

Rethinking the territorial cohesion in the EU: institutional and functional elements of the concept

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Abstract

In the present work we propose a better understanding of the concept of territorial cohesion from its thematic components. The „cohesion” concept has been called vague, ambiguous and subjective, generating a great debate still far from over. However, its relevance as an engine of the current European regional policy is simply indisputable; therefore, its importance for the EU, at a critical moment like the current one, is undeniable. Hence the need for its reformulation from a European construction perspective, posing a formulation of the Territorial Cohesion as a meta-concept integrated by various functional components, without implying obviating its political nature or its conceptual weaknesses.

Keywords: territorial cohesion, regional policy, territorial inequality, metaconcept

Introduction

Given the political and economic relevance of the Regional and Cohesion Policy in the current EU, the relevance of territorial cohesion concept for the European Union is simply strategic. The debates around its interpretation with the subsequent controversy have been generating a whole current of thought and reflection around the Territorial Cohesion and its problems (Faludi, 2004, 2005, 2010; Medeiros, 2016; Barca, 2009; Davoudi, 2005; Doucet, 2006; Evers, 2008, 2012; Schön, 2005; Servillo, 2010; Sykes, 2011; Waterhout, 2007; Iammarino *et al.*, 2017), becoming a topic of great relevance and interest. The operational projections of the concept cannot be ignored in everything related to its application and measurement, highlighting the various works of the ESPON Program in this regard (ESPON, 2006, ESPON, 2007, ESPON-TeDi, 2010, ESPON-Interco, 2011, ESPON Kitcasp, 2012).

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Although the term ‘territorial Cohesion’ only officially appears in 1997 in the Treaty of Amsterdam text, it is not about ‘something’ new or novel. Since its inception, Territorial Cohesion has been a quietly ‘touched’ issue (Medeiros, 2011), from the perspective of territorial economic-political disparities existing within the European Union (Amin and Tomaney, 1995; Dunford and Kafkalas, 1992; Dunford and Smith, 2000; Bachtler, 2003; Böhme *et al.*, 2008; Bachtler *et al.*, 2016), well with a socioeconomic bias (Wishlade, 2008; Florio, 2006; Giannias *et al.*, 1999; Guersent, 2001), with an econometric bias (Bachtler and Wren, 2006; Badinger *et al.*, 2004; Crescenzi, 2009; Batterbury, 2006), or simply with a critical bias (Boldrin and Canova, 2001; Mendez and Bachtler, 2015; Michelis and Monfort, 2008).

The semantic field of the term cohesion states that within a certain group there is a situation of harmony, symmetry and balance between the parts that make it up, causing the group to remain united. On the contrary, it projects a situation of asymmetry, divergence or inequality between subjects that are part of a group with respect to certain standards. Therefore, in order to deal with this situation of de-cohesion, it would be necessary to try to ‘unite’ the group, for which it would be necessary to use convergence mechanisms that reduce differences.

From different perspectives, territorial cohesion has been considered a vague (Faludi, 2013), ambiguous (Davoudi, 2005), elusive (Schön, 2009) concept, a sort of buzzword (Malý and Mulíček, 2016) and, for the rest, under subjective interpretation (Luukkonen, 2010). Obviously, the feeling of facing something inaccurate, confusing or difficult to grasp seems to be the dominant position (Medeiros, 2016).

In this sense, the situation and the current moment of the construction process of the European Union, in which new actions are being rescheduled, in general, and specifically in the area of Cohesion Policy, need to deepen the understanding of the operational meaning of territorial cohesion at the community level. This will facilitate the diagnosis of the territory, as well as the monitoring and evaluation of public policies and their territorial impact.

In this paper, we will review in a panoramic way the fundamental conceptual elements of Territorial Cohesion, that „emerging conceptual novelty of the EU” (Medeiros, 2016, p. 2) which seems to arouse both interest and influence in the rest of the world (Buitelaar *et al.*, 2015). Our main objective is to improve the understanding of territorial cohesion as an operational concept; for this, we must, on the one hand, define its thematic contents and, on the other, clearly define its conceptual profiles. In this work, we limit ourselves exclusively to addressing the conceptual problem of Territorial Cohesion without going into aspects such as its measurement, batteries or typologies of indicators, otherwise so frequent in this field.

We do not deal with the analysis of Territorial Cohesion Policy in the European Union (among which, in addition to regional policy, we can also consider other community policies that have an impact on territorial cohesion, such as the CAP, rural development, the environment, transport and trans-European networks, among others). Hence, we do not consider historical aspects (birth, evolution, impact

of enlargements and / or BREXIT, among others) or of operation (financial and budgetary instruments, role of the EU institutions, instruments of action, etc.) of the mentioned Policy.

To do this, we set several specific objectives in our work, which we address in the different sections. The first specific objective, which we developed in the first section, is to highlight the historical existence of inter-territorial differences in Europe to justify the need for territorial cohesion in the EU construction process and, therefore, the need for a Cohesion Policy that reduces these disparities. The second specific objective raises a conceptual approach to territorial cohesion, which requires special attention to functional and institutional elements, from the perspective of territorial cohesion governance, which we address in the second section.

