

Small and Medium-Sized Towns in Europe: Conceptual, Methodological and Policy Issues

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# **Small and medium-sized town in Europe: Conceptual, methodological and policy issues. Introduction to the Special Issue**

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## **Abstract**

Despite small and medium-sized towns (SMSTs) have been, and continue to be, a central part of the history of Europe, these places have largely been neglected by urban research. The ESPON TOWN project, on which this Special Issue builds, sought to redress this neglect performing a comparative analysis of their position and role across Europe. In this introductory article we discuss some of the theoretical and methodological challenges when it came to identifying, studying and analysing SMSTs and the theoretical framework developed to inform our understanding of SMSTs. In particular, three themes are discussed. The first one is about the ontological problem of defining a town. Administrative, morphological and functional perspectives are considered. The second one reflects on a wide array of interpretative approaches about the relationship between towns and their regional context. The third one is about the thematic and multi-scalar perspectives that can characterise the policy approach to towns.

**Keywords:** town, Europe, urban studies, territorialist approach, urban agenda

## **Introduction**

Mainstream discourses on the ‘urban age’ (see Brenner and Schmid, 2013, for a critique) argue that a crucial transformation has taken place globally with regard to human settlement patterns whereby the majority of the global population now live in urban areas. Thus a EU report estimates that around 70% of Europe’s population live in cities (cf. CEC, 2011: p. 14). However, what is often less well acknowledged is that a significant percentage (around 56%, *ibid*, p.1) of this urban population live in small and medium sized towns (SMSTs). The European pattern of settlements depends to a considerable degree on smaller-size urban areas (with populations between 5,000 and 100,000, CEC, 2011), which are considered to play an important role in Europe’s polycentric urban structure and preserving the ‘uniqueness’ of urban life in Europe. Yet, these places have largely been ignored by academic research and policy makers at national and European level. Ontological complexity, different institutional contexts and lack of comparative data have made them largely ‘invisible’ to the policy-making and academic research agenda, except few exceptions.

Moreover, while there are some existing quantitative studies on towns within national urban systems (for example Shepherd, 2009; Powe et al., 2007; Matlovic and Bernasovsky, 2002; Spasic and Petric, 2006; Bessy and Sicamois, 1998) and thematic cross-national comparisons of case studies (see for example Knox and Mayer 2009), most attention has been paid to larger urban and metropolitan areas, within which smaller settlements are considered to constitute embedded settlement configurations largely ‘subservient’ to the metropolis. Thus the vast majority of research and policy analysis has focused on large cities and on metropolitan regions (‘big’ or ‘global’ places) often in the context of globalising forces and international competition but there has been relatively little work on smaller cities and towns (for example McCann, 2004). That is why a few voices (e.g. Bell and Jayne, 2009) have argued for the need to understand the role and significance of small cities and to accept the challenge of ‘thinking big about thinking small’ (*ibid*: 683), seeking to remedy the ‘invisibility’ of the territorial role of SMSTs within Europe and in their countries and regions, a role that has largely remained neglected in the “urban study orthodoxy obsessed with ‘the city’ as being the biggest” (Bell and Jayne, 2009: 684). A few researchers in the 2000’s have focused on the role of SMSTs in rural development (Mayfield and al., 2005; Courtney al., 2007; Courtney and Moseley, 2008; van Leeuwen, 2010) and more recently, there has been some attention at the policy level, especially the 2015 Latvian Presidency of the EU which sought to place the SMSTs issue on the EU Cohesion and Territorial Development policy agenda (Latvian Presidency, 2015).

This special issue starts from the premise that towns have been, and continue to be, a central part of the history of Europe from the city-states of earlier periods to today. Within the EU they represent a particular European feature of the urban mosaic consisting of a rich and complex patchwork of inter-linked national urban systems (Bagnasco, 2000; Le Galès & Therborn, 2010). The ESPON TOWN project, on which this proposed Special Issue builds, sought to redress this neglect by focussing on places with populations between 5,000 and 50,000 across Europe (i.e. SMSTs as identified by DG Regio) and performing a comparative analysis of their position and role across Europe. TOWN estimated that about 8,350 urban settlements can be classified as SMSTs (based on the range of population mentioned above with a density of population between 300 and 1500 inhabitants/sqkm) (Servillo et al., 2013). The adoption of these criteria allowed the TOWN project to estimate that overall about 27% of the EU population live in SMSTs while about 19% in very small towns (below 5,000 inhabitants) (ibid.). Therefore, the focus of this special issue is on settlements in which almost half of the EU population currently reside, and thus represent places that merit more detailed scientific scrutiny as part of the current (and future) urban and regional research agenda rather than being appended to larger contexts such as metropolitan areas and urban or rural regions.

