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# Cross-fertilisation between spatial planning and territorial cohesion: lessons from the Czech Republic

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## ABSTRACT

This paper contributes to the literature on the territorial dimension of EU Cohesion Policy and spatial planning in EU Member States. It offers a perspective on these debates by focusing on the case study of the Czech Republic which exemplifies the group of countries being the main beneficiaries of Cohesion Policy. Building on interviews, document analyses and interactive workshops, the barriers and potentials for cross-fertilisation between Cohesion Policy and spatial planning are identified. Upon this background, concrete policies are recommended. Therefore, the paper goes a step further by explaining why the problem occurs and what can be done about it.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## KEYWORDS

Spatial planning; urban planning; regional planning; territorial cohesion; European Union

## 1. Introduction

Spatial planning in the Czech Republic and EU Cohesion Policy currently operate on separate policy tracks, leading to inefficiencies and missed opportunities for synergies. Cross-fertilization, which involves integrating these policies to create mutually reinforcing strategies, is essential for achieving cohesive and sustainable regional development. In the Czech Republic, the relationship between spatial planning and EU Cohesion Policy remains largely disconnected, limiting their effectiveness. More research on cross-fertilization is needed to align objectives, share resources, and coordinate efforts across different governance levels. Our qualitative research employs desk research, questionnaires, and interviews to analyse the current state and potential integration. We gathered insights from expert debates, surveys of 24 planners, and interviews with 15 key informants, validated through an interactive dialogue with both national and international experts. This comprehensive approach aims to provide practical recommendations for better aligning spatial planning with EU Cohesion Policy.

Spatial planning systems have developed in various countries within their national frameworks of property law, cadastre, and territorial governance, among others. Constrained by these frameworks, spatial planning systems have developed a ‘hardware’ consisting of formal institutions, instruments and procedures of planning.

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However, effective planning also requires a complementary ‘software,’ which refers to the informal role and authority of planning (Healey, 1999).

In other words, while ‘hardware’ encompasses the tangible, structural elements (institutional arrangements, laws, and regulations), the ‘software’ addresses the more intangible but equally critical elements, such as the collaborative spirit, communication practices, and trust among stakeholders within the planning processes.

This distinction between ‘hardware’ and ‘software’ is crucial for understanding the institutional and cultural challenges discussed later in the paper. Institutional challenges relate to the ‘hardware’ aspects of planning, where structural or procedural barriers impede effective integration between spatial planning and Cohesion Policy. On the other hand, cultural challenges correspond to the ‘software’ of planning, reflecting the embedded cultural attitudes and governance styles that affect cooperation and cross-sectoral communication.

For the ‘software’ of planning, Knieling and Othengrafen (2016) as well as Adams *et al.* (2012) use the term ‘planning culture’, which is closely connected to a more general governance culture. With increasing interaction between sectoral policies, Faludi characterised the policy domain, which in our view seeks to coordinate sectoral policies, to achieve specific spatial outcomes in a given territory (Faludi, 2010).

In the member states of the European Union (EU), the diversity of national or even regional spatial planning systems is facing the common EU policy of territorial cohesion aimed at providing high-quality access to public services and high quality of life to people all over the EU regions. As early as 1994, the ministers responsible for spatial planning agreed on three policy guidelines for the spatial development of the then EU10: development of a balanced and polycentric urban system and a new urban–rural relationship; securing parity of access to infrastructure and knowledge; and sustainable development, prudent management and protection of nature and cultural heritage. Following this line, European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) requested that ‘[s]patial development policies promote sustainable development of the EU through a balanced spatial structure’. Lisbon Treaty (European Commission, 1997) completed the social and economic cohesion with territorial cohesion as a shared responsibility of the EU.

Aware of how different the European planning systems are, which practically did not allow their unification, the efforts focused at least to find common features of these systems, and/or to classify these systems in some way. Shaw *et al.* (1995), identified the activities of regional policy, regional planning and land use/physical planning as common features of spatial planning. This resulted in the EU Compendium (1997), which uses this classification for then member states. Following this line, Nadin (1998) and later Nadin and Stead (2008) classified the national planning systems in ‘families’ and as such they distinguished four major traditions of spatial planning in Europe: regional economics; comprehensive integrated planning; land-use management; and urbanism.

Umberto Janin Rivolin (2012) distinguished planning systems for their relevance, efficiency, effectiveness, impact and sustainability. The ‘maturity’ of planning consists of both ‘hardware’ and ‘software’. Also, the maturity of planning systems varies across Europe.

Cohesion Policy, the EU’s regional and urban development policy, has been developed to accomplish the objectives of sustainable development through a balanced spatial structure. It is the most ‘territorial’ EU policy, which puts a strong emphasis on

harmonising the level of territorial development. It builds on a multi-level governance implementation system and promotes integrated development of territories. This development is supported by providing funding via European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) for a diversity of investment projects as part of sectoral or regional programmes defined for EU member states and their regions (mostly underdeveloped).

More recently, the functional areas were defined both at supranational level (macro-regional strategies) or at the sub-national level (metropolitan regions, functional urban areas, or territories with specific geographic characteristics). Their development is supported via specific Territorial Delivery Mechanisms in Cohesion Policy, such as Integrated Territorial Investment (ITI) used for supporting whole-functional urban areas, and Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) used for supporting more localised, community-specific initiatives. Both principles behind those mechanisms, i.e. integrated territorial development in case of ITI and empowering local communities in case of CLLD, are presented in The Territorial Agenda 2030 strategic document endorsed by the EU in 2020.

The important territorial aspects of Cohesion Policy make it highly relevant to discuss the relationships between it and spatial planning. In Faludi's perspective, 'spatial planning is not really different from territorial cohesion policy' (Faludi, 2010, p. 3). However, despite this 'proximity' between Cohesion Policy and planning, generating synergies has proven challenging, as there is still a disconnect between those two domains, which this article is addressing.

In order to increase the effectiveness of different policies by coordination, a concept of cross-fertilisation process was utilised (Nadin *et al.*, 2021), being defined as 'the interaction between sectoral policy decision-makers that creates complementarity, increases efficiency through synergy and avoids the costs of non-coordination' (Nadin *et al.*, 2021, p. 3). In this article, cross-fertilisation is studied between spatial planning based on national/subnational legislation and territorial cohesion applied via the EU Cohesion Policy. It is, therefore, a concept overarching different departments and sectors across different governance levels, accounting for all the different actors and stakeholders.