The third and final specific objective, developed in the third section, seeks to achieve an operational concept of territorial cohesion through a meta-conceptual approach and thematic content as well as its normative projection in the EU legal framework. Finally, a section is dedicated to conclusions and reflections.

1. A Europe of sharp inter-territorial differences

We cannot ignore that one of the most obvious and visible features of the current EU is precisely its heterogeneity - economically, politically and socially, encompassing within its borders a range of socioeconomic situations where disparity appears to be the common denominator.

That heterogeneous European Whole is not something new; in fact, the first community study on regional development (1959)¹ showed the existence of the so-called 'Industrial Lotharingia', an industrialized strip that stretched from Holland to the North of Italy, representing 30% of the incipient European Economic Community's territory, 45% of its population and 60% of the Common Market's total production. It is in this territorial space where the most developed European regions emerged and consolidated. This is why this territorial strip constituted the „centre” of Europe in the coordinates of the centre-periphery model.

This 'European centre' coexisted with the 'European periphery' constituted by regions and territories which as they moved away from that strip, could reach per capita income differences of up to five times lower.

Such territorial disparities have remained in very good health throughout the EU for six decades. Although the 'center' has been denominated in different ways:

¹On this date, the Marjolin Committee was created to study the casuistry of regional studies, which was followed by other initiatives such as, in 1960, the Motte Report to the European Parliament, which proposed the creation of a regional development advisory committee and the elaboration of a director program of territorial planning; in 1961, the Conference of Regional Economies in Brussels; in 1965, the Thompson Report on the regional problems of the enlarged Community; or in 1972, among others, the Summit Conference in Paris, which represented the embryo of the creation of the ERDF.

from industrial lotharingia to the Blue Banana² (Brunet, 1989), or even more recently Pentagon, as designated by the European Spatial Development Prospective (ESDP) (EC, 1999: 21), it has continued to be the center along the years. If there is a „centre” it is because there is a periphery, given that the situation has not changed during all these decades, which shows an unbalanced and heterogeneous Europe (Faludi, 2005).

The persistence of this situation of discontinuity (center vs. periphery), during the last five decades clearly shows us the great difficulties of the European construction process. In fact, as highlighted by different Cohesion Reports (EC, 1996, 2001, 2004, 2007a, 2010, 2014, 2017), territorial disparities within the EU remain very pronounced despite the efforts for their correction and some advances achieved in recent times, as seem to indicate both the Seventh Report (EC, 2017) and the Eurostat Regional Yearbook (2017).

In fact, the Seventh Cohesion Report states:

„The first signs of narrowing disparities are also evident at regional level across the EU. From 2008 onwards, regional disparities in employment and unemployment rates widened along with those in GDP per head. In 2014, disparities in employment started to narrow, followed by disparities in GDP per head in 2015. Nevertheless, many regions still have a GDP per head and an employment rate below pre-crisis levels” (EC, 2017: xi)

Regional disparities between the European centre and European periphery do not seem to be altered even if some modifications are observed regarding the initial panorama, inasmuch as the successive enlargements of the EU have altered the initial equilibria although leaving the centre-periphery scheme practically intact. To be exact, the center is defined as: „a band of relatively ‘rich’ regions running from northern Italy, up through Austria and Germany before splitting in one direction towards the Benelux countries, southern England and southern Ireland, and in the other direction towards the Nordic Member States”. This European Centre appears opposed to the European Periphery, that is to say: „a band of relatively ‘poor’ regions running from the Baltic Member States down through the eastern regions of the EU to Greece and southern Italy, before extending across the Mediterranean to the Iberian Peninsula” (Eurostat, 2017, p. 118).

²The Blue Banana (also known as the European Megalopolis or the Manchester-Milan Axis) is a discontinuous urban, industrial and services corridor stretching from northern England to northern Italy, with a population around 111 million. The concept was developed in 1989 by RECLUS, a group of French geographers managed by Roger Brunet who identified the „blue banana”, projecting it as such a backbone (West European „backbone”) of the European urban system. It approximately covers the territory from North West England across Greater London to the Benelux states, along the German Rhineland, Southern Germany, Alsace, Western France and Switzerland to Northern Italy in the south.

The relative novelty in this state of affairs is the increasing economic importance of urban and metropolitan areas³, which act as points of territorial concentration of economic activity and wealth. Highlighted within the group of metropolitan areas, the so-called „capital city metropolitan regions” accumulated almost 25% of the EU-28’s GDP, concentrating 34.7% of metropolitan regions economic activity in 2014 (Eurostat, 2017). Although this is not an exclusively European phenomenon⁴ (Ganong and Shoag, 2015).

Therefore, this gradual change, from rural regions and smaller towns towards metropolitan regions, in the location of economic activities and production processes throughout the European territory seems to be confirmed. This pattern was particularly prevalent for capital cities regions, although it is necessary to point out the great differences between countries⁵ within the EU.

