

## **GEOSPECS Interim Report Commentary**

This project is significant in the context of Cohesion Policy after 2013. The Lisbon Treaty, in giving EU competence in relation to Territorial Cohesion, explicitly related that to “rural areas, areas affected by industrial transition, and regions which suffer from severe and permanent natural or demographic handicaps such as the northernmost regions with very low population density and islands, cross-border and mountain regions.” The ESPON Typologies Compilation project already made an attempt to define such areas. Inevitably such a task is fraught given the underlying politics.

The GEOSPECS project approaches the challenge in a slightly different way. It focuses on the following types of geographical specificities:

- Mountain areas,
- Islands,
- Sparsely populated areas,
- Outermost regions (e.g. French Guyana),
- Border regions,
- Coastal areas and
- Inner peripheries (i.e. areas in the EU core but peripheral within their own country, such as Wallonia in Belgium.)

The report takes issue with the definitions proposed for such regions in the Fifth Cohesion Report. The researchers have grappled with the challenge of delineating the regions in these categories by working at the finer grain level of LAU2, rather than the much bigger NUTS 3 units. This delivers greater spatial precision and should avoid misleading situations, e.g. where a NUTS 3 region was declared “coastal” even if most of the region was some distance from the coast. The “Inner Periphery” remains the most ambiguous and difficult to pin down.

In addition, the team have used time-distance by road for the delineation of sparsely populated areas, coastal zones, border zones and inner peripheries. The calculation of population potentials within a 45 minute travel time across all of the ESPON space is a particularly significant advance. Innovative approaches of coasts and borders based on time distance to the border also provide new insights.

Importantly, the report stresses that “The objective of the project is not to benchmark GEOSPECS areas against European average values, nor to assess whether the creation of European regional development programmes targeting one or more of these categories could be envisaged. Rather, GEOSPECS seeks to understand how each type of specificity may influence socio-economic development processes, and potentially lead local and regional stakeholders to

the formulation of development objectives that are different from those prevailing at the European and national levels.”

Thus the focus is strongly towards the idea of strength in diversity, through endogenous development. The underlying rationale is that all GEOSPECS areas are influenced by wide range of factors, some of which stem from geographic specificity, while others are related to inherited features, macro-economic contexts, and institutional structures.

To operationalise this argument, the Interim Report includes a matrix that combines the seven different types of regions with a list of socio-economic and environmental structures and processes. This is used to generate questions about how the specific geographical features might shape activities within each type of region. For example, for islands, what is the role of the regulatory framework and commercial context for the operation of air/sea connections?

Scotland's Highlands and Islands will be a case study as a mountainous area, and in addition the Outer Hebrides will be a case study for islands. Pembrokeshire, Devon and Cornwall are part of the Celtic Sea coastal case study.

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Related ESPON Reports: 2013 Targeted Analysis on Territorial Diversity in Europe (TeDi); 2013 Scientific Platform on Typology Compilation.

Future Reports: Interim Report 2 March 2011; Draft Final Report 2 March 2012; Final Report 1 July 2012.

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