



Title: The COVID_19 pandemic and its effects on territorial cohesion, regional inequality, economic growth and urbanization: Evaluating policy responses and thinking loudly

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Abstract:

The recent pandemic crisis and the subsequent economic recession due to the lockdown of economic activities have greatly affected the economic well-being of EU inhabitants putting European countries and regions under severe stress. As a result, European Cohesion Policy, focusing on economic, social and territorial policy aspects and tackling socio-economic disparities both within and between the Member States, appears more important than ever. In this policy debate paper, we attempt to reflect on the effects of the COVID_19 pandemic on the core aspects of the COHSMO project. More to the point, we explore the ways through which the advent of the pandemic influenced, and will influence, territorial cohesion, regional inequality, economic growth/regional resilience, and urbanization.

Keyword list: territorial cohesion, spatial inequality, economic growth and resilience, urbanization, spatial justice, pandemic crisis

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Abbreviations

EC	European Commission
ESDP	European Spatial Development Perspective
ESPN	European Spatial Planning Observation Network
EU	European Union
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
TC	Territorial Cohesion

Executive Summary

Only a few years after the end of the 2008 crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic crisis has posed great challenges in several countries worldwide. At the epicenter of these significant and dramatic changes is the European Union (EU) with millions of infection cases from COVID-19 and more than half a million deaths. Beyond the effects on health and related costs, COVID-19 has triggered an economic, social, and humanitarian crisis. As a result, the pandemic is a great policy concern not only for national and regional governments but also for the EU as a whole since it might endanger what is perceived as the European Model of Society and EU economic, social and territorial cohesion. As a result, European Cohesion Policy, focusing on economic, social and territorial policy aspects and tackling socio-economic disparities both within and between the Member States, appears more important than ever.

The full title of the COHSMO research project is ‘Inequality, urbanization and territorial cohesion: Developing the European social model of economic growth and democratic capacity’. In this policy debate paper, we attempt to reflect on the effects of the COVID_19 pandemic on the core aspects of the COHSMO project. More to the point, we investigate the ways that the advent of the pandemic influenced (and will influence), territorial cohesion, inequality, economic growth, and urbanization. As expected, these analytical explorations can only be elementary as it is clearly too early to draw any form of conclusions.

In terms of regional inequalities, there is strong evidence that regional inequalities in the EU are increasing, or at least not decreasing, since the 1980s while the EU has experienced increasing levels of territorial inequality during the recent decade as a result of important recent socio-economic and political changes. The recent pandemic crisis and the subsequent economic recession due to the lockdown of economic activities, have greatly affected the socio-economic well-being of EU inhabitants and can result in new forms of increased spatial inequality with detrimental effects on EU economic, social and territorial cohesion. Although more and better data is needed to understand and evaluate the economic and social effects of COVID-19 on the regional level, most recent studies, focusing mainly on GDP per capita, conclude that the pandemic has greatly increased the existing levels of regional inequality.

As far as regional resilience is concerned, it is logical to assume that regions specialized in economic activities that can be considered as less essential such as leisure and tourism rather than others such as shopping, regions with a relatively high level of specialization and low level of diversification which can reduce the concentration of risks, regions with a lower level of human capital as well as regions with a high level of older people might be more affected than others. As far as the more developed and urbanized regions are concerned, the predictions are more difficult although some recent studies conclude that the more vulnerable regions, such as deprived urban areas, have been harder hit than others. Furthermore, capital regions or other metropolitan regions show a relatively higher risk of job disruption than other regions. In light of this situation, European and national regional policies can greatly influence how a region copes with disruptions mitigating the impacts of the shock.

In terms of urbanization, for some authors, the effect of the pandemic on cities depends on its duration. If the pandemic (in any form) lasts for years cities will change to a significant extent; if it proves short-termed then alterations might not be so substantial. Some surveys even suggest that cities and urban centers might thrive in the future as people are eager for face-to-face contact and do not

necessarily prefer to work from home or even shop-online. Time will tell if the pandemic will change urbanization or we will continue with our urban civilization as normal.

As far as territorial policy is concerned, although the EU altered its budget to counteract the negative socio-economic consequences of the COVID_19 pandemic providing substantial financial assistance to foster economic recovery, the responses mostly included centralized efforts. In other words, policies were mostly horizontal and not place-based. In this context, the crisis has highlighted the importance of coordination mechanisms across governmental levels. In parallel, the experience encourages the implementation of a sound territorial policy and the adoption of spatially selective interventions to ameliorate the effects of the pandemic crisis on the most affected regions. European and national regional policies can greatly influence how a region copes with disruptions mitigating the impacts of the shock. This is the main message of the regional resilience literature. Moreover, past experience suggests that there is a need for appropriate and focused policy efforts to actively protect socio-economic outcomes, rather than trying to recover the losses in the aftermath of crises, as economic recoveries do not necessarily, inevitably and automatically lead to recoveries for human and social indicators; very often, the damage is permanent or highly persistent because some of these losses are simply not recoverable

At the EU level, this is very critical because the effects of the pandemic crisis may undermine the European objectives of social, economic and territorial cohesion and threaten its unity and integrity. As a result, a sound territorial cohesion policy can play a critical role in the period after the post-COVID-19 era by shortening the recovery period for affected territories and increasing their resilience. Territorial cohesion policy can be (and should be) an important policy tool for post-pandemic economic, social and territorial revival.

1 Introduction

Only a few years after the end of the 2008 crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic crisis has posed great challenges in several countries worldwide. At the epicenter of these significant and dramatic changes is the European Union (EU) with millions of infection cases from COVID-19 and more than half a million deaths; this is probably one of the most serious EU challenges in terms of crisis management (Russack and Blockmans 2020) that bring into question many certainties of the past decades. Beyond the effects on health and related costs, COVID-19 has triggered an economic, social, and humanitarian crisis. The effects of the pandemic, with successive lockdowns and other restrictions, have greatly diminished consumption and investment as well as GDP per capita and well-being. The pandemic is a great policy concern not only for national and regional governments but also for the EU as a whole. In parallel, these negative developments might endanger not only what is perceived as the European Model of Society and EU economic, social and territorial cohesion (Zaucha & Böhme 2020) but also European integration and even democracy. As a result, European Cohesion Policy, focusing on economic, social and territorial policy aspects and tackling socio-economic disparities both within and between the Member States, appears more important than ever.

