



Co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund

Inspire Policy Making with Territorial Evidence

POLICY BRIEF

Soft cooperation as a building block of territorial cohesion in functional areas

This policy brief is about soft territorial cooperation and how ESPON – European Territorial Observation Network can support collaborative processes from stakeholders' demands with schematic representations of territories and governance set-ups to promote a dialogue with those involved with the development of intermunicipal, cross-border, transnational or macroregional cooperation areas.

This publication is primarily intended for policymakers and practitioners at various levels engaged in discussing spatial development patterns and perspectives beyond administrative and statistical borders, aimed at a more results-oriented territorial policy through participative processes.

1

What is soft territorial cooperation?

Soft territorial cooperation occurs across Europe, at the level of Macro regions (e.g. Baltic Sea region, Danube region, Alpine region, Adriatic–Ionian region), in cross-border functional areas (e.g. Greater Copenhagen, Tyrol–Alto Adige–Trentino Euroregion), in metropolitan regions and in rural areas. Soft forms of cooperation help to design and implement results-oriented solutions in relation to which relevant actors have developed a sense of ownership and commitment. It often makes it possible to act outside traditional frameworks, e.g. through joint actions of private and public bodies at different levels.

The starting point for soft cooperation initiatives is in most cases the existence of a community of intent. Stakeholders involved must feel ownership of the outputs and be empowered to contribute to the achievement of common and agreed objectives.

Soft territorial cooperation initiatives have ‘open’ and ‘fuzzy’ boundaries and can be developed at all geographical levels, as boundaries vary depending on the topic that is addressed and change over time. They may operate in functional areas but the focus is on generating functional integration, rather than on adapting to a ‘functional area’. In practical terms it means that the cooperation territory is not a predefined geographical unit but is agreed upon depending on the areas relevant to issues identified by stakeholders. This approach opens up the prospect of a more results-oriented territorial policy.

It is important to point out that soft territorial cooperation is not an alternative but a complement to ‘hard’ structures. Hard structures are stable over time, can have more democratic legitimacy and are better equipped to address conflicts of interests. Soft structures can help involve a broader range of actors in territorial governance. They are better equipped to be experimental and to implement consensus-based strategies. Soft initiatives can harden when it appears necessary to formalise their functioning and competences.

In a nutshell, soft territorial cooperation initiatives have the following main components:

- **medium- to long-term integrative perspective**, i.e. not limited to the implementation of a single project;
- seeking to **enhance the capacities of those involved**, making them agents of their own development;
- pursuit of **enhanced cooperation to support functional relations** and capitalise on a convergence of interests;
- the aim of **renewing relations between institutional levels, sectors of activity and different types of bodies** (e.g. non-governmental organisations, private companies, local and regional authorities, agencies).

2

Why soft cooperation? Policy context: soft territorial cooperation as a building block in the European pursuit of territorial cohesion

The Territorial State and Perspectives of the European Union (2011), a background document for the Territorial Agenda 2020, considers that ‘progress towards territorial cohesion entails a permanent and cooperative process involving the various actors and stakeholders of territorial development at political, administrative and technical levels’ and states that ‘this process of cooperation is called territorial governance’. It further mentions that ‘territorial governance should be able to manage different functional territories and ensure the balanced and coordinated contribution of the local, regional, national, and European actors’.

In the Territorial Agenda 2030, Member States commit themselves to ‘engage with local and regional decision makers to strengthen cooperation on long-term place-based strategies and address sustainable functional links between neighbouring areas’. Soft territorial cooperation can contribute to the promotion of integrated multilevel governance approaches, as it facilitates dialogues between levels of governance by integrating groups of actors in functional regions at different scales, from intermunicipal to transnational.

Soft territorial cooperation is also promoted under cohesion policy. Regulations for the 2021–2027 programming period encourage local and regional actors to draw up and implement integrated territorial strategies. Policy objective 5, ‘A

Europe closer to citizens by fostering the sustainable and integrated development of all types of territories and local initiatives’, is specifically designed for this purpose. From the perspective of the European Commission, integrated territorial development should be multisectoral, multilevel and multistakeholder.

ESPON has reviewed 12 soft territorial cooperation initiatives from across Europe. This analysis has shown that soft territorial cooperation contributes to the territorial cohesion policy principles of partnership and subsidiarity, and can lead to the adoption of integrated territorial development strategies targeting functional areas. It helps to widen the range of actors involved in policy design and implementation. Soft approaches can help public authorities at all geographical levels promote functional integration.

