



# ESPON as a tool of national and regional policy<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** This paper presents selected examples of thematic scope and possibilities of practical application of the projects implemented under the ESPON programme. The projects provide knowledge concerning the development state of territorial structures within the European Union as well as tools and indicators for their monitoring. These projects can be categorized into several groups, among which the leading role is played by the Applied Research and Targeted Analysis. The second part of the paper focuses on practical application of ESPON knowledge in national and regional context, e.g. in Poland and in Serbia.

**Keywords:** ESPON projects, thematic scope, project applicability.

## Introduction to ESPON

The aim of ESPON Programme is to support policy development in the pursuit of territorial cohesion. For years, ESPON knowledge was used mainly by policy makers on European and national level. The history of ESPON started at the beginning of the 21st century, when ESPON was established with the idea to support work on development of European Spatial Development Perspective (Faludi A., Waterhout B., 2002:166-172). For more than a decade ESPON, based on relatively small-scale funds, involved research in Europe (not only in the EU Member States) with participation of researchers and practitioners from several hundred institutions. Within the ESPON 2006 programme, 35 major studies were completed involving more than 600 researchers and 130 institutions focusing on various ways to analyse spatial dynamics across Europe. In the last period of 2007-2013, greater emphasis was placed on disseminating results obtained so far with attempts to make them accessible to practitioners at regional and local level.

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ESPON Programme presents the results of research not only in the form of reports from individual projects, but also through the Synthesis Reports, collections of scientific articles in the series of Scientific Reports, Territorial Observations studies, short Evidence Brief, and the Map of the Month. All those documents are directed to policy makers in whole Europe. An interesting feature of ESPON is the pursuit to cover what is called ‘the ESPON space’ in any territorial analysis. The ESPON space includes the entire European Union (EU-15, or more recently, EU-27 or even EU-28) plus Switzerland, Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein. In some studies, even candidate countries or regions neighbouring upon the European Union have been analyzed.

The authors of this paper attempted to show in what manner ESPON knowledge – methods, indicators and results – could be beneficial in everyday work of practitioners. The article also undertakes to explain how ESPON made the territorial analysis available to researchers and policy makers.

## Thematic scope and applicability

The thematic scope of ESPON Programme results directly from its overarching practical purpose, which is substantive support of actions in the field of EU’s Cohesion Policy (ESPON 2013 Programme, 2007). Projects undertaken within this programme provide practitioners and policy-makers of various administrative levels with scientific knowledge concerning the development state of the European Union territorial structures, tendencies and perspectives of their transformation, as well as tools and indicators to monitor these structures.

Overview of issues examined by ESPON is closely associated with the types of projects that make up five basic priority groups in the 2007-2013 programming period (ESPON Projects - Final overview 2012): 1) Applied Research, 2) Targeted Analysis, 3) Scientific Platform, 4) Capitalisation, Ownership and Participation, 5) Technical Assistance, Analytical Support and Communication. In the context of the subject matter of the programme, the first three groups, within which specific research is conducted, are particularly relevant.

*Applied Research* is intended to provide competent knowledge and consistent data on the structure of Europe’s spatial diversity. This group primarily uses current scientific achievements (Science in support of European Territorial Development and Cohesion, 2013). The subject area defined for this priority group focuses on key contemporary issues (e.g. demography, globalization, climate change, economic crisis, etc.), or connects these problems integrally, referring to selected territories (urban area, rural area, region) and economic sectors (transport, power engineering). The result of this research usually comprises a synthesis of spatial structures in the form of typologies or classifications enabling the diagnosis of state and assessment of trends and perspectives in the field of examined issues (e.g. Sohn, Stambolic 2013, Bański, Garcia-Blanco 2013). It also allows for the analysis of the impact of policies on the transformation of regional structures in Europe. In the 2007-2013 financial perspective 25 thematic projects have been conducted in the field of Applied Research priority group:

1. Attractiveness of European Regions and Cities for Residents and Visitors
2. Future Orientation for Cities
3. Climate Change and Territorial Effects on Regions and Local Economies in Europe
4. Demographic and Migratory Flows Affecting European Regions and Cities
5. Economic Crisis: Resilience of Regions