The full title of the COHSMO research project is ‘Inequality, urbanization and territorial cohesion: Developing the European social model of economic growth and democratic capacity’. In this policy debate paper, we attempt to reflect on the effects of the COVID_19 pandemic on the core aspects of the COHSMO project. More to the point, we investigate the ways that the advent of the pandemic influenced (and will influence), territorial cohesion, inequality, economic growth, and urbanization. As expected, these analytical explorations can only be elementary as it is clearly too early to draw any form of conclusions. In the pages that follow, we shed light on changes in Territorial Cohesion as existing levels of (spatial) inequality, economic growth (or regional resilience) and urbanization brought along by the advent of the global pandemic. Last but not least, we reflect on the policy measures that have been taken to restrict and tackle its negative consequences while we envision plausible policy responses.

2 Territorial cohesion, spatial inequalities and the pandemic crisis

A. The concept of Territorial Cohesion

Territorial cohesion appears to be the opposite of spatial inequalities; thus, when the aims and goals of territorial cohesion are promoted, spatial inequalities and disparities between and within places gradually diminish. Territorial cohesion is a shared competence between the European Commission and the various EU countries/governments. It is a very ambiguous and contested concept with many different interpretations and various meanings. As a policy concept, territorial cohesion originates from the French tradition of regional thinking. The roots of the concept are linked to French regional policy (Faludi 2007a, 2010, 2015), where a decentralized state attempts to diminish regional disparities. More to the point, the role of Jacques Delors (European Commissioner 1985-1995) and Michel Barnier (EU Regional Commissioner) are considered as influential for the enlargement of European Cohesion policy from economic and social priorities to territorial ones (Holder and Layard 2011).

The publication of the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP 1999) is considered the first and foremost important step towards the creation of a European planning philosophy. In essence, it created the foundations of territorial cohesion policy. According to the ESDP, the main problem of EU space is the heavy concentration of people, activities and economic growth into a few specific metropolitan areas (the ‘infamous’ European pentagon: the metropolitan and satellite areas of London, Paris, Milan, Munich and Hamburg). In this sense, the main objectives of European planning philosophy are the ‘balanced and sustainable development’ of all EU territory, the promotion of polycentric development, the parity of access to infrastructure and knowledge across EU space and the wise management of natural and cultural heritage. In other words, these are the solutions to the problematic forms of spatial concentration of population and economic activities in EU space.

Territorial cohesion has been described, among others, as a ‘vague’, ‘ambiguous’ and ‘complex’, while several studies have been conducted to analyze its meaning and operational dimensions (see for instance Mirwaldt et al. 2008; Begg 2010; ESPON INTERCO 2013; González et al. 2015; Atkinson & Zimmerman 2016; Avdikos & Chardas 2016; Faludi 2016; Medeiros 2016; Dao et al., 2017; Nosek, 2017; Asprogerakas & Zachari 2020). According to the literature, territorial cohesion remains a ‘vague’ policy concept (Atkinson and Zimmerman 2016). For others, it is simply a ‘fashionable term’ with ‘many layers of meaning’ (Mirwaldt et al. 2008). Some writers have suggested that territorial cohesion is an ‘elusive’ and ‘ambiguous’ term that cannot be easily translated into a clear and measurable concept (Medeiros 2016). Others have stated that territorial cohesion is a ‘contested’, ‘multi-dimensional’ and ‘dynamic’ policy concept that clearly ‘lacks clarity’ (Dao et al. 2017). It has been also suggested that territorial cohesion is of an ‘amorphous’ character (Van Well 2012). To cut the long story short, a strict definition of territorial cohesion is an almost ‘impossible’ task (Bohme and Gloersen 2011).

Territorial cohesion as a normative policy concept contains several interpretations including, among others, socio-economic convergence¹, spatial planning, economic competitiveness², and policy coordination³ (Evers 2012). However, only the last two of them (i.e. economic competitiveness and policy coordination) appear to offer new added value at the EU level policy as socio-economic convergence⁴ and spatial planning have been implicit in the cohesion policy for a long time (Othengrafen & Cornett 2013). The fact that some of these interpretations (e.g. socio-economic convergence versus economic competitiveness) conflict with each other (Waterhout 2007) might hinder the ability of territorial cohesion as a policy goal (Nosek 2017).

Before we move any further with our analysis, we should keep in mind that territorial cohesion is an EU policy construct; an EU policy instrument that became perceived and successively communicated by European regional policy officers and technocrats. Following such lines, Dabinett (2011) suggests that: ‘territorial cohesion is a construct that is not found outside the documents and discourses that constitutes the words of EU spatial planners and spatial policy’ (Dabinett 2011:2). Other writers have stated that territorial cohesion is simply an EU policy discourse with its meaning related to the discursive chains that it becomes attached to (Servillo 2010). To put it differently, territorial cohesion can be seen as a half ‘empty’ EU policy signifier always depending on whoever uses the term and for what kind of reasons (Faludi 2015).

According to Abrahams (2014), we should not approach territorial cohesion by trying to define it; instead, it might be more appropriate to let the concept be ‘fuzzy’. Instead of asking what territorial cohesion is, it might be more useful to ask the following questions: What does territorial cohesion do? How does it get translated in different (national) EU contexts? What kind of uses different actors can make of it? For Abrahams, this is a ‘pragmatic’ approach to the concept. Van Well (2012) has suggested that territorial cohesion can be viewed as a ‘moving target’ that each member-state (or region) constructs its meaning to promote their own territorial priorities and guarantee EU funding. Other writers have wondered if territorial cohesion has the same meaning in all EU national contexts, or alternatively, different national interpretations exist between EU countries (Mirwaldt et al. 2008)?

It has to be noted that specific national policy and analytical mindsets existed in many EU countries much before the arrival of the EU territorial cohesion policy. Accordingly, the arrival of territorial cohesion policy in various national contexts did not take place at a policy and analytical vacuum, but instead, in an already formed environment in relation to broadly defined national cohesion/ convergence goals. As a result, in many cases, territorial cohesion had to be adapted in order to fit in. On the other hand, the arrival of territorial cohesion policy changed many aspects of these pre-existing national policy/ analytical environments and brought an emphasis on new policy priorities. In short, territorial cohesion might mean different things in different EU countries, but also, between different actors (central, regional, local politics).

¹ Convergence regards the reduced disparities among regions in the course of the time and is linked to the popular concepts of sigma and beta-convergence (for a review see Artelaris 2015).

² According to Colomb and Santina (2014), territorial cohesion pursues economic growth and competitiveness with concerns about solidarity and equity.

³ Policy coordination can be perceived as horizontal coordination, vertical coordination and territorial coordination (for a review see Nosek 2017).

⁴ Avdikos and Chardas (2016), however, suggest that the role and importance of socio-economic convergence in the last years has become less prominent and influential in the policy-making process.