Summing up, in the European panorama, the dominant tendencies point, on the one hand, to the imbalance between the centre and the European periphery, both economically and socially. On the other hand, there is a sharp trend towards the polarization of economic activity (employment, income and added value), in metropolitan areas, especially in metropolitan capitals. This concentration, in turn, accentuates territorial imbalances.

In the Globalization’s coordinates, this serious intraregional imbalance observed along the EU perimeter weakens European performance in the global world, by subtracting much competitiveness with respect to the great global powers, the USA type, in a geo-economic perspective (Faludi, 2005, p. 13).

In the past, these remarkable territorial imbalances justified the European redistributive regional policy existence, i.e. the *European Community Regional Policy*, its main objective being the reduction of economic and social disparities existing in the changing EU territorial set. As the Preamble of the Treaty of Rome stated „the EC member states are concerned to ensure their harmonious development, reducing the differences between the various regions and the delay of the less favored”

³Metropolitan regions are defined in relation to NUTS level 3 regions; they may be composed of one or more regions and cover urban agglomerations with more than 250 thousand inhabitants.

⁴The phenomenon of the concentration of wealth in metropolitan areas does not only affect Europe, but is common to many countries, both developed and developing. In the USA case, income inequality per person among the metropolitan areas was 30% higher in 2016 than in 1980 (Ganong and Shoag, 2015).

⁵So in the cases of Germany (5.4%), Italy (9.2%), Poland, Spain and the Netherlands the capital city metropolitan region does not accumulate more than 20% of GDP (2014), showing a polycentric structure in the territorial distribution of economic activity. Meanwhile in France, Belgium, the United Kingdom, the Czech Republic, Portugal and Greece, the capital city exceeded 30% of the national total economic output, thus illustrating an accentuated monocentric tendency in the territorial diffusion of economic activity (Eurostat, 2017).

Therefore, a Regional Policy would help the weakest territories, stimulating their growth and modernization through the ‘solidarity funds’ redistribution among the most disadvantaged regions, with the ultimate goal to make the common market advantages available to those territories.

The results of this Regional Policy are unequal in the sense that despite the poor regions’ progress in capital accumulation, divergences are maintained even if they do not grow. Furthermore, the metropolitan urban areas’ sustained growth versus the relative stagnation of the remaining ones indicates us that differences are deepening instead of being reduced. This situation has generated a tough debate about European Regional Policy efficiency which is far from over (Iammarino *et al.*, 2017). The fundamental aspects of that unfinished debate are the reconfiguration and restructuring of the European Regional Policy by updating it, by changing its objectives and purposes, by segmenting it or even by eliminating it.

2. A conceptual approach to territorial cohesion. Functional and institutional elements

The balanced or ‘harmonic’ development would be the medicine against this unbalanced development that starts from the origins of the EU. A kind of antibiotic against abroad bacterial spectrum that has to fight, on the one hand, against the chronic interregional disparities by avoiding the excessive concentration of activity (and population) in the central EU’s core and in its capital metropolitan areas, thus improving the competitiveness of the entire European system. This implies the effective economic activity deconcentration by its decentralization through the generation of new ‘centers’, so that the European airplane could have more engines besides the existing ‘central’ one, linked to the metropolitan capitals.

This necessary diversification of economic, productive and population centers in the European map appeared clear and defined in the European Spatial Development Prospective (ESDP) (EC, 1999, p. 21) although designated as „polycentric” development. In addition to the harmonic and polycentric development, the effort for competitiveness and integration of the different European regions in the World Economy was considered critical. In fact, the European Territorial Strategy (ETS) raised the need to enhance „*several large areas of economic integration of global importance in the EU, including its peripheral areas, endowed with high-quality global functions and services, through transnational territorial development strategies*” (EC, 1999, p. 23). With the intention of mitigating existing imbalances (Faludi, 2005, p. 13), this approach echoes both the Second and the Third Cohesion Reports (EC, 2001; EC, 2004).

For the achievement of these designs, the ESDP proposes what it calls „transnational strategies of territorial development” which, although not as precise as they should be (Faludi, 2005), suggest a clear commitment both to endogenous ‘bottom-up’ development and to transversal inter-territorial cooperation, with a

special mention of urban networks and underlining the need to seek complementarities between European territories in order to optimize such cooperation (Faludi, 2005, p. 14). These approaches reflect, on the one side, the influence of the new territorializing paradigms of Regional Development⁶ (Aydalot, 1986; Aydalot and Keeble, 1988; Camagni, 1995; Scott, 2001, Bachtler, 2003). On the other, they reflect the impact of Globalization and the solid commitment to it through such strategy of economic growth through the national economies integration into the global economy.

In this sense, it is important to emphasize that, in global coordinates, what differentiates one territory from another is not so much its endowment with productive factors, companies, institutions and people but the networks that they manage to constitute or participate in, such as productive networks, social networks, territorial networks, etc. Then, the territory's economic importance in the global world does not derive so much from being the physical support of the productive activity⁷ but from its relational capacity.

