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# Commentary
# Governing post-pandemic territories: in search of non-standard territorial governance approaches

Claims towards a paradigm shift in how societies are organised in space, formulated in the early stage of the COVID-19 pandemic, faded away. Nevertheless, the pandemic contributed to ongoing changes in how people settle, live and work, calling for a shift from traditional territorial governance models to softer approaches able to tackle non-standard geographies. This commentary reflects on trends boosted by the pandemic and discusses functional approaches introduced at the EU level. We argue that the post-pandemic recovery should be seen as a 'window of opportunity' to consolidate innovative territorial governance instruments into a more coherent framework for place-based action.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, post-pandemic, territorial governance, non-standard geographies, soft spaces, functional areas

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has certainly challenged our way of living and raised questions on ever-increasing urbanisation (Cotella and Vitale Brovarone, 2021). However, the advocated paradigm shift in how our societies are organised in space, and the related claims for an urban exodus to the rural, seem to have faded away (Erdelen and Richardson, 2021). Whereas reflecting on the impact of the pandemic from the eye of the storm may have contributed to magnify its impact and implications (Cheshmehzangi, 2021), in this contribution we argue that it should not be discarded as an episodic event. On the contrary, it helped to unveil – and often accelerate – phenomena that were already ongoing, in relation to how people settle, live and work. Some evidence in support of this argument includes the increasing trend in digital nomadism and amenity migration, the complex balance between depopulating rural areas and newcoming migrant population (Ehn et al., 2022; Frolich and Schmidt, 2023; Gallent et al., 2023; Gkartzios and Lowe, 2019), the increasing attention to food

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provision systems (Lever et al., 2022; Regnier-Davies et al., 2022) and the organisation of new models of energy provision and consumption (Di Silvestre et al., 2021). Together with the spatially fluid, asymmetric impact of the crisis (in relation to both health and socioeconomic dynamics) (Cotella et al., 2023), these phenomena call for a shift from traditional territorial governance and policy models to more flexible, softer approaches, able to grasp and adapt to the complexity of the multiple non-standard geographies they should steer and govern (Cotella, 2023a; 2023b).

In order to shed some light on the matter, in this commentary we discuss how this challenge may be taken up from a multilevel perspective, taking stock of different initiatives put in place by the European Union (EU), that however are still characterised by a high level of fragmentation (Purkarthofer and Schmitt, 2021). After this brief introduction, the contribution reflects on the evolving arguments generated during the COVID-19 pandemic, from those claiming for a radical paradigm shift in the spatial organisation of societies to the turn in the direction of recovery and the planning of more resilient futures. Next, we propose an understanding of the pandemic as an 'incubator of non-standard geographies', which contributed to accelerating ongoing trends towards functional development models, hard to manage by territorial governance actions pivoted upon rigid administrative units. This commentary then presents some initiatives that have been put in place through time at the EU level in order to deal with the emerging functional phenomena, such as integrated territorial investments, community-led local development, sustainable urban mobility plans, the targeted support to energy communities and enterprises clusters etc. The concluding section rounds off the contribution, discussing how, whereas these initiatives have certainly produced an impact, their adoption in the member states is still mostly voluntary, episodic in nature and uncoordinated. Acknowledging these challenges, we argue that the post-pandemic recovery should be seen as a 'window of opportunity' (Kingdon, 2010), a specific moment in time when contextual conditions may favour the strengthening and consolidation of the innovative territorial governance models and policies that the EU has been working on for some time now. In so doing, the EU can offer actors in the member states a coherent framework for action, and with it the unprecedented chance to adopt functional territorial governance models that are tailored to the actual characteristics of each place.