Overall, the European principle of territorial cohesion can be pursued through the systematic promotion of soft territorial cooperation at all geographical levels. On this basis, existing solutions to combine financial instruments with European Structural and Investment Funds could be further developed to facilitate the implementation of strategic options identified by soft territorial cooperation initiatives, while opening the funds to soft territorial cooperation allows cohesion policy to be less constrained by administrative boundaries and closer to the needs of European citizens and businesses.

3

The ESPON approach: how can it help policymakers?

Experience shows that major communication efforts are needed to convey the added value of soft cooperation to bodies at regional and subregional levels, as it requires allocating extensive resources to dialogues and exchanges.

Various challenges need to be addressed when bringing together stakeholders from different sectors and geographical levels: establishing a shared evidence base; ensuring that all actors have a common mental perception of the cooperation area; and promoting a shared understanding of development targets and objectives, and of their territorial implications. Such objectives are pursued through collaborative processes, and focus on building a common ground for cooperation: What issues, challenges and opportunities can we agree on? Which win–win solutions could be capitalised on? At the same time, differences of opinion, conflicts of interest and diverging objectives are identified.

A first challenge for these collaborative processes is to facilitate the convergence of stakeholders' mental maps of the cooperation area. This can be done by organising workshops addressing the following types of questions.

- **In the current state:** What are its boundaries? How is the cooperation area organised? Where are opportunities, challenges, bottlenecks, possible connections?

- **In an envisaged future:** How could the cooperation area be reorganised? Which links could be strengthened? Which risks would need to be addressed? Which opportunities could be transformed into strengths?

The ESPON approach helps to address and answer these questions through soft cooperation tools to address territorial development in functional areas: mapshots (Box 1, Figure 1) and institutional maps (Box 2, Figure 2). They are produced during a participative process that includes three tasks:

1. synthesis of the cooperation rationale, based on the arguments brought forward to justify the cooperation initiative;
2. description of the cooperation landscape: what sub-entities have a tradition of cooperation, what inherited dividing lines need to be considered;
3. comparison and combination of socioeconomic patterns and trends considered relevant by cooperation partners and those emerging from available data.

The aim of the mapshots and institutional maps developed by ESPON is to build a shared understanding of the territory in the cooperation area among those who are cooperating. They can either serve as input into the dialogue process or be the output of the participatory process.

BOX 1

Mapshots are schematic representations of a territory for cooperation purposes, including geographical features, socioeconomic patterns and (perceived) cooperation dynamics, normally jointly produced by stakeholders as part of an organised participative process. However, mapshots can be produced by experts. An expert mapshot can synthesise qualitative and quantitative evidence. It can function as an input to discussions between stakeholders – a type of processed evidence base. The expert then uses the mapshot to synthesise outputs from, for example, statistical analyses, thematic maps, document reviews and interviews. The mapshot removes the 'noise' in these different sources of information and represents only patterns considered relevant by the expert and then to be discussed with the stakeholders.