One of the first problems facing any research on such places is that while there is a tacit acknowledgement (see CEC, 2007, 2008 and 2011 for examples of how policy makers at EU level approach the issue) that SMSTs are important within European urban (and rural-urban) systems, the role that they play in their localities, their impact, service functions and cultural significance remains shrouded in ambiguity. Despite everyone having a 'feeling' of what constitutes (small and medium-sized) towns in terms of their physical characteristics, spatial identity, daily routines and life style, the term does not immediately constitute a coherent category or object of study, as it covers a diversity of situations across Europe.

The size issue that the terms themselves carry is controversial: cities that are smaller than other cities imply the presence of a threshold that tends to become blurred when we observe a territory that has a wide variety of urban forms and different patterns of land use. This is why we sympathise with Brunet's opinion (1997) about towns as 'unidentified real objects'. It is unidentified because there is no widely shared and clear concept, nevertheless it is a 'real' object because of its specific (common-sense) shared cultural meaning that evokes certain common images and an, often implicit, understanding of what are characteristic territorial features of such places.

Despite these conceptual difficulties it is important to pose the question: can this notion of small settlements constitute a coherent analytical category? On one hand, all the urban categories identified on the basis of size entail inherent contradictions as they cut across a range of different typologies. Moreover, size is relative and depends on the territorial context in which the urban settlement is located which varies from country to country. Several critiques have been elaborated of this type of approach, arguing instead for a 'political economy' approach of cities, following David Harvey's view of 'cities as polities' (see Schouten, 2008), and/or oriented to the understanding of flows and networks (Castells and Cardoso, 2005) that characterise urban phenomena rather than focusing on the physical identification (and delimitation) of settlements and their consequent classification in terms of size. On the other hand while these critiques to a certain extent reproduce a big-size-urban bias, they do address certain gaps in the understanding of urban complexity within traditional approaches that are mainly related to larger-size cities.

Given the above it is perhaps no surprise that prior to the ESPON TOWN project there was not even the most basic overview of smaller settlements and their roles across Europe (only an explorative exercise - the ESPON SMESTO project - ÖIR et al. 2006). Therefore, despite its limitations, the focus on this specific size cohort of settlements provides a valuable opportunity to investigate this under-addressed urban phenomenon in Europe.

Hence, this special issue presents findings in each of the different analytical approaches deployed in the TOWN project, which combined different analytical perspectives. It brings together geomatics analysis for the identification of patterns of settlements (Russo et al., this special issue), pan-European quantitative analysis of socio-economic changes using regional (Servillo & Russo, this special issue) and settlement data (Smith, this special issue), qualitative analysis of economic profiles of towns and their strategic capacity to steer changes (Hamdouch et al. , this special issue), functional relations among towns and regional articulation of job centres and functional micro-regions ( Sýkora & Mulíček, this special issue), and policy attention at wider scale and in particular at EU level (Atkinson, this special issue).

All these contributions and streams of analysis can be located under the umbrella of what Brenner and Schmid (2013) call a 'territorialist approach' in the larger domain of urban studies. The following section of this paper (section 1) provides a brief critical reflection on the methodological approach adopted in the TOWN project. Moreover, the complexity of the topic and the links with alternative analytical traditions opened up various methodological and analytical questions, for which only some tentative answers have been provided by the project. In particular, three transversal interpretative issues stimulated the various streams of analysis which are addressed in

the following sections. The first interpretative question is about the ontological problem of defining a town, with related methodological and analytical consequences. Administrative, morphological and functional perspectives are considered (section 1). The second interpretative question relates to the relationship between the small settlement and its regional area. This is a fundamental issue that can be found (mostly) implicitly in all the research approaches in regional and urban studies. It covers a wide array of approaches that go from the region as the determinant factor of socio-economic dynamics of the town, to the 'autonomy' of each urban settlement to steer its own developmental trajectory (section 2). The third interpretative question is about the thematic perspectives that characterise the policy approach to towns. In particular, it addresses how local entrepreneurship and supra-scale policy initiatives can open up different opportunities and policy approaches (section 3). Finally, the paper concludes by indicating how the different papers of the special issue contribute to addressing these interpretative dimensions, contributing to developing a heuristic framework for understanding SMSTs that will stimulate further research and debate.