The European Commission had considerable leverage in driving institutional changes and used conditionality to promote the establishment of a regional tier of government to make the new member states ready and capable of managing EU funding at the sub-national level, leading to far-reaching institutional changes (e.g. Hughes *et al.* (2005); Bruszt (2008); Dąbrowski and Piskorek (2018)). Similarly, cross-border and macro-regional cooperation tools, also co-funded through the EU, are deemed to exert an influence on rescaling and planning practice, as the research on the Baltic states showed (Raagmaa *et al.*, 2014; Stead, 2014; Raagmaa & Stead, 2017).

In this paper, we explore the conditions for synergies between Cohesion Policy and spatial planning, building on the case study of the Czech Republic.

The Czech Republic offers an informative and illustrative case study to learn more about cross-fertilisation by being a representative of countries that are the main beneficiaries of Cohesion Policy, for which the funding represents an important influence and funding source for spatial policies. The Czech case shares many characteristics with several of the more recent EU member states from Central and Eastern Europe (Knieling & Othengrafen, 2016). That is why presented lessons from the Czech Republic might remain relevant also for other countries; although with varying relevance to each of those countries' planning system. This variance is the result of different history and systemic

transformation in those countries, making it valuable to study and compare literature from the region, e.g. from Poland (Nowak *et al.*, 2022).

The paper is structured as follows. The next section sets the scene for the discussion on relationships between territorial cohesion and spatial planning, starting from the observation that they operate in ‘parallel universes’. The concept of parallel universes is applied to the East-Central European countries, placing them in the broader European context. In the third section, the methodology and the case of the Czech Republic are explained, and it also provides an overview of the main challenges and opportunities in the Czech context. Subsequently, we discuss recommendations for improvements in the short- and long-term, while drawing lessons for other similar contexts in Europe. The paper concludes with a summary of the main take-away messages and avenues for further research.

## 2. Territorial cohesion and spatial planning

### 2.1. EU cohesion policy and national planning systems: parallel universes?

Bringing Cohesion Policy closer to spatial planning has been debated since the 1990s. Since then, the discussion has been fuelled with new arguments. The place-based approach, which rejects the ‘one size fits all’ types of solutions, brought the notion that each territory should be considered individually. In this context, spatial planning may play an ‘important new role [...] as a critical platform to coordinate and harmonise sectoral policy action and EU investment programmes’ (Daly & González, 2013, p. 79).

However, the closer alignment between those two policy realms has been difficult and controversial. Spatial planning, on one hand, is not a formal competence of the EU, while, on the other hand, territorial cohesion is at least a shared competence of the EU and member states (Faludi, 2018). Consequently, the EU’s policies and recommendations towards a more territorial approach to Cohesion Policy depend on the willingness of the member states to engage in this shift. This task is made more difficult by the diversity of territorial administration and spatial planning systems across the EU, resulting in an uneven degree of Europeanisation of spatial planning among EU member states (Nadin *et al.*, 2021).

Against this background, researchers have been exploring whether, how and when Cohesion Policy and planning practice in the member states of the EU could influence each other. Several studies indicated that there is indeed scope for influence and synergies between Cohesion Policy and spatial planning (Dühr *et al.*, 2010; Adams *et al.*, 2012), while others explored how Cohesion Policy triggered a process of Europeanisation of planning mediated through domestic factors (Dühr *et al.*, 2007; Giannakourou, 2012; Dąbrowski, 2014; Evers & Tennekes, 2016; Purkarthofer, 2018). Central and Eastern European countries appeared as particularly prone to such influence of Cohesion Policy on planning and territorial governance, which seeks to devolve power to the lowest governance levels so that policymaking processes can be driven by local knowledge and expertise (Moodie *et al.*, 2023).

The ESPON Comparative Analysis of Territorial Governance and Spatial Planning Systems in Europe analysed relations between territorial cohesion policies and spatial planning systems in altogether 32 European countries. This paper builds on findings

from the Czech case study conducted as part of ESPON COMPASS Dialogue and Case Study (2020–2021).

## **2.2. Cross-fertilisation between spatial planning and cohesion policy**

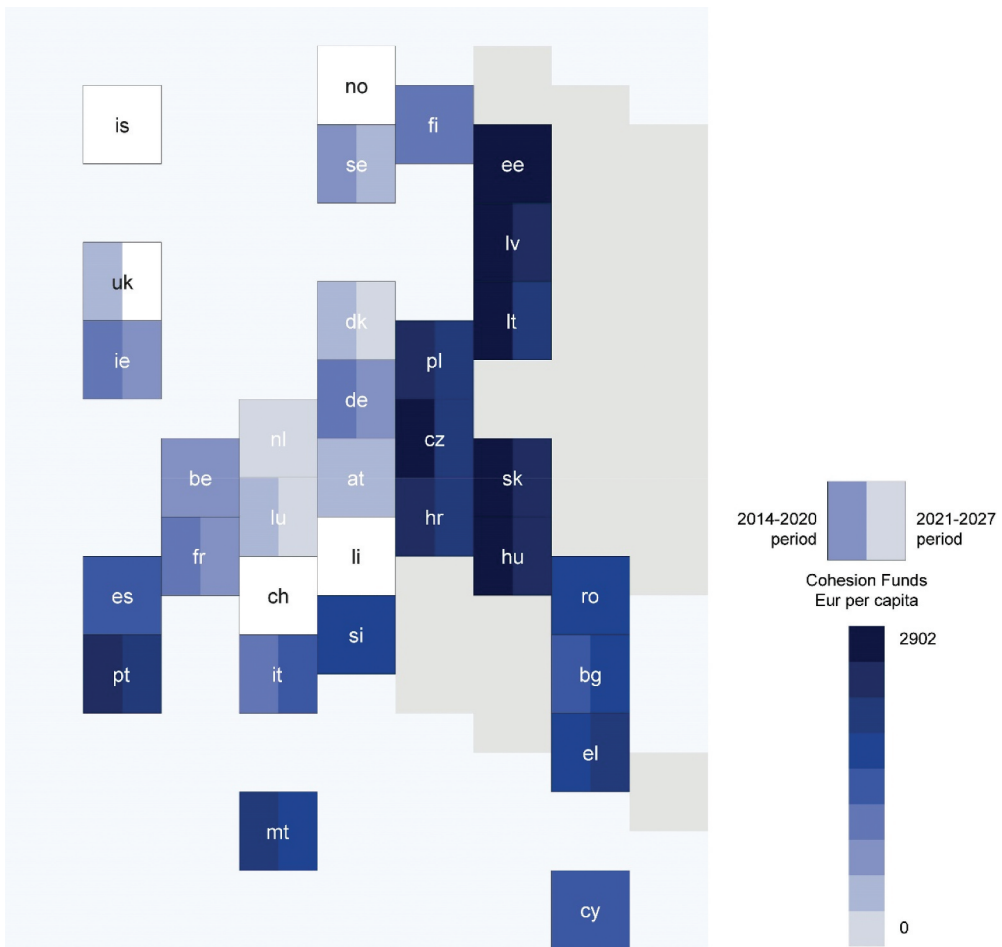
Research indicated that the scope for Cohesion Policy to influence spatial planning remained contingent upon the domestic contexts and differential engagement in EU territorial governance (Nadin *et al.*, 2018), depending on the country-specific pathways of institutional development (Dąbrowski & Piskorek, 2018) and the orientation and capacity of domestic spatial planning systems (Medeiros, 2014). While providing rich accounts of how Cohesion Policy triggered changes in the planning systems and practice, studies on this topic, being based on case study research, generally do not paint a ‘big picture’ when it comes to cross-fertilisation.