BOX 2

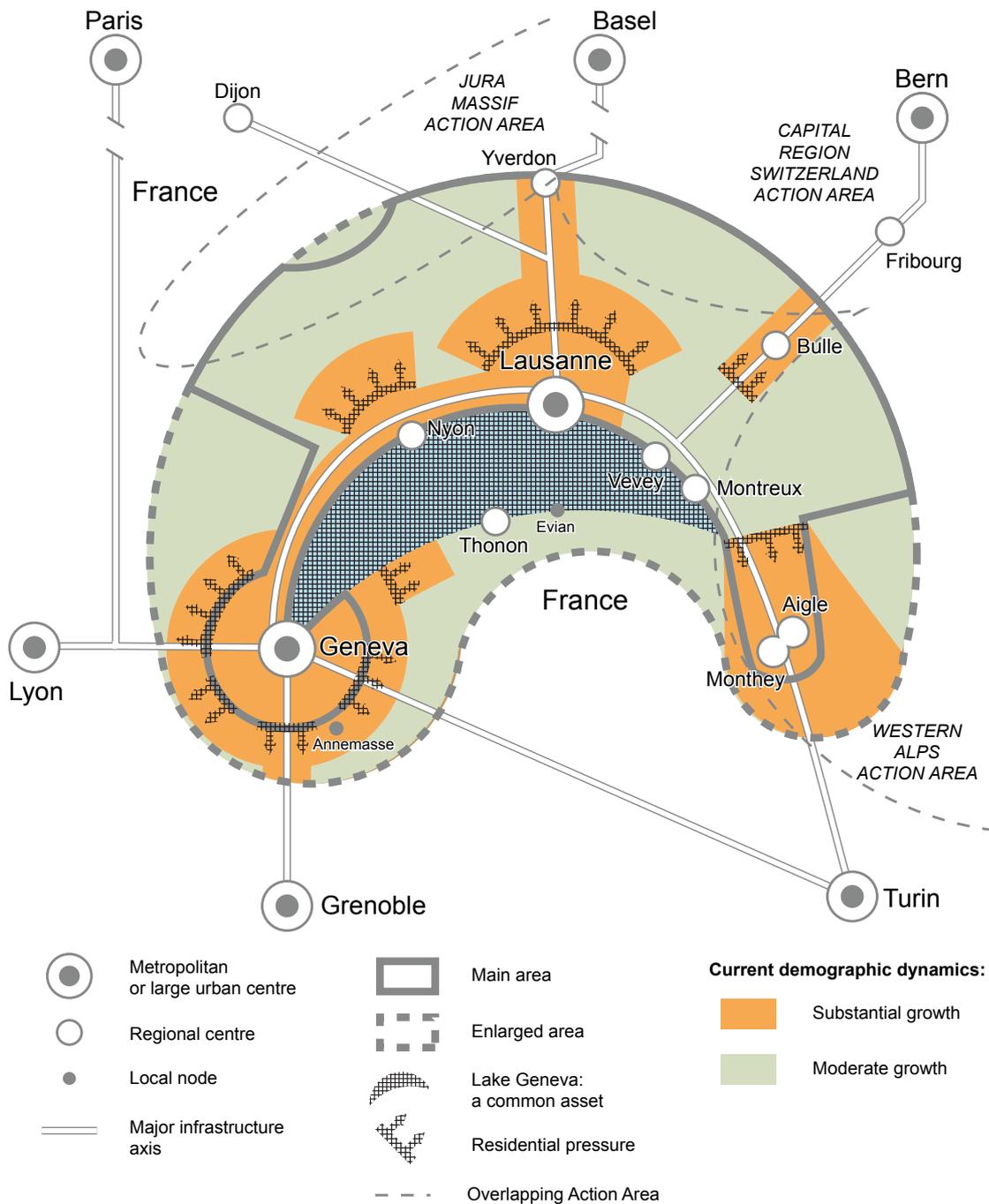
Institutional maps synthesise the way in administrative units and cooperation instances are organised geographically. For example, they identify overlaps between instances of territorial cooperation, and ways in which administrative units may be embedded in each other.

This helps to understand the institutional context of soft territorial cooperation.

The process described above can be facilitated through a dedicated tool, in particular the [ACTAREA web app](#) being developed by ESPON. This online drawing app is a tool intended to support stakeholders, practitioners and policymakers in collaborative approaches to territorial development. Such collaborative processes bring together stakeholders and experts, and they help to establish a platform of shared knowledge and opinions on territorial development preconditions and perspectives.

ACTAREA can be used in virtual and face-to-face dialogues. It is meant to build a shared mental map of the cooperation area (mapshots); jointly produce a graphic synthesis of the institutional cooperation context (institutional maps); and trigger dialogues among various actors on territorial patterns and trends, opportunities and challenges in a cooperation area.

Figure 1
Example of a mapshot: Lake Geneva Metropolitan Action Area

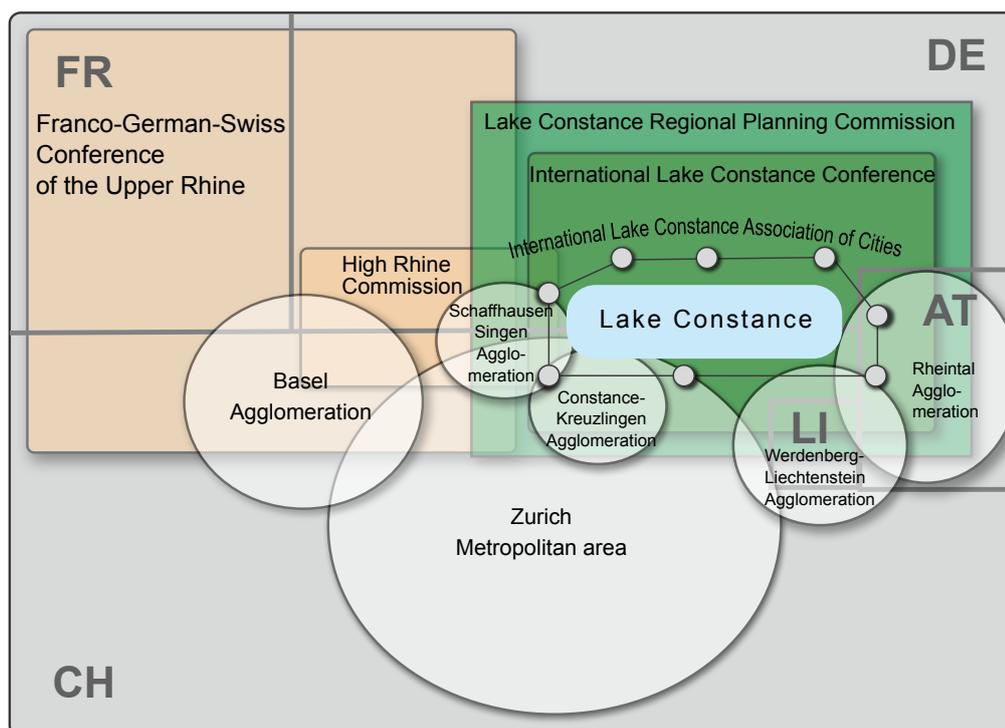


Source: ESPON ACTAREA, 2017.