6. Regions at Risk of Energy Poverty
7. Assessment of Regional and Territorial Sensitivity
8. Spatial indicators for a Europe 2020 Strategy Territorial Analysis
9. Territorial Impact of Globalization for Europe and its Regions
10. Territorial Approaches for New Governance
11. Regional Potential for a Greener Economy
12. Secondary growth poles in territorial development
13. Knowledge, Innovation, Territory
14. European Patterns of Land Use
15. European Neighbour Regions
16. Territorial Dimension of Poverty and Social Exclusion in Europe
17. European Development Opportunities in Rural Areas
18. Territorial Scenarios and Visions for Europe
19. European Seas and Territorial Development, Opportunities and Risks
20. Indicators and Perspectives for Services of General Interest in Territorial Cohesion and Development
21. Geographic Specificities and Development Potentials in Europe
22. European Territorial Cooperation as a Factor of Growth, Jobs and Quality of Life
23. Territorial Impact Package for Transport and Agricultural Policies
24. Small and Medium-Sized Towns
25. Transport Accessibility at regional/local scale and patterns in Europe

*Targeted Analysis* mainly provides practical knowledge for representatives of various administrative levels and practitioners involved in territorial development or shaping development policy. Projects under Priority 2 were inspired by practitioners, who had a major role in defining the thematic scope; these projects had also to have a European relevance. Target Analysis projects were kind of innovation in ESPON 2013. Compared to previous programming period, ESPON 2013 was created to increase the utility of results from the projects to policy makers. In general, the projects are focused on different types of areas (urban agglomerations, rural areas, border regions, metropolitan regions, etc.). Such approach allows for collecting detailed factual material, enabling the analysis and evaluation of the socio-economic conditions in selected regions, which, in turn, allows for supporting practitioners in spatial planning and specific strategic actions they undertake. In the field of Targeted Analysis 23 thematic projects have been conducted:

1. The Case for Agglomeration Economies in Europe
2. Success for Convergence Regions' Economies
3. Using applied research results from ESPON as a yardstick for cross-border spatial development planning
4. Key Indicators for Territorial Cohesion and Spatial Planning
5. Identifying and Exchanging Best Practices in Developing Regional Integrated Strategies in Europe
6. The Development of the Islands – European Islands and Cohesion Policy
7. Best Development Conditions in European Metropolises: Paris, Berlin and Warsaw
8. Cross-Border Polycentric Metropolitan Regions
9. Metropolisation and Polycentric Development in Central Europe: Evidence Based Strategic Options
10. Potential of Rural Regions

11. Spatial Scenarios: New Tools for Local-Regional Territories
12. Territorial Diversity in Europe
13. Smart Institutions for Territorial Development
14. ESPON and Territorial Impact Assessment
15. Territorial Performance Monitoring
16. Airports as Drivers of Economic Success in Peripheral Regions
17. North Sea - Spreading Transnational Results
18. Transnational Support Method for European Cooperation
19. Growth Poles in South-East Europe
20. Landscape Policy for the 3 Countries Park
21. Liveable Landscapes: a Key Value for Sustainable Territorial Development
22. Advanced Monitoring and Coordination of EU R&D Policies at Regional Level
23. Selective Migration and Unbalanced Sex Ratio in Rural Regions

*Scientific Platform* provides analytical tools, methodological solutions, and statistical data, as well as a variety of territorial indicators intended to support other projects or practitioners seeking processed spatial information. Among the most important measures are the following: ESPON database, atlases and maps of territorial indicators spatial diversity, as well as indicators and territorial instruments (e.g. Territorial Dimensions of the Europe 2020 Strategy, 2013). Altogether 13 thematic actions have been carried out within the Scientific Actions:

1. ESPON Atlas on European Territorial Structures and Dynamics
2. Multi-Dimensional Database Design and Development
3. ESPON Database 2013
4. Hyper Atlas
5. Map Updates
6. ESPON Online Mapping Tool
7. Territorial Evidence Packs for Structural Funds Programmes
8. Indicators of Territorial Cohesion
9. Territorial Monitoring for the Baltic Sea Region
10. EU Territorial Monitoring System
11. Detecting Territorial Potentials and Challenges
12. Typologies: Typology Compilation
13. ESPON CityBench for benchmarking European Urban Zones

The other two priorities, namely Capitalisation, Ownership and Participation, as well as Technical Assistance, Analytical Support and Communication, refer to tasks of a different nature, encompassing project management system, procedures of funding, networking and dissemination of research results. Priority 4 projects have to support policy development, preparing strategies and plans by involved the policy makers and stakeholders in process of creating documents. Participation of practitioners in scientific research process is based on discussion of results and their practical implications and use ([www.espon.eu](http://www.espon.eu)).