## The COVID-19 pandemic: much ado about nothing?

Having hit particularly strong in those metropolitan areas that have through time consolidated as the main drivers of development, the COVID-19 pandemic put into question the relentless march of urbanisation and concentration of people in cities. The downsides of concentrating large numbers of people in small areas were before then considered as minor drawbacks of these irreversible and even desirable processes,

compared to the advantages the latter brings along in terms of economies of scale, access to diverse skills and services, interconnectivity and leisure (Cotella and Vitale Brovarone, 2021). Since its inception, the COVID-19 pandemic challenged this view, flagging up the need to reflect on the fragility and vulnerability of our consolidated way of living, overall raising questions on the ever-growing urban concentration that characterises our society.

A number of voices started pointing out the need for a paradigm shift, advocating in favour of the resettlement of underpopulated or abandoned rural areas. For instance, in April 2020 the Italian urban planner Stefano Boeri depicted the resettlement of small municipalities and abandoned villages as an opportunity for facilitating a contraction of urbanisation trends in favour of social and physical dispersion (Giovara, 2020). A few days later, Rem Koolhas argued that the brightness of our future depends on how we will be able to deal with that 98 per cent of our territory that is not yet 'urban' (Piccoli, 2020). Similarly, several media supported the storyline that residents were abandoning cities for the countryside. However, already during the first year of the pandemic and even more so in the following ones, these claims for and ideas of an urban exodus started to be questioned (Florida, 2020; Whitaker, 2021). Although out-migration flows from dense metropolitan cores to sparse rural settlements were registered, especially during the heaviest waves of the pandemic which implied mobility restrictions, these changes were less relevant than anticipated. The overestimation of population movements was particularly pronounced in remote rural areas. In spite of the narrative of a rural renaissance and urban exodus speculated by the media, some studies highlighted that out-migration flows have mostly landed in areas with low population density close to cities and holiday destinations (González-Leonardo et al., 2022; Vogiazides and Kawalerowicz, 2022; Rowe et al., 2023). Evidence from various countries across the globe points out that population movements from dense big cities to sparse rural areas were smaller than expected, but also that the impacts of COVID-19 leading to out-migration from cities was temporary in most cases (Rowe et al., 2023).

The excess of expectations regarding a rural revival was the result of stereotypical narratives of the idyllic rural. Such visions are myopic in the face of spirals of decline that have undermined the liveability and social infrastructure of rural areas, especially remote ones (Oliva and Camarero, 2019; Vitale Brovarone et al., 2022; Tomaney et al., 2023). Over the last century, urban–rural relations evolved into a complex system of functional interdependences; the attraction of urban poles progressively drained out active population groups from these areas, increasing their ageing index. In parallel with depopulation, de-anthropisation, weakening of social ties and loss of cultural values and identity progressively affected these areas. The urban society permeated the rural, leading to a proliferation of second homes and accommodation facilities, but also importing its economic, political and cultural models. The value of rural

areas as places of production gave way to their attractiveness as places for tourism and leisure (Gallent and Gkartzios, 2019). However strong and disruptive, the pandemic must therefore be placed within a process of marginalisation that has been affecting these areas for decades.

At the same time, although the effects of the COVID-19 did not produce a radical paradigm shift in the spatial organisation of societies, the pandemic prompted the turn in the direction of recovery and the planning of more resilient futures (Cotella et al., 2023). At the European level, one of the main political reactions to the pandemic has been the introduction of the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF). According to the European Commission, the aim of the RRF is to mitigate the economic and social impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and make European economies and societies more sustainable, resilient and better prepared for the challenges and opportunities of green and digital transition. Despite representing only a temporary recovery instrument that is expected to run from 2020 to 2026, the RRF has embarked on a double objective: first, it has been conceived primarily as a reaction to the immediate pandemic effects; second, it took the momentum to support countries and territories in their recovery path to address green and digital transition. Overall, the RRF embodies well the EU approach to the post-pandemic era. The vision it communicates is not one of a radical change in development and settlement models, rather one aiming at the recovery of the pre-pandemic status quo, together with the enhancement of the overall resilience of the European territorial system.

Whereas the pandemic does not seem to have been able to inspire any radical shift in the way our society conceives its future, it did contribute to put a number of ongoing changes under the magnifying glass, as it will be further discussed in the coming section.