The mapshot of the Lake Geneva Metropolitan Action Area shows that development in the cooperation area is unbalanced. Population and economic activities as well as transport infrastructure are concentrated on the northern (Swiss) shore of the lake. In the core metropolitan area, a continuous linear agglomeration is emerging between Lausanne and Geneva that generates sprawl in their rural hinterlands and puts neighbouring regions under pressure.

The main cooperation priorities are therefore to manage and channel growth and to contain urban sprawl. Around the city of Geneva, proximity to the French border creates specific challenges. The functional agglomeration extends far beyond this border. Differences in employment opportunities, purchasing power and property prices generate substantial commuter flows, tensions on housing markets and traffic congestion.

Figure 2
Example of an institutional map: Lake Constance Spatial Development Conference



In the case of the Lake Constance Spatial Development Conference, the institutional map first shows the proximity with the International Lake Constance Conference, which covers almost the same area. The Lake Constance Spatial Development Conference also interacts with the city network Internationaler Städtebund Bodensee, which is a platform for exchanges between cities situated directly on the lake. The cooperation area also overlaps with the Upper Rhine Conference and the Trinational Metropolitan Region of the Upper Rhine, which are congruent cooperation perimeters.

Overall, the ESPON approach, in particular the collaborative tool developed, brings clear added value to territorial policymaking in:

- synthesising policy-relevant spatial patterns and trends derived from multiple quantitative analyses, thematic maps and studies;
- combining results from multiple analyses when data from different sources are not strictly comparable (a recurring situation in cross-border regions);
- illustrating spatial discontinuities and (administrative, cultural, linguistic etc.) borders that should be taken into account in a certain cooperation area;
- comparing flow volumes, highlighting bottlenecks, identifying sending and receiving territories;
- exploring and comparing the spatial imaginations of stakeholders;
- supporting participative processes and broadening the participation of stakeholders;
- deepening reflections on territorial patterns and trends, first by encouraging stakeholders to select information to be displayed or hidden, and second by providing a framework for drawing up a structured representation that synthesises relations between different territories and scales;
- strengthening cohesion within a cooperation area by building a shared representation around which strategic options and concrete measures can be organised.

4 ESPON supporting collaborative processes based on stakeholders' demands

4.1 Luxembourg cross-border functional region

Luxembourg's government has launched the process of creating a vision for the cross-border functional area of Luxembourg until 2050 (called 'Luxembourg in Transition') based on the principles of carbon neutrality and resilience. In this process, it is mobilising experts from different parts of Europe. To support this process, the Luxembourgish Department of Spatial Planning requested syntheses of available evidence on cross-border functional interdependencies and interrelations, with three thematic perspectives: labour markets, housing and transport; energy production and provision; and food provision and associated value chains. The objective was to synthesise available evidence in a communicative way.

