

TOWN in Europe

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# STRATEGIC TERRITORIAL AGENDAS FOR SMALL AND MIDDLE-SIZED TOWNS AND URBAN SYSTEMS



Edited by **Pietro Elisei**



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Edited by PIETRO ELISEI  
2014



# STRATEGIC TERRITORIAL AGENDAS FOR SMALL AND MIDDLE-SIZED TOWNS AND URBAN SYSTEMS

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## LIST OF ACRONYMS

CF	Cohesion Fund	LAGs	Local Action Groups
CLLD	Community Led Local Development	OGC	Open Geodata Consortium
CMS	Content Management System	PA	Partnership Agreements
EAFRD	European Agriculture Fund for Rural Development	SA	Strategic Agenda
EC	European Commission	SEE	South East Europe
ERDF	European regional Development Fund	SEE-WP	SEE Web Platform
ESF	European Social Fund	STUA	Strategic Urban Agenda
ESPON	European Spatial Planning Observation Network	SMSCs	Small and Medium Sized Cities
EU	European Union	SMCTs	Small and Medium Sized Towns
GIS	Geographical Information System	SMEs	Small and medium Enterprises
HDUCs	High Density Urban Clusters	UC	Urban Center
ISOCARP	International Society of City and Regional Planners	UIRS	Urbanistični inštitut Republike Slovenije (Urban Planning Institute of the Republic of Slovenia)
IFHP	International Federation for Housing and Planning	UTF	Urban Task Force
ICT	Information and Communication Technologies	UN	United Nations
ITI	Integrated Territorial Investment	WMS	Web Map Service
INU	Istituto Nazionale di Urbanistica		

# TOWN in Europe

*Loris Antonio Servillo*

The aim of the ESPON TOWN project (Servillo et al., 2014) was to construct ‘new’ knowledge about European small and medium sized towns (SMSTs), acknowledging that they are hardly considered subjects in research (Bell and Jayne, 2009) and policy agendas yet are recognisable in the everyday experience of European citizens and firms. Therefore, the TOWN research team designed and implemented a multi-method, multi-level research framework in order to tease out insights on the European town experience drawing on both qualitative and quantitative evidence.

The project shows that this size of urban settlements has an important role within the wider regional and functional context; hence, towns can indeed make an important contribution to supporting EU strategic policies such as the EU 2020 policy framework and for the achievement of territorial cohesion. In this sense, TOWN has sought to remedy the ‘invisibility’ of the territorial role of SMSTs and advocates the need for future thinking and policy development specifically tailored to towns across Europe (ECOVAST, 2013). It recognises that towns have their own specific ‘urban’ (territorial) capital and related territorial potentials that are embedded in wider global dynamics, albeit in specific spatial contexts in which the economic dynamics are “largely underpinned by a complex interplay of internal and external forces” (Courtney and Moseley, 2008, p. 315).

The logical structure of the project started with the identification and listing of urban settlements that can be considered SMSTs from a morphological perspective. Based on the methodological work of DG Regio and OECD (DG REGIO, 2011), the result shows that within the 87% of the EU 27 (plus partners) population, 46.3% lives in HDUCs (*High Density Urban Clusters*), while more that 38% lives in smaller settlements, further subdivided into different classes by finer population and density ranges (table 1). This important finding, which allowed the construction of a regional typology (Fig. 2), indicates that the traditional discourses on the urban shift of the global population (for a critique: Brenner and Schmid, 2013) neglect complex questions related to the fact that most of the EU population still lives in ‘smaller’ urban settlements. Therefore, a specific focus on it at EU level is not only a matter of policy relevance, but also of spatial justice.

