

*Dear Mr.Cattaneo*

*Distinguished guests*

*Dear colleagues and friends*

It is my pleasure to welcome you today on behalf of ESPON, the European Territorial Observatory Network. Over the last few days, the future of the EU Cohesion Policy has been a recurring theme across sessions and venues of the European Week of Regions and Cities. Our conference today is no exception. It revolves around the European Territorial Review, the ESPON contribution to the debate on Cohesion Policy post-2020.

The high interest in this event encourages me to say that our efforts have resonated with you, the people concerned with the future of our regions and cities. A future that we cannot take for granted. A number of challenges are changing the European social, economic and territorial fabric. These changes over time have a divergent impact on the development of places and therefore, policy choices have to respect the territorial diversity, be it physical, climatic, cultural or political.

ESPON has embarked on a mission to detect and explain the territorial diversity of European regions and cities. It is our belief that territorial evidence is fundamental to navigate through complex and intertwined realities of development and to design policies that would bring results.

Based on recent ESPON research, the Review examines a range of key societal challenges such as ageing and migration, economic development and employment, resources and energy, connectivity and access to services of general interest. It offers insights as to how these challenges manifest themselves in territorial patterns and reshape our Continent.

The European Territorial Review that we present to you today is more than an insightful depiction of diversity and changes. It is released at a time when some parts of Europe witness a re-emergence of sentiments that favour division over conjunction. Yet, it is undeniable that we live in an increasingly interconnected world. Occurrences in one place are likely to have impact elsewhere. Moreover, development is not bound by borders; in fact, on many issues it transcends the scale of administrative entities. This requires us to constantly consider our plans and actions in a wider territorial context.

Therefore, we wish to underline today that current and future territorial challenges of regions and cities can be tackled more effectively through cooperation at different geographic and functional scales – from functional urban to European.

Amidst the current debates on the post-2020 Cohesion Policy, this conclusion translates into the overarching message today: the need to strengthen the territorial dimension of future Cohesion Policy by promoting interactions and cooperation among places at different geographical scales.

But the Review doesn't stop there! It looks into proposals as to how the territorial dimension could be strengthened in the future and suggests that post-2020 Cohesion Policy seriously consider "mainstreaming" territorial cooperation. This would mean that future Cohesion Policy programmes could include elements of territorial cooperation. Accordingly, Member States, regions and cities would be encouraged to propose integrated investment frameworks aiming to tackle the development challenges beyond administrative borders – at different functional scales and through territorial cooperation initiatives.

Looking beyond administrative borders has so far been regarded as an Interreg trademark. As the numerous examples articulated in the Review show, territorial cooperation pays off. It is our conviction that the time has come to dare the next step and mainstream territorial cooperation.

With this in mind, I would like to thank you for this high turnout on the last day of the European Week of Regions and Cities. I am confident that the next few hours will engender new thinking about territorial cooperation.

Let me express my sincere gratitude to our panellists who are supporting us in this debate today.

I also would like to thank our ESPON scientists, whose research made the Review possible in the first place.

Finally, let me thank also the Committee of the Regions for hosting us today. We are privileged to be in a place, where cooperation outweighs barriers.

With these words, I wish you all a very fruitful exchange, new ideas and inspiration for future cooperation.

Thank you.