Consequently, cross-fertilisation remains weak in most countries, despite the growing emphasis on the territorial and urban dimensions of Cohesion Policy (Nadin *et al.*, 2021). It was found that the potential for cross-fertilisation was in the implementation of Cohesion Policy tools with a specific territorial focus that encourages collaboration and coordination of planning across administrative boundaries: for example, Integrated Territorial Investment stimulated metropolitan-scale planning, e.g. in Warsaw, Budapest or Brno urban regions. By the same token, territorial cooperation programmes (INTERREG) also played a role in cross-fertilisation by stimulating the development of cross-boundary territorial/spatial visions and strategies, although their application often remains rather diffused (Zonneveld, 2005). Cross-fertilisation was also found more effective when competences for Cohesion Policy implementation rested at the sub-national level and in smaller countries, where Cohesion Policy and spatial planning were often the domain of the same institutions (Nadin *et al.*, 2021). Finally, stronger embeddedness of strategic spatial planning within the planning system (as opposed to land use planning) was deemed to favour cross-fertilisation. In most contexts, however, spatial planning and Cohesion Policy operate in separate policy tracks (Cotella, 2018). We can thus speak of the ‘parallel universes’ of Cohesion Policy and planning as a barrier for cross-fertilisation. As we will show, the Czech case illustrates well this misalignment.

## **2.3. The national contexts for cohesion policy in East-Central European countries**

East-Central European countries that accessed the European Union in 2004 and 2007 underwent a process of transition towards liberal democracy and market economy, and processes of Europeanisation (Matlak *et al.*, 2018). Given their relative underdevelopment as compared to the ‘old’ EU Member States, this group of countries is among the biggest beneficiaries of EU funding derived from Cohesion Policy (see Figure 1). The idea of supporting lagging regions to improve their prosperity that originated in the European Community of 10 member states where the assistance was targeted in Mediterranean peripheries, suddenly encompassed a large portion of the enlarged EU.

In the context of EU enlargement, the European Commission had considerable leverage in driving institutional changes and used conditionality to promote the establishment of a regional tier of government to make the new member states ready and capable of managing EU funding at the sub-national level, leading to far-



**Figure 1.** Cohesion policy allocations in 2014–2020 and 2021–2027, where € 0 is the lowest and € 2902 is the highest amount per capita. Data source: Bachtler *et al.* (2020, p. 19); geographic representation: Nadin *et al.* (2021, p. 4).

reaching institutional changes (Hughes *et al.*, 2005; Bruszt, 2008; Dąbrowski & Piskorek, 2018).

The influence of territorial cooperation on spatial planning in most Central and Eastern European countries had been increasing in the long run between 2000 and 2016. In the programming period of 2014–2020, Cohesion Policy played a major role in financing public investment. ESIF accounted for 74.36% of overall public investments in Lithuania, 61.17% in Poland, 48.54% in Bulgaria, 44.86% in Romania and 42.52% in the Czech Republic in 2017, while the biggest net receiver was Portugal with 84.20% of all public investment financed from EU cohesion funds. It is, however, in striking contrast to other countries that still benefit from large ESIF budget, like Italy (12.71%) or Spain (16.59%), let alone ‘net contributor’ countries like Austria (1.31%); all figures adopted from Bachtler *et al.* (2020).



For the 2021–2027 period, Cohesion Policy allocations are lower for most countries, including the Czech Republic. Several regions previously classified as Less Developed Regions will move to the Transitions Regions category and the countries' allocation will decrease (Bachtler *et al.*, 2020). Still, in the running programming period, the average Czech citizen will benefit from the sixth largest allocation of ESIF funding per capita, more than € 1000 above the EU average of € 818.

In sum, ESIF matter for the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and to some degree for the countries of the South of Europe (although in some of them, like in Italy, only some regions benefit from a similar magnitude of funding), given the amount of funding transferred and how important it is in financing public investment. Additionally, ESIF require co-financing from national or local resources, which effectively makes most of public investments dependent on the Cohesion Policy priorities. This may affect the national priorities in line with Cohesion Policy priorities, which otherwise might not have happened.

When it comes to the urban dimension of Cohesion Policy, i.e. instruments directly targeting Member States' cities (Cotella, 2019), the influence on Bulgarian, Czech, Greek, Polish and Portuguese planning was moderate, and it has also been increasing. Thus, overall, the influence of the different aspects of Cohesion Policy in East Central and East Southern Europe was assessed as low to moderate, but generally increasing over time. In this way, EU Cohesion Funds significantly influence not only national priorities of spatial planning and regional policies, but they also contribute to (obviously slower) processes and systems of national spatial planning towards their 'Europeanization'.