At this point, if the harmonic and polycentric development consists in something like a „balanced distribution across the territory of activities, population, production and knowledge management”, keeping in mind „the balance between human activities and the environment”, then the „French touch” is evident (Faludi, 2004). Since such elements are the basic thematic contents of the so-called „Aménagement du Territoire”, a concept based on the notion of „regional disparities” (Gravier, 1947), which imply a negative impact because, for example, the city-region of Paris attracts resources, activities and people from all over France to concentrate them in the Parisian metropolis (Faludi, 2005, p. 19). To counteract this tendency through economic territorial planning, the territorial polycentric development of the whole France was proposed as a remedy to the concentration of activities and people in the French capital.

As broadly accepted, we could define ‘Aménagement’ as the public policy oriented towards planning and coordinating the use of the ground, the organization of building-construction activities and the distribution of equipment, infrastructure and activities in a determined geographic space (Geoconfluences, 2017). It is, therefore, a voluntarist public policy which tries to counteract the powerful market laws that tend to concentrate economic activities and the population in certain points or areas to the detriment of others. A voluntarist public policy, implemented by the French State⁸, aimed at harmoniously distributing throughout the national territory the population, economic activities, education tools, transport infrastructure, etc.

⁶ Such as „productive milieux”, „endogenous initiatives of development”, „entrepreneurial and territorial networks”, „global city-regions”, etc.

⁷ This could generate comparative advantages: either by economies of scale and agglomeration or by diminishing returns.

⁸ This Policy, carried out after 1955, reached its zenith in the years 1960-1970 with the creation of the D.A.T.A.R. (Delegation à l'aménagement du territoire) in 1963. The

So if the „Aménagement’s objective is to try to correct the geo-economic imbalances between urban areas and rural areas, between central areas and peripheral areas usually its main tool will be the Territorial Planning. Precisely, „the balanced diffusion of economic activity” or „a harmonious location of economic activities” constitutes the Economic, Social and Territorial Cohesion’s essence, according to the Green Paper on Territorial Cohesion (EC, 2008). To be precise: „*Territorial cohesion is about ensuring the harmonious development of all these places*” (EC, 2008, p. 3).

However, the vision of „territorial cohesion” raised by the aforementioned document is much more ambitious since it considers that territorial cohesion achievement is associated (in addition to harmonic or polycentric development) to an improvement of living conditions and a number of socio-material factors⁹(somewhat heterogeneous) that ensure that all EU citizens can make the most of the advantages and characteristics of their territories. In addition, territorial diversity (normally considered as a weakness or the EU’s „passive”) is considered an asset contributing to the EU’s sustainable development.

Following the guidelines previously established by the ESDP (EC, 1999), the Green Paper highlights, on the one hand, the importance of competitiveness and integration of the various European regions in the World Economy, clearly aligned with trends and globalization schemes. On the other, the Green Paper consider the flow of technology, ideas, innovations, goods, services and capital as factors that guarantee the long-term sustainable growth of the EU as a whole (EC, 2008, p. 3).

Although, unlike the Fordist or Keynesian schemes of the 60-70, in the current pro-global schemes, the competitiveness and prosperity of the territories seem to depend on each other more than: a) the ability of endogenous people and companies to use territorial assets as efficiently as possible (EC, 2008, p. 3); b) the ability to generate links with other territories (community and non-EU) so that territorial assets are used in a rational, coordinated and sustainable manner.

Likewise, the Green Paper highlights the leading role of cooperation in the coordinates of the present territorial development since the vast majority of current

Delegation for Regional Planning and Regional Action, in charge of the inter-ministerial coordination promoted by the Interministerial Committees of Regional Planning (CIAT). Among the contributions of the DATAR, it would be necessary to mention „les métropoles d’équilibre” or the medium cities (les villes moyennes). In order to finance the activities, the Fonds national d’aménagement du territoire (FNAT) was subsequently replaced by the FIAT (Fonds d’intervention pour l’aménagement du territoire). The parallels with the European Regional Policy are more than obvious.

⁹Factors such as „improving conditions along the eastern outer border, promoting globally competitive and sustainable cities, addressing social exclusion in parts of a larger region and in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods, improving access to education, medical care and energy in remote regions and the difficulties of some regions with specific geographical features” (EC, 2008, p. 3).

territorial problems require integrated solutions and cooperation between various authorities and territorial agents. By contrast, public policies (this is community, regional policy, cohesion policy) have a subsidiary role: „can help the territories to make the best possible use of their assets” (EC, 2008, p. 3). That is to say, public policies can help EU territories to jointly respond to common challenges, achieve critical mass, obtain increased returns by combining their activities, exploit the complementarities and synergies between them and overcome the divisions derived from borders between member states emphasizing a list of easily recognizable policies in the current European panorama (EC, 2008, p. 3).

The reports *Territorial cohesion: unleashing the territorial potential*¹⁰ (EC, 2009), *Territorial Agenda of the European Union 2020* (TA20, 2011) and *7th Report on Economic, Social and Territorial Cohesion* (EC, 2017) reiterate the recommendations of the Green Paper and the previous texts, particularly in everything related to harmonious and sustainable polycentric development (TA20, 2011, pp. 9-11) (EC, 2009, p. 3), although by putting much emphasis on the territorial aspects of Cohesion and by underlining the increasing importance of sustainability and diversity.

