’, which characterizes such regions.

In the end, the rationale behind this investment emphasis on EU medium towns, mostly located in lagging regions, can be seen as a solid lifeline for the implementation of concrete and pro-active territorial cohesion policies, as the development of their hinterland is normally dependent on their own territorial dynamics. As such, we argue that the achievement of the goal of territorial cohesion, in a given country, can greatly

depend on the development path of these medium towns, making them a priority investment for cohesion and development policies.

2. Territorial Cohesion and medium towns

For clarity sake regarding the meaning of territorial Cohesion, this article understands it as “the process of promoting a more cohesive and balanced territory, by: (i) supporting the reduction of socioeconomic territorial imbalances; (ii) promoting environmental sustainability; (iii) reinforcing and improving the territorial cooperation/governance processes; and (iv) reinforcing and establishing a more polycentric urban system (Medeiros, 2016a:10).

In this sense, the achievement of the goal of Territorial Cohesion in a given territory implies a multidimensional intervention (Fig. 1) making it a complex and difficult to analyse process, from the political and academic standpoint. Even so, the underlined rationale in achieving Territorial Cohesion requires intervention measures which lead to increasing levels of socioeconomic cohesion, environmental sustainability, territorial governance/cooperation, and territorial polycentricity, in areas where this levels are lower, when compared with the remaining areas.

In a nutshell, the principle of territorial cohesion does not differ much from the principle of territorial development, as in both cases there is a need for a positive change in a given territory, during a certain period of time, in several analytic dimensions. However, while territorial development can occur in all analysed territories, even if the development increase varies from one to another, Territorial Cohesion can only become a reality if less cohesive regions do better in the mentioned dimensions of Territorial Cohesion, than the more cohesive regions.

Following from this rationale, any genuine and effective Cohesion Policy has to put its emphasis in supporting the less cohesive and development territories, by means of allocated funding, in all dimensions of territorial cohesion. And, according to the latter Cohesion Report this is exactly what EU Cohesion Policy has been doing for the past 25 years (EC, 2014).

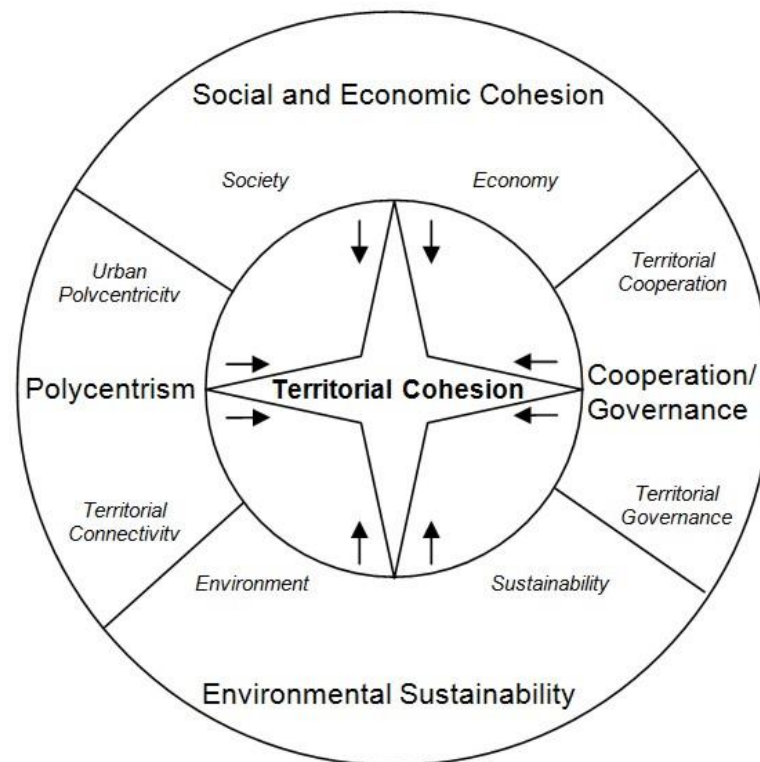


Fig. 1 - The star of the Territorial Cohesion
(Source, Medeiros 2016a)

Nevertheless, and despite all the positive contributions from EU Cohesion Policy interventions in promoting territorial development, in all its main dimensions, and the overall narrowing of socioeconomic disparities between EU Member States, since the early 1990s, there are clear evidences that, within the national level, the prevailing trends are more in the direction of ‘territorial exclusion’ rather than ‘territorial cohesion’ (see Medeiros, 2013, 2016a, 2016b, 2016c).