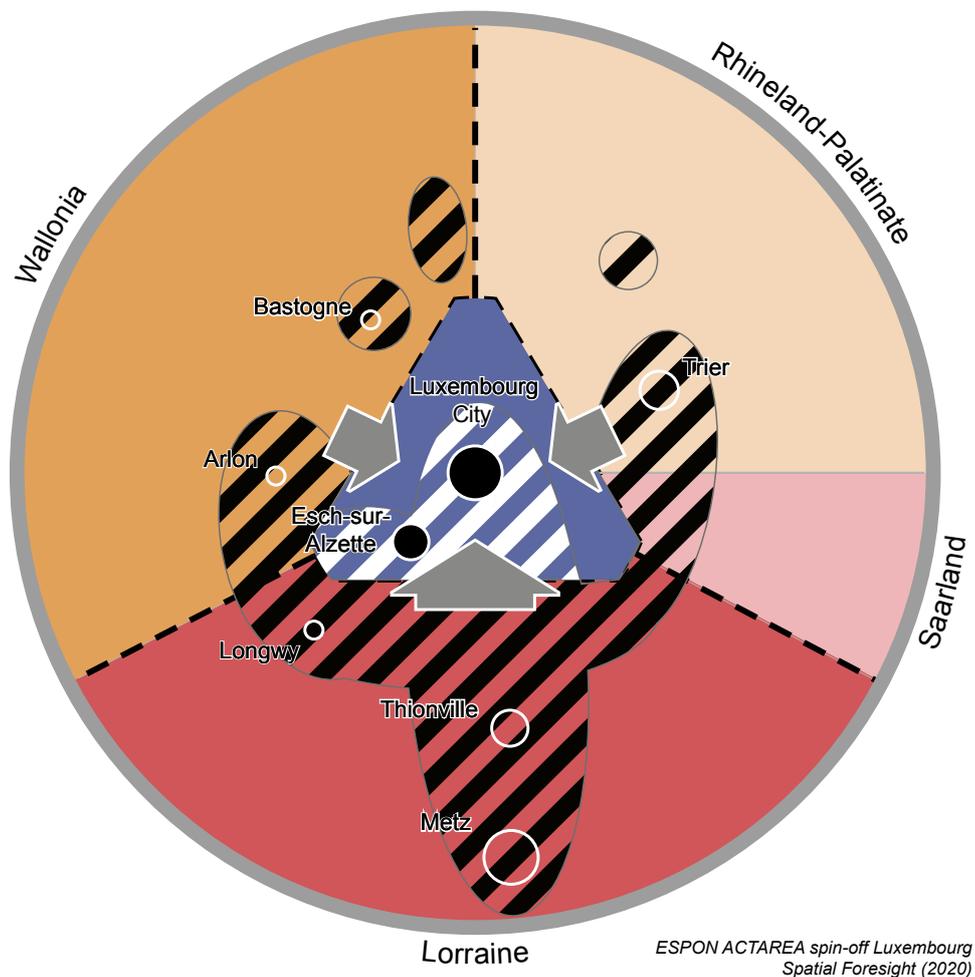
ESPON collected available evidence from different national, cross-border and European sources. The evidence includes quantitative data, but also finalised maps and figures, reports and strategy papers. The compilation of quantitative and qualitative data also made it possible to delimit functional areas. Functional areas are not only of different sizes for each theme but also structured differently.

- The functioning of **labour markets** is largely determined by travel times between locations, i.e. the combined result of physical distance, infrastructure endowment and public transport services actually in operation. When considering labour markets and commuting, this leads to a concentric representation that shows components of regions neighbouring Luxembourg that could theoretically be within commuting distance with appropriate transport infrastructure (Figure 3). The mapshot singles out areas

affected by intensive out-commuting and in-commuting, and shows that commuter flows from France are about twice as large as from Belgium and Germany.

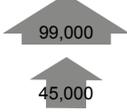
- **Energy provision** is influenced by the capacity of interconnections between national distribution systems, and by the institutional set-up of energy markets. The mapshot on energy production and provision, focused on electricity, gas and hydrogen, shows policy challenges at the cross-border scale (Figure 4). A core objective is to limit the climate impact of electricity consumption in Luxembourg. Neighbouring territories are then characterised on the basis of the ratio of electricity production from renewable sources to total electricity consumption, providing a proxy for the level of development of such production activities.
- In the organisation of **food value chains**, attention is paid to reduction of food miles, i.e. the distance that the food travels from farm to plate. Public policies in this field also have to consider economies of scale, as they play a major role in establishing a cost-efficient and competitive food industry. Public authorities may weigh up the advantages of such economic optimisation against impacts on the environment and climate, and considerations relating to the long-term resilience of food provision. With respect to food production, the mapshot focuses on two geographical scales (Figure 5): the immediately surrounding areas for local food provision; and neighbouring regions as a whole in terms of trade and the organisation of the agrifood sector. The challenges are different at each scale. The focus is on the share of organic farming in the immediate surroundings, while concentrations of major industrial players in the agrifood sector are identified at a wider scale.

Figure 3
Labour markets and commuting in the Luxembourg cross-border functional region



ESPON ACTAREA spin-off Luxembourg
 Spatial Foresight (2020)