B. Measuring Territorial cohesion

Measuring territorial cohesion (and regional inequalities) is certainly not a simple and well-defined task due to the insufficient clarity of the concept and its different interpretations among the EU Member States (Medeiros 2016), as well as to the lack of a widely accepted and established methodology (Dao et al. 2017).⁵ Although territorial cohesion is, by its nature, a multidimensional concept characterized by a multiplicity of aspects (i.e. economic, social, political and cultural), it has been mainly associated with Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita, especially during the first two programming periods (i.e. 2000 to 2006 and 2007 to 2013). GDP has been used as the main eligibility criteria for EU funding and as the basic indicator of the effectiveness of EU regional policies. This is in line with the promotion of the objectives of economic and social progress as well as the achievement of a high level of employment and balanced and sustainable development (Weckroth and Moisiso 2020).

However, in recent years, the need for a more holistic framework of measurement territorial cohesion has been acknowledged. It has been argued that conventional single indicators such as GDP per capita⁶ or (un)employment rates can be considered as incomplete measures of territorial cohesion, mainly because there are insufficient in covering several aspects of quality of life and human development⁷. As Commissioner Hahn suggested in 2010 “there is an inherent need to develop more indicators for different thematic approaches..... That would also facilitate to integrate monitoring and evaluation system in the decision-making process which is of crucial importance as a pace-maker.” (Hahn 2010). In a similar vein, a few years later, Commissioner Crețu noted that “GDP alone does not accurately enough reflect the needs of a region, as it leaves out crucial parameters such as quality of life, social inclusion, level of employment or sustainable development. This is why, to complement GDP, the Commission is investigating other indicators....⁸”. The intensification of the discussion in the last 10 years has been strongly associated with the 2008 economic crisis (Boarini and D’ercole 2013; Artelaris 2017), while much more debate is expected in the years to come as a result of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic (Artelaris 2021).

The recognition of the multidimensionality of territorial cohesion has given rise to an increasing consensus among academics and practitioners for establishing alternative measurement

⁵ Measuring territorial cohesion, however, is crucial for at least two reasons: first, to reduce the vagueness of the concept and “engage the academic community in producing useful studies, which could be of vital importance to better understand and correct territorial imbalances”; second, to use and discuss the concept “in a more concrete and focused way” at the political level (Medeiros 2016:6). According to Medeiros: “Leaving the fate of knowledge regarding territorial cohesion to non-measurable and uninformed academic discussions would only contribute to maintain the present, elusive status quo of this notion ad eternum” (Medeiros 2016:6). For Dao et al. (2017), measuring territorial cohesion can make the concept more operational (Dao et al 2017).

⁶ In a similar vein, the “Istanbul Declaration” of 2007, affirmed by several important supranational organisations such as the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the European Commission (EC), the United Nations (UN) and the World Bank, and signed by many others, highlighted, for the first time, a broad international consensus on “the need to undertake the measurement of societal progress in every country, going beyond conventional economic measures such as GDP per capita” (OECD 2007). The “Beyond GDP” conference organised by the EC in 2007, the so-called Stiglitz–Sen–Fitoussi report (Stiglitz et al. 2009), and the OECD’s global project on “Measuring the Progress of Societies” are also key milestones.

⁷ GDP, for instance, focuses only on monetary issues excluding non-market activities that contribute to human development and well-being while labour market indicators, also, present serious disadvantages, since they cannot capture, for example, the extent of problems in some specific areas (e.g. structurally weaker regions, regions with large numbers of foreign workers on temporary contracts or in regions with high levels of brain drain) (Ghai, 2003; Artelaris 2017).

⁸ https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-8-2017-11-13-ITM-019_EL.html

approaches. Several important efforts have been made towards this direction at the EU level, including, inter alia, the studies of ESPON (2007), Medeiros (2011), ESPON (2012), ESPON (2013) and Hanell (2015) (for an extensive review see Zaucha & Böhme 2020). Although significant breakthroughs have been made regarding this issue, the adoption of a sound and uniform approach remains a daunting task (Zaucha & Böhme 2020); those studies are based on different aspects of conceptual and intellectual frameworks of territorial cohesion, analyzed different geographic scales and followed different methodological approaches. However, they all highlight the need to measure territorial cohesion according to a multidimensional approach.

More specifically, two main approaches have emerged for the measurement of territorial cohesion (Hanell 2015).⁹ According to the first one, the concept can be measured by using a number of relative thematic variables and identifying their patterns and trends. Those variables do not cover only the economic and social dimensions of territorial cohesion but also other dimensions explained above (territorial governance and cooperation, sustainability, polycentricity, etc). According to the second approach, territorial cohesion can be measured via Composite Indicators (also known as synthetic indices). A Composite Indicator aims to combine many aspects of the phenomenon/concept analysed, facilitating the reduction of the multifaceted reality to a single value. These indicators, although they are not without critics (Dialga and Giang 2017), are considered standard and effective tools for the measurement of multidimensional phenomena. Today, one of the most interesting areas of research is probably the construction of Composite Indicators at the regional level, not only because of the increased availability and quality of regional data but also because of the need for better regional policies (Artelaris 2021). As a result, several Composite Indicators have been constructed to measure territorial cohesion using, however, a different number of variables and producing different results.

Examples of the first approach include the ESPON project namely INTERCO. In this project, a top list of 32 indicators structured along six territorial objectives was selected covering both thematic issues and policy dimensions of territorial cohesion (ESPON, 2013). The territorial objectives included: strong local economies ensuring global competitiveness; innovative territories; fair access to services, markets and jobs; inclusion and quality of life; attractive regions of high ecological values and strong territorial capital; and integrated polycentric territorial development. The choice of indicators was determined by the priorities of the Territorial Agenda 2020 and Europe 2020 Strategy.

An example of the second approach (composite indicators approach) includes the study of Medeiros (2011) based on the methodology used for the Human Development Index (HDI), introduced by the UN in 1990 (UNDP 1990). HDI is probably the oldest and most significant attempt to overcome the narrow focus of GDP. In this study, Medeiros proposes a Territorial cohesion (composite) indicator taking into consideration the debate about the third pillar of Cohesion. The Territorial Cohesion index is based on four dimensions related to socioeconomic territorial imbalances, environmental sustainability, territorial cooperation/governance processes and polycentric urban system. The results of the study revealed a heterogeneous pattern of territorial cohesion for the EU (NUTS 2 level).

⁹ It is worth noting that this literature can be also linked with several significant strands such as the capabilities approach, the basic human values approach (Grisez et al. 1987), the intermediate needs approach (Doyal and Gough 1993), the universal human values approach (Schwartz 1994), the domains of subjective well-being approach (Cummins 1996), the dimensions of well-being approach (Narayan et al. 2000) and the central human capabilities approach (Nussbaum 2000).