In view of these trends, one potential policy option to attain the goal of Territorial Cohesion within the national level could be to direct a particular attention to investing in the medium towns of less cohesive regions, as they are normally considered being important regional development engines, while having “good development potential if they concentrate on selected forms of territorial capital which offer comparative advantages” (ESPON: 2006: 18).

Here, one can argue that the regional distribution of EU Cohesion Funds have already been favouring the most populated areas, which include these medium towns located in less populated areas. However, for the most part, the larger agglomerations areas, have been receiving a considerable share of these funds as well (see Medeiros, 2013, 2016b, 2016c). In light of this, one way of correcting this present panorama could pass by shifting these funds allocated to larger and more dynamic urban areas, to medium towns located in less developed EU regions.

3. Medium towns as Territorial Cohesion anchors in Iberia Peninsula?

The definition of medium town varies according to various supra-national and national entities. For instance, for the World Bank, a medium town could have around 1,000,000 inhabitants (Casas and Ibars, 2003). In a different way, a recent attempt from the EC and the OECD to harmonize the definition of cities proposes criteria for medium cities to have between 100,000 to 250,000 inhabitants (Dijkstra and Poelman, 2012). If we apply this criteria to the Iberian countries, Portugal would have one city, whereas Spain 38.

Indeed, some Spanish researchers tend to define medium towns with similar criteria from the EC/OECD: the ones covering between 50,000 and 300,000 inhabitants. Conversely, for Portugal such criteria would be impractical, due to a reduced number of cities which fits those criteria. As such, the identification of Portuguese medium towns is based not on the number of its inhabitants, but on the city: (i) role on structuring the regional hinterland; (ii) capacity to organize small city clusters; (iii) capacity to have specialized functions with national and international relevancy (Ferrão and Sá Marques, 2003).

As can be seen in Figures 2 and 3, the use of a tailor-made definition of a medium town, which takes into account each country urban network system idiosyncrasies and specificities, presents several advantages over a normative and harmonized definition of medium towns. This advantage comes from the realisation that it places on the map several cities located in less developed regions that despite having less than 100,000 inhabitants, play a vital role in developing the surrounding hinterland.

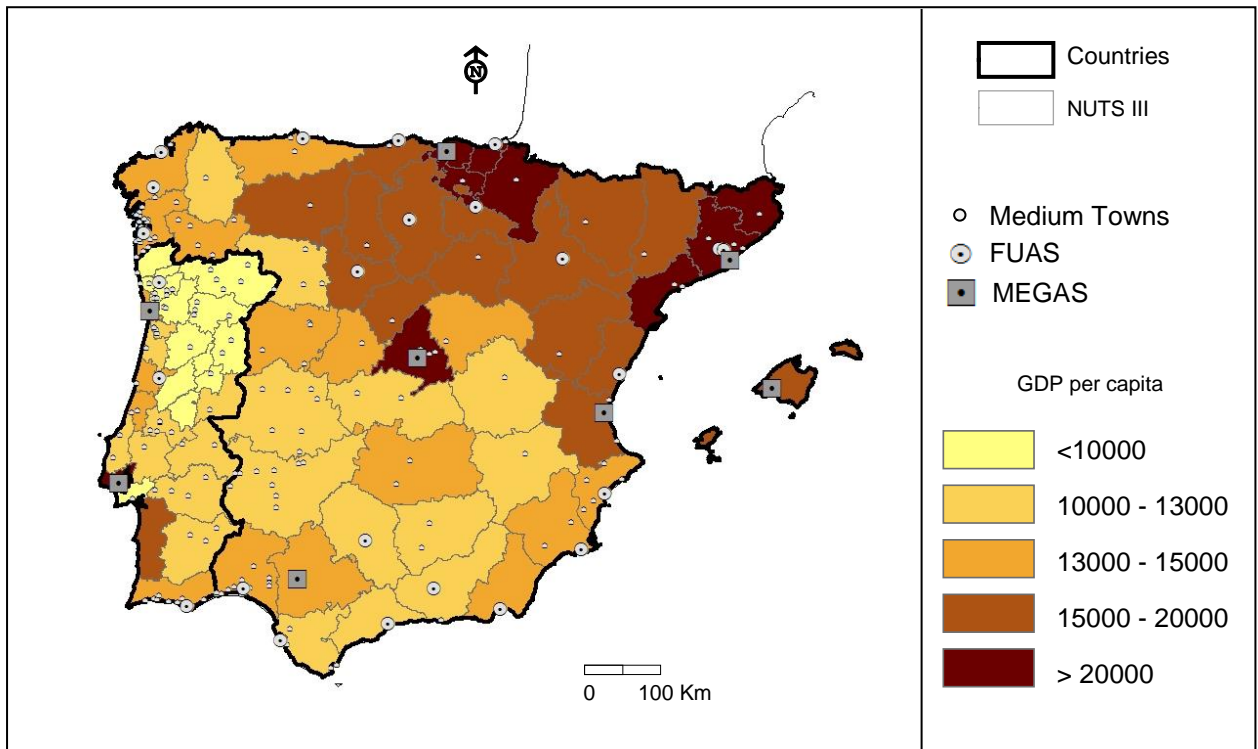


Fig. 2 – Megas, Fuas and Medium Tows in Iberia Peninsula
 Source: Data (several). Author Cartography