## **1. A territorialist approach**

The territorialist approach (Brenner and Schmid, 2013: 14) and settlement-based understandings of cityness is a relatively traditional understanding of space; here urban phenomena are interpreted as bounded, coherent and discrete spatial units. It is based on two fundamental empirical and theoretical problems. First, it seeks to identify the appropriate spatial boundaries of the areas whose populations need to be measured. It is the core analytical struggle of geomatics methods (Guerois et al., 2012) and requires the association of data with the identified spatial features in order to perform comparative analysis. Within this perspective, an important contribution has been made by DG Regio and OECD (Dijkstra & Poelman, 2012; EC, 2014) through a world-wide geomatics analysis of spatial configuration understood as a Euclidian space. The paper by Russo et al. in this special issue builds on this approach in order to provide a state of the art on SMSTs in the EU.

Second, it seeks to set out criteria for the interpretation of urban phenomena through typologies. It belongs to a long tradition of urban studies that has mainly adopted a demographic approach. It is the most traditional way of defining categories and is currently used by several national statistical institutes. It is based on the identification of appropriate thresholds of population within a predefined jurisdictional unit that allows for the classification of 'urban' types. Brenner and Schmid (2013) argue that the origins of such a demographic-approach can be found in the 1930s and that it has continued to be developed until today (Schnore, 1964; Bloom et al., 2010; Montgomery, 2010).

Critiques of this approach are by no means new. For instance Wirth (1969 [1937]) criticised such an arbitrary population-based definition of the urban condition. His theory of urbanism paid attention to the role of urbanisation in intensifying interspatial interdependencies and reorganising territorial organisation. However, Brenner and Schmid (2013) argue Wirth's theory was still based on the conception of social life taking place in bounded human settlements that could be typologized through the use of more elaborate characteristics, such as population, density, and heterogeneity.

Another important critique of this approach refers to the univocal distinction between urban and rural areas. The 'banalization of territorial complexity' (Copus et al., 2011) through an urban-rural dichotomy tends to leave the rural area as a residual area (or category) without any genuine content, distinction or connotation. As a result urban areas and rural hinterlands cannot meaningfully be distinguished as discrete and different spaces. This neglects their complex system of economic and social interactions which means they are interdependent, as commuting patterns,

service provision and distribution, leisure and recreation linkages indicate (ibid.). The complex relationships between activities and socio-spatial organisation, the labour market structure and economic bonds have stimulated a need for different interpretative approaches that are able to grasp this territorial complexity.

As noted above, this requires a political economy and network system perspective on urbanization (see Andersen et al., 2011), and on the functional and socioeconomic role played by SMSTs in urban hierarchies and new territorial contexts (ÖIR et al., 2006; Carrière, 2008; Powe et al., 2009; Santamaria, 2012; Elisei, 2014).

However, despite these criticisms, the territorialist approach used in the TOWN project offered a valuable way of providing an overview of 'smallness' as an urban phenomena at the EU scale. While taking on board these critiques and recognising the limitations of a territorialist approach it was possible to utilise it as a first step that provided the interpretative tools for an initial determination and investigation of the phenomenon. The combination of different methods of investigation (geomatics, quantitative, and qualitative methods) usefully shed light on the confused morass of concepts and assumptions that currently prevails around SMSTs and to construct the first pan-EU delimitation of these urban features. At the same time it provided some material for policy reflection. Thus the output has provided the reference point for the TOWN report and a related policy document on small and medium urban areas produced by the Latvian ministry of regional development during the EU Latvian presidency in 2015 (Latvian Presidency, 2015).



## 2. Defining a town: different approaches

As the discussion above shows an unambiguous ontological definition of towns in the European context using a territorialist approach is problematic. This endeavour is further hampered by the vagaries and semantic richness of (multiple) language(s) (and translating between them). The term ‘town’ has clear cultural connotations of smaller-ness, but it is often difficult to clearly demarcate a ‘town’ from a ‘city’. In English, the Oxford dictionary refers to the term town as “a built-up area with a name, defined boundaries, and local government that is larger than a village and generally smaller than a city” (Oxford Dictionaries: “town”). The distinction in the English language (based on some concept of ‘size’) exists in other national and linguistic contexts, but in some case it may have also other connotations, such as in French with the terms ‘cité’ and ‘ville’, the former also used to designate a district of the latter (‘cité d’Arles’, ‘cité ouvrière’). The contexts within which towns exist in each European country are often widely different (Henderson, 1997; Santamaria, 2000; 2012; ÖIR et al., 2006) leading therefore to very different definitions and understandings of what a town actually corresponds to (even where such a definition exists).