The analysis shows that macro territorial dynamics are the most important determinant factors for regional performances of regions characterised by smaller settlements, which seem to experience less spatial inertia vis-à-vis larger-scale phenomena. At the same time national differences indicate that the specific configuration of urban systems and national policies matter. Together with these macro-scale phenomena, Fig. 3 shows evidences of macro/meso regional path dependency that can be seen both in wealthier areas of the central part of Europe (the Pentagon) and in other contexts (e.g. Eastern countries). The analysis reveals a general divergence in performances of regions characterised by smaller settlements in remote areas and those close to metropolitan areas/urban regions. While the former tend to exhibit negative trends, the latter are characterized by better performances. However, it is not a case of geographic determinism, but rather of regional dependency in which specific local strategies are still able to define specific trajectories. Moreover, under geographical and institutional conditions (a strong local sense of identity and degree of institutional and fiscal decentralisation enabling proactive strategies) it is possible that the activities rooted in such SMSTs are better able to resist metropolitan dominance by establishing processes of synergetic networking with larger urban areas. This may represent an example of ‘borrowing-size’ effect (Alonso, 1973; Meijers and Burger, 2010), according to which towns that are close to bigger urban areas are able to realise a ‘virtual critical mass’ in terms of accessibility to services and other urban characteristics.

The functional role of towns in the regional context is also one of the variables to understand their performances. The functional position of a micro-regional centre within its wider network of commuting flows (as autonomous, agglomerated or networked) has some influence in relation to changes in population and jobs for towns, in particular for the autonomous ones, which tend to present negative trends. At the same time the analysis did suggest that size mattered. Larger centres (mostly cities with population over 50,000) performed better in comparison with small and medium sized ones when it came to employment growth and population change. Even if it is not possible to prove it, we can suspect relationships with decades of policy attentions primarily dedicated to larger settlements.

In terms of socio-economic characteristics of the single towns, the data suggests that SMSTs are statistically different from larger cities (HDUCs). However, SMSTs from individual countries and regions are statistically different from SMSTs in other countries and regions, pointing to the fact that SMSTs are significantly influenced by their context (Servillo et al., 2014: p. 31). Therefore, even if the analysis suggested that SMSTs tend to exhibit specific features (e.g. having a greater proportion of Industrial employment and less in service sector, a lower proportion of working age adults with a degree, or higher proportion of school age children), a great diversity among SMSTs both within a national urban system as well as between national urban systems remains relevant.

Finally, the data suggests that the sectorial profile is important. Historically, for instance, towns have had some degree of competitive advantage in industrial employment (Massey, 1984). However, today this relative advantage may be problematic, as industrial employment (particularly manufacturing) has become increasingly subjected to global competition, delocalization, concentration towards main urban areas, etc. All the streams of analysis seem to confirm that those towns with a higher proportion of employment in industrial activities tend to have negative trends, revealing their fragility. This constitutes a major potential threat for many SMSTs. In policy terms, this requires that specific attention be given to the industrial sector and to the reformulation of territorial strategies and the diversification of economic structures, e.g. via (smart) innovation and the establishment of networked cooperation forms among towns. At the same time, valorisation of touristic sector, often combined with agro-industry, can represent a complementary strategy.

All in all, the socio-economic composition of a town itself and its inherent value within wider spatial context is an important distinguishing characteristic. It is reasonable to assume that the socio-economic performance of a town can be related to a range of factors which are a combination of geographic position, macro/regional trends, socio-economic specialisation, historical development and the ways in which these are understood by policy actors (i.e. their 'policy frames').

In policy term, given the wide variation between SMSTs across Europe and within countries, it is necessary to caution against the adoption of any simplistic 'one-size fits all approach'. It is neither possible nor desirable to rigidly prescribe a particular 'set of actions' because of the wide variety of regional situations and types of SMSTs. Only an in-depth analysis of the local economy can provide information on the type of local assets and of target groups (firms, new entrepreneurs, residents, commuters, tourists, etc.) that contribute to economic devel-

opment within a SMST context. This must constitute the basis of an integrated strategic approach that supports the factors relevant to the local economy and develops them in sustainable ways (through various forms of support such as investment in the relevant infrastructure, provision of incentives, collaboration between relevant/complimentary sectors, taking care not to overdevelop in ways that threaten environmental and amenity values, etc.).

This requires a combination of local actions and regional coordination and support. Firstly, bundles of policies should be deployed at local level, with associated forms of governance that provide a sense of 'local ownership' – avoiding though too much 'inward looking'. However, many of the case study towns showed problems in terms of 'capacity to act' (mobilisation). The propensity to 'innovate' and activate strategies rooted in local milieu does not take place in all SMSTs: Secondly, and consequently, regional levels should enable cooperation and provide the policy context within which to develop tailored policies. Since our evidence shows that meso/regional trends are significant, it is necessary to develop policy bundles tailored to specific functional territories rather than relying on a single local authority's initiatives, which the risk of being ineffective.