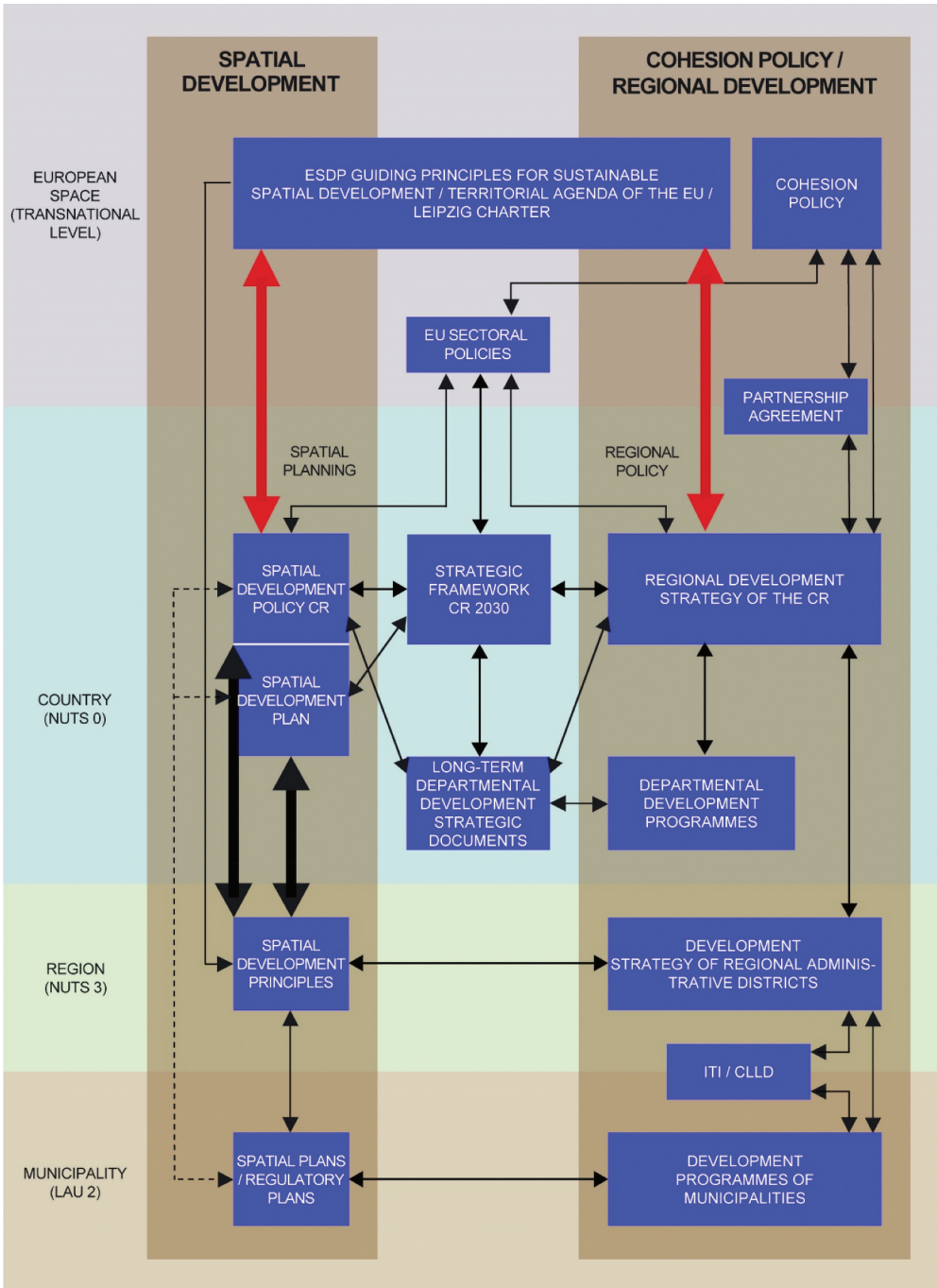
### 3. Analysing the Czech case results

The previous chapter shows that the Czech Republic exemplifies the complex interplay between national spatial planning and Cohesion Policy. Since joining the EU in 2004, Czech planning system has evolved from its centralized roots to incorporate more decentralized, local governance structures. Despite significant EU funding through ESIF, aligning domestic planning frameworks with EU territorial cohesion objectives remains a nuanced and ongoing process.

Additionally, when compared to other European countries, the Czech system of territorial governance has several specificities. Legally, the system encompasses topics of development and sustainability but lacks focus on cohesion, protection, and citizen involvement. In practice, however, it addresses development primarily. Moreover, while the legal framework mandates that planning should address land-use, environment, and infrastructure, in practice, it tends to focus mainly on land-use and infrastructure (Nadin *et al.*, 2018). In the following chapter, features of the Czech system of territorial governance are further explored, emphasizing institutional separation between spatial planning and regional policy, and the resulting challenges for cross-fertilisation and effective territorial governance.

#### 3.1. The Czech system of territorial governance

Czech system of territorial governance consists of institutionally separated spatial planning aimed at spatial development, and regional policy designated for cohesion in



**Figure 2.** Diagram explaining the territorial governance system in the Czech Republic. Source: ministry for regional Development; policy of spatial development (2021).

regional development, which operate at the national, regional and municipal levels, in parallel, without much cross-influence (see [Figure 2](#)).

Spatial planning (the literal translation of the Czech term is ‘territorial planning’) is requested to coordinate public and private interests in land use and examine its possibilities of land use with regard to territorial conditions. Spatial planning has undergone a number of changes since the first legal regulation in the 1940s. In dramatically changing political and governance frameworks, it has, however, maintained legal and factual continuity throughout. Current legislation is proclaiming to streamline the process of development and promote sustainable development.

Formally, spatial planning system can be classified as mature. Spatial planning documents exist on national, regional and local (municipal) levels. Documents for ‘higher’ levels incorporate binding decisions that must be considered and further specified within the documents for the ‘lower’ levels. Regional authorities can, however, intervene in local development only in matters of regional importance.

Sectoral policies heavily influence spatial planning, particularly those dealing with transportation, energy and manufacturing. The institutional actors, who defend the specific public interests that are expressed in the sectoral policies, have a very strong legal position when negotiating planning documents.

Spatial planning operates with longer time periods than the six-year programming periods of the EU, for which the objectives of structural funding are usually set and reflected in priorities for spatial development. However, certain inertia of spatial planning is considered an advantage by planning professionals. The argument is that the physical environment cannot effectively adapt to the ever-changing socioeconomic conditions.

The agenda for Czech regional policy was introduced in 1998 by the Regional Development Act. The Act requires that the Strategy for Regional Development of the Czech Republic is elaborated and updated regularly. Since the EU accession, its updates follow the planning periods of ESIF. The Strategy is expected to use the outcomes of territorial planning and coordinate sectoral policies from the perspective of spatial effects. In practice, however, sectoral policies frequently do not take spatial effects into account (Šýkora, 2017).