Although the main message of these empirical studies is that further research is needed for developing a common framework of measuring territorial cohesion, their findings can be used by policymakers not only as a way to better understand territorial cohesion but also as guiding lights in the process of policymaking, and as tools for the evaluation of the performance and effectiveness of the adopted policies. Measuring territorial cohesion is still an unfinished task and more has to be done in this direction.

C. Territorial cohesion and spatial justice

The discourse of territorial cohesion has led to the re-conceptualization of the European regional policy by including the dimension of spatial justice (Davoudi 2005). As a result, great strides have been made in academia during the last years for the application of the concept of spatial justice in the regional context and to EU cohesion policy concerns (Kearns et al. 2014, Jones et al. 2020). Furthermore, European policymakers have explored whether the concept of spatial justice can be used as an effective alternative to the concept of territorial cohesion and territorial cohesion policy¹⁰ (Jones et al. 2019: 99). The main reason for this interest in spatial justice is the significant increases in EU territorial inequalities that intensified (and continue to do so) spatial injustices and put EU territorial cohesion policy under pressure (Jones et al. 2020).

The existence of spatial injustices has been associated with the rise of populist movements and anti-establishment and anti-EU voting patterns. Allegedly, people living in places dominated by spatial injustices feel that their places of living “don’t matter” to decision-makers and cultivate feelings of scepticism, anger and despair towards the EU. This is the main reason that spatial (in)justice has been associated with Euroscepticism, the literature of the ‘geography of ‘discontent’ as well as the ‘left-behind’ hypothesis. Several studies have shown that anti-EU and anti-establishment sentiments usually occur in economically weaker and stagnated areas (Los et al. 2017, McCann 2018, McCann 2020) and/or in more affluent areas experiencing an economic decline that started before the onset of the crisis (Dijkstra et al. 2020). In a similar vein, Rodriguez-Pose (2018) speaks about the revenge of the ‘places that don’t matter’ (not the ‘people that don’t matter’), a phenomenon that can be related to a failure of regional policies. Spatial justice can also be linked with austerity in the sense that fiscal consolidation programmes and austerity measures can intensify territorial inequality (Gray and Barford 2018) reinforcing spatial injustices and undermining the European policy efforts towards the aim of territorial cohesion (Agnello et al. 2016).

In light of this, justice is considered as a matter of geography (Heynen et al. 2018) associated with “both processes (income distribution mechanisms) and outcomes (level of imbalances) prevailing in different territories” (Petraikos et al. 2021:2). According to Rawls’ (1971) ‘Theory of Justice’, his principle of ‘fair equality of opportunity’ in just and democratic societies translates into the dictum that social and economic differences can only become tolerated if they are associated with offices and positions that are open to everyone. Nevertheless, this Rawlsian principle of justice is a-spatial, as his theory does not examine the distribution of injustices in space (Mally 2016); it does not take account of the position of the equality of opportunity in space. The spatialization of this principle

¹⁰ In the policy context, a few recent studies have explored the contribution of place-based policies to spatial justice. Although place-based policies can have a significant contribution to spatial justice in some cases the positive link is hindered in several countries by several factors related to the domestic institutional environment (Keller et al. 2021 Weck et al. 2021) such as the high degree of involvement of the central government (Petraikos et al. 2021).

would mean that people should not be disadvantaged because of their location; location should not be a constraint to the life-chances and capabilities of individuals.

More to the point, spatial justice is based, to a great extent, on the academic debate in the 70s and 80s combining the notions of justice, based on John Rawls' theory of justice (Rawls, 1971), and territorialized social justice (Davies 1968, Harvey 1973, Pirie 1983, see also Jones et al. 2019: 107-110). If social justice is seen through a geographical perspective, then social justice transforms into spatial justice. The concept of spatial justice originates from the work of Edward Soja (2010) and his ideas about the unequal distribution of injustices in space, especially at the urban level; an approach conceptually quite close to economic, social and political disparities perspective. According to Soja, spatial justice (or injustice) is not just the outcome of economic, social and political processes, it is also a “dynamic force affecting these processes in significant ways” (Soja 2010:2). Seeking spatial justice means the geographical extension of economic, social and/or environmental, etc. justice to places (and groups of the population) that they experience injustices (Soja 2010:5). Like the concept of territorial cohesion, spatial justice cannot be considered in strictly economic terms. However, in contrast to the concept of territorial cohesion, spatial justice allows for a more plural understanding of development, well-being and quality of life, bringing those notions to the forefront of the discussion (Jones et al. 2019). Madanipour et al. (2021) suggest that the contribution of territorial cohesion to spatial justice is limited and one-sided “providing necessary but insufficient responses to spatial imbalances and social inequalities” (Madanipour et al. 2021: 15). Notwithstanding these efforts, the concept of spatial justice remains complex and contested (Madanipour et al. 2021) while its metrics remain limited, unclear and in its infancy (Israel and Frenkel 2018).

D. The effects of the pandemic crisis on Territorial cohesion and regional inequalities

As argued above, territorial cohesion aims to reduce spatial inequalities. When they are high levels of territorial inequalities then territorial cohesion is canceled; territorial cohesion is the nemesis of spatial inequalities and vice versa. But what were the effects of the COVID_19 pandemic across different EU regions? How the pandemic might have influenced territorial cohesion across EU space? These are some very important questions with no definite answers to them yet.

To start with, there is strong evidence that regional inequalities in the EU are increasing, or at least not decreasing, since the 1980s (Asso 2020, Cörvers and Mayhew 2021). During the recent decade, the EU has experienced increasing levels of territorial inequality as a result of important recent socio-economic and political changes (Capello et al. 2015; Iammarino et al. 2019; Dijkstra et al. 2019). The recent pandemic crisis and the subsequent economic recession due to the lockdown of economic activities, have greatly affected the socio-economic well-being of EU inhabitants (Grasso et al. 2021) putting European countries under severe stress. However, the ramifications of the crisis, as previous crises, appear anything but spatially uniform affecting EU places in very unequal ways (Capello and Caragliu 2021). This can result in new forms of increased spatial inequality with detrimental effects on EU economic, social and territorial cohesion (Bailey et al. 2020). These new developments have already triggered a heated debate concerning the effects of the pandemic on EU places and the challenges it brings along to territorial cohesion's objectives (Capello and Caragliu 2021).