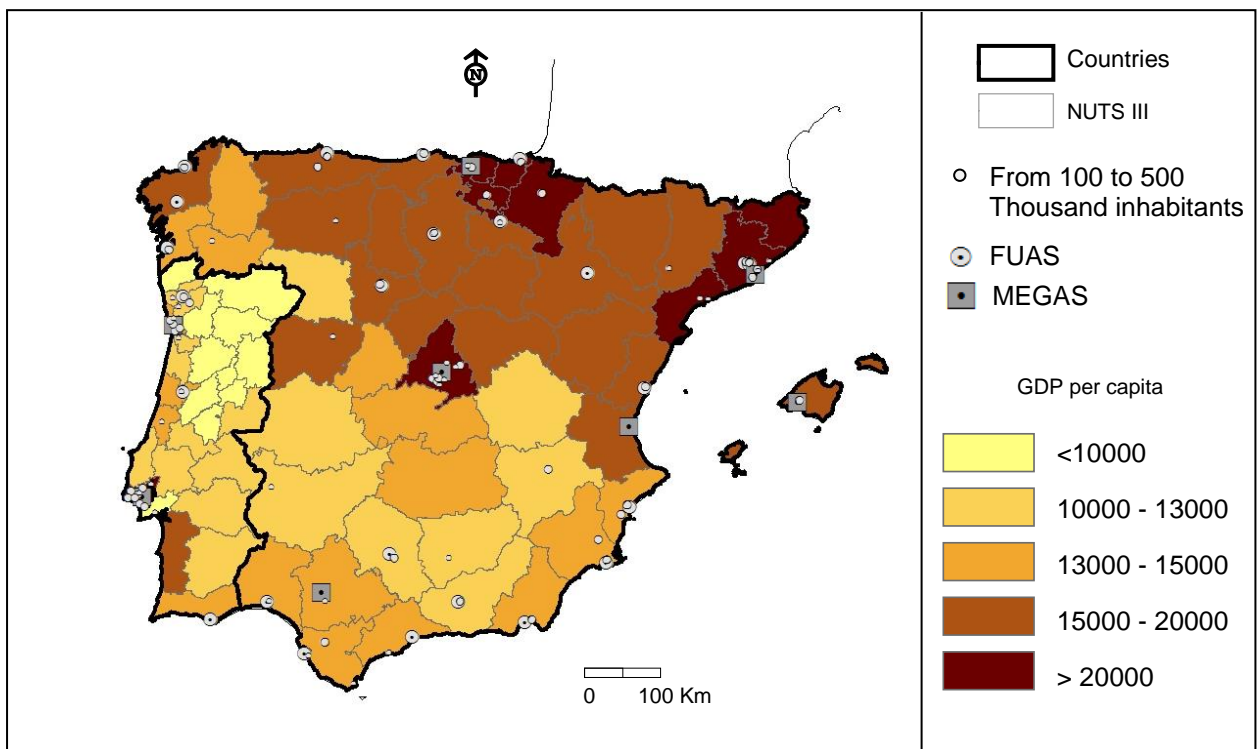


Fig. 3 – Megas, Fuas and Medium Tows (From 100 to 500 thousand inhabitants) in Iberia Peninsula. Source: Data (several). Author Cartography

A similar line of thought is backed by an ESPON study (ESPON 1.4.1, 2006), where the revision of small and medium sized towns in Europe was not only based on a morphological approach (corresponding to a settlement area), but equally on an functional (corresponding to an integrated zone in terms of social and/or economic activity and administrative (corresponding to an area defined as urban, as a result of predetermined quantitative criteria) approaches (ESPON 1.4.1, 2006: 17).

After defining the most adequate criteria for classifying medium cities, the next step would be the identification of the ones who would be eligible to receive the bulk of the territorial development investments in order to counterbalance the territorial exclusion path of many European lagging regions. For some, probably, a realistic approach would be the use of economic indicators, such as GDP per capita, for each region (NUTE 2 or NUTE 3), to identify lagging regions, following from the criteria used by the EC to allocate Investment, Structural and Cohesion Funds.