## The pandemic as an incubator of non-standard geographies

The COVID-19 pandemic shed light on and acted as a catalyst of emerging trends towards functional development models, contributing to accelerate phenomena that were already ongoing in relation to people's settlement, consumption, work and leisure dynamics. On the one hand, the impact of the pandemic spread on metropolitan and regional territories following fluid functional patterns, in turn calling for actions that do not respond to traditional administrative units but should be tailored to softer functional geographies. On the other hand, it made evident and boosted some trends that let emerge the need to reflect on how to approach the non-standard geographies that they generate on the ground, such as, among others, digital nomadism and amenity migration (Ehn et al., 2022; Frolich and Schmidt, 2023; Gallent et al., 2023), the increasing attention to food provision systems (Lever et al., 2022; Regnier-Davies et al., 2022) and the organisation of new models of energy generation, management

and consumption (Koukoufikis et al., 2023). Each of these functional practices and geographies calls to reflect on the limits of traditional policies and planning processes, and on the introduction of innovative territorial governance models and practices (Cotella, 2023b).

## Remote working, digital nomadism and amenity migration

The social distancing measures and restrictions to mobility during the heaviest waves of the COVID-19 pandemic led to an unprecedented structural increase in remote (or 'smart') working, having in turn deep socio-spatial implications (Gifford, 2022; Vogl and Akhavan, 2022). Not only has working from home been recognised in many sectors of society as a way of work that is beneficial for many (Hensher et al., 2023), but the possibilities of unsettled digital working opened up new opportunities and practices, especially for knowledge workers. Less central areas become very attractive, as the pandemic generated a new look on where to live and work (Akhavan et al., 2023). A variety of territories are working to attract 'digital nomads',[1] branding their areas, introducing changes in the previous main functions as well as creating infrastructures and services to welcome these populations, giving rise to a non-standard geographic trend (ESPON, 2023). In this case, it is not the COVID-19 pandemic that determined digital nomadism. On the contrary, the pandemic has temporarily halted digital nomadism due to restrictions to mobility, while in the long term it has contributed to digital nomadism by getting organisations and workers more experienced with remote working (Adekoya et al., 2022). Another trend that the COVID-19 pandemic triggered in some cases and boosted in others is amenity migration (Gosnell and Abrams, 2011), mostly due to 'push' factors of the increased disamenity of city life in that period (Argent and Plummer, 2022). Amenity migration has some similarities with digital nomadism, and overlaps with it in some respects, but involves a broader set of 'migrants', and entails different life (and work) patterns linked to the transition of rural areas from places of production to places of consumption (Gallent and Gkartzios, 2019). Although, like digital nomadism, amenity migration existed well before COVD-19, various studies reported an amplification of amenity demand during and after the pandemic, with implications for the housing market (Gallent et al., 2023; Kordel and Naumann, 2023) and for local socioeconomic systems.

The evolution of remote working, digital nomadism and amenity migration since COVID-19 has and will certainly continue to change geographical patterns, and needs tailored policy responses in different respects. For instance, in remote and rural areas with poor digital infrastructure, there is the need to provide facilities to enable remote work. Also, providing decent access to services to these – more or less permanent

1 A temporary, medium to high-income, and potentially short-term, cyclical population, often working in creative/knowledge industries or managerial positions.

– new dwellers is an issue, especially in peripheral and rural areas. As Wang et al. note, digital nomadism is an 'exemplar and ideal type of hypermobility' (Wang et al., 2020, 1385), following fluid work and life patterns. Infrastructure and service provision needed for this to occur would need to be systematically analysed. Some territories are already responding to this trend, providing working spaces, digital infrastructures and incentives to attract these new inhabitants. However, it is still not clear if and to what extent they will contribute to local development and community well-being in the long term (Vogl and Akhavan, 2022; Brouwer and Mariotti, 2023).