The Strategy for Regional Development is a key tool for the implementation of Czech regional policy and the coordination of other public policies on regional development. The strategy especially regards the dynamic and balanced economic and social development of the country and its individual regions, while laying down the basic conditions for the fulfilment of objectives of regional development. As such, the national priorities set in the Strategy for Regional Development for the Czech Republic are the immediate link to EU Cohesion Policy.

As discussed above, Czech regional policy, similarly as in the cases of Hungary, Poland and Slovakia (cf. e.g. ESPON (Nadin *et al.*, 2018)), has been actually driven by the EU policies and priorities. Over the years since EU accession, the influence of EU policies and, consequently, EU structural funds, was increasing with the volume of the EU resources available and with their recognition as the means to support development and enhance prosperity. However, the territorial impacts of Cohesion Policy in relation to spatial planning remained at best moderate in the Czech case (Nadin *et al.*, 2018), hence limiting opportunities for cross-fertilisation between the two policies. This is not exceptional, at least partial alignment between Cohesion Policy and spatial planning in

terms of goals, implementation mechanisms and timing can be observed only in a limited number of countries (e.g. France, Poland and Portugal) (Nadin *et al.*, 2018).

The assistance of the Czech regional policy has been channelled to the structurally weak parts of the country. The delimitation of these regions is periodically reviewed and changes in the delimitation reflect the shifting nature of detriment: while rural peripheries were assisted in the 1990s, since 2008 the assistance has been focused on the structurally affected industrial regions of North-Western Bohemia and Moravia-Silesia (Ostrava) regions.

Since 2014, novel territorial instruments have been introduced as part of the Cohesion Policy: integrated territorial investments (ITI) and community-led local development (CLLD), which in theory could lead to a stronger alignment of Cohesion Policy programmes and spatial planning. In practice, they have not functioned as an appropriate tool to support the spatial planning system, which remained strongly constrained by jurisdictions of municipalities and regions. Particularly in the case of the Prague Metropolitan Region, any effort for coordinated planning among Prague and the surrounding municipalities belonging to the Central Bohemian Region faces extreme difficulties. This is one of the several examples of how in the Czech context (but also in other ESIF recipient countries) ‘a top-down conforming pressure from the EU, usually by means of requirements for EU funding, may lead to rather formal adjustments in terms of superficial arrangements that would not affect the actual processes as the essence of planning’ (Maier, 2015, p. 27). Here the ‘software’ of planning culture, which is expected to serve the power, proved its vigour. Moreover, the support from political elites for the ideas of sustainable development, environmental policy and social cohesion, as they are coming from the EU policy forums, is sometimes weak vis-à-vis immediate political targets.

In sum, the Czech Republic’s territorial governance system and Cohesion Policy implementation are misaligned. Planning is the domain of different institutions than the elaboration and management of Cohesion Policy programmes. Territorial focus of both policies is poorly pronounced, and the time horizons of planning and Cohesion Policy are misaligned. This creates unfavourable conditions for cross-fertilisation, as our empirical research confirms.

#### 4. Materials and methods

To analyse the extent of and conditions for strengthening cross-fertilisation between Czech spatial planning, regional development policy and Cohesion Policy, qualitative research techniques were applied. We started with desk research of planning literature, particularly expert debates in the Czech journal *Urbanismus a územní rozvoj* [Urbanism and spatial development] spanning across previous Cohesion Policy programming period (2014–2020). The preliminary results from the recent study *Analysis, recommendations and legislative proposals for a Building Act reform in the area of spatial planning* delivered by Deloitte Czech Republic (DG REFORM, 2020) also informed the research.

To dive deeper into concrete organisational structures, a questionnaire for Czech planners and planning administrators was elaborated and distributed among 24 experts. The questionnaire was divided into three parts, each covering a specific topic on the linkage of Cohesion Policy and spatial planning: (A) how spatial planning can contribute to implementation of the policy objectives of the 2021–2027 Cohesion Policy; (B) how spatial planning can make use of the Territorial Delivery Mechanisms in Cohesion Policy and

a new instrument – European Urban Initiative; (C) how the priorities of the Territorial Agenda 2030 can be implemented in spatial planning.

When processing the filled-in questionnaires, detailed interviews were arranged with 15 key respondents from the Ministry of Regional Development, regional administration, planning practice and research. During these interviews, the respondents added and explained information in their questionnaires, in order to increase comprehension of their answers and offer more and better insights on the topic.

Building on the questionnaires and interviews, draft results were elaborated and circulated among the participants that were also invited for an online interactive dialogue session, involving both the interviewed group and international experts and researchers. The insights from this interactive dialogue were created collaboratively using a shared space, allowing participants to contribute and comment in real-time. This allowed for validation and comparison of the case with practices elsewhere in Europe and these insights were then utilised to derive the recommendations presented in our study.

To conclude, our qualitative research employed (1) desk research, (2) questionnaires, (3) interviews with the respondents and (4) the interactive dialogue session with the respondents and international experts. These methods provided comprehensive insights into current practices and challenges. The following sections will delve deeper into interpreting these findings.

#### ***4.1. Interpreting the insights from the interviews***

Chapter 4.1 presents a general interpretation of the interview insights, focusing on broader themes such as barriers to cross-fertilization, differing expert opinions, and the overall integration of EU policies. This overview lays the foundation for the specific challenges and opportunities discussed in Chapter 4.2.

Weak connection between spatial planning and strategic planning was frequently mentioned as a major barrier for cross-fertilization. The underlying problem is a lack of communication between respective departmental units as well as expert teams. This problem mostly occurs on the regional and national levels, while on the local level it diminishes, simply because agendas of spatial and strategic planning are often handled by the same staff. On the other hand, the awareness of territorial cohesion decreases among the staff from the top to the local tier.

The EU funding is crucial for cross-fertilisation and in this context. ITI was mentioned as a useful tool for planning for functional urban areas, overcoming the jurisdiction limits of municipalities. However, the Czech law does not provide any spatial planning instruments for functional urban areas with legal power extending municipal jurisdiction.

In the interviews over the completed questionnaires, the opinion was expressed that the debate revolves around how much money was spent while it should revolve more about how well it was used.

From the sample of experts, the opinions seem to be different for participants from state governmental offices, and those from regions and planning practice. It can also be observed that within state administrators, there are different opinions between the officers responsible for spatial planning and those dealing with regional policy and development. The experts from practice were more sceptical about the linkage between spatial planning and EU policies than the officials.

The state officers are better informed on EU policies than regional administrators and spatial planning practitioners. Three experts on spatial planning were unable to answer questions they considered related to regional policy or, on the opposite, some experts on regional policy felt unqualified to respond to the questions they considered related to spatial planning. This illustrates how fragmented the professional scene of spatial management is.