	Term	Definition	Distinctive characteristics	Criteria
Morphological approach	Urban settlement	Built up area (area with urban physical characteristics) of a minimum population size	Concentration of buildings (distinction from open spaces) and population (above minimal threshold)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Compact build-up area</li> <li>• Distance between settlements and buildings</li> <li>• Population</li> <li>• Density of urbanised area</li> </ul>
	Urban municipality	Settlement with urban administrative status	Local government with urban administrative duties and responsibilities and territory / boundary containing urban settlements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Local government</li> <li>• administrative functions</li> <li>• Historical attribution</li> </ul>
Functional Approach	Urban centre / urban core	Urban settlement (municipality) with concentration of jobs, services and other urban functions	Role of centre for region due to concentration of jobs and other urban functions attracting commuters and visitors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Population</li> <li>• Jobs</li> <li>• Other urban functions</li> <li>• Commuting</li> <li>• Centrality</li> </ul>
	Urban functional region	Larger area with functional relationship with one or more urban cores	Gravitational area of jobs, services and other functions located in urban core(s)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Access to jobs and services</li> <li>• Home-work commuting</li> <li>• Home-service commuting</li> </ul>

**Table 1 - Comparison of different conceptualisations and related criteria (source: authors)**

However, there is not only about semantic ambiguity; there is also a methodological and interpretative issue. In an attempt to construct a taxonomy of conceptualisations, another ESPON project identified three basic approaches to the definition of towns (ÖIR et al., 2006):

morphological, administrative and functional approach. On this basis four key spatial features related to the definition and conceptualisation of urban places can be identified (Table 1): Settlement, Municipality (or administrative unit), Urban centre and related Functional region.

All the three interpretations highlight different aspects, and at the same time have consequences in terms of method of analysis and data availability. Additionally, the relationship between them further complicates the topic.

#### *The relationship between urban settlements and administrative units*

The analysis of towns in Europe is almost impossible based on their administrative definition, because of cultural and morphological differences across Europe. While this is a relative problem for larger urban areas, it is of even greater significance for smaller settlements.

Cultural and institutional differences matter. Some countries have a specific population threshold for defining urban municipalities, albeit with substantial variation (e.g. Czech Republic and Luxemburg use 2.000 inhabitants as a bottom line, Slovakia 5.000 inhabitants, Switzerland and Spain 10.000). In some countries the status of an urban municipality, town or other administrative terminology is granted by an upper administrative level (e.g. the State in the Czech Republic, Poland and Ireland, the Länder in Germany) and the designation may be based on an ad hoc decision. For example, in the UK city status has been conferred by the Monarch since 16th century, while in Poland and Germany historical events and political decisions determined the attribution of town rights/status. This illustrates the rather arbitrary, nationally specific, attribution of 'town status' across Europe in terms both of demographic threshold and formal appointment.

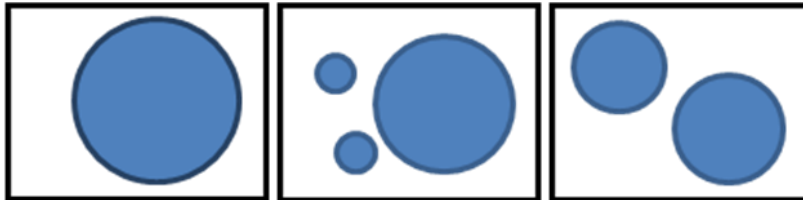
Therefore the town as settlement with its own built-up area (i.e. morphological criterion) differs from the town in terms of a territorial area as an administrative entity with functions, rights and duties (i.e. administrative criterion), and this difference means a large variety of forms in Europe. Therefore, the data collection and socio-economic characteristics that are attributed to urban administrative units refers in reality to a wide variety of morphological settlements that cannot be compared.

Figure 1 illustrates the three main empirical categories that describe the relationship between the built-up area and urban municipality, which are the reference for data collection.

The first category indicates those regions that mainly have an administrative unit for each settlement (which may match a defined population threshold). Traditionally, these can be found in

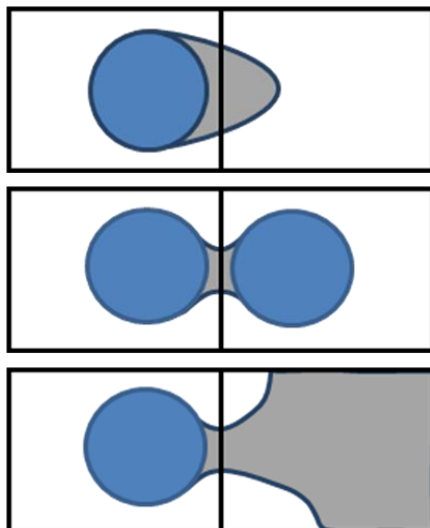
countries that experienced the Napoleonic reform of territorial administration (France, Spain, Italy, Belgium, etc.) and others inspired by it.