## Regional food systems

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic disruptively affected food supply chains, determining unprecedented stresses (Deconinck et al., 2020) and shedding light on the fragility of the prevailing food supply systems. Vertically integrated food supply chains, with large-scale production and centralised planning and control were seriously challenged by the outbreak of COVID-19 (Marusak et al., 2021). Unexpected consumer demand and the sudden and dramatic drop in wholesale demand by restaurants, hotels and schools, coupled with the surge of grocery retail demand due to the significant increase of meals at home as well as consumer panic behaviours (Hall et al., 2020; Hobbs, 2020) determined system failures. By contrast, regional food supply chains proved to be more adaptive and resilient, quickly pivoting their operations to provide their customers with convenient and safe purchasing mechanisms (Marusak et al., 2021).

Unveiling the lack of resilience of the prevailing large-scale, vertically integrated food supply systems, the pandemic triggered transformative changes and called to reflect on the limits of how food systems are organised (Chenarides et al., 2021). Hard, 'managerial' approaches to food systems governance embedded in national food systems and international supply chains were supplanted by softer, regional (or even hyper-local) place-based systems and community-led initiatives (Lever et al., 2022; Regnier-Davies et al., 2022; Turcu and Rotolo, 2022). Small-scale farmers, peri-urban food growing projects, farm shops, as well as mutual aid groups collaborating with civil society initiatives, demonstrated remarkable resilience. The COVID-19 pandemic revealed the potential of this largely invisible network of heterogeneous actors, contributing to the development of regional place-based food systems, often initiated by informal networks. These practices, characterised by mutuality and inter-dependence of hybrid connections of food system actors, embedded change across administrative boundaries and geographical scales (Lever et al., 2022).

The many successful small-scale initiatives, often called from or led by grassroots, on the one hand made evident the limits of the lack of flexibility in institutional policies, and on the other hand called to reflect on if and how to, besides emergency

responses, scale up and institutionalise these practices and make them part of transition pathways. The COVID-19 emergency was then an opportunity to rethink and reshape existing food systems policies, transitioning to smaller-scale, more flexible and adaptive systems (Carey et al., 2021; Marusak et al., 2021). James et al. (2021) suggest ten principles, based on the '5Ds of redistribution' (decolonisation, decarbonisation, diversification, democratisation and decommodification) and the '5Rs of regeneration' (relationality, respect, reciprocity, responsibility and rights). To this, non-standard territorial governance mechanisms are needed, able to adapt to the complexity of making food systems more resilient, healthy and just.

## Energy communities

COVID-19 had implications also on the energy sector. In the short term, an unprecedented fall in energy demand (primarily due to mobility restrictions and diminished industrial activities), as well as the breakdown in international trade which disrupted supply chains for energy installations, production facilities and infrastructures, with dramatic shortages in essential raw materials (Kuzemko et al., 2020; D'Orazio, 2024). The pandemic also profoundly impacted the energy market, disturbing its equilibrium with fluctuating prices of energy products and stocks, impacting both energy importers and exporters (Zhang et al., 2021).

Notwithstanding the impacts of the breakdown in international trade and shortages in raw materials, which delayed installations, the renewable energy sector displayed resilience and enhanced competitiveness (D'Orazio, 2024). Several countries increased their investment in renewable sources, turning to feasible energy policies to guarantee energy security and mitigate energy poverty (Zhang et al., 2021), advancing the transition towards low-carbon energy systems. As such, the COVID-19 pandemic catalysed change, accelerating an ongoing trend of de-globalisation of energy industries (Kuzemko et al., 2020) and leading to significant transformations in policies and priorities towards more sustainable and environmentally friendly energy systems.