Not in vain, the common denominator of the set of thematic elements encompassed within the conceptual area ‘territorial cohesion’ is the territory or, rather Territoriality, which is the real thread. We can consider the Territory as a historical-political-social-cultural construction with institutional recognition that manages and controls a defined physical space (Sack, 1986). Therefore, territory projects the control of a social group over a portion of the space generating a series of economic-productive, social, political, institutional and cultural relations and interactions (language, values, identity, etc.) (Ardrey, 1966). Interactions occur both inside the defined space and outside, with other „territories”.

Since territories (and their relational interactions) tend to diverge in that social groups are not identical (nor their culture, nor the relational and institutional dynamics they generate are equal), the endowment of territorial productive factors is not the same, and neither its management capacity, its institutionally, its capital (human, social or territorial) are equal. Consequently, territorial interactions will tend to be divergent and discontinuous. Therefore, the most dynamic territories in terms of society will tend to concentrate and densify economic activities around them, generating unequal functional relations with other territories, which will tend to generate gaps, discontinuities or inter-territorial distances that can become very significant, as in the EU’s case.

Hence, from the territorial flank, cohesion consists essentially in a process of convergence that tends to reduce inter-territorial differences in GDP, income and quality of life, so that it could also be understood as a process of generating

¹⁰ Result of the Kiruna Conference (2009) on Politics of Cohesion and Territorial Development.

opportunities for the least favored or at least, of guaranteeing the existence of opportunities for all (TA20, 2011, p. 4).

If territory is the thread of Territorial Cohesion to achieve territorial units ‘harmonic development (integrated in different networks and territorial systems), it is essential to stimulate the functional relationships between them in such a way that exchanges of all kinds are intensified, the space-time distances between the different network’s nodes and between the different networks that make up the system are reduced, resulting in the physical interconnections that allow the articulation of the different territorial units to be decisive.

Therefore, connectivity, understood holistically, appears as a fundamental component of harmonic development (also of Territorial Cohesion). But it is not only about connecting territories through good physical infrastructures and good intermodal transport connections. Likewise, it is important to guarantee, on the one side, access to „services of general economic interest”, such as medical care, education, sustainable energy, access to broadband Internet, reliable connections to energy networks and solid links between companies and research centers. On the other side, the access to „integrated transport systems” which would involve the construction of roads or rail links between cities, inland waterways, the development of intermodal transport chains and advanced transport systems and traffic management systems (EC, 2008, p. 6). With respect to the connectivity section, the EU as a whole offers a very unequal panorama; consequently, increasing territorial cohesion means reinforcing all these elements.

To achieve high levels of connectivity is essential to have cooperation, more exactly a strong multilevel cooperation (EC, 2008, p. 7), since the problems¹¹ that are intended to be addressed do not seem to know borders and boundaries, their minimization imply a very fluid inter-administrative cooperation and a new optics to make and design policies. This means involving different types of public and private actors, in a cooperation of variable geometry that could cover, as appropriate, cooperation between local communities and their neighbours, cooperation between EU countries and even cooperation between countries of the EU and third countries (EC, 2008, p. 7). As with connectivity, there are very interesting initiatives within the EU, especially in the field of cross-border cooperation although, at a general level, the results are uneven.

This strong ‘multilevel cooperation’ inevitably implies what has been called ‘multilevel Governance’ (Bache, 2008), that is, the ability to organize, regulate and manage, in a relational way, the integration processes of the different European territories, interactively combining both different territorial levels of government and

¹¹Among others, either environmental problems (linked to climate change, fires, droughts, floods, loss of biodiversity, pollution, etc.) or cross-border problems (migratory pressure, regular or irregular migrations, inter-frontier movements, commuting, shared management, public transport, access to health care, higher education and educational equipment and training, air quality and waste, etc.) or technological-scientific innovation problems.

‘local actors’, whether public or private. Although the concept may be controversial and contradictory (Bache, 1998), it presents, in addition to its great descriptive-explanatory power, large doses of reality since one of the common places of the current European policy is, precisely, multilevel governance (Bache, 2008). Carrying out multilevel governance would imply the institutional capacity necessary to do so, since the ‘almighty’ and overflowing dynamics of the economic processes that take place in the Globalization context should lead to their essential regulatory organization. Otherwise, unlimited market freedom in a context of enormous territorial disparity (as in the European case) would generate serious problems of social inefficiency.

Therefore, ‘multi-level governance’, in turn, requires as a correlate of Public Policies essential to channel territorial economic forces by orienting, stimulating or even correcting (or at least trying to) the divergence tendencies. But this requires an institutional framework able to act from (and on) the territories. For this reason, territorial cohesion requires reinforced public institutions with supranational horizons of action (institutionality of territorial cohesion) that carry out concrete actions that favour territorial cohesion¹².