In summary, the insights from the interviews reveal a fragmented approach to planning, influenced by varying levels of knowledge and differing institutional perspectives. Addressing these issues requires better integration between planning and policymaking, focusing on coherent communication and mutual understanding across administrative levels.

## **4.2. Specific challenges and potentials for cross-fertilisation**

Chapter 4.2 concerns with the specific challenges and potentials identified through our research. The identified challenges were classified into institutional, related to the institutional ‘hardware’ – organisational structures, regulations, distribution of competencies; and cultural ‘software’ – related to the less tangible, deeply embedded features of the Czech political and planning culture. By focusing on particular issues, this chapter aims to highlight areas for improvement provide background for targeted recommendations. Tackling these challenges and building upon the potentials is a way to improve cross-fertilisation.

The challenges are classified into two categories, as introduced in Chapter 1: institutional, related to the institutional structures, regulations, distribution of competencies; and cultural, related to the less tangible, but no less important, deeply embedded features of the Czech political and planning culture.

### **4.2.1. Institutional challenges**

First, the institutional duality of regional policy and spatial planning is the main challenge. Both parallel systems are loosely coordinated with other policies that have a strong territorial impact, such as transport policies. Spatial planning is only loosely connected with financial planning and budgeting of municipalities and regions: consequently, economic feasibility and sustainability are often weakly considered in plans.

Second, there is a weak regulation of the horizontal relationship between sectoral policies and strategies at different territorial levels, except for the requirement to obtain consent from the respective authorities, which represent specific public interests and promote their sectoral perspectives. This is in contrast to the strong vertical hierarchy between the state, regional and municipal levels of spatial planning instruments, as is stipulated by law.

Third, spatial planning remains reactive rather than proactive, being driven by sectoral policies instead of ensuring spatial coordination. As a result, the budgets of the departments providing major infrastructures shape planning priorities, which leads to biased spatial planning and decision-making towards narrowly defined particular sectoral goals.

Fourth, spatial planning often lacks perspectives on sustainability of the planned projects in the long run and how they contribute to strategic development goals for

a specific territory. Thus, impacts of the planned projects on territorial cohesion are not effectively considered in planning.

Fifth, the databases needed for evidence-based planning and decision-making are fragmented. Spatial planning collects and regularly updates territorial data, but some of the data used for purposes of regional development and management are not included there. Apart from this database, other public authorities collect geographical data on, for example, the environment, health and transport services, but some of these databases are not shared.

Finally, the professional capacity of planning and building authorities is weak and they remain stuck between state executive and local self-administration – they need to follow the demands from the central government, while being part of the local government. This makes them hardly able to consider a more strategic perspective when dealing with investment projects.

Addressing these institutional challenges requires an approach that strengthens communication and coordination across all levels and sectors. By enhancing the professional capacity of planning authorities and integrating financial planning with spatial strategies, the Czech Republic can move towards more cohesive and sustainable territorial governance. Moreover, leveraging technological advancements and fostering public engagement can bridge existing gaps, ensuring that planning processes are both inclusive and aligned with broader policy goals.

#### **4.2.2. Cultural challenges**

The cultural barriers may be much more difficult to overcome, due to their deep embeddedness in the ways how public affairs are run in the country and how the generations of officials are socialised in this cultural setting.

First, a gap exists between formal planning rules, as prescribed by the planning system, and informal components of planning practice embedded in planning cultures, such as actual behavioural patterns of planning actors. In fact, the official objectives of planning, e.g. sustainable development based on the balance between social cohesion, environmental protection and economic development, are proclaimed in official policies and documents, but not necessarily reflected in the actual behaviour and decisions by planning stakeholders. The pursuit of particular economic interests is often disguised behind the officially declared concern for producing positive societal and environmental impacts (Tynkkynen, 2016).

Second, a top-down governance model is predominant with the emphasis on planning put on formal compliance with the national priorities and requirements. The issues of design quality, territorial equity or social fairness can become secondary in planning reality. This challenge might be considered as institutional, however in the case of Czech Republic, where the top-down model had been so deeply embedded within the history on planning, it is more fitting to be considered cultural.

Third, a weak capacity for communication and compromise is another feature of political culture, which also weighs on the capacity to coordinate across jurisdictions and sectoral boundaries between policies. The predominant perception among the actors is a ‘zero-sum game’ thinking about interactions with others, instead of seeking ‘win-win’

solutions. That hinders the much-needed dialogue and a perspective going beyond one's own institutional remit.

Related to the above, planning stakeholders often are not aware of the wider context of their activities, the possible externalities of their decisions for other fields, and their impacts on the pursuit of the public interest.

Finally, the planning culture in the Czech Republic is rooted in the Germanic *Städtebau* tradition (Maier, 2020), with most planners having an educational background in architecture and considering spatial planning as an extension to architecture and urban design. This, combined with exposure to neo-liberal *laissez-faire* policies and approaches in planning, makes planning professionals in the Czech Republic ill-prepared to cope with the challenges of sustainable development, spatial equity, climate change and decarbonisation.

#### 4.2.3. Potentials

Besides the barriers stemming from the identified challenges, several potential opportunities for closer integration between spatial planning and Cohesion Policy were highlighted, based on the interviews and interactive dialogues.

First, the Czech Republic has developed a full, 'mature' three-tier system (European Commission, 1997; Reimer *et al.*, 2014) of hierarchically coordinated statutory planning documents (national, regional, municipal), which is an asset to build on. In addition, there is access to planning data, GIS information, analyses and documents provided via the internet, which can facilitate linking Cohesion Policy programmes to spatial conditions, making them truly place-based. The 'mature' planning system is underpinned by a widespread network of planning offices, which can work with the authorities responsible for Cohesion Policy implementation at different levels. Most municipalities have valid local plans, which are obligatory for any change of land use, particularly for decisions by planning and building offices. One can build on this potential to anchor Cohesion Policy implementation in spatial conditions.

Second, a system of legal protection of specific public interests related to spatial planning covers nature and landscape, water resources, mineral resources, air, agricultural land, forestry, cultural heritage, flood protection, noise protection, etc. This can counterbalance the above-mentioned overlooking of the wider policy context and of the consequences of planning decisions.