In this context, transformative community-driven initiatives, such as energy communities, paved the way for citizen-driven energy transition. Energy communities can take any form of a legal entity – for instance, that of an association, a cooperative, a partnership, a non-profit organisation or a small/medium-sized enterprise – that aims at collectively generating, managing and sharing energy resources, prioritising inclusivity and facilitating equitable access to clean and affordable energy (Koukoufikis et al., 2023). At the same time, they target consumption reduction through awareness campaigns, low-tech energy efficiency or smart building techniques (Schreuder and Horlings, 2022). They have the potential to provide direct benefits to citizens by increasing energy efficiency, lowering energy costs and creating local job opportunities. By supporting citizen participation, energy communities can improve the flexibility

and security of the electricity system through demand response and storage, in so doing offering a means to re-structure existing energy systems step-by-step. Overall, the diffusion of energy communities contributes to increasing public acceptance of renewable energy projects and makes it easier to attract private investments in the clean energy transition, in so doing paving the way for a clean energy transition while moving citizens to the fore.

## The European Union (fragmented) contribution to non-standard functional approaches

Whereas all the above trends may potentially contribute to establishing virtuous and more resilient societal dynamics – whether through a repopulation of remote areas, the increase of food systems resilience or the overall sustainability and security of the energy system – due to their fluid nature they are hard to tackle through territorial governance initiatives based on rigid administrative boundaries. To steer and govern them in a comprehensive and integrated way, in so doing maximising their societal impact, it is necessary to adopt place-based approaches that take into account the functional nature of the actual territorial development dynamics. In the last decade the EU has produced a number of experiments in this area, that are however still in search of consolidation.

The EU organises its spatial policy drawing on its institutional mandate provided by the member states through the introduction in the treaties of the objective of economic and social cohesion, reinforced in 2007 by the addition of an explicit territorial dimension (Davoudi, 2005; Faludi, 2006; Medeiros, 2016). The conceptual architecture behind territorial cohesion is based on the premise that 'geography matters' and its aim is 'to prevent uneven regional development from reducing overall growth potential' (Council decision 2006/702/EC) (Cotella and Dabrowski, 2021). In 2009, Fabrizio Barca wrote an extensive report entitled 'An agenda for a reformed cohesion policy: A place-based approach to meeting European Union challenges and expectations' (Barca, 2009). Since then, the expression 'place-based approach' has become commonplace and is typically used in connection with the territorial dimension (Asprogerekas and Preza, 2022). The cornerstone of Barca's report is its rejection of an over-simplistic view of existing administrative regions as the universal units of regional development, as they are not appropriate for the implementation of integrated solutions. These considerations were translated both within EU level guidance documents aimed at cohesive territorial development – as the recent Territorial Agenda 2030 – and in the agenda of the EU cohesion policy 2014–2020. More importantly, the latter was complemented by the introduction of specific instruments dedicated to the promotion of integrated territorial development aimed at tackling functional dynamics from an innovative perspective (Purkarthofer and Schmitt, 2021).

Among them, the most relevant are certainly the integrated territorial investments and community-led local development. The aim of Integrated Territorial Investments (ITIs) is to make it easier to promote a 'place-based' form of policy making through the development and implementation of integrated territorial development strategies that follow functional logics and use funding from different sources. ITIs can increase administrative capacity to deal with integrated territorial development at the most appropriate level. This could, in the longer term, help to widen capacities for conducting territorial development through the preparation of integrated strategies on a variable set of topics, and the promotion of flexible dialogue and joint action within functional territories, in coordination with other local, regional and national strategies as well as by fostering partnership among several territorial development stakeholders, such as local governments and other public bodies, business, NGOs and representatives of local community groups. Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) is a tool for involving citizens at the local level in developing responses to the social, environmental and economic challenges they face in their territories. This should concretely occur through the design and implementation of local integrated strategies that help territories' transition to a more sustainable future. CLLD can be a particularly powerful tool, especially in times of crisis, showing that local communities can take concrete steps towards forms of economic development, which are smarter, more sustainable and more inclusive, in line with the EU post-pandemic vision of development.[2]

Both ITI and CLLD can be used to promote integrated actions aimed at a more sustainable development in any type of territory, in so doing detaching the action of the engaged stakeholders from the traditional administrative units of the public action. The relative leeway given to domestic actors in defining the geographical and thematic scope of an ITI or a CLLD may, in principle, favour their use as innovative instruments through which to tackle the non-standard geographies and spatial relations generated by the processes that have been discussed in the previous section, for instance, allowing a given territory the opportunity to develop an integrated development strategy aimed at counteracting depopulation through place-branding and structural action to increase connectivity, or at supporting a regional food system.

