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## Geographic specificities are high on the European policy agenda

Areas with specific territorial features have received increasing attention in recent years. The Lisbon Treaty changes the wording of Article 174 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (ex article 158 TEC) so that it now reads:

*"In order to promote its overall harmonious development, the Union shall develop and pursue its actions leading to the strengthening of its economic, social and territorial cohesion.*

*In particular, the Union shall aim at reducing disparities between the levels of development of the various regions and the backwardness of the least favoured regions.*

*Among the regions concerned, particular attention shall be paid to rural areas, areas affected by industrial transition, and **regions which suffer from severe and permanent natural or demographic handicaps such as the northernmost regions with very low population density and island, cross-border and mountain regions.**"*

### A dedicated Intergroup in the European Parliament

In view of transforming this phrase into practical actions, 61 Members of the European Parliament have set up a parliamentary intergroup, known as the "Intergroup Mountain, Island and Sparsely Populated Regions" or "Intergroup 174".

Intergroups are "informal bodies of MEPs with membership from different political groups from within the European Parliament. While intergroups are not considered organs of the European Parliament, officially recognised intergroups are resourced by the Parliament with meeting space and translation facilities."

The executive secretariat of "Intergroup 174" is provided by the European Association of Elected Representatives from Mountain Regions (AEM). It is notable that this intergroup does not specifically consider issues related to **cross-border regions**, in spite of the reference made to them in Article 174.



Photos: Roland Zumbühl, Espresso Addict, Matti Piironen, Christian Bickel

The other organisations supporting the work of the Intergroup are the Islands Commission of the Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions (CPMR), Euromontana, the European small islands network (ESIN), The Network of Insular Chambers of Commerce and Industry of the European Union (Insuleur) and the Northern Sparsely Populated Areas (NSPA).

More information about ongoing discussions in the Intergroup can be found [here](#).

### **European Commission: DG REGIO trying to identify how to deal with regions with geographic specificities**

The European Commission's Directorate General for Regional Policy (DG REGIO) devotes considerable attention to geographic specificities. Its [Green Paper on Territorial Cohesion](#), published in 2008, defines territorial cohesion as "a means of transforming diversity into an asset that contributes to sustainable development of the entire EU". It mentions three types of regions with geographic specificities that face particular development challenges: mountains, island, and sparsely populated regions. However, it also points out that this list is not exhaustive. Development pressures and risks related to global warming in coastal zones, as well as demographic change and migratory phenomena of Outermost regions, are specifically mentioned.

In 2009, the European Commission published a Working Paper by Philippe Monfort that discusses "territories with specific geographical features". It concludes that "categories of territories considered generally include regions that perform relatively poorly compared to the EU-27 average. In particular, they often record lower levels of GDP per head and higher unemployment rates". At the same time, the study acknowledges that generalizations are inadequate, since "each category includes a wide variety of situations". You may find the full Working Paper [here](#).

The methodology of the study has been strongly criticised, not least by the CPMR Islands Commission which produced a critical note that can be found [here](#). In particular, the CPMR emphasises that the Working Paper applied a scale of analysis that is too broad and that the indicators used do not sufficiently reflect territorial challenges. Maps reflecting the delimitations of mountainous, insular and sparsely populated regions used in the Working Paper can be found [here](#).

DG REGIO also seeks to identify how well-established policy instruments such as the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) function in geographically specific areas. On 26 July 2010, it published a call for tenders on the relevance and the effectiveness of ERDF and Cohesion Fund support to regions with specific geographical features: islands, mountainous and sparsely populated areas. The objective of the study is to examine the extent to which cohesion policy interventions are, and have been, appropriate in islands and mountainous and sparsely populated regions. A second objective is to explore policy and governance approaches and identify good practices in implementing "territorial cohesion" on the ground for islands and mountainous and sparsely populated regions.

### **Interest in Geographic specificities for a wide range of European policies**

Geographic specificities are addressed by a wide range of European policies. Targeted measures for mountain agriculture have existed since 1975. The environmental challenges of mountain areas have recently been addressed in the study "Europe's ecological backbone: recognising the true value of our mountains" published by the European Environmental Agency (EEA) in 2010 that can be downloaded [here](#).

The EEA previously published a report entitled “The changing faces of Europe’s coastal areas” (2006), which can be found [here](#). Coastal zones have also been addressed as part of the *Integrated coastal zone management* (ICZM) which, in combination with the European Maritime Spatial Policy, should help in combining the numerous conflicting uses of the maritime and coastal parts of Europe. The recently published report on the “Economic effects of Maritime Spatial Planning” published by the European Commission Directorate General for Maritime Affairs (DG MARE), to be found [here](#), offers interesting insights on these issues.

### Are geographic specificities an asset or a handicap?

In spite of its subtitle - “turning Territorial Diversity into strength” - the DG [REGIO Green Paper on Territorial Cohesion](#) describes regions with specific geographic features as being “handicapped” rather than “endowed with assets”. Mountainous, insular, sparsely populated, coastal and outermost regions are introduced as areas that “face particular development challenges”. The Northern Sparsely Populated Areas (NSPA) have been particularly eager to change the perception of these regions as “problem areas” and to focus on their unused potentials. In their [Vision Report](#) and [Position paper on the future cohesion policy](#) they market themselves as “Strong, Specific and Promising”. Their argument is that public policies are needed to unleash their potential, rather than to compensate for their weaknesses.

Similar lines of argument are also defended for other types of geographic specificities, e.g for mountain areas by Euromontana as part of the [discussions in the “Intergroup 174”](#).

If geographic specificities generate a diversity of development potentials across Europe, European regional policies could help in ensuring that these are fully taken advantage of. Specific measures would need to be designed to compensate for the effects of “spatially blind” sectoral policies and to encourage more spatially differentiated approaches of economic growth and sustainable development.

One of the objectives of the GEOSPECS project is to explore whether an evidence base for such approaches of geographic diversity in Europe can be identified.

## Introducing the GEOSPECS project

The ESPON