An alternative method in providing a more complete picture of the European regions, which are following a trend of territorial exclusion, is the use of a territorial cohesion index, for a certain period of time, as presented in Figure 4. Its advantage is based on the use of indicators associated with all the dimensions of Territorial Cohesion and not only on an economic indicator. However, the limitations in producing such holistic indexes are known, and are mainly due to lack of available and comparable statistical indicators, namely for smaller territorial scales, such as NUTS3 and Municipalities.

Another criterion for selecting the medium towns which, would beneficiate with more funding from available territorial development strategies, would be the incorporation of all national medium towns, with the exception of the ones in close proximity with the main national metropolitan urban networks. However, even here, the medium towns located in the less developed areas should beneficiate from larger financial allocations when compared with the rest. In this regard, and looking at the available data from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) allocation per municipality in Iberian Peninsula (Fig.5), one can conclude that its concentration in the lagging regions medium towns has the potential to increase even more, compared with what happened in the past.

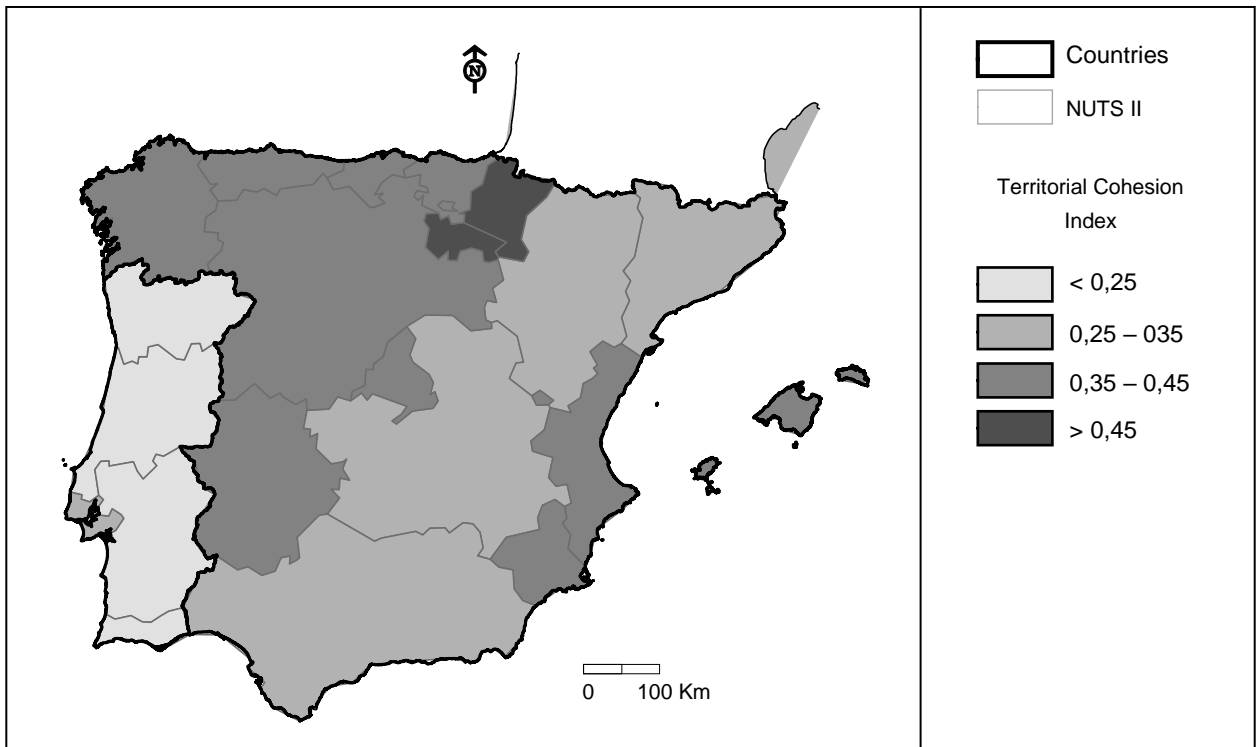


Fig. 4 – Territorial Cohesion Index (1995-2010) in the Iberian Peninsula - NUTS II
 Source: Data (several). Author Cartography