Although the literature on the geographies of crises is scarce and underdeveloped and there are no rigorous explanations behind the responses of regions to shocks (Eraydin, 2016; Martin et al., 2016, Artelaris 2017), a clear message from the studies of the 2008 economic crisis in the EU is that some regions were more affected than others. However, the literature produced mixed results in terms of regional inequality. A strand of studies suggested that the less developed EU regions were relatively more resilient in the crisis (Davies 2011, Christopherson, et al. 2013, Donald et al. 2014,

and EC 2014) implying a decrease in regional inequality. On the contrary, other studies showed that the more developed regions, were less affected by the crisis (Brakman et al., 2015; Capello et al. 2015) implying regional divergence trends. Similar messages were made by other studies focusing on single countries (e.g. Artelaris 2017, Gray and Barford, 2018). The investigation of this issue is of high importance since there is evidence that the effects of the pandemic crisis on territorial inequalities are expected to be more heterogeneous than the 2008 crisis (OECD 2020).

Although more and better data is needed to understand and evaluate the economic and social effects of COVID-19 on the regional level, most recent studies, focusing mainly on GDP per capita, conclude that the pandemic has greatly increased the existing levels of regional inequality (OECD 2020). For instance, Capello and Caragliu (2021) find, using the latest generation of the Macroeconomic, Sectoral, Social, Territorial (MASST4) model, a rise of regional inequality in the EU mainly because of the heterogeneous effects of the crisis at the country level. However, the regional disparity is expected to diminish in the years to come as a result of a decisive rebound of those countries mostly hit by the crisis (Capello and Caragliu 2021). In a similar vein, Brad et al. (2021) also offer evidence of growing regional inequalities examining 199 NUTS-3 regions in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE).

3 From economic growth to regional resilience

During a crisis, the notion of economic growth gets substituted with recession. In such a difficult economic environment, the emphasis shifts from economic expansion to contraction. In such cases, what is important is how different spatial units react to these negative economic conditions; how they are affected and what levels of resilience they manifest and exhibit. Accordingly, from preoccupations with economic growth, we move to ideas of resilience. More to the point, the notion of regional resilience analyses how fast spatial units react to, and recover from, an economic shock such as a pandemic crisis has been increasingly taken up in the literature of spatial economics and regional development. This notion was brought to the forefront in 2008 when several scholars started investigating reactions of regional economies to economic crises. Regional resilience attracted academic attention during those years of unfavourable economic conditions mainly because of the generalised sense of uncertainty and insecurity, necessitating the search for formulas for adaptation and survival (Lagravinese 2015). This concept also attracted great attention because the 2008 economic crisis had greatly uneven territorial effects at both country-level (for Greece see Artelaris 2017, Artelaris 2021; for Italy see Cainelli et al 2019, for Spain, see Geelhoedt et al. 2021) and European level (see for example Martin, 2010, Groot et al., 2011; Kitson et al., 2011; Martin, 2011, Fingleton et al., 2012; Brakman et al 2015, Capello et al, 2015, Lagravinese, 2015, Giannakis and Bruggeman 2020). Some places were found to be more resilient than others. The intensity, geographical coverage and the multi-dimensional expression of the crisis provided an arena for new research related to, inter alia, the evolution of regional disparities, the determinants of resistance to external shocks, as well the policy tools to alleviate the impact of crisis (Petraikos and Psycharis, 2015).

Although this growing strand of literature has gained prominence in the field of regional economics, several authors have expressed doubts about 'resilience' as an analytical concept (Hassink, 2010; Dubé and Polèse, 2016). Moreover, the theoretical literature is still limited, inconclusive, and underdeveloped while lacking the sophistication usually found in economic growth

literature. As a result, there is a lack of a well-established discourse related to the “definition and central features of resilient regional systems” (Eraydin, 2016: 601). However, regional resilience has been extensively used in the fields of economic geography and regional science to address one of the most fundamental and intriguing questions: ‘why [do] some regions manage to renew themselves or to lock themselves out, whereas others are more locked in decline?’ (Hassink, 2010: 45).

Since the theoretical approaches have an ambiguous and inconclusive message regarding the effects of an economic shock, several empirical studies have focused on the determinants of regional resilience and the heterogeneous impact of the crisis (Chapple and Lester, 2010; Davies, 2011; Hill et al., 2011; Fingleton et al., 2012; Martin, 2012; Cellini and Torrissi, 2014; Lee, 2014; Lagravinese, 2015; Martin et al., 2016; Sensier and Artis, 2016). Understanding the determinants of resilience and the mechanisms that make regions recover from an economic shock could help policy makers to design and implement territorial policies.

In this sense, the critical issue is what could explain the major differences in which regional economies react to, and recover from, an economic shock such as a pandemic crisis? Following studies investigating the 2008 crisis, we can support the idea that, although there is no widely accepted consensus on this issue, there are several possible factors; the initial level of economic development, regional sectoral composition, regional specialization or diversification, the geography of human capital, urbanization and population structure are considered potential critical determinants (Pickles and Smith, 2011; Courvisanos et al., 2016; Eraydin, 2016). However, it is worth noting that the findings are dependent on the chosen indicators; Although several studies have used single indicators, mainly employment rates and GDP per capita, others have constructed Composite Indicators (CIs) to provide insight into the severity of shocks (for a review, see Angeon and Bates, 2015).

More specifically, regarding the effects of the initial level of economic development on resilience the literature is inconclusive. Although a strand of the literature suggests that the more advanced regions are relatively more resilient in the period of crisis (see for example Brakman et al., 2015, Petrakos and Psycharis, 2016), other studies present evidence for the opposite (Davies 2011, Artelaris 2017). The inclusion of the initial level of economic development can also be linked with the process of regional convergence or divergence and the existence of possible non-linearities behind conventional convergence analysis; convergence may come about for different groups of regions or stages of economic development (Fischer and Stirböck 2006, Ramajo et al. 2008, Fischer and Stirböck 2006, Artelaris et al. 2011, Mazzola and Pizzuto 2020). The investigation of this link can be also linked with another strand of the literature that relates business cycles with the spatial concentration of economic activities (Berry, 1988). What this theory suggests is that expansion cycles begin at the more developed and dynamic regions of countries while the interaction of agglomeration effects and market size provides a lead over other regions. On the contrary, these spatial units are less resilient and more exposed to external (economic) shocks during the contraction cycles. This trend implies that regional inequality presents a pro-cyclical behaviour, increasing in periods of expansion and decreasing in periods of recession (or slow growth).

The pre-crisis regional sectoral composition has been also acknowledged as one of the most important determinants of economic resilience. In general terms, some economic activities have been found more vulnerable to changes caused by a shock wave than others. For instance, there is some evidence that regions specialized in the secondary sector seem to be less resilient and more vulnerable (Fingleton et al. 2012) while regions specialized in the service sector (both private and public) are more resilient (Navarro-Espigares et al. 2012, Giannakis and Bruggeman 2020).

