

EUROREGION BALTIC

Response to the European Commission's public consultation on the Green Paper: Territorial Cohesion – turning territorial diversity into strength.

Euroregion Baltic (ERB) welcomes the initiative taken by the European Commission to launch a debate leading to a better and shared understanding of territorial cohesion and its implications for policy.

ERB fully agrees with the notion of the territorial diversity of the EU as a vital asset that can contribute to the sustainable development of the EU as whole. ERB comprises various areas with a highly sensitive and vulnerable environment.

ERB welcomes territorial cohesion as a new objective in the EU Cohesion Policy whose impact on different territories of the Union will now be measured with more indicators than just such economic and social criteria as GDP and unemployment rate.

ERB strongly believes that focus of territorial cohesion should be placed on relationships binding EU territories at different levels, as well as numerous forms of cooperation, coordination and partnerships, also including neighbouring regions. ERB consists of EU members and the Kaliningrad region within the Russian Federation.

ERB acknowledges the fact that the Baltic Sea Region has been selected a prominent example of the pursuit of territorial cohesion. With its dynamic growth in the recent years, the region continues to pose challenges, e.g. with regards to its geographical extent.

Definition

Territorial Cohesion aims to ensure a balanced, polycentric and sustainable development in all parts of the Community, and to allow all citizens to benefit equally from the basic freedoms set out in the Treaties and implemented through the EU policies, including access to knowledge as well as basic social and health services.

The objective of territorial cohesion also aims to turn the territorial diversity into strength to the benefit of the whole Community, ensuring environmental sustainability, accessibility and fair competitiveness, even for those territories suffering from severe and permanent natural or demographic handicaps.

Cross-sectoral approach and the governance issue

Territorial cohesion should not be limited to the EU Cohesion Policy, but should encompass all EU policies, especially those with a strong territorial impact, including:

- the Single Market Policy, with focus on the free movement of persons, goods, services and financial capital, in order to ensure competitiveness in all parts of the Community based on fair and equal opportunities;
- the Common Agricultural Policy, inclusive of the rural development policy in order to improve economic diversification, urban-rural links, as well as competitiveness and accessibility;
- the Integrated Maritime Policy and the Common Fisheries Policy;
- the policies for development of basic educational, social and health infrastructures;
- the transport policy and the Trans-European Networks, with the view of safeguarding accessibility to more remote and less populated territories of the Union, and to the neighbouring regions;
- the environment, climate and energy policies, in order to enhance the environmental sustainability, especially of the most vulnerable territories;
- the neighbourhood policy, with the view of strengthening territorial cooperation with the neighbouring regions;
- the culture policy, in order to improve intercultural dialogue and to turn cultural diversities into strength;

- the state aid rules, in more detailed consideration of specific development conditions and vulnerabilities of territories with severe permanent natural or demographic handicaps.

Not only does territorial cohesion require a cross-sectoral approach, but it also poses an important governance challenge. The European Commission has already demonstrated its commitment to promoting good governance while working on the integrated maritime policy and EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region, the step welcomed in Euroregion Baltic.

With this paper ERB would also like to express its support towards the idea put forward by the Conference of Peripheral and Maritime Regions (CPMR) to launch a European Territorial Pact involving all stakeholders from the local to the European level and incorporating all policies with territorial impact. We strongly believe stakeholders from the private and NGO sectors will be crucial partners to be involved in such a European Territorial Pact.

Better cooperation

Stakeholders in the EU and its neighbours must be given proper instruments for long term cooperation. Maritime borders must not be seen as obstacles to territorial cohesion.

Territorial cohesion is tightly linked to regional and local initiatives. Growth is created on local and regional levels and has impact on the overall EU growth strategy. Local and regional actors must be able to continue to make use of interregional cooperation programmes and instruments.

Effective pursuit of the territorial cohesion goals will require improvements in the existing forms of territorial cooperation, legislation and tools. EU territorial and neighbourhood cooperation programmes should to a higher degree be based on existing cooperation structures such as euroregions and similar cross-border cooperation structures, especially those with well-elaborated long-term development strategies and solid, politically anchored cooperation structures.

That such structures can fully benefit from the available EU legislation also ought to be in focus. In particular, euroregions and similar CBC structures should be able to apply the legal status laid down in the EU regulation for the European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC). Several member states have not yet implemented the EGTCs into their national legislation systems, while some member states having implemented the regulation, do not allow inclusion of partners with limited responsibilities, hereby creating barriers for territorial cooperation structures with partners from neighbouring countries.

The importance of political cooperation must also be emphasized. EU Cohesion Policy should actively support the development of regional political cross-border co-operation and institutional platforms such as euroregions and EGTC's.

Indicators

To monitor and evaluate territorial cohesion ERB would like to propose the following quantity indicators:

- population density and demography,
- remoteness, accessibility and the level of severe permanent natural handicaps,
- climate vulnerability and environmental emissions,
- energy supplies and safety.

To monitor and evaluate territorial cohesion ERB would like to propose the following quality indicators:

- attractivity based on natural and cultural heritage,
- number of NGOs and their activity level,
- access to knowledge (education and libraries),
- access to basic social and health care services,
- traffic death rate, level of criminality and substance abuse (alcohol and drugs).