Beside ITI and CLLD, the EU has through time introduced additional initiatives, aimed at approaching territorial development from a functional perspective. Among them, an important role in relation to the post-pandemic recovery of metropolitan areas around Europe and to the enhancement of their sustainability and resilience is

2 The approach draws on the assumption that local actors have a better knowledge of local challenges that need to be addressed and the resource and opportunities available in their territories, therefore they are able to mobilise local resources for the development process in a way that does not happen with top-down approaches. This gives local actors a greater sense of ownership and commitment to the projects, which allows them to make the best of the local assets.

played by the Sustainable Urban Mobility Plans (SUMPs), strategic plans designed to satisfy the mobility needs of people and businesses in cities and their surroundings for a better quality of life. By definition SUMPs are anchored to functional logics and geographies, as they should be pivoted around traffic flows linking urban cores with their commuting zones. More specifically, a SUMP's main aim is to make the functional urban area it is intended for more accessible and to provide high-quality, safe and sustainable low-emission mobility to, through and in that area.[3] A SUMP foresees cooperation and synergies between all levels of government, local, regional, national and across different policy areas. It should be prepared in partnership with local residents and stakeholders and ensure a variety of sustainable transport options for the safe, healthy and fluid passage of people and goods.

More recently, particular attention has been dedicated by the European Commission to supporting citizen-driven energy actions that contribute to the clean energy transition, advancing energy efficiency within local communities. Acknowledging the emergence of energy communities around Europe, the European Parliament has provided funding for three different projects that contribute to the dissemination of best practices and provide technical assistance for the development of concrete energy community initiatives across the EU: the Energy Communities Repository, the Rural Energy Community Advisory Hub, and the support service for Citizen-Led Renovation. Importantly, through the 2019 Clean Energy for all Europeans package, the EU introduced the concept of energy communities in its legislation, notably as citizen energy communities and renewable energy communities. More specifically, the directive on common rules for the internal electricity market ((EU) 2019/944) includes new rules that enable active consumer participation, individually or through citizen energy communities, in all markets, either by generating, consuming, sharing or selling electricity, or by providing flexibility services through demand response and storage. The directive aims to improve the uptake of energy communities and makes it easier for citizens to integrate efficiently in the electricity system, as active participants. In addition, the revised renewable energy directive (2018/2001/EU) aims to strengthen the role of renewables self-consumers and renewable energy communities.

Finally, an additional EU initiative that in some ways supports a functional approach and allows the tackling of non-standard development dynamics is the so-called Joint Cluster Initiatives (JCI), also known as Euroclusters, launched as an instrument to implement the EU industrial strategy. Euroclusters aims at contributing to accelerating the transition to a green and digital economy, through the creation of a network that improves resilience in industrial ecosystems and develops interconnected value

3 It should in particular support zero-emission mobility and the implementation of an urban transport system that contributes to better overall performance of the transport network, in particular through the development of infrastructure for the seamless circulation of zero-emission vehicles and multimodal passenger hubs to facilitate first- and last-mile connections, and of multimodal freight terminals serving urban areas.

chains in the EU single market, while at the same time boosting access to global supply and value chains.[4] More in particular, clusters are groups of firms, related economic actors and institutions located near each other and with sufficient scale to develop specialised expertise, services, resources, suppliers and skills. In this light, they are clearly functional in nature, and through the Euroclusters initiative the EU aims at targeting them through cross-sectoral, interdisciplinary and trans-European strategic initiatives gathering industry clusters and other economic actors to implement the EU industrial strategy.