The Priority 5 group, Technical Assistance, Analytical Support and Communication fulfils yet other tasks - support for project communication, execution of tasks, managing the preparation and execution of projects. Recent efforts of ESPON program managers are focused primarily on the dissemination of ESPON results and create a more friendly reports and tools for practitioners. Policy makers at national, regional and local are becoming ESPON reports recipients. Difficult language, lack of translation into national languages and the amount of material collected over the years formed

so far a barrier for practitioners, who need a quick way to access information and use it. Therefore, it is often so that from the ESPON materials benefit just the individuals and institutions that are or have been involved in ESPON activities.

Overview of the ESPON Programme priorities and projects accomplished within their scope allows for identification of several key thematic groups, which comprise specific areas of interest. Thematic classification partly results from the three ESPON priorities discussed before, which generally refer to: EU regional typology (Applied Research), diagnosis of specific regions or groups of regions (Targeted Analysis), as well as tools and spatial analysis methods (Scientific Platform). However, particularly in the case of the first two priorities of ESPON a thematic scope classification based on different assumptions could be proposed. The projects focus on the three main subject groups: 1) specific regions or areas, 2) contemporary issues of regional development, 3) management of regional development (Fig. 1). In the first group, projects primarily pertain to cities and metropolitan regions, rural areas, border regions and islands. In the second group projects encompass the following issues: globalization, demographic problems, development of new energy sources, transport concerns, climate change and economic crisis. In contrast, projects within the “management of regional development” group focus towards the issues of strategies, development scenarios, territorial cooperation and management.

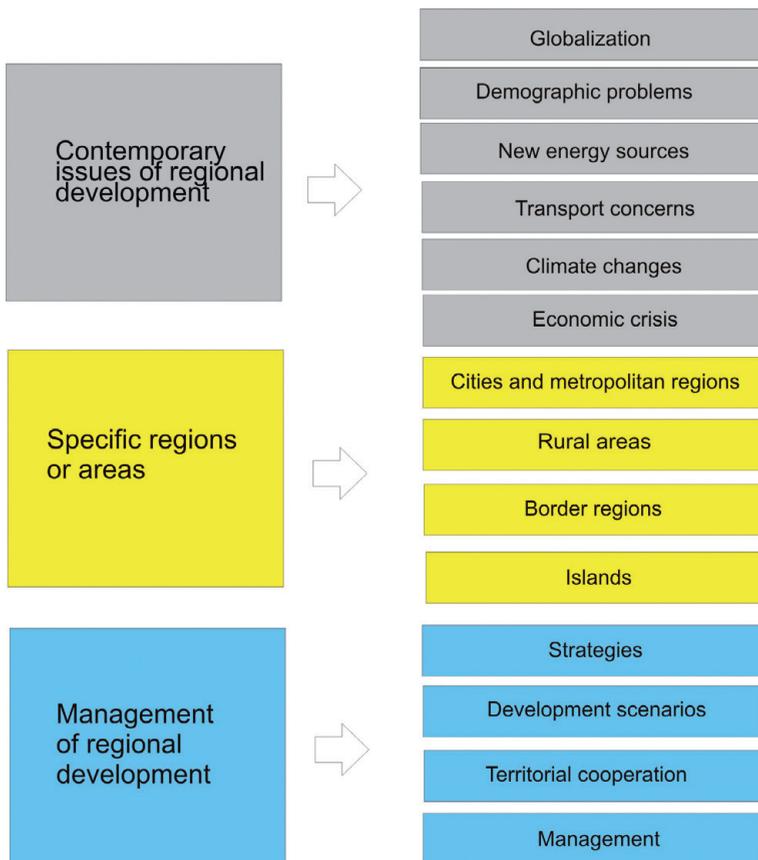


Figure 1. Scheme of ESPON 2013 thematic scope.

