

The Third Cohesion Report and the European Spatial Development Perspective

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The third Cohesion Report has been keenly awaited. Does it open up new perspectives on the continuation, albeit under the flag of territorial cohesion policy, of the ESDP process, important also for the future of ESPON, in which so many researchers on European spatial development are presently engaged? After all, ESPON was set up to prepare us for the next ESDP!

The third Cohesion Report discusses policy delivery mechanisms in the Conclusions section, tucked away after the Executive Summary, which itself only rarely mentions territorial cohesion as such. However, they do give indications as to what may be in the offing. They firstly state the belief that the ‘...delivery mechanism for cohesion policy has demonstrated its capacity to deliver quality projects of European interest on the ground while maintaining high standards in the management and control of public expenditure.’ The Conclusions nevertheless announce a number of reforms, designed among others to encourage a more strategic approach:

‘The Commission proposes that an overall strategic document for cohesion policy should be adopted by the Council, with an opinion of the Parliament, in advance of the new programming period and on the basis of a Commission proposal, defining clear priorities for Member States and regions.

The strategic approach would guide the policy in its implementation and make it more politically accountable. It would help to more tightly specify the desired level of synergy to be achieved between cohesion policy and the Lisbon and Gothenburg agendas and would increase consistency with the Broad Economic Policy Guidelines and the European Employment Strategy.

Each year, the European Institutions would examine progress on the strategic priorities and results achieved on the basis of a report by the Commission summarising Member States’ progress reports.’

In order to better divine the Commission’s thinking behind this approach, one should look at the report of an internal Working Group on ‘Multi-level Governance: Linking and Networking the Various Regional and Local Levels’ that made recommendations to the Forward Studies Unit preparing the White Paper on European Governance in 2001. This working group proposed to produce, at the beginning of each Programming Period for the Structural Funds, a *European Scheme of Reference for Sustainable Development and Economic, Social and Territorial Cohesion (SERDEC)*. One cannot go wrong in assuming that this is the same as the strategic document that the third Cohesion Report mentions. If so, then territorial cohesion would be an important element in the equation. The Annual Management Plan 2004 of DG Regio confirms this where it says on p. 6 that the DG will prepare the future economic, social and territorial Cohesion policy for the period after 2006.

Now, if this is the case, then ESPON researchers should brace themselves. As in the past when they have been drafted into preparing the third Cohesion Report, the same will happen again: ESPON will inevitably be linked to the work on this strategic document to be published before the beginning of the next programming period.

This is not the place to speculate about the shape of the intended document, nor of the process of formulating it, except for re-emphasising that, if at all, territorial cohesion will be a competence shared between the Union and the Member States. Not much is known however of what this competence sharing implies. However, the so-called Open Method of Co-ordination seems ideally suited to giving it shape. This method works among others with indicators. It just so happens that territorial indicators are among the ESPON themes, too. One could thus easily see them playing a central role in the Open Method of Co-ordination as applied in territorial cohesion policy. Is it too fanciful therefore to view ESPON, and in particular the work on territorial indicators within it, as a stepping stone for the application of OMC to the framework of territorial cohesion policy and to see this as the follow-up to the ESDP process?

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