**Fig.1. Three types of relationships between urban administrative unit (the black square) and urban settlement (blue circle)**



However, in areas with fragmented settlements it is possible to have sub-divisional structures, with administrative representative structure (e.g. in Spain some municipalities may be divided into "Entidades singulares de población" and, in some cases, these may be governed by "Entidades locales menores"). The second category indicates those regions in which the administrative boundary contains more than one settlement, and the administrative function is allocated to the main settlement. Also in this case thresholds for the definition of the minimum size of the area may be attributed, while the status of municipality can be bestowed by a political act (e.g. Poland, Czech Republic).

**Fig.2. Settlements dynamics (blue core and grey expansion) and relationship with administrative unit / municipalitie (black box)**



Finally, a third category indicates countries with relatively large administrative units, in which several settlements of a certain dimension are included. This is the case in the UK and Sweden, for instance, where sub-administrative units ('parish' in UK) exist but do not have important official

(and statistical) roles. Also in this case, the attribution of urban administrative functions (and the possibility of electing a mayor, for instance, as in UK) derives from political decisions.

Moreover, additional complications may develop in the context of suburbanisation which has taken place in many countries over several decades. At the risk of being overly schematic, figure 2 indicates three sprawling phenomena that make the relationship between settlements and administration even more complicated.

The settlement expansion (represented in grey) may cross the administrative unit boundary (top figure), in some cases transforming two discrete settlements belonging to a different administrative unit into a built up continuum (centre figure). In other cases, the settlement may have become agglomerated by the expansion of a larger urban/metropolitan area (bottom figure).

As the paper by Smith in this special issue shows in table 2, this is a common phenomenon in Europe. While many towns (defined by their morphological boundaries) remain contained within a single municipal area it is also clear that morphological settlements have expanded across two or more municipalities (especially in sprawled cases such as Flanders in Belgium, or the Ruhr in Germany). This phenomenon not only has implications for data collection but also for urban governance issues (e.g. provision of and accessibility to services). Indeed, this process of urban expansion lies at the root of many attempts to reform administrative units, as in the case of Flanders, and in France with the current efforts to merge supra-municipal cooperation bodies.

#### *The urban centre and its functional region*

This alternative perspective moves away from an Euclidian interpretation of settlements in physical space, and focuses more on the territorial role that concentration of jobs and services play in structuring regional networks of flows of population. Many countries complement the identification of urban municipalities (towns and cities) with functional criteria rooted in the theoretical assumptions of Christaller's "Central Place Theory" (1933), in order to provide a better grasp of the complex structure of urbanised areas.

The functional urban region refers to a territorial unit that is spatially integrated through the repetitive daily relations between homes and jobs entailed in commuting to work (Hall and Hay, 1980; Bourne, 1975; van der Laan 1998; OECD, 2002; Antikainen, 2005; Karlsson and Olsson, 2006; Sýkora and Mulíček, 2009). Related to this understanding are concepts such as *travel-to-work area* (Coombes et al. 1982; Robson et al. 2006) and the *local labour market area* (van der Laan and

Schalke, 2001), both being based on the commuting patterns of the economically active population travelling daily from one municipality to another.

In some countries, such as France, Belgium and the Netherlands (Eurostat, 1992), the urban regions have an official definition for functional regions (e.g. *aire urbaine* in France, *région urbaine/Stadsgewest* in Belgium, *agglomération* in Switzerland). While in other countries, the concept of “urban regions” has been developed and applied empirically by research institutes or national agencies without official recognition (for instance Austria, Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Slovenia, Spain and the United Kingdom). Moreover, in some instances (e.g. in France: Region Centre, 2011; in Wales: Welsh Government, 2008), the functional approach has been enriched through the investigation of the gravitational areas of important services. In particular for smaller units, the presence of and access to services of general interests (e.g. health care, cultural centres, etc.) is important in the definition of specific hierarchies within the territory. However, the concept of functional (urban) region that at a general level refers to the socio-economic region organized around urban cores has important differences in its interpretation. At least two essential variants can be distinguished: one more focused on identifying the gravitational area of a core city, while the other focuses on the more detailed relationship between different units. Once again the big city bias plays an important role.

The first variant refers to functional urban regions/areas (e.g. FUA in IGEAT et al., 2006). It represents highly urbanized regions characterized by a high degree of spatial concentration. It leaves less urbanized areas outside functional urban regions (van der Laan, 1998; Pumain, 2004). It is the approach pursued for instance by DG Regio (Dijkstra & Poelman, 2012) that aims to identify a large urban region as a singular territorial feature. Also symbolically, all the smaller settlements are aggregated under the name of the big city conurbation.