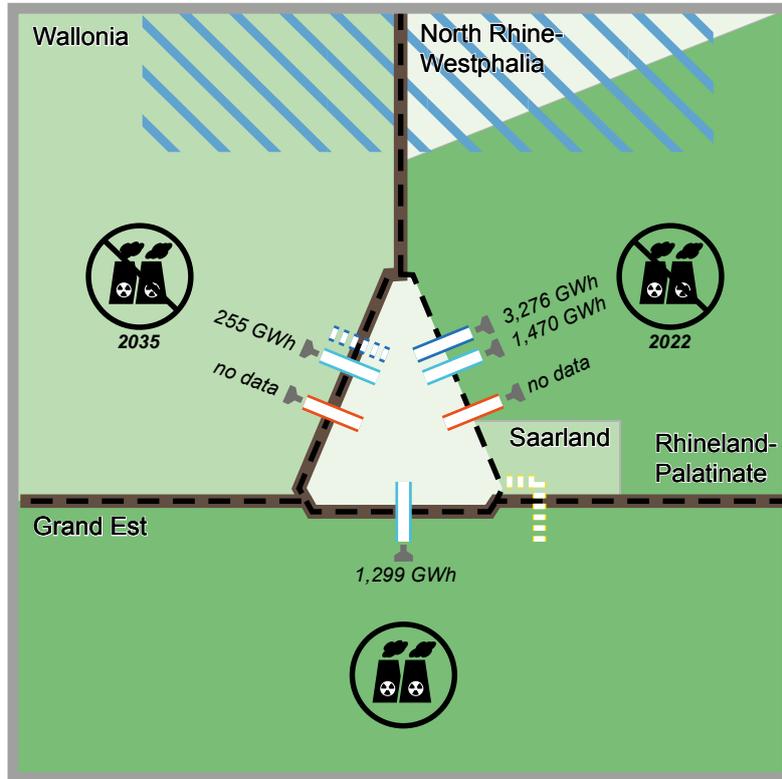
**The functional zone:
 Luxembourg commuting area**

-  Functional area: commuting zone (effective and potential)
-  in
 out Area of intense commuting
-  99,000
 45,000 } Flows of workers to Luxembourg
-  National border

**Contrasted situations
 on regional labour markets**

- Active population (trend 2010-2020)
 - Growing 
 - Stable  
 - Decreasing  
- Unemployment level (end 2019 - before COVID-19 lockdown)
 - <math>< 5\%</math> 
 - 5.8% 

Figure 4
Energy production and provision in the Luxembourg cross-border functional region



ESPON ACTAREA spin-off Luxembourg
 Spatial Foresight (2020)

**The functional zone:
 Greater Region extended**

Functional zone - energy

Zones and networks

Bidding zone borders
 National border
 Inter-State border (Germany)

Connections between networks

Electricity: interconnection for non-industrial purposes
 Electricity: interconnection for industrial purposes
 Natural gas
 Hydrogen
 Active connection
 Inactive or potential connection (infrastructure only)

Electricity production

Renewable electricity ratio: ratio of the renewable electricity production to total electricity consumption)

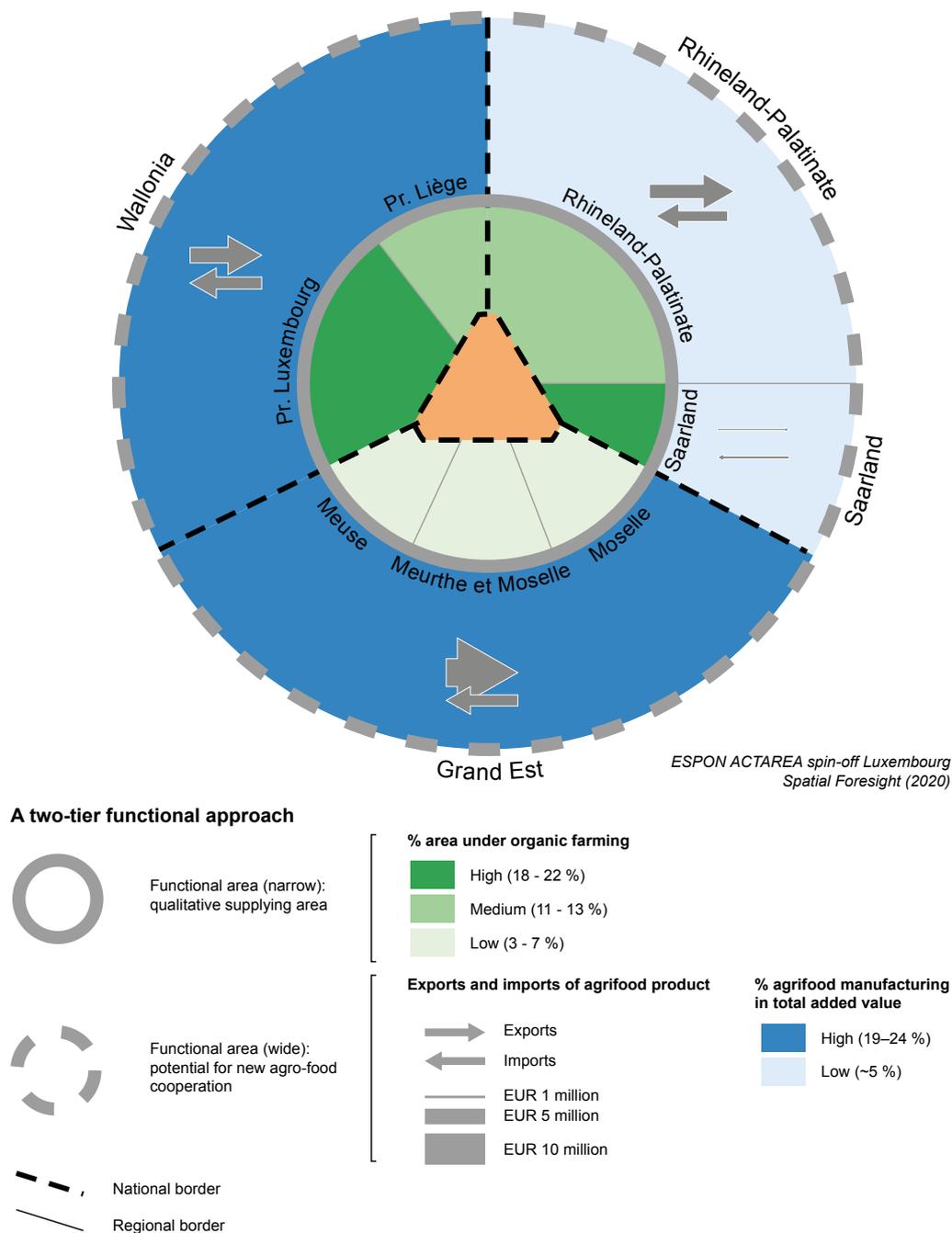
Low (< 11 %)
 Medium (15–20 %)
 High (> 40 %)