One primary debate has been whether there is a strong and systematic link between regional specialization or diversification and regional resilience. This discussion started during the period of the Great Depression of the 1930s when scholars studied the impact of cyclical fluctuations on communities (Dissart, 2003, Artelaris 2017). Regions with a relatively high level of diversification or varied economic structure can be less responsive and sensitive to fluctuations caused by negative external shocks or cyclical downturns since the diversity reduces the concentration of risks (Crescenzi et al., 2016). From this perspective, regional diversification can be considered analogous to corporate diversification as a risk-spreading strategy (Frenken et al., 2007, Artelaris 2017). However, the gains of a diversified regional economy can be counteracted by sectoral inter-relatedness that can increase the diffusion of shocks from one sector to the others yielding an unclear result for regional systems (Martin, 2012).

Human capital is another important driver of regional resilience. Education lies at the heart of human capital. Regions with a better-educated workforce are typically more resilient since they can generate new knowledge (Giannakis and Bruggeman 2017).

Urbanization can be another key factor of regional resilience. However, the evidence is also mixed. Although some studies suggest that the more urbanised regions are relatively more resilient in periods of crisis (Capello et al., 2015. Petrakos and Psycharis 2016), other studies show that the more urbanised regions, with a higher degree of economic openness and connectivity, were more vulnerable to the 2008 crisis shock (Donald, et al, 2014; Brakman et al (2015), Dijkstra et al., 2015). These regions are most exposed to the crisis probably because they face important pressures from international and EU competitors because of their productive structure (Artelaris 2017). The concentration of higher value-added activities, technological advancements, and highly skilled human capital, usually found in urban centres, do not seem to protect the regions in the period of crisis.

Population structure and especially age has also been associated with regional resilience. Most of the studies have shown that older populations are usually less productive and adapted to economic changes and surviving economic downturns (Giannakis and Bruggeman 2020).

But now the question to be answered is: what territorial effects do we expect during the pandemic crisis? Do we expect the same kind of effects or different? The answers to these questions are not easy and straightforward since the crisis is still unfolding and much more data are needed. Moreover, there are several differences between the COVID-19 crisis and the 2008 global financial crisis in terms of scope, origin (endogenous in 2008 versus exogenous in 2020), and consequences while the effects of territorial inequalities are expected to be more intensified (OECD 2020).

However, it is logical to assume that regions specialized in economic activities that can be considered as less essential such as leisure and tourism rather than others such as shopping (Sapir 2020, OECD 2020), regions with a relatively high level of specialization and low level of diversification which can reduce the concentration of risks, regions with a lower level of human capital as well as regions with a high level of older people might be more affected than others. As far as the more developed and urbanized regions are concerned, the predictions are more difficult although some recent studies (e.g. OECD 2020) conclude that the more vulnerable regions, such as deprived urban areas, have been harder hit than others. Furthermore, capital regions or other metropolitan regions show a relatively higher risk of job disruption than other regions (OECD 2020). In light of this situation, European and national regional policies can greatly influence how a region copes with disruptions mitigating the impacts of the shock (Qingfang and Wei 2021). However, the above discussion highlights that the EU policies should be taken into account the different structures and needs of regional economies.

4 Urbanization and the pandemic

As mentioned above, one important aspect of territorial cohesion is polycentric development and the advancement of urban economic growth. The idea of polycentricity is close to notions such as economic competitiveness, smart growth, digital connectivity, etc. For territorial cohesion, the concentration of people, activity and prosperity in a few specific urban areas increases costs (land values, quality of life, commuting time etc.), but also, creates obstacles to spatial justice (concentration of economic opportunity, facilities, infrastructure etc.). Among others, territorial cohesion aims to facilitate urban-based economic growth by creating a polycentric system to supplement or even partly replace the few economically important big cities/conglomerations. Allegedly, the creation of such a system can increase the economic competitiveness of different regions/ areas and break the monopolistic conditions of the global city model of Europe where a few cities dominate economic activity. Last but not least, the polycentric urban system (and its functional areas) is perceived as the main motto of present and future economic growth and development for the knowledge-based economy. However, a system that is based on more economically important medium-size cities instead of a few very big ones, is seen as the European way forward to economic development and the necessary attraction of financial and human talent.

Irrespective of the idea of the polycentric system, the reality is that cohesion policies and territorial cohesion policy in particular are based on the notion of economic agglomeration. Since the 1990s, the agglomeration of economic activity has been the model that cohesion policies were built upon. To put it differently, cohesion and territorial cohesion policies have followed, or simply accepted, an agglomeration-centric approach by adopting neoliberal economic principles, which advocated that the free economy boosts economic growth and finds ways to trickle it down (Davoudi 2020). In short, the agglomeration theory has been the economic cornerstone of cohesion policy in neoliberal times (Cotella and Vitale Brovarone 2021). Even the idea of the creation of a European polycentric urban system is again based on agglomeration. Nevertheless, a more dispersed agglomeration than the monopolistic model of a few economically important big cities. All in all, territorial cohesion and the agglomeration of economic activity have been together from the beginning and continue to do so (at least until the advent of the pandemic).

In the era of COVID-19, it is not only the agglomeration model that is at risk but also life in cities and city-centers as we knew it. It is not only the urban agglomeration of economic activities that is in question, but also, the present and future of cities-centers and other urban areas of high density. As it is widely accepted by now, the spread of the pandemic had a positive correlation with levels of urbanization and population density (Connolly, Harris-Ali, Keil 2020). As a result, in city-centers and inner-city areas with high population density the pandemic spread faster and even led to the collapse of the healthcare system (for instance New York). Furthermore, the pandemic exposed or even increased already existing socio-spatial inequalities as infection rates were much higher in deprived neighborhoods and among ethnic minorities (Biglieri, De Vidovich and Keil 2020). The positive relation between urbanization and levels of infection makes us think about the future of our crowded cities. In short, the current pandemic has changed city-life and the ways we think about urban density.

During successive lockdowns, cities and city-centers lost their liveliness and economic activities. Gradually, an academic bibliography emerged on the pandemic city, its ways of coping and the future. Many ideas about the fate of cities and urban centers came to the fore. Allegedly, the pandemic and post-pandemic city and city-center should be more walk-able, greener, with more open spaces, etc. New urban planning and even architecture are necessary (Sharifi, Khavarian-Garmsir 2020). The dominance of the suburbs over city-centers might characterize cities after the pandemic. E-commerce

and distant working might become (partly) permanent and lead to the decentralization of activities and forms of dwelling (Pisano 2020). As a result, urban centers might lose a big part of their vitality and even experience a gradual economic and cultural decline. However, we should not forget that since Louis Mumford's (1970) 'Culture of Cities', cities and urban-centers have been thought of as the manifestation of life in its highest form. Henry Lefebvre (2003) viewed modern capitalism as a new form of urbanism. Jane Jacobs (1961) and Richard Sennett (1970) perceived face-to-face interaction and urban encounters as the very essence of city life. Economic geography brought ideas of spatial clustering as responsible for producing innovation and economic growth. Richard Florida talked about the creativity of cities (2002). Someone is left wondering if the pandemic can bring most of these ideas to an end? If it will manage to change our urban lives and the ways we think about cities and city-centers at large?