Source: own elaboration.

The range of potential ESPON Programme applicability, as shown in Figure 1, is very broad and multi-layered – starting with providing detailed knowledge about regions, through specific tools down to indicators for policy implementation. The recipients of Programme results are scientists, planners, politicians and representatives of local and government administration at various levels. The practical role of ESPON is particularly significant with regard to decision-making processes. This can be evidenced by examining the example of formulating new strategies and documents. The key development policy dilemma is the choice between, on the one hand, sustainability and social justice, and, on the other hand, efficiency with competitiveness. It is therefore necessary to decide on one of several alternative scenarios, fostering - among others - diversity and territorial cohesion.

The findings of ESPON projects point out that regional strategies should dedicate more attention to local specificities and local potential. The subject of regional diagnosis should be primarily to identify regional characteristics, which could be applied as key factors in achieving economic success. Specialization of local or regional economies implementing the specificity of endogenous potentials (niche activities) should become one of the main priorities for future development strategies. Development policies, including territorial cohesion should be formulated on the basis of adequate recognition of social, economic and environmental specificity of a region and endogenous potential competitive to other areas. Specificity and distinctness from other regions should become the integral elements of regional and local identity.

## **Practical application of ESPON**

By assumption, the ESPON program is implemented in order to support policy makers through provision of relevant knowledge and tools by the international teams of scientists and experts. Research conducted in order to support the cohesion policy is based on the observation of European space, events and trends. Studies executed in Europe and the resulting reports, publications and tools are intended to be a part of support for the formulation of policies in the context of EU cohesion policy.

Research methods described in the projects, good practices in the regions, conclusions and recommendations are the best source of information for practitioners at European, national, regional and local levels. Proper adjustment to the current needs of the regions can bring measurable results.

Particular European countries are beginning to benefit from the ESPON projects effects; practitioners at various administration levels put into practice conclusions and methods drawn from ESPON documents in their daily work.

In order to disseminate ESPON knowledge, the ESPON Contact Points were established (the total of 30, including Liechtenstein, which has chosen to be covered by Swiss ECP) in all Member States. Their task is not only to disseminate knowledge, but also to customize the results of projects to national and local context. ESPON Contact Points are a kind of link between researchers and policy makers in countries. ECP activities are also directed to:

- national and foreign entities operating within the framework of ESPON,
- national and foreign research institutions and academia,
- representatives of the central government and of the various levels of local government,
- opinion leaders and representatives of advisory bodies (<http://en.espon.pl/>).

Some ECPs translate selected results of chosen ESPON projects into national languages, as well as prepare meetings with researchers and practitioners at the national and local levels.

One of the projects implemented by the contact points (in this case France, Germany, Greece, Luxembourg, Poland and UK) was the USEESPON project, which aimed to support the process of exploitation of the results arising from research conducted in the framework of the ESPON 2013 Programme. The goal is achieved by involving key stakeholders in the use of research findings in their daily work (in the creation of public policies and the management of territorial development). The main challenge is to provide essential applications - specific knowledge that comes from ESPON research and public policy makers to managing development (<http://www.espon-usespon.eu/>). On the project website, the policymakers from countries involved in the project can find supporting materials in their language about “Urban Benchmarking as a tool for complex assessment of development potential”<sup>2</sup>. There, in a step-by-step explanation policymakers can find the most relevant information on how to implement a method in their region. The USEESPON project provides also explanation and experience from the Nexus model - a tool developed by European researchers, which focuses directly on the relationship between the challenges and opportunities of the development area. This tool promotes changes in the strategic regional policy objectives of convergence to realize the potential of growth and promote sustainable development. Another method applied in the project was Delphi method, which helped in assessment of relative importance of hazards for the European regional development. Using examples, the researchers showed how to use ESPON concepts and techniques in policy-making and practice. It is worth presenting the situations, where the methods and results of ESPON have been implemented and used in the construction of documents of national and regional importance. A sample of examples shows that the ESPON methods are not only used in the ‘old’ EU countries, but also in the new Member States and non-Member States. ESPON methods are often applied in the institutional environments that are actively involved in ESPON projects (e.g. the Ministry of Regional Development in Poland), have the knowledge and experience of project and know its capacities. For this reason the role of Contact Points in distribution of ESPON knowledge appears to be crucial. Furthermore is worth mentioning that the ESPON Programme knowledge was in quite a significant degree incorporated into 5th report on economic, social and territorial cohesion. In Poland, during the process of updating the National Spatial Development Concept (NSDC), the issues not taken into account in the previous version of the document, have been analyzed. Areas of research related to infrastructure, accessibility of Polish space, metropolitan areas, and urban functional areas have been examined, in particular, on the basis of knowledge generated within ESPON projects. Certain ESPON studies (e.g. ESPON Project 1.1.1. Potentials for polycentric development in Europe, ESPON project 1.4.3. Study on Urban Functions) were applied to create the new spatial policy of the country.