The second variant assumes that every settlement has a gravitational area and the whole territory can be articulated in smaller micro-urban regions. Each settlement is linked to an urban region even if by weak ties (Hall & Hay, 1980; Sýkora and Mulíček 2009). These urban micro-regions break down the homogeneity of the functional urban areas and permit the reconstruction of different relations between settlements. The TOWN project has applied this approach to ten regions in Europe, as illustrated in paper by Sýkora and Mulíček in this special issue.

The exchanges and relations between the different parts of the urban region not only delimit the zone of influence of one or more central cores and specify the types of towns, but also allows the identification of different types of relationship between urban centres. Based on the ESPON 1.4.1 project (ÖIR et al., 2006), which distinguished networked, agglomerated, and autonomous towns,

the paper by Sýkora and Mulíček illustrates the result of refining this typology and its cross-tabulation with aspects of socio-economic performance. For instance, it suggests that autonomous towns, which have relatively low flows of commuters with other urban centres, are experiencing a process of decline (e.g. in terms of their working population, employment and service functions) in comparison to those that are networked or agglomerated in larger metropolitan areas.

### **3. Territorial relationship: two implicit approaches to smaller settlements**

One of the key issues concerns the relationship between settlements and their regional context. This raises a basic research question: to what extent are the general dynamics that characterize smaller settlements embedded in their regional context? Assuming this is the case it raises additional questions regarding the degree to which this regional embeddedness operates in a deterministic manner or still leaves space for independent action on the part of such places? In other words, two contrasting assumptions can be identified in existing urban studies and in general in geographical studies, which (with a certain degree of exaggeration) can be characterised as 'regional determinism' vs. 'territorial autonomy'.

The 'regional determinist' approach assumes that the socio-economic dynamics and performance of smaller settlements are solely determined by their regional location. Here the region is conceived as being relatively homogeneous and the matrix of relational forces between territorial features, and meso and macro driving forces operate in a deterministic manner leaving no room for manoeuvre by smaller settlements. This conceptualisation of the conurbation around a large urban centre through functional relationships (e.g. Large Urban Zone) implies that all smaller settlements are merely part of a larger urban structure. The (urban) core is the driving force in which the other settlements are embedded and this core structures and 'fixes' the functional relationships between places.

The 'territorial autonomy' approach, on the other hand, views the 'urban area' as an independent territorial element whose socio-economic dynamics can be understood in *situ*. This has important implications for the policy capacities of and opportunities available to (smaller) urban areas. Here they are conceived as 'territorial forms' that have a, variable, independent capacity to develop their own socio-spatial trajectory. In this approach the regional context operates as a neutral context. This approach influences many of the studies that focus on specific issues, such as the role of the creative class (Lorentzen & van Heur, 2012), some sustainable development practices (Knox & Mayer, 2009), and in general the definition of strategic agendas for urban municipalities (Elisei, 2014). In these studies (smaller) urban areas appear as autonomous territorial elements and the focus is on how they create a policy agenda and seeks to 'manage' their socio-economic development. The regional scale and its role in creating a general framework for action fade into the background.

The TOWN research, and arguably most of the research in urban studies, is located between these two positions and herein lies the complexity of this research topic. This approach to SMSTs implies the need to understand the complex multi-scalar relationships that characterise their territorial

context. Hence, the issue is to what extent smaller settlements, that are embedded in wider regional macro dynamics in larger (urban or rural) areas, have their own specific socio-economic, cultural and administrative capacities and thus have a certain degree of territorial autonomy to 'steer their own path' that is worthy of study.

The problem we face is that there is a lack of information about relevant pan-European trends in terms of socio-economic dynamics, economic profiles and role(s) and this gap in our knowledge impedes further investigation of the existence of structural factors and their impacts on/implications for settlements such as SMSTs. This special issue provides new insights and throws light on the issue. The papers by Servillo & Russo and Smith provide evidence that the regional context has a major influence on the general socio-economic factors influencing the developmental trends of smaller settlements. Macro dynamics seem to be dominant, particularly in regions strongly characterised by smaller settlements.

However, the paper by Hamdouch et al. indicates that SMSTs have a certain, albeit variable, strategic capacity to 'autonomously' steer their own development trajectory. This is related to their particular circumstances and, among other factors, is influenced, non-deterministically, by their institutional context which frames their capacity to act in terms of policy development to address those circumstances. By combining the analyses of socio-economic profiles, economic performance and functional roles of SMSTs within regions, the authors were able to develop a typology of towns which demonstrate, on the one hand, the way towns take on particular roles within a region (centres of administration, residential services, tourism, R&D, manufacturing, etc.) and, on the other, why towns are what they are due to the impact of contextual (regional) factors.