As conceptual components of territorial cohesion, Connectivity and Cooperation is the antidote against separation, fragmentation and distance. In this order of things, isolation would be considered the most basic form of non-cohesion. Therefore, in the European territorial cohesion schemes, it is critical to pay special attention to the „fragile territories” with the highest level of isolation, such as mountains, islands, borders, sparsely populated regions, rural areas and remote regions (ultraperipherals), categories that usually appear in combination, reinforcing isolation and the difficulty of cohesion (EC, 2008, p. 8).

3. What is territorial cohesion? Metaconcepts and normative references

In our approach, the meta-concept of Territorial Cohesion seems to include five major thematic areas in a diachronic sense as shown in Table 1.

¹² In this regard the „Conference on Good Governance for Cohesion Policy” was organized by the European Commission’s DG Regional and Urban Policy and held on 24 May 2018 in Brussels (retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/conferences/good_governance).

Table 1. Metacomponents and thematic contents of the territorial cohesion

METACONCEPT TERRITORIAL COHESION	
COMPONENTS	THEMATIC CONTENTS
A REDISTRIBUTION*	A1 Solidarity+ Help + Stimulus Disadvantaged regions A2 Territorial Competitiveness
B POLYCENTRISM	B1 Harmonious or balanced development B2 Standard Social Factors B3 Standard living conditions
C TERRITORIAL	C1 Connectivity C2 Access to Services of General Economic Interest (SGEI) C3 Sustainable Development C4 Vulnerable Areas (Mountain Regions, Island Regions, Border Regions, Sparsely populated regions, Rural Areas) C5 Remote Regions (peripheral + outermost)
D INSTITUTIONAL	D1 Multilevel Governance D2 Multilevel institutions D3 Public Support Policies D4 Intangible Aspects (Innovation, R&D, European Identity, Multilingualism, e-government)
F RELATIONAL	F1 Territorial Cooperation (transboundary + transnational) F2 Multilevel Institutional Cooperation F3 European Integration + Regional Aspects (Trans-EU Networks)

*the redistributive component would include thematic referring to European regional policies of stimulation, solidarity and quantitative aid (structural funds) to the most disadvantaged regions.

Source: authors representation

These thematic components are included in a vision of EU prosperity (Economic Development) as a whole, linked to the competitiveness of community territories, supported, on the one hand, by an endogenous (and bottom up) perspective of economic growth and, on the other, in an essential relational perspective with other community (and non-community) territories where interactions of all kinds are the vehicle of increasing returns. A vision where public policies appear to be more subsidiary (or support) than anything else and where theoretical background materials clearly reflect pro-globalization and liberal approaches.

These meta-components appear fragmented in the legal-normative projection of the concept of Territorial Cohesion, which makes it difficult to understand them. In order to clarify and facilitate a better comprehension we have prepared Table 2.

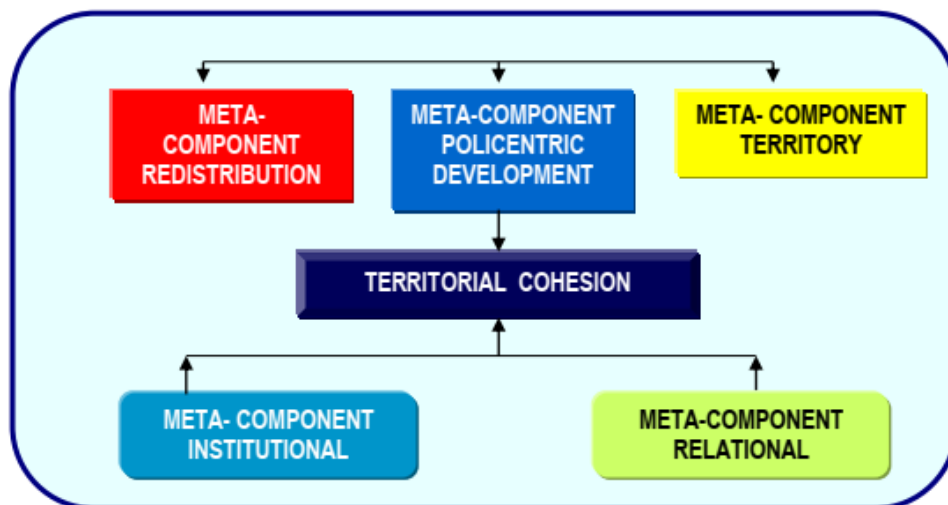
Table 2. Normative references on territorial cohesion