High potential for wind energy generation

Continued electricity production from nuclear power

Foreseen shutdown of electricity production from nuclear power (**date**)

Figure 5
Food provision and associated value chains in the Luxembourg cross-border functional region



Considered jointly, the three mapshots illustrate multiple asymmetric relations between subunits of the Luxembourg cross-border functional region, in terms of employment opportunities, income levels, energy and food self-sufficiency, as well as turnover and investment capacity of food-processing companies. Considering that benefits of cooperation in one field can be complemented by a different territorial distribution of benefits in another field,

this calls for an integrated and multisectoral approach to cooperation. Imagining governance mechanisms that would make it possible to acknowledge these cross-sectoral win-win solutions is key to a successful and sustainable cooperation. These arrangements will need to be tailored to each bilateral relationship, considering the different profiles of Luxembourg's neighbouring regions.

4.2

Regional partnerships to be implemented under the Comprehensive Plan of the Republic of Lithuania

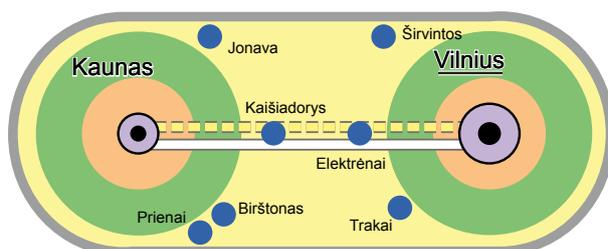
The 2021 update of the Comprehensive Plan of the Territory of the Republic of Lithuania defines spatial development aims and functional priorities for different parts of the country. It also provides for the establishment of three urban partnerships, with a view to ‘increasing the country’s overall role at international level, generating all kinds of benefits for the country’s internal prosperity, and improving the quality of life in the regions’: Vilnius–Kaunas, Šiauliai–Panevėžys and Klaipėda Region (‘coastal zone’).

ESPON has analysed cooperation prospects in the first and last of these three partnerships. The purpose of the mapshots is to provide starting points for stakeholder discussions on how regional cooperation processes could be initiated, and what thematic and geographical focuses they could have. They were produced by compiling evidence, reviewing documents and carrying out interviews with experts and stakeholders. The Vilnius–Kaunas partnership is at the crossroads of a north–south axis from Helsinki and Tallinn to Warsaw and an east–west axis from Minsk to Klaipėda, Lithuania’s main port city. The Rail Baltica high-speed railway will be a game changer in this part of Lithuania. Kaunas will be on the new north–south axis

from Tallinn to Warsaw and will also be 36 minutes’ travel time from Vilnius (compared with 1 hour and 23 minutes currently).