In this framework, spatial planners need to work with regional and local stakeholders to create a shared vision of where territorial development is going and then allocate investment (e.g. in infrastructure) to support that vision. This will need to be a nuanced vision encompassing the territory as whole but also sub-regions based on the functional complementarities of SMSTs and larger urban areas.

To this purpose, our case studies revealed considerable variation in the capacity/willingness of towns to engage in collaborative/cooperative actions with other proximate SMSTs in terms of developing common projects (other than for basic services such as waste collection and water) and sharing of services (e.g. education and health care) or even more strategic issues (location of supra-local services, development strategies, etc.). What tended to be lacking is a multi-scalar integrated vision, embedded in a wider region which could frame a long-term development process of benefit to all relevant SMSTs. Developing such a 'vision' will need to be a collaborative venture involving regional and local actors who can work together in partnership (see OECD, 2013; Pucher et al., 2012).

Forms of cooperation between local authorities at the scale of the micro region should be encouraged, as they can help to ameliorate wider changes in the spatial distribution of activities and services. This is particularly important at a time when many countries and localities are experiencing significant

reductions in public expenditure. Initiatives such as the community led local development programme (CLLD) recently launched by the European Commission, based on the experience of LEADER but with the intention to overcome the traditional distinction between rural and urban programmes

seems to move in the right direction. It represents a challenge to innovate through bottom-up dynamics and integrated vision of territories. The following years will be crucial in understanding the limits and potentialities of this approach, not only at EU but in particular at national/regional levels.

Table 1. Main statistics about different settlement types. (Source: Servillo et al., 2014)

Classes	Delimitation criteria	Count	Av. Pop	Av. Sq. km	Av. Density	Total pop. in this class	as % of ESPON space*
High-density Urban Clusters (HDUC)	Pop. > 50,000	850	275,476.10	92.3	2,927.10	234,154,670	46.3%
	Pop. Density > 1,500 inh./km <sup>2</sup>						
Large SMST	Pop > 50,000	100	132,331.4	101.8	1,299.6	13,233,142	2,6%
	Pop. Density < 1,500 inh./km <sup>2</sup>						
Medium SMST	25,000 < Pop < 50,000	966	35,162.90	19.7	2,060.59	33,967,357	6.7%
	Pop. Density > 300 inh./km <sup>2</sup>						
Small SMST	5,000 < Pop < 25,000	7348	10,241.50	7.6	1,470.09	75,254,510	14.9%
	Pop. Density > 300 inh./km <sup>2</sup>						
Very Small Towns (VST)	Pop. < 5,000	69,043	1,193.10	1.7	699.3	82,376,586	16.3%
	Pop. Density > 300 inh./km <sup>2</sup>						

\* including EU 27+ Iceland, Norway, Lichtenstein, Switzerland.