Finally, spatial planning is a matter of increasing interest of the citizens for the space they live in. This is shown by the fact that over the last years, planning has become a widely debated issue in Czech local election campaigns. Recently, protests against planned projects shifted towards attempts for a dialogue between the public and the planners (Chmelová, 2020). Such dialogue is key because it identifies citizens' needs and helps to find synergies, creating potential for cross-fertilisation. This collaborative approach not only addresses how to best spend all the EU funding but shifts the focus towards how to best use it to achieve the strategic goals outlined in the municipal planning documents.

Besides these existing opportunities within the system of Czech spatial planning, several external trends in technology and governance can contribute to cross-fertilisation in the future. A continuous and predictable Cohesion Policy expressed in structural and investment funds can speed up the overcoming of the existing challenges



and bottlenecks, such as misaligned time horizons of planning and Cohesion Policy. Moreover, the development of information and communication technology can contribute to a restructuring of the existing departmentalised, top-down spatial planning system towards a more balanced governance by establishing two-way communication between authorities and the interested parties. Wider use of 'soft' planning methods in spatial planning may be supported by online participation in the process.

In conclusion, addressing both institutional and cultural challenges while capitalizing on existing potentials is essential for enhancing cross-fertilization between spatial planning and Cohesion Policy. Doing so will promote more sustainable, cohesive, and context-sensitive territorial development in the Czech Republic.

## 5. Recommendation for practical mechanisms of policy integration

Derived from the above challenges and potentials, recommendations can be formulated to introduce mechanisms of policy integration to facilitate better coordination and cross-fertilisation between spatial planning, regional development policy, and Cohesion Policy implementation. These recommendations were distilled from the topics of the questionnaires, interviews and interactive dialogue, that were recurring or considered important by the overall agreement among participants.

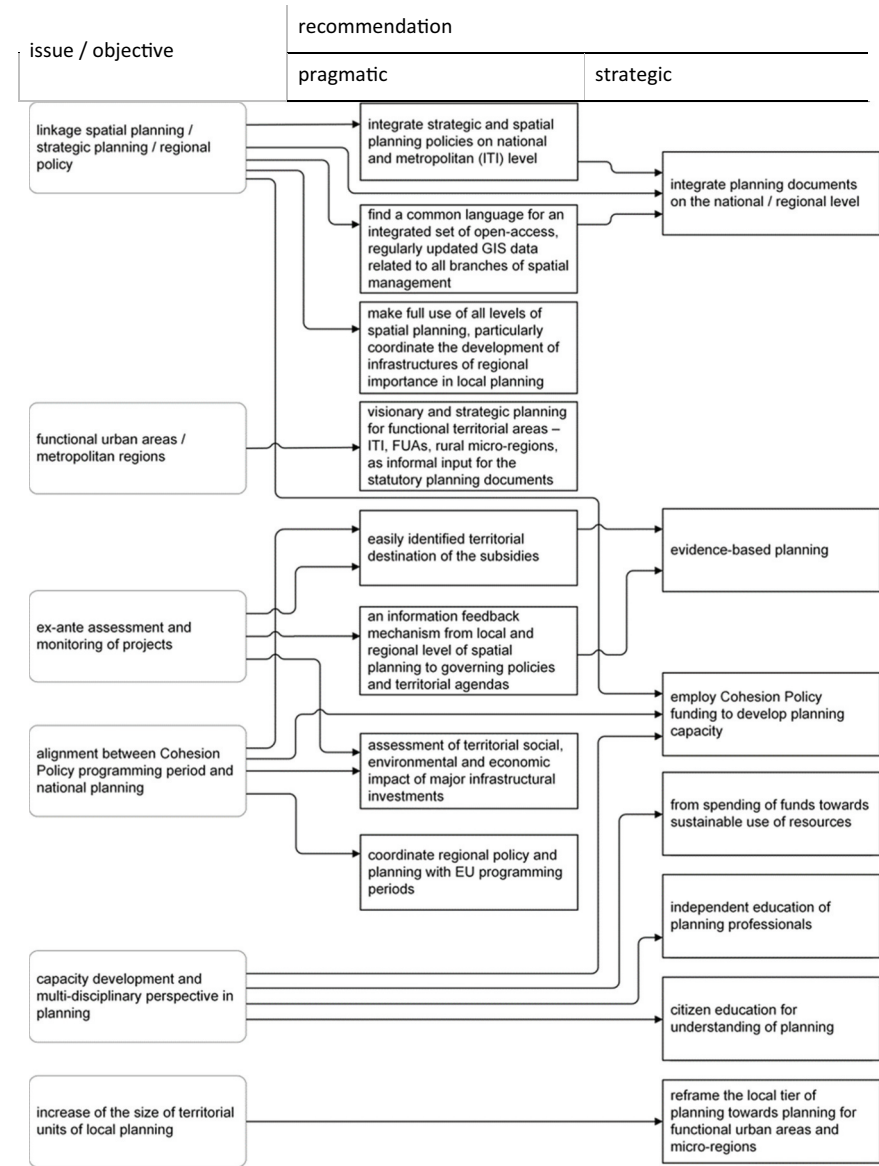
The abovementioned issues were treated as objectives to be accomplished by recommendations (Table 1). These recommendations are divided into two sets: pragmatic recommendations for the short term that concentrate the effort to where the effects could be 'within reach' (albeit by no means easily), and strategic recommendations to be accomplished in the long run.

The reason behind this division is to provide additional information for the needs of creating better mechanisms of policy integration. It is important for the policy makers to know how which recommendations can be achieved more quickly and which ones are more strategic and bring effects after a longer period of time. Additionally, the table shows which strategic recommendations have pragmatic prerequisites that also need to be considered. Not only to make sure that these prerequisites will be fulfilled before taking the next step but also to warn about taking the steps in an opposing or contradicting direction, which could prevent the next step from implementation.

To explain Table 1, we present the following example. The table shows that, in order to achieve a better link between spatial planning, strategic planning and regional policy in the short-term, 'pragmatic horizon', it is first necessary to integrate spatial planning strategies and policies at national and metropolitan (ITI) levels. Furthermore, it is necessary to find a common language as a groundwork for an integrated open-access GIS database shared by all branches of territorial management. Finally, there is a need to make full use of spatial planning tools at all levels and to coordinate the development of infrastructures of regional importance in local planning. In the strategic horizon, it is desirable to integrate planning documents at the national and regional levels.

Covering all of these recommendations in detail would go beyond the scope of this article, but, in a nutshell, it is recommended to promote pragmatic and strategic changes, particularly in terms of continued support and capacity development for cooperation and planning in functional areas, interregional knowledge transfer on

**Table 1.** Overview of issues and corresponding recommendations. Source: own elaboration.



this topic and development of spatial data platforms including the capacity to employ it.