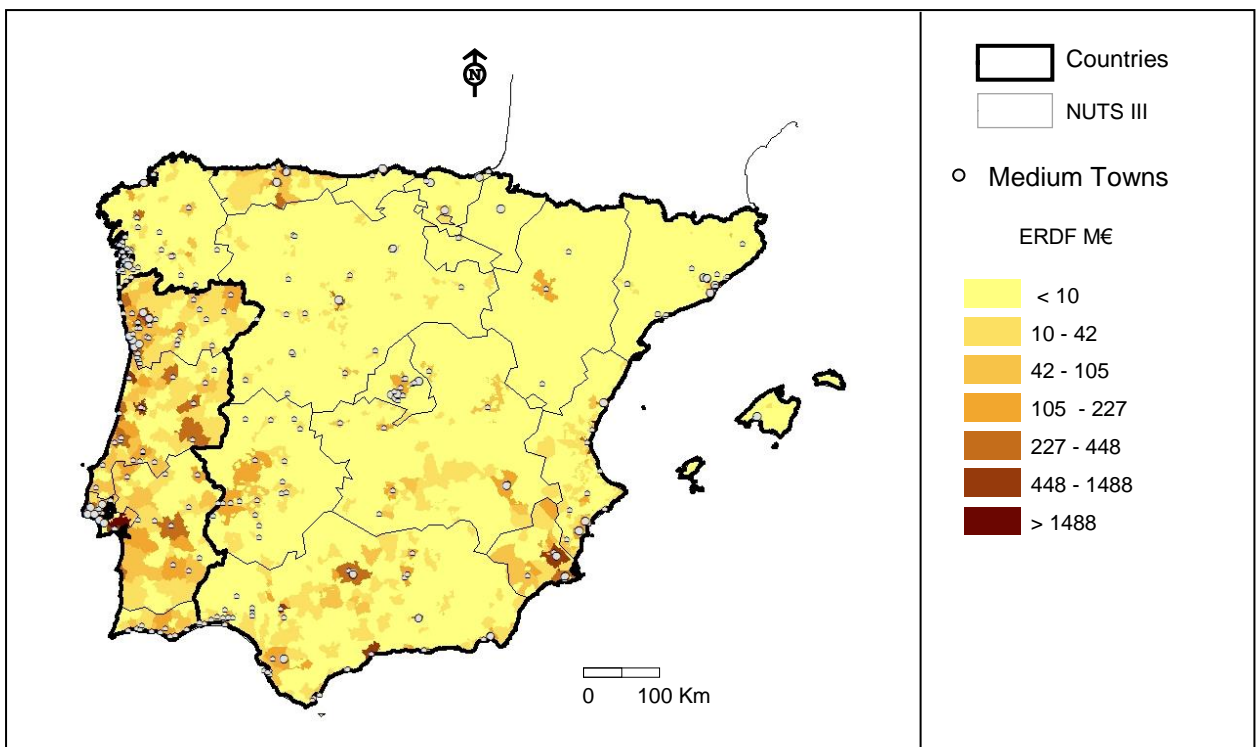


Fig. 5 – ERDF per municipality in Iberia Peninsula - Portugal 1989-2013 / Spain 2000-2013. Source: Data (EU funds national project databases). Author Cartography

4. Conclusion

After many years of scientific and political debates around the need for the EC to promote not only pro-active socio-economic cohesion policies, but also to engaging into the more ambitious goal of achieving territorial cohesion within the EU territory, only by 2009 this goal was officially included in the EU treaty. However, available studies conclude that this latter goal has not been achieved within EU countries, despite the fact that EU funds have had a quite positive impact in promoting territorial development within EU territory.

In this context, we propose a territorial development policy shift, both from the EU Structural and Investment related policies, and the national regional development policies, to favour not all territories equally, and more specifically the larger urban agglomerations and the lagging regions, but to concentrate territorial development investment efforts on medium cities located in less developed regions, as a more effective way to achieve the goal of territorial cohesion at the national level.

As seen in this article, the concretization of the proposed territorial development strategy comes with numerous challenges. For one, the selection of the benefited Medium Cities needs to follow tailor-made criteria to each country urban network and territorial characteristics. In sum, this criteria needs to take into consideration not only the size of the City (in number of Inhabitants), but also its influence to the development of the surrounding territory. Moreover, it needs to make use of valid statistical criteria to identify the country's lagging regions.

When applying the propose methodology to Iberia Peninsula, it was possible to detect several Medium Cities in the centre-north of Portugal and south of Spain which could be an approximate test-ground to experiment with this proposed rationale in view of effectively achieving the goal of territorial cohesion, both in Portugal and in Spain. Nevertheless, to achieve this goal, it is necessary that the regional, national, and EU political agendas can be aligned in the proposed policy strategy direction, which involves difficult decisions of putting aside the remaining territories.

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