Therefore, a multi-scalar analysis of the phenomenon is necessary, one in which local and non-local dynamics are articulated. At the same time, it requires specific choices to be made concerning the relevant interpretative categories and the understanding of the functional regional relationships between urban nodes and their consequent structuring effects.



#### **4. Policy capacity and opportunity**

Until recently at EU level there has been relatively little attention directed specifically at SMSTs. However, a series of developments since the mid-2000s have offered greater possibilities of, at least, developing policy approaches and associated policy instruments that may be appropriate for 'thinking about' and addressing the situation of SMSTs. What perhaps signalled this possibility was the publication of the Green Paper on Territorial Cohesion, subtitled 'Turning Diversity into Strength' (CEC 2008) which was quickly followed by the related publication of the Barca Report (Barca 2009) and the embedding of the 'place-based approach' as a key principle and practice of EU territorial development regardless of the type of territory in which places are located.

Of course the Green Paper's argument that Europe is a very diverse continent and that this diversity is a strength to be cherished and built upon carries with it strong normative connotations about the desirability of a form of European, national and sub-national territorial development that is polycentric, 'balanced and harmonious' in which the 'triple' goals of economic, social and territorial cohesion are compatible with competitiveness. In this approach all places have strengths/possibilities that can provide the basis for (endogenous) development, albeit with external support and embedded in appropriate multi-level governance systems, and local governance arrangements that are internally coherent and function across territorial boundaries. The Barca Report promotes the supply of integrated goods and services tailored to contexts, and argues for associated institutional changes (Barca, 2009, p17).

This approach clearly offers possibilities for SMSTs, either individually or collectively, to address their situation and develop strategies within a regional context that build on their particular strengths while tackling their weaknesses. However, it does require them to think in innovative ways about their situation, how governance is organised and across administrative boundaries. It also requires them to be aware of and able to engage with appropriate European, national and regional strategies, policies and programmes. For most SMSTs this is a major challenge and the evidence collected as part of the TOWN project through detailed case studies suggests that to date only a very few have risen to the challenge. Hamdouch et al.'s article focuses on the way(s) towns are seeking (or are not) to create their own development trajectories by making political choices on how and what to promote, improve and invest in critical assets, such as natural and built heritage, quality of life, skills, know-how, networks, partnerships, etc.

Nor have most national and regional levels of governance been particularly mindful of SMSTs' situations; the TOWN research found that most failed to consider the role(s) and function(s) of SMSTs. On the one hand, Servillo & Russo, Hamdouch et al., and Sýkora and Mulíček's papers

indicate the importance of contextual factors, such as the macro and meso dynamics affecting the macro areas, institutional settings, position within the urban hierarchy and relations with other urban areas in the region for understanding the profile, performance and the role of towns. On the other hand, Atkinson's paper shows how only a few (e.g. Catalonia and Wales) actually included SMSTs in their regional approach as part of wider spatial/territorial development strategies. In these instances support (including resources and planning policies) was given to specific SMSTs to help them develop within sub-regional contexts. This does, however, mean that the relevant SMSTs have, or can develop, the capacity to act. The implications of this approach was that many other SMSTs were at best allocated 'subsidiary' roles and functions as part of a sub-regional spatial approach to development, whilst some were largely left to their fate.

The new phase of the post-2014 Cohesion and Structural Funds offers Member States, regions and SMSTs the possibility of new resources and associated instruments that could be used by SMSTs to develop such local strategies. The European Commission through the Common Strategic Framework (CSF) has created a framework for enhanced coordination between the different funds. The goal of the CSF (European Commission 2012, p3) is to "...increase coherence between policy commitments made in the context of Europe 2020 and investment on the ground". The aim is to improve the integrated and focussed use of different strands of the Structural Funds (e.g. ERDF, ESF and the Rural Development pillar of CAP [EAFRD] and the EMFF) to support the achievement of Europe 2020 across the EU and within Member States. This, along with the new instruments, potentially allows Member States and Managing Authorities to develop approaches that could be of benefit to SMSTs. There are a range of relevant new instruments: Integrated Territorial Investment (ITI), integrated sustainable urban development (ISUD) and Community-Led Local Development (CCLD). These instruments encourage Member States and Managing Authorities to develop a more integrated and territorially focused approach with a substantial 'bottom-up' component and gives local communities the possibility of taking a leading role in the design and delivery of appropriate local development strategies. These new instruments offer the potential for an enhanced development of SMSTs regardless of their location. Atkinson's paper develops further some reflections on these opportunities.