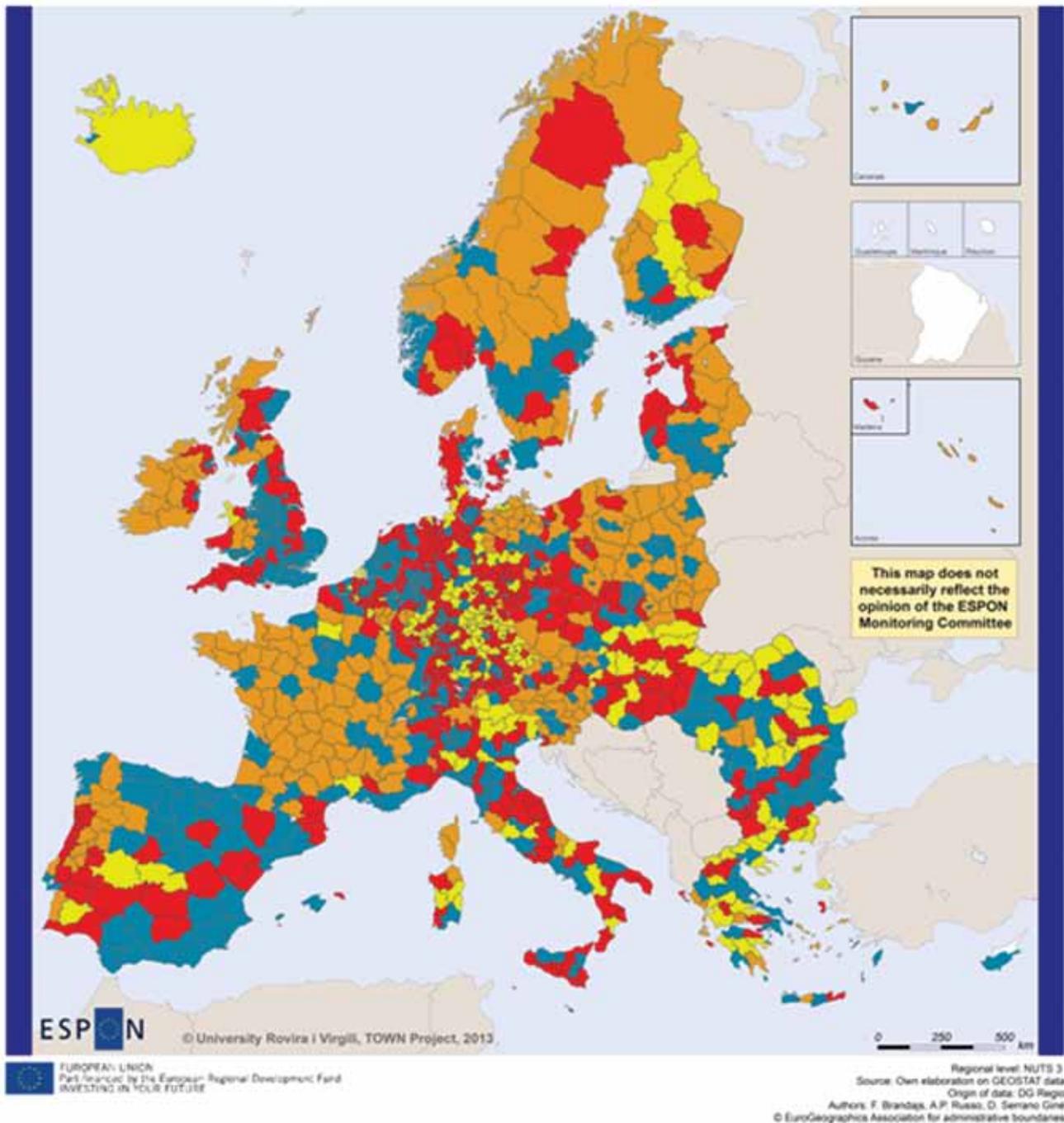
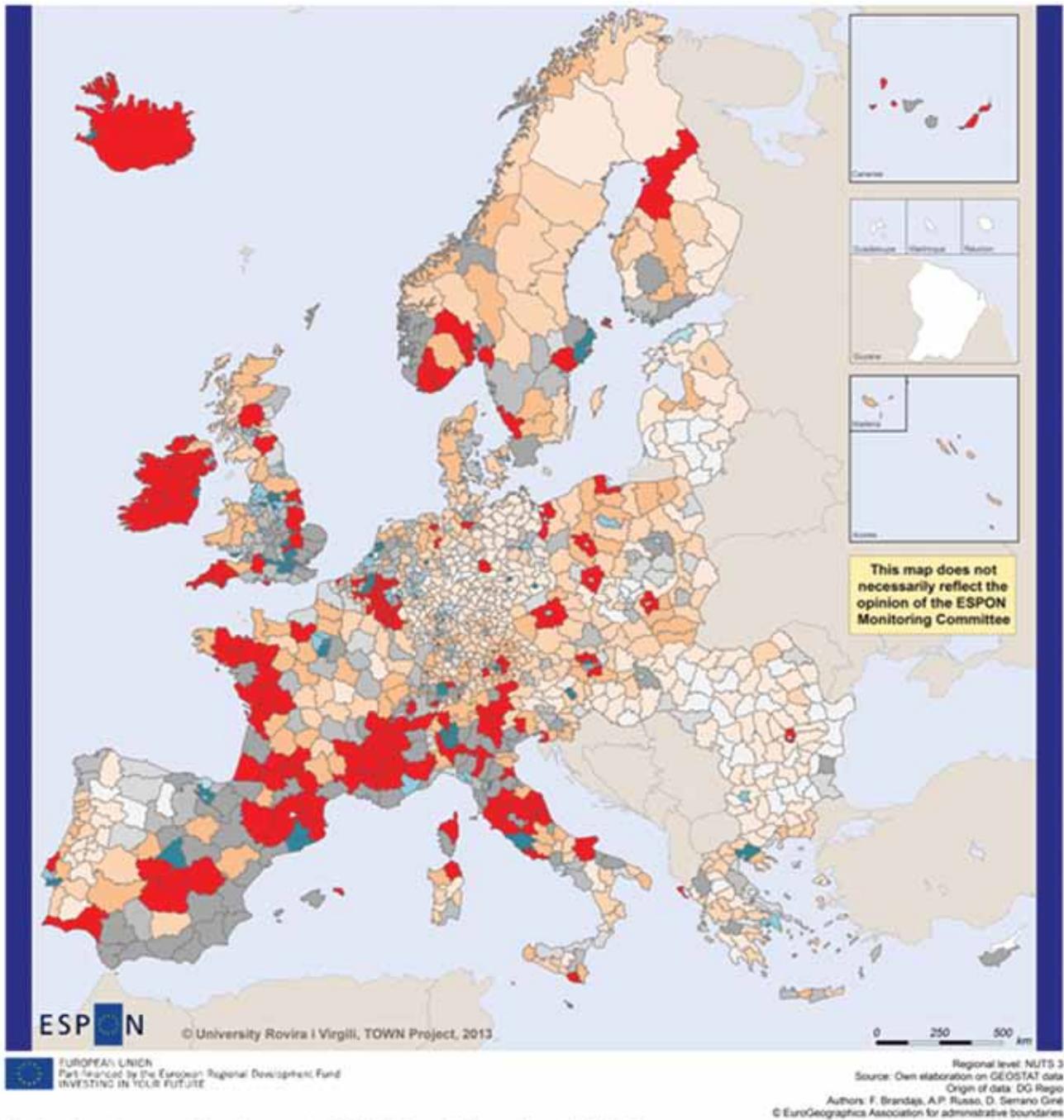