Research on the impact of urban areas and metropolitan areas has been carried out in the world since the 1930s (McKenzie 1993, Huff 1973); in Poland, the study of development of urban functional regions has been taken up already in the 1970s by Korcelli (1976). The close relationship of the city with its suburbs in the era of intensive industrialization has been particularly apparent in terms of commuting to work (more on the impact of cities in the context of the metropolitan region in Korcelli - Olejniczak 2012). The delimitation of functional areas in Poland is documented very abundantly, in case of most of the cities the impact areas were designated for cognitive or practical reasons, however, the delimitation criteria are incomparable, therefore, the necessity arose of creating a unified delimitation (Śleszyński 2013). Results of the ESPON project 1.4.3. Study on Urban Functions were the basis for the delimitation of Functional Urban Areas (FUAs) for the purpose of the National

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.espon-usespon.eu/supporting-materials>

Spatial Development Concept. ESPON studies take into account 151 largest Polish cities, delimiting their cores and suburban areas (at municipality level). However, due to lack of data, some criteria, such as, for example, commuting to work, have not been taken into account (Figure 2). Lack of data is an important issue in the case of ESPON projects. Adaptation of methodologies and indicators to the actual availability of data often leads to a distortion regarding the results of the projects.

It is also very frequent that the data ought to be carefully prepared, as they are collected by different institutions, not always according to the same methodology. The missing substantive data, as well as temporal discontinuities, make the results from respective ESPON studies less useful for practitioners. Another problem is the scale of the phenomena studied, the data often relate to entire countries or regions and is not adequate in the case of analysis at the local level.

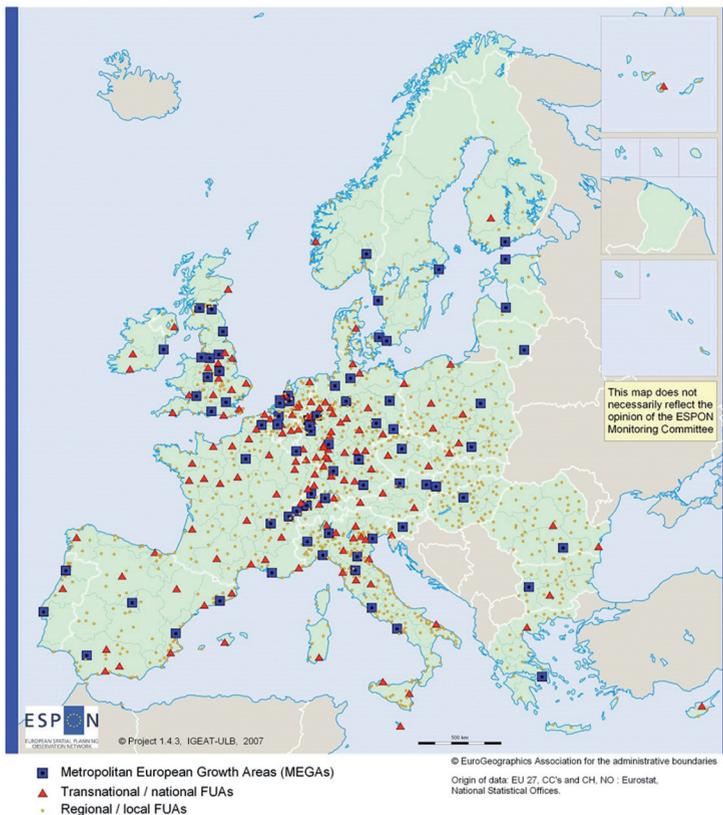


Figure 2. The FUAs according to the functional criteria (Global score).