What all of these instruments do, is to encourage Member States and Managing Authorities to adopt a more integrated and territorially focused approach that includes a significant 'bottom-up' element supported by multi-sectoral territorial partnerships. If this is to be of benefit to SMSTs it will require three things. First, at the national and regional level there will need to be recognition of the significance of SMSTs and then the creativity, capacity and political will at these levels to engage in developing genuinely strategic and integrated territorial approaches that bridge the silos

of EU and national funding streams in order to develop a SMST focus. Second, it will require similar developments at SMST level, new ways of thinking about local development, governance and the relevance of local territorial boundaries to emerge. Third, this will also require the development of appropriate multi-level and territorial governance formations that support these initiatives.

Finally at a political level, the 2015 EU Latvian Presidency produced a report on SMSTS (Latvian Presidency, 2015), largely based on the TOWN research, which argued that the EU and Member States should give greater priority to them and develop appropriate territorial and place-based approaches. Together with the focus on the inner peripheries advocated by the Italian presidency and the role of urban areas (in particular the smaller ones) in cross-border conditions as advocated by the Luxembourg presidency, this represents an important policy recognition at the EU level during the trio presidency of 2014-15. This has helped raise the overall profile of SMSTs across Europe and placed them more firmly on the European territorial development agenda. Although what actual impacts this has at EU and Member State levels remains to be seen.

## **5. Conclusion. An overview of the different contributions of the special issue**

This special issue argues that the role of SMSTs in territorial development and spatial dynamics in the globalised context has been underestimated. The research on which it is based has produced evidence of a diversity of territorial population structures (Russo et al., this special issue). It has been able to identify regions and countries in which SMSTs constitute organised dense urban hierarchies structured by adjacent larger urban areas, as well as regions with a more balanced and 'looser' structure characterised by settlements of smaller size. Moreover, the special issue highlights the complexity of multi-scalar dynamics and the variety of regional/national contexts. First, it provides evidence indicating the importance of macro- and meso-trends affecting socio-economic dynamics (Servillo and Russo, this special issue) and that multiple scale effects and national contexts matter. If this is the case, paying specific attention to SMSTs could offer opportunities to increase the resilience of territories facing global economic trends because towns are rooted in local specificities and existing territorial capital.

Focusing on large urban areas runs the risk of ignoring the uniqueness of SMSTs. In this sense, evidence supports the importance of both the specific socio-economic compositions of smaller settlements and factors that determine their economic dynamics (Smith, this special issue) and of their strategic capacity to perform in their local and regional contexts (Hamdouch et al., in this special issue). SMSTs have their own specific 'urban' (territorial) capital and related territorial potentials that root global, regional and local dynamics 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). Therefore, SMSTs may exhibit different spatial performances determined by their context and specific territorial identities.

From this perspective, if urban orthodoxy tends to overlook smaller settlements in the shadow of larger urban areas or in regional interpretations (Bell and Jayne, 2009), there is another trap that has to be avoided: the idea that SMSTs are 'free electrons' with their own autonomous territorial trajectory, uninfluenced by any wider 'scale-dependency'. Hence, a research approach to SMSTs has to face the dual challenge of identifying their specificities while simultaneously situating them in terms of their regional embeddedness. At the same time it is necessary to understand the role of settlements in urban hierarchies, and how they have specific roles for larger areas in terms of job and service centres (Sýkora and Mulíček, 2015, this special issue).

Finally, a policy overview on different approaches and on the role of EU in pursuing a renewed urban agenda (EC, 2014) shows the lacunae but also the opportunities for supporting such multi-

scalar dynamics and bottom-up activities that would facilitate new forms of tailored regional governance dynamics. Atkinson's article firstly considers approaches at European and national levels to SMSTs arguing that in recent years there has been a limited recognition that SMSTs have a significant role to play in the European territory. The article then provides an illustrative selection of towns from the ten case study countries showing that the category SMSTs contains a varied and often dissimilar group of towns in a wide variety of regional contexts. Policy approaches should be developed within particular national and regional contexts with support from the European level.

To conclude, the proposed Special Issue provides a coherent theoretical and methodological approach to the analysis of small towns that addresses their various spatial and socio-political dimensions. It provides a means to carry out empirical analysis combining qualitative enquiry and existing data sets across Europe in an interdisciplinary manner, providing new understandings of and insights into SMSTs from both academic and policy perspectives. Further investigations can start from here, creating the possibility to enrich both conceptual approaches and knowledge production.

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