Fig. 2: TOWN regional typology (Source: Servillo et al., 2014)



Typology based on population change rates 2001-2011 as a difference from the EU-27 average



\* Population growth rates based on change rate between 2001 and 2011, as difference from change in same indicator for the whole EU27. Whenever either of these data are not available, most recent and older available year within the 2001-2011 range have been used.

Fig. 3: Population change rate 2001-2011 and regional typology (Source: Servillo et al., 2014)

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Reconsidering the planning practice and exploring new opportunities for making it attuned to the ever changing urban reality is increasingly becoming one of the key issues in many South-East European countries.

*Milica Bajić-Brković – ISOCARP president*

The STATUS methodology links the projects sustainability to the decision-making process modalities. The decisions are split among different actors congregating into a participatory planning process.

*Pietro Elisei – International Expert in Urban Planning – STATUS Designer and Content Manager*

The very essence of the STATUS project is the introduction of a (more) integrated territorial approach in the thinking of the participating municipalities regarding their urban development agenda.

*Derek Martin – International Expert in Urban Planning*

The results of the STATUS project represent the basic platform for territorial development in the partners' areas for the future. All territorial partners are better prepared for the use of structural funds in the period 2014 – 2020 and further into the future, when an important role will be played by the established Urban Task Forces (UTF).

*Barbara Mušič – Urban Planning Institute of the Republic of Slovenia (UIRS)*

It's just a matter of adapting to change and addressing real local needs with the most suiting instruments.

*Sabina Dimitriu – Junior researcher in Urban Planning*

Next to the conditions for sound investments it is important to look at organisational capacity and financial modeling of the investments.

*Joep de Roo – STATUS General Manager*



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