

ET2050 - Territorial Scenarios and Visions for Europe (ESPON) (2011-2015)

Territorial development in Europe: What does the future hold?

Europe is not a flat and empty space free from development constraints, but an old civilised territory made of hundreds of thousands of small towns and cities of all sizes, a predominantly man-made landscape, an extremely diverse mosaic of regions with different geographic characteristics where territory matters very much. But what does the future hold for European territory?

This is exactly the question addressed by the recently completed EU project “Scenarios and Vision for European Territory 2050” (ET2050), funded by ESPON, the European Spatial Planning Observatory Network. The project aimed not only to predict likely futures but also to assess the alternative territorial strategies in terms of economic growth, regional disparities, land-use and related environmental impacts (transport, energy, emissions, etc.). The project highlighted three possible territorial scenarios for development for 2050, taking into account several ongoing mega-trends (such as slowing economic growth, ageing population, external and internal migration, climate change, geopolitical challenges).

Scenario A: The promotion and networking of European Metropolises

Scenario B: The promotion of polycentric development by supporting second-tier cities

Scenario C: The promotion of small cities and less developed regions

The ET-2050 project argues that the polycentric territorial scenario (B) induces the most balanced growth. Making Europe open and polycentric remains the most suitable territorial strategy supporting competitiveness, social cohesion and sustainability goals. The efficiency and quality of European territory lies in networking cities of all sizes, from local to global level, as well as empowering people and local activities to valorise their own assets at European and global scale.

The 2014 Final Report of the ESPON research titled Territorial Scenarios and Visions for Europe (ET2050) prepared scenarios for European spatial development on the time horizon of 2050. The report included not only the baseline and exploratory scenarios, but presented the results of the impact assessment of the Eastern-European scenarios as well. These forecasted impediments to the catch-up effect and relative decline in the development of Central and Eastern Europe. Based on the forecast of MULTIPOLE and MASST models, 84 of the examined 132 Central and Eastern European regions, will show relatively lower development in 2030 than in 2010, and only 48 cases can be expected to experience growth. The disparities between countries barely decreased, the models forecast stagnation in this regard, but spatial disparities within the countries are expected to significantly increase. If the policies, which can influence these processes, do not change, we may expect a more pronounced divisions in Europe and the development of its Southern and Eastern regions being finally outpaced by the Northern and Western ones. In Europe, the competitive regions with cities of considerable size and a polycentric urban network will be the beneficiaries of EU structural policy and a faster growth rate. In the Central European regions, the gap between capital cities and secondary centres remains wide and polycentricity dramatically declines, which intensifies centralization efforts.