Source: ESPON, 2007, ESPON 2006 project - 1.4.3 – Study on urban functions. Final Report.

Work on the NSDC began in early 2012. Maps created for the purposes of document shows a comparison of the delimitation created for the ESPON study with a range of functional urban areas designated in the planning studies in the last decade, and the Larger Urban Zones, developed by the Central Statistical Office. Poland's Ministry of Regional Development has initiated the work on a common concept of Functional Urban Areas based on existing knowledge gained from the ESPON project and national publications.

The new concept of functional urban areas in Poland encompasses seven indicators, concerning functional relations, including socio-economic and morphological characteristics: (1) leaving for gainful employment to the FUA core (indicator used for the first time in the delimitation for data after 1990); (2) migration (registration of residence) from the FUA core (3) the share of the employed in non-agricultural professions, (4) the intensity of economic entities in general (in relation to population number), (5) the share of high-order service economic entities in the overall number of entities (6) the population density (without forests and waters), (7) housing completions in relation to population. The result is a delimitation covering 299 municipalities, including 33 core and 266 located in the outer zones (Śleszyński 2013). Delimitation criteria presented in the materials of the Ministry of Regional Development (Kryteria delimitacji miejskich obszarów funkcjonalnych ośrodków wojewódzkich 2013) are a tool ensuring the comparability of methodology throughout the country. At the beginning of 2014 several district towns (capital cities of NUTS 4 territorial units) began to develop delimitation of their urban functional areas.

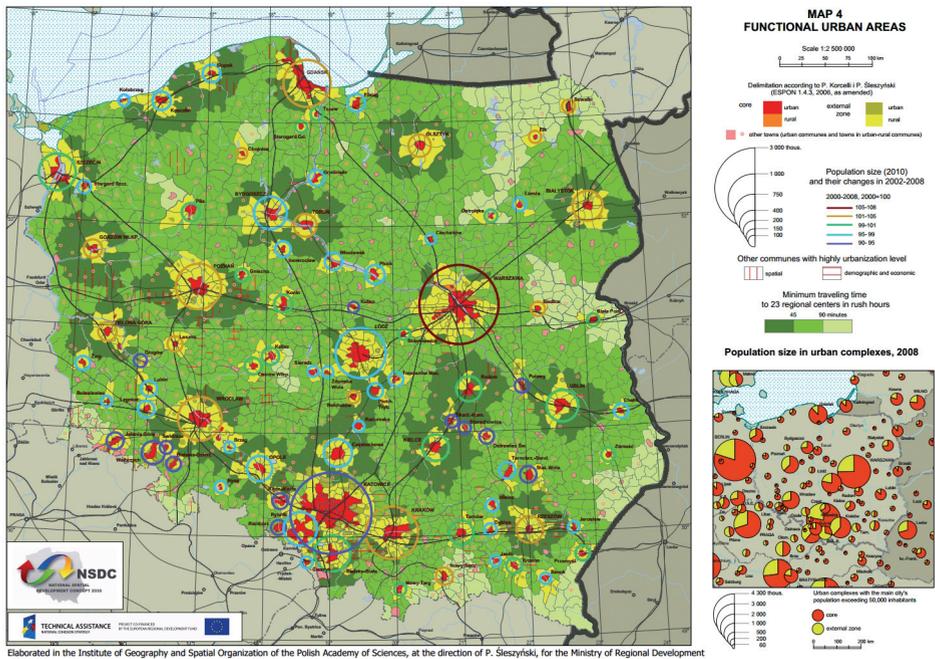


Figure 3. Functional Urban Areas (FUAs).  
Source: National Spatial Development Concept 2030.

The ESPON method of determining the functional urban areas was also implemented for the purpose of developing the Spatial Plan of The Republic of Serbia. 2010-2014-2020, as well as the National Regional Development Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria for the period 2005-2015. In the first case, The Republic Agency for Spatial Planning (RASP) in Serbia has applied ESPON methodology and conducted own studies resulting in a map presenting functional urban areas (Figure 4).