## Discussion and conclusions

Territorial governance should play a critical role in addressing and managing territorial development dynamics in the post-pandemic scenario, in so doing ensuring that the non-standard geographies triggered by multiple emerging trends are tackled effectively. In its action, however, it most often still relies on rigid administrative hierarchies and boundaries, an approach that is path-dependently rooted in the functioning of traditional public administration institutions. As argued by Faludi (2018), this view fails to account for the complexities posed by contemporary territorial development (and political) dynamics. Territorialism and the logics behind it are hard to overcome, as a consequence of the perceived benefits that they deliver in terms of ownership, security, organisation and democracy. Nonetheless, authorities and actors at all territorial levels have progressively started to acknowledge the need to look beyond traditional administrative units, to address key contemporary challenges.

The emerging trends that the COVID-19 pandemic has unveiled and boosted are some of the non-standard geographies that need to be addressed through innovative approaches and tools. As our territories face increasingly dynamic and interconnected challenges, it is important to embrace a functional understanding of territorial governance, as a means to tackle functional dynamics. The latter have been the subject of fertile debate at the European level (Dijkstra et al., 2019; Dijkstra and Jacobs-Crisioni, 2023) and the EU is actively supporting functional territorial governance with an emphasis on the importance of place-based, participatory governance. Territorial delivery mechanisms such as ITIs, CLLD, SUMPs, energy communities and industrial clusters make it possible to fund functional area strategies under the cohesion policy, in so doing providing an articulated framework within which domestic actors can structure their action.

Despite the fertile conceptual debate and the growing number of experimental initiatives, however, the notion of functional area has not yet been fully embraced by policy actors at the different levels, and territorial development agencies still struggle to

4 There are over 1,500 clusters located in more than 200 EU-27 regions. Clusters account for almost 25 per cent of total EU employment.

undertake initiatives that extend across administrative boundaries. When examining the initiatives generated in the member states as a consequence of the introduced policy frameworks, it clearly emerges that regions and cities are interested and willing to make use of the new tools (Servillo, 2019; Păceșilă et al., 2022). However, the lack of guidance and regulation on how to use them – at least in part imputable to the lack of territorial governance competences at the EU level, hence to the caution that the European Commission pays when interacting with that sphere in order to avoid potential clashes with the member states – had often led to uncertainty and, in turn, to a rather fragmented and differential implementation. As a consequence, it is rather common that the characteristics and aims of the new tools are misinterpreted, or their use disregarded as too complex and cumbersome (Ferry et al., 2018).

Overall, to set up effective functional territorial governance episodes – e.g. in terms of mobilising partners, maintaining the momentum of dialogue and cooperation, defining roles and responsibilities in dialogue with local, regional and sectoral authorities – remains a highly complex and challenging business that raises questions of legitimacy, competing jurisdiction, delimitation and added value. It can be argued that a functional approach necessitates a shift towards integrated governance structures that, having identified the issues at stake, bring together diverse stakeholders from multiple administrative units whose interaction may be functional to address them towards a solution. The key challenge seems to be to find the right problem 'owners', that are able to address a given functional conundrum at the right scale and with the relevant tool(s). That is, the functional, political and representational relations within a given functional area need to be understood in their institutional context before taking action (Salet et al., 2015).

Following this advice, the European institutions may attempt to exploit the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic as a window of opportunity, and the post-pandemic recovery as a testing ground for the further consolidation of the instruments that it had introduced through time in order to promote functional, place-based territorial governance. Without endangering the sovereignty of the member states on the matter (an issue that has proven contentious in the past; see Faludi, 2006; 2010), The European Commission should attempt to reinforce and further structure its multilevel regional development framework (Cotella et al., 2021) by earmarking a larger part of the resources dedicated to the EU cohesion policy to initiatives targeting functional areas, in so doing leveraging the action of domestic stakeholders through economic conditionality. After all, the efforts dedicated to the definition of sound methodologies to identify functional urban and rural dynamics have provided the necessary evidence to ground this attempt, and the concluding phase of the 2021–27 programming period and the discussion of the 2028–34 cycle will constitute a suitable occasion.

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