NORMATIVES REFERENCES ON TERRITORIAL COHESION	
ARTICLE	CONTENT
Article N. 174, Title XVIII Treaty of the EU Consolidated Version From 26.10.2012 Official Journal EU C 326/13	„In order to promote the harmonious development of the Union as a whole, the Union shall develop and continue its action aimed at strengthening its economic, social and territorial cohesion. The Union will aim, in particular, to reduce the differences between the levels of development of the various regions and the delay of the less favored regions. Particular attention will be given between the affected regions to rural areas, to areas affected by an industrial transition and to regions suffering from serious and permanent natural or demographic disadvantages, such as the more northern regions with low population density and insular, transboundary and mountain regions”.
Article N. 14, Treaty of the EU Consolidated Version From 26.10.2012. Official Journal EU C 326/13	„Without prejudice to Article 4 of the Treaty on European Union and to Articles 93, 106 and 107 of this Treaty, and in view of the place that services of general economic interest occupy among the common values of the Union, as well as their role in the promotion of social and territorial cohesion, the Union and the Member States, in accordance with their respective powers and within the scope of the Treaties, shall ensure that these services act in accordance with principles and conditions, in particular economic and social financial institutions, enabling them to fulfill their role. The European Parliament and the Council shall establish such principles and conditions through regulations, in accordance with the ordinary legislative procedure, without prejudice to the competence of the Member States, in compliance with the Treaties, to lend, commission and finance these services”.
Article N 170, Title XVI Treaty of the EU Consolidated Version From 26.10.2012 Official Journal EU C 326/13	„In order to contribute to the realization of the objectives referred to in Articles 26 and 174 and to enable the citizens of the Union, economic operators and regional and local authorities to fully participate in the benefits resulting from the creation of a space Without internal borders, the Union will contribute to the establishment and development of trans-European networks in the transport infrastructure, telecommunications and energy sectors. 2. In the context of a system of open and competitive markets, the action of the Union shall aim to promote the interconnection and interoperability of national networks, as well as access to such networks. It will take into account, in particular, the need to establish links between insular, landlocked and peripheral regions and the central regions of the Union”
Article N 171-1. Title XVI Treaty of the EU	„In order to achieve the objectives referred to in Article 170, the Union shall: a) draw up a set of guidelines relating to the objectives, priorities and broad lines of actions envisaged in the field of trans-

Consolidated Version, From 26.10.2012 Official Journal EU C 326/13	European networks; these guidelines will identify projects of common interest; b) carry out the actions that may be necessary to ensure the interoperability of the networks, especially in the field of harmonization of technical standards; and c) may support projects of common interest supported by Member States and determined in accordance with the guidelines mentioned in the first script, especially via feasibility studies, credit guarantees or interest subsidies; The Union may also provide a financial contribution through the Cohesion Fund created in accordance with the provisions of Article 177 to specific projects in the Member States in the field of transport infrastructure. Union action shall take into account economic viability potential of the projects”.
Article N 171-2. Title XVI Treaty of the EU Consolidated Version, From 26.10.2012 Official Journal EU C 326/13	„The Member States shall coordinate with each other, in collaboration with the Commission, the policies they apply at national level and which may have a significant influence on the achievement of the objectives set out in Article 170. The Commission, in close cooperation with the Member States, may take any useful initiative to encourage such coordination”.
Article N. 3 Treaty of the EU Consolidated Version From 26.10.2012. Official Journal EU	„The Union shall promote economic, social and territorial cohesion and solidarity among the Member States”
Article N. 4-1 Treaty of the EU Consolidated Version From 26.10.2012. Official Journal EU	„The Union shall have shared competence with the Member States when the Treaties give it a competence that does not correspond to the areas mentioned in Articles 3 and 6. 2. The competences shared between the Union and the Member States shall apply to the following main areas: a) the internal market; b) social policy, in the aspects defined in this Treaty; c) economic, social and territorial cohesion”

Source: authors representation

In this sense, Article 174 of the Treaty of the European Union (former Article 158 TEC), seems to transcribe with clarity the components „Redistribution” (A), „Polycentrism” (B) and „Territorial” (C) (although referring only to the „vulnerable zones” sub-component (C4)), from the meta-concept „Territorial Cohesion”, leaving the rest in a sort of shadow normative area, although in art.14 (former Article 16 TEC), reference is made to the „Territorial” component (although only in the theme of „access to services of general economic interest” (C2)).

Figure1. Meta-components of Territorial Cohesion

Source: own representation

Likewise, when referring to the trans-European networks, Article 170-1 (former Article 154 TEC) reflects the ‘connectivity’ (C1) sub-element of the ‘territorial’ component and therefore access to services of general economic interest” (C2) while 170 -2 refers to the ‘vulnerable zones’ component.

Finally, there can be found indirect references to the ‘Institutional’ Component (D) (multilevel governance (D1) + public support policies (D3)) and to the Relational Component (E) (territorial cooperation (F1) + multilevel cooperation (F2) in Article 171-1 and 2 (former Article 151 TEC).

The rest of references in the EU Treaty to territorial cohesion is very generic (Art.3 and 4-1), not allowing for further concretizations, although it seems to show the ‘redistributive’ component as the one with greater recognition, at least in normative terms.

Conclusions and reflections

Despite having been labelled as an imprecise, indefinite and even ‘philosophical’ concept and despite all its shadows, Territorial Cohesion, has constituted one of the most suggestive courses of EU’s action in the last decades, generating a series of controversies and debates which are far from over.