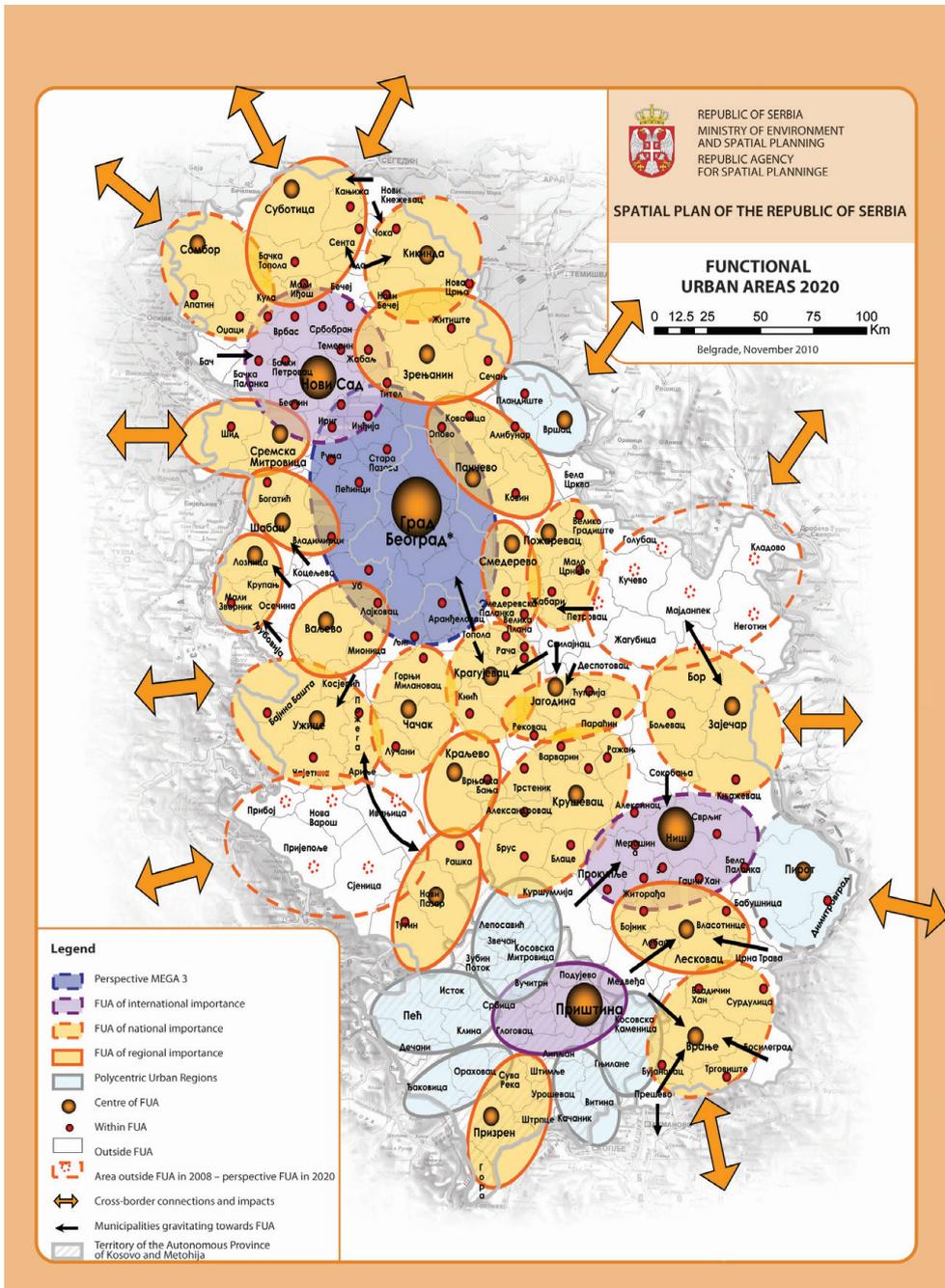


Figure 4. Functional Urban Areas in Serbia.