For some authors, the effect of the pandemic on cities depends on its duration. If the pandemic (in any form) lasts for years cities will change to a significant extent; if it proves short-termed then alterations might not be so substantial (Florida, Rodriguez-Pose, Storper 2021). In November 2020, the first positive news about the efficacy of vaccines came along. A new optimism emerged. The Dow Jones experienced historical highs, while American people lined for miles to get free food for Thanksgiving festivities. This is the colossal distance that separated the hopes of economic recovery and the harsh reality of the negative effects of the pandemic in people's lives. Right now we are in the midst of an economic recovery. Consumption is up and city-centers are open for customers and workers alike. Some surveys even suggest that cities and urban centers might thrive in the future as people are eager for face-to-face contact and do not necessarily prefer to work from home or even shop online. For Mumford (1970) as long as people desire face-to-face contact, cities and city centers will exist in one form or another. Time will tell if the pandemic will change urbanization or we will continue with our urban civilization as normal.

5 Policy responses in an era of pandemic crisis

A. COVID_19 and EU policy response

Cohesion Policy has proven to be an effective and efficient policy tool to address the previous crisis such as the 2008 economic crisis and the refugee crisis of 2014-2015. The current pandemic crisis is not an exception. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the EU altered its budget to counteract the negative socio-economic consequences of the COVID_19 pandemic providing substantial financial assistance to foster economic recovery. In July 2020, the Special European Council decided on a massive European Recovery Plan but also increased the budget of the post-2020 period. The main aim was to support a '*sustainable and resilient recovery*' while promoting the green and the digital transition (EORPA 2020). The most significant measures were the launching of the 'Next Generation EU' initiative (2021-2024) and a new revamped budget for the current programming period (2021-2027) exceeding 1 billion Euros. The main priorities remained the facilitation of a transition to a 'smarter' and 'greener' Europe along with fighting the socio-economic outcomes of the pandemic. For the European Commission, the advent of the pandemic was not only a challenge but also an opportunity to bring closer the much-needed digital and green revolution. As it is stated by the

European Commission: *‘Our generational challenges- the green and digital revolution- are even more important now than before the crisis [COVID_19] started. Through the recovery, we will press fast-forward on the twin green and digital revolutions’* (EC 2020a).

Cohesion policy has been one of the cornerstones of the European response to the COVID_19 crisis. A new initiative REACT-EU was established to increase the cohesion policies’ budget (2014-2020) with an extra 55 billion EUROS. The REACT-EU initiative stands for Recovery Assistance for Cohesion and Territories of Europe. The extra funding was (unequally) spread between the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the European Social Fund (ESF) and the European Fund for Aid to the most Deprived (EC 2020b). The new instrument was launched in 2020 while continues in 2021-2022 through funds from the ‘Next Generation EU’ initiative. It aims to provide financial support for the recovery of significant sectors of the economy while decisions for the allocation of funds take place at the national governments’ level. Significant measures include the establishment of an instrument providing (temporary) support to mitigate unemployment risks in an emergency (SURE), amendments to the EU budget to address urgent issues, re-direction of EU funds to help member states most in need and support to most affected sectors¹¹. All these initiatives will offer great help in all EU countries, but those hit hardest will benefit most (Sapir 2020), although the findings of a recent expert poll based on 19 institutes from 15 different countries suggest that there was, at least in the first phase of the crisis, a general perception that “the EU’s response has been too little, too late” (Russack, and Blockmans 2020).

B. Territorial Cohesion Policy and the pandemic

As mentioned above, there is strong evidence that the pandemic has not had homogenous territorial effects across Europe; instead it seems to generate more social and spatial inequality across and within EU countries, regions and places and, as a result, new forms of intra-European, inter-regional and intra-regional inequalities across and within EU countries. For instance, the COVID_19 created unequal employment outcomes (job losses) between different sectors of the economy or health outcomes in relation to income and class. Both inequalities had clearly a spatial aspect; in the first case job losses were more profound in Southern European tourist based economies while rates of infection were more pronounced in inner city areas. For these reasons, in the Territorial Agenda 2030 it is stated that: *‘While revising the Territorial Agenda, the COVID-19 pandemic has changed policy making and future development outlooks. As implications and policy responses vary across territories due to different conditions, the pandemic shows that territories matter and are highly interdependent. Territorial cohesion should play an important role in the recovery process’* (Ministers responsible for Spatial Planning and Territorial Development and/or Territorial Cohesion 2020:2).

The questions that arise then are the following: What changes did the COVID_19 pandemic bring to EU cohesion policies and territorial cohesion policy in particular? What were the immediate EU policy responses to the pandemic? Were they designed and implemented with any territorial/spatial aspect in mind?

On a more theoretical level, a few early conclusions can be drawn in relation to the aims of territorial cohesion policy and the early policy responses of member states’ governments to the COVID_19

¹¹ For a thorough presentation see <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/coronavirus/covid-19-economy>.

crisis. In general terms, there were significant differences in terms of territorial policy dynamics among the EU countries and different patterns of central-regional interactions (Vampa 2021). The responses, although fairly different between federal and unitary governments, mostly included centralized efforts. They mostly focused on the national level with regional and local governments following the directions of the central government (Georgieva et al. 2020). At least within the first stages of the pandemic, there was not much emphasis on the territorial aspects of policies to counteract the impacts of the newly emerged crisis (Neto 2020). Policies were mostly horizontal and not place-based. However, this was in sharp contrast to EU cohesion policies and territorial cohesion in particular, in which the place-based approach is of high importance. In parallel, the pandemic crisis and its economic and social effects have revealed the difficulties of European cooperation in several EU policies such as territorial policy. This might be a great opportunity for the EU for providing coordinated solutions to their new problems.

According to territorial cohesion's place-based approach, local undeveloped regions/areas can create a positive dynamic by taking advantage of endogenous resources and local comparative advantages. Subsequently, territorial diversity has to be taken into account in all developmental efforts. Such efforts take place through external help (investment) and as part of multi-level governance. Furthermore, the place-based approach takes for granted a 'bottom-up' perspective as local knowledge and capabilities have to be harnessed. These are the main characteristics of territorial cohesion's place-based approach that can also be found in cohesion policies in general.