In the European Union framework, the idea of cohesion as a „search for harmony or convergence” inter-part has been used profusely to explain the need to address the enormous territorial differences existing both historically and currently

in the EU. However, this approach linked to the need to address inter-territorial disparities as a legitimization of the Regional European Policy is no longer enough because the challenges and difficulties that the globalizing context poses for the EU have generated the need to rethink and broaden the thematic limits from the primitive territorial cohesion conceptual coordinates, enriching and progressively expanding its thematic components and expanding its range.

Therefore, Territorial Cohesion is more than an ambiguous, uncertain, elusive or confusing concept as often labelled because, according to the review carried out, it appears as a complex, polysemic, multidisciplinary and multidimensional concept.

The thematic horizon of territorial cohesion has evolved and expanded in the short span of four decades from a purely redistributive perspective (anchored around the need to address the intra-territorial socio-economic disparities existing throughout the EU) to a harmonious and polycentric development of the whole EU territory. This new perspective overcomes the traditional centre-periphery dichotomy and favours greater competitiveness of community territories in the global context.

The latest evolution has led to a complex territoriality of great scope that includes aspects such as connectivity, access to general economic interest services, vulnerable areas, or even sustainable development. In recent years, institutional elements, such as multi-level governance or cooperation between institutions and territorial agents, appear within the thematic scope of Territorial Cohesion, which causes a progressively stronger institutional dimension within it. This institutional dimension will tend to grow in the coming years.

Obviously, this profusion of cumulative thematic contents which, at times, could be contradictory to each other certainly does not help to improve understanding about Territorial Cohesion. Also, it leads to confusion on the use of the term, since the reviewed European literature often speaks of 'pursuit cohesion'. Then, more than an operative or instrumental concept, Territorial Cohesion appears as a goal to pursue, 'goal' in the sense of the general objective of the Methodology of the Logical Framework or of the 'objective-image' of the Strategic Planning methodology.

Difficulties in understanding and subsequent controversies regarding territorial cohesion could be partially resolved if we understand territorial cohesion more as a 'conceptual perimeter' than as a unique concept. In this sense, we could consider Territorial Cohesion a meta-concept. Our Territorial Cohesion meta-concept is made up of a series of components that in turn cover different thematic contents (or subcomponents), as a whole forming of a dense and motley 'conceptual perimeter' that must be deconstructed to be fully understood.

The empirical economic evidence shows that it is very difficult to correct or harmonize divergent territorial dynamics, so the compensatory strategies of these inter-territorial inequalities, in our case, the so-called 'territorial cohesion', have a rather macro-political objective, as it happened with the French ancestor of 'our'

territorial cohesion, the ‘Amenagement du Territoire’. Therefore, the territorial Cohesion could be imbued with an enormous voluntarism, in our case, European voluntarism.

These conceptual weaknesses make the main challenge of cohesion instrumental and it is essential that cohesion can be measured and operational in order to be operative, otherwise it will tend to remain in the elusive terrain of uncertainty. These same conceptual weaknesses of territorial cohesion become strengths in the perspective of European construction, where cohesion appears as a true cornerstone. From this perspective, when can we consider a group or a society as ‘cohesive’? Possibly, when there are operational harmonization mechanisms that reduce disparities and divergences by filling in existing gaps.

The presence of these mechanisms would stimulate the effective inclusion of singular individuals in a group or singular groups in the society as a whole. Also, individuals (and groups of individuals) must share common goals and a sense of belonging to the group.

The current EU is a heterogeneous territorial context, marked by a growing inter-territorial disparity and increasing difficulties in understanding among the different member states (and groups of member states). In this context, Territorial Cohesion is a sine qua non element of European construction which, let us not forget, is a kind of ‘work in progress’ that is far from over.

In such a complex European context, the use of Territorial Cohesion, a ‘political’ objective implies a consolidation process as such ‘group’ (group, society, collective, territory). In this sense, Territorial Cohesion appears as a guiding utopia for the effective policies to be carried out in order to achieve it. A useful utopia oriented towards strengthening the various public, private, institutional or social stakeholders in the development of this great collective project, which is the EU.

Therefore, the added value of Territorial Cohesion for the EU lies not so much in its concrete or operative dimensions (certainly improvable), nor in its instrumental possibilities, but in the values that it entails, in its axiology and, especially, in its teleology, that is, the purpose (or purposes) towards which it is directed. In this sense, if the ‘resilient disparity’ is what characterizes the current EU, the implementation (and improvement) of community policies based on concepts (even somewhat ambiguous) that favour territorial convergence, stimulating a harmonious and sustainable development of the various European territories more than an election, seems a necessity ... how this policy has to be implemented is a different question.

It should not be forgotten (as often seems to happen in the debate on territorial cohesion in the EU) that the use of this concept or of other similar ones implies the existence of a collective project around this „heterogeneous whole” which is the EU. A collective project that, in spite of its shadows and shortcomings, implies belonging to a ‘whole’ superior to ‘Parties’ and, more importantly, the will to affirm and strengthen those ‘parts to improve the ‘whole’ should not be forgotten.

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