Source: Spatial Plan of The Republic of Serbia. 2010-2014-2020. Abridged version, 2010, Republic Agency of Spatial Planning, Belgrade.

Serbia is one of the youngest countries in Europe, and so, the administration was able to adapt their plans to the modern European reality. Despite the fact that Serbia still remains an EU candidate country, the strategic documents were prepared in accordance with laws applying in the European Union and with current trends in spatial planning (Jansen et al. 2012:2). Almost from the beginning of the ESPON network, Serbia has been attempting to become its member and establish close contacts with ESPON projects partners and Member States.

The Republic Agency for Spatial Planning is responsible for the development of policy and spatial planning on national and regional levels, as well between different sectors. To avoid gaps in strategic documents concerning **territorial monitoring system of spatial planning** (at national and local level), documents are compatible with methodology, indicators and ESPON Programme results, as well as with spatial data within the Infrastructure for Spatial Information in Europe (INSPIRE) Directive. The whole task has been carried out within the framework of the Serbian-Netherlands Government-to-Government project (G2G) 'Building capacity for INSPIRE Directive and ESPON 2013 Programme in the Republic of Serbia' (Jansen et al. 2012:4). RASP successfully implements the methodology and indicators from ESPON Project 4.1.3 (called Monitoring Territorial Development; 2007).

It is worth noting that European countries draw from ESPON knowledge in small portions, but over the years and with increasingly active ESPON policy to distribute knowledge, there are noticeable changes in documents and policy across Europe.

## Conclusions

The ESPON program is from the very beginning addressed to decision makers, but the scale of knowledge concerning the program results is faint. As Nathalie Noupadja from the Council of European Municipalities and Regions during the ESPON Policy Seminar "An interactive ESPON handbook for regions" mentioned, ESPON program at the local level is only known within the so-called "Blue Banana" countries - and in most cases local decision makers are only familiar with ESPON maps (e.g. concerning GDP). Feedback from local and regional representatives involved in the workshops conducted within ESPON DeTeC project (see Dymén et al. 2014), confirmed the earlier findings of the ESPON 2013 Programme External Evaluation (2011), as well as other ESPON evaluations, stating that a significant barrier in the dissemination of ESPON knowledge is constituted by language. Many ESPON Contact Points allocate their financial means for translation and issuing main reports and ESPON publications in national languages, but their share remains much too low for efficient dissemination of ESPON knowledge. Another argument, raised by the participants of the workshop, is too global a coverage of the phenomena presented on the maps, which are not analyzed at the local level. Decision-makers prefer to work with domestic sources or OECD database. One of the remarks at the ESPON policy seminar was that long-established and small regions are more critical towards ESPON, while "new" and large regions (e.g. South East Scotland or DKMT Euroregion) are more positive. This to a large extent depends on the governance approach and institutional underpinning of the region.

Research is often divided into two categories: academic research and applied research. For years, scientists have been dealing with a difficult task of presenting academic research in a comprehensible and utile way to practitioners. Good quality applied research presents high level of applicability and at the same time retains adequately high scientific level.

The ESPON Programme meets both these criteria. Researchers from the entire Europe know that regions are not isolated entities but are parts of a larger territorial context (Regional use of ESPON knowledge, 2010). Researchers involved in the ESPON Programme develop innovation-based knowledge and tools. This allows practitioners across Europe to detect potentials and preconditions for territorial development, deriving from their larger context, but also to provide guidance in conducting actions in the field of regional territorial development strategies and policies (Regional use of ESPON knowledge, 2010).

The ESPON methods and knowledge have so far been known only to a narrow circle of people working at the European level, people involved in ESPON projects and the related national contact points. With projects such as DeTeC or USEESPON and activities of persons involved in the work on the projects, as well as preparation of documents of national and regional importance, a growing number of people at lower levels of government have a chance to hear about ESPON and to apply the respective methods and knowledge in their work.

There is much work in front of the ESPON Programme, the results of the workshop organized in the framework of the ESPON project DeTeC show that regional and local data from ESPON (especially maps) are not useful. Likewise, application-oriented methodologies and a user-friendly language of transmitting the results (this language not being user-friendly now) should be developed. Further, the amount and availability of information should be improved.

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