For some scholars, the pandemic crisis brought new importance to the place-based approach and local/regional contexts (Neto 2020; Tufs, Larosse, Corpakis 2020, OECD 2020). Although the initial policy responses to the COVID_19 crisis were horizontal, a new emphasis on places as being able to solve problems has to come to the policy front. More to the point, it is suggested that a new type of policy thinking to respond to the consequences of the pandemic is much needed; a type of response that can incorporate territorial aspects as places have different levels of resilience to the outcomes of the pandemic (Neto 2020). According to such thinking, regions and places have different levels of vulnerability and resistance and thus require different amounts of external help. In this sense, a more thoughtful policy response should not treat places as undifferentiated towards the consequences of the pandemic, but instead, it should be able to evaluate vulnerability (and resilience) and thus distribute help accordingly. This is another way of seeing the policy response to the pandemic; a territorial response that is based on the place-based approach and replicates the logic of cohesion policies. This approach can be an effective tool to address social issues such as poverty, social exclusion and deprivation as well as marginalization. As OECD (2020:77) highlights "COVID-19's differentiated impact on communities, regions and countries is inspiring broader discussion on the how to increase resilience and how to be better prepared for future health, economic, social or climate-related shocks".

To continue, another important aspect that territorial cohesion policy should take into account is that COVID_19 can create obstacles to the efficiency of the economic agglomeration model, which is clearly urban in nature. As the pandemic was mostly spread in cities, these were the places where it created its most negative consequences and in some cases even brought havoc. However, the vulnerability of crowded cities to the pandemic puts a question mark on the future viability of the agglomeration-centric approach according to which economic activity and human skills concentrate in urbanized and thus densely populated areas. Accordingly, in the light of the COVID_19 pandemic, some pertinent (although theoretical) questions arise: What is the future of territorial cohesion if it is not based on agglomeration? What territorial cohesion policy could look like if a constellation of cities was not the main motto of economic development, digital transition and smart growth? What

alternative types of economic models could emerge to create growth and inspire territorial cohesion policy for a post-pandemic world that takes seriously the possibility of future health scares and pandemic outbreaks?

The reality is that the European economic model cannot really leave behind the urban agglomeration model; logistically it cannot leave behind cities and relocate economic activities to the countryside and beyond. This is not feasible under current circumstances. For some writers, what can be done is for rural areas to become through massive investment more livable to complement the urban dimension. In such a scenario, agglomeration should spread out from cities to the surrounding rural areas creating more space for people and activities to be located in. However, the new rural will not substitute the urban; instead the rural and the urban will work together to create a new form of a more spread out agglomeration model (Cotella and Vitale Brovarone 2021). In a way, this is similar to Lefebvre's (2003) idea about the urban capitalist revolution; the creation of an urban capitalist economic system that is not only found in cities but in areas that lay between them, too; an urbanized countryside that is an integral part of the existing economic system; a more dispersed agglomeration that encompasses both urban and rural spaces.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

The recent pandemic crisis and the subsequent economic recession due to the lockdown of economic activities have greatly affected the economic well-being of EU inhabitants putting European countries under severe stress. Crescenzi et al. (2021:279) highlight that “the EU is now facing the most dramatic economic crisis in its history” while several scholars suggest that the pandemic crisis constitutes a major challenge for the European Union, economic integration and territorial policy. In this report, we explored the ways through which the advent of the pandemic influenced, and will influence, territorial cohesion, regional inequality, economic growth/regional resilience, and urbanization. As mentioned above, these analytical explorations can only be elementary as it is clearly too early to draw any form of conclusions.

Although more and better data is needed to understand and evaluate the economic and social effects of COVID-19 at the territorial level, most of the recent studies suggest that the effects of the pandemic crisis have spread differently across the EU greatly increasing the existing levels of regional inequality and diminishing territorial cohesion (OECD 2020). This means that EU, national, regional and local governments should react in different ways and adopts different policies. However, although the EU altered its budget to counteract the negative socio-economic consequences of the COVID_19 pandemic providing substantial financial assistance to foster economic recovery, the responses mostly included centralized efforts. In other words, policies were mostly horizontal and not place-based. In this context, the crisis has highlighted the importance of coordination mechanisms across governmental levels (Georgieva et al. 2020).

However, the experience encourages the implementation of a sound territorial policy and the adoption of spatially selective interventions to ameliorate the effects of the pandemic crisis on the most affected regions. European and national regional policies can greatly influence how a region copes with disruptions mitigating the impacts of the shock (Qingfang and Wei 2021). This is the main message of the regional resilience literature; this discussion highlights that the EU policies should be taken into account the different structures and needs of regional economies. A reconsideration of

regional policies is probably a necessity since existing approaches might be no longer appropriate and effective; as Hadjimichalis suggests "much of contemporary urban and regional development theory was crafted in the 1970–1980s, a period of relative stability, integration and growth that ended in the 2009 economic crisis and was replaced by low growth, economic instability, new mass migrations, the rebuilding of borders around the world and finally by the COVID-19 crisis" (Hadjimichalis 2021:12).

Moreover, past experience suggests that there is a need for appropriate and focused policy efforts to actively protect socio-economic outcomes, rather than trying to recover the losses in the aftermath of crises, as economic recoveries do not necessarily, inevitably and automatically lead to recoveries for human and social indicators; very often, the damage is permanent or highly persistent because some of these losses are simply not recoverable (Martin, 2010; Mohseni-Cheraghloou, 2016, Artelaris 2017). This is also the main finding of Rice and Venables (2021) focusing on the UK; they suggest that the present (high) level of regional inequality in the UK is strongly associated with shocks experienced more than 40 years ago. In this sense, regional government should not only focus on short-term effects; «Longer-term priorities must be included in the immediate response measures in order to boost the resilience of regional socio-economic systems» (OECD 2020:5).

At the EU level, this is very critical because the effects of the pandemic crisis may undermine the European objectives of social, economic and territorial cohesion and threaten its unity and integrity. This is the main reason that this issue has been associated with Euroscepticism, the literature of the 'geography of discontent' as well as the 'left-behind' hypothesis as several studies have shown that anti-EU and anti-establishment sentiments usually occur in economically weaker and stagnated areas. As a result, a sound territorial cohesion policy can play a critical role in the period after the post-COVID-19 era by shortening the recovery period for affected territories and increasing their resilience (Ministers responsible for Spatial Planning and Territorial Development and/or Territorial Cohesion 2020). Territorial cohesion policy can be (and should be) an important policy tool for post-pandemic economic, social and territorial revival.

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