The mapshot focusing on functional areas for labour markets and service provision targets a relatively limited area around the Vilnius–Kaunas axis (see Figure 6). It envisages a stepwise cooperation process. The first step is to coordinate policy responses to the increased mutual accessibility of the city centres of Kaunas and Vilnius as a result of the construction of a high-speed railway. This may, for example, have impacts on real estate markets, commuting, access to advanced services, culture and sports events. As a second step, coordination with district municipalities is a precondition for a regional partnership. A strengthened development dynamic in the city centres around possibilities offered by the Rail Baltica railway may function as a catalyst for stronger cooperation between city and district municipalities. As a third step, other surrounding municipalities may be actively involved in the partnership, with focus on strengthening transport systems that would connect each entire functional area to its corresponding city centre. Fourth, secondary nodes may define their strategic positioning in the context of stronger, more integrated functional areas around Vilnius and Kaunas. This includes fine-tuning their respective smart specialisation strategies. Finally, rural areas may be incorporated in the cooperation dynamic, with a particular focus on their contribution to overall sustainable development.

Figure 6
Vilnius–Kaunas regional partnership



Partnership extent

○ Core area
Vilnius–Kaunas

Urban hierarchy

● First-tier city
● Local regional centre

Inland transport corridors

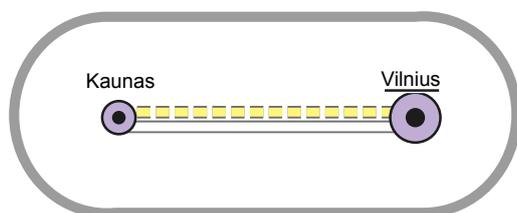
— Major axis (A1, electrified railway)
- - - Future high-speed Vilnius–Kaunas transport axis

Territorial risk factors

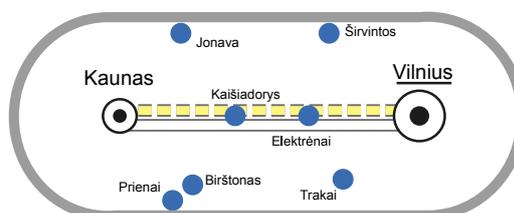
associated with a development of a partnership focused on the two metropolitan centres

- Combined challenge of pressure on real-estate prices and sluggish demographic growth.
- Need for further administrative coordination and integration especially with respect to service provision (e.g. public transport, kindergarten, sport facilities)
- Third-ring transport gap (missing public transport links to connect periurban margins to the city centres to Rail Baltica)
- Smart specialisation and urban functions of second-tier nodes still to be defined/fine-tuned
- Balanced rural development to be rethought in relation to metropolisation and urban–rural integration trends

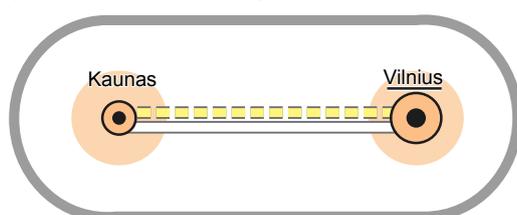
Step 1 – Coordinated development in the city centres, with a focus on the immediate surroundings of the railway stations



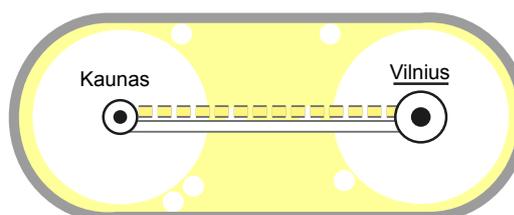
Step 4 – Specifying the urban function and fields of specialisation of secondary nodes



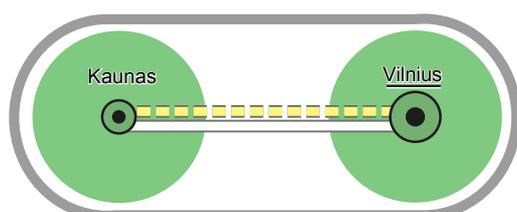
Step 2 – Better cooperation and coordination between city municipalities and district municipalities



Step 5 – Framework for balanced development in rural areas



Step 3 – Associating surrounding municipalities with in commuting distance of city centres, with a focus on sustainable transport solutions and limits to urban sprawl



Further reading:

ESPON ACTAREA - Thinking and Planning in Areas of Territorial Cooperation - <https://www.espon.eu/actarea>

ESPON ACTAREA spin-off Lithuania - Cooperation perspectives under the Comprehensive Plan of the territory of the Republic of Lithuania - <https://www.espon.eu/sites/default/files/attachments/Final%20report%20ACTAREA%20spinoff%20Lithuania.pdf>

ESPON ACTAREA spin-off Luxembourg - Cooperation perspectives for the Luxembourg Cross-border Functional Region- https://www.espon.eu/sites/default/files/attachments/Final%20Report%20ACTAREA%20spinoff%20Luxembourg_0.pdf

ESPON ACTAREA Tool - Mapping soft territorial cooperation areas and initiatives - <https://www.espon.eu/actarea-tool>



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