As was mentioned by the participants of the interactive dialogue, one does not need to ‘reinvent the wheel’ but rather work with the existing funding instruments to develop capacity and employ ESIF to support the implementation of spatial strategies and plans, while strengthening the emerging coordination and decision-making structures for functional areas spanning across municipal boundaries. At the same time, the new programming period creates new opportunities. Namely, it is worth exploring the potentials opened by the new cross-cutting Policy Objective 5 ‘A Europe closer to citizens’ focusing on territorial strategies

and local initiatives for sustainable and integrated development of urban, rural and coastal areas with greater degree of participation of civil society.

## 6. Conclusions and discussion

In this paper, we set out to shed light on the barriers and potentials for cross-fertilisation between Cohesion Policy and spatial planning with a special focus on the case of the Czech Republic and to draw policy lessons on this matter for other contexts in Europe. While previous research and policy documents advocate such cross-fertilisation (Daly & González, 2013, Nadin *et al.*, 2018), they seldom offer concrete insight into how to achieve this. The cross-fertilisation between Cohesion Policy and national spatial management is a process that, in the case of the Czech Republic as well as the other countries of East-Central Europe, can be traced as far back as the pre-accession period before 2004/2007. As our research confirmed, however, this process has been hampered by the institutional separation of the Czech spatial planning system from regional policy that developed as a direct partner for the implementation of Cohesion Policy.

Our research revealed two types of barriers for cross-fertilisation: institutional and cultural, with the former probably easier to overcome than the latter one, related to more deeply embedded features of territorial governance system as well as political and planning culture. We also found several assets within the Czech planning system that could support the process of cross-fertilisation. On that basis, we engaged the policy and planning stakeholders in defining the objectives for cross-fertilisation effort and formulation of pragmatic and strategic recommendations.

We remain realistic about the magnitude of the challenges that pursuit of these policy change options would require. However, our research does clarify what it takes to bring Cohesion Policy closer to planning and to generate synergies and added value in terms of sustainable urban and regional development.

The limitation of this research is that it focuses on a single-case study, whereas the stakes behind cross-fertilisation are much broader. Still, our research approach based on collecting local knowledge may provide a framework to be replicated in other countries and recommendations for policy change can be valuable in countries with comparable planning, policy contexts and path dependencies as in the Czech Republic.

Emphasis on cross-fertilisation as defined and elaborated in this paper may result in a deeper territorial impact sensitivity which is tailored to what is understood as relevant in a particular country as well as practical and feasible in that country.

In the wake of growing emphasis on the place-based approach and the urban dimension of Cohesion Policy, it is necessary for the Czech planning to proceed towards the gradual alignment, if not integration of spatial and strategic planning at national and regional levels. This can create synergies between development policies agreed at the transnational level with their application in specific territorial conditions. In the first phase, it is necessary to 'find a common language'; make full use of ICT and GIS tools to ensure general and continuous availability of data on the territory and its development; and to use all possibilities of spatial planning tools – both binding and indicative – for functional territorial units.

The strategic goal for Czech spatial planning should be to increase its institutional capacity by strengthening awareness of European agendas through training of planners

and strengthening active public participation. As one of the participants of the Interactive Dialogue put this, while ‘Cohesion Policy is driven by outputs – jobs, new roads, spatial planning should be driven by outcomes – quality of lives, accessibility’.

Our study points out several policy implications for the transnational level, namely the need for less formal regulations for ESIF, but with stricter demands on territorial cohesion in planning practice. This stipulates more strategic and place-specific use of ESIF, in line with the spatial planning priorities. To create awareness and public support for this, EU Cohesion Policy should also be better and more clearly communicated in the phase of preparation of programmes, not only towards politicians and the professional public, but, especially, towards the general public. This could contribute not only to a deeper understanding of the objectives of this policy but also to better preparedness of the territorial governance and spatial planning actors to use the ESIF resources to achieve these objectives. In this respect, the cross-cutting Policy Objective 5 for Cohesion Policy in 2021–2027 also emphasizes wider citizen engagement in decision-making on Cohesion Policy implementation, in order to improve the communication and dialogue, as well as to engage the citizens and local or regional stakeholders in co-decision on the interventions and co-evaluation of impacts of Cohesion Policy.

To follow up on the recommendations further, it is crucial to integrate several points related to cross-fertilization that were noted throughout the research. It is important to create stronger links between networks of planning offices and departments responsible for EU cohesion policy should be developed further. Additionally, Czech spatial planning could increase institutional capacity by enhancing planners’ awareness of EU cohesion policy goals, an important aspect of capacity development that warrants explicit mention. Furthermore, the misalignment between planning time horizons and EU cohesion policy suggests extending alignment efforts to regional and local planning periods, in addition to the national level. Incorporating these points would provide clearer and more detailed guidance for effective cross-fertilization in planning processes.

The recommendations also point to open questions and avenues for future research. The first of these concerns the balance between flexibility, subsidiarity and the place-based approach. The challenge is how to operationalise the capacity of Cohesion Policy’s growing emphasis on citizen engagement and territorial delivery of ESIF in vastly divergent contexts to deliver more place-specific outcomes, while ensuring the pursuit of the wider goals of this policy. By the same token, one also needs to maintain a balance between the desirable alignment of spatial planning and Cohesion Policy, but without overshadowing the place-specific strategies of spatial planning with the pan-European goals of the latter. This challenge may become more acute due to the new emphasis on supporting just transition and post-COVID recovery through top-down decision-making at the national level. A second challenge concerns overcoming the legal and institutional barriers in cooperation between the territorial units that hamper planning for functional areas. While the place-based approach by Cohesion Policy promoted change towards cooperation and planning across municipal boundaries, these impacts largely depend on local path dependencies and capacities (Mendez *et al.*, 2021).

Obviously, we need more research on what works in this respect and how to operationalise ‘soft’ planning methods in different contexts (Allmendinger *et al.*, 2015). When

it comes to functional areas, there also remains the challenge of effectively engaging citizens in the debate and decision-making on what may be a relatively abstract spatial construct, distant from the usual locus of citizens' identity. This brings forward the need to rethink communication and citizen engagement activities to trigger active public support for the promotion of Cohesion Policy goals (Mendez *et al.*, 2020; Dąbrowski *et al.*, 2021) in the daily practice of planning and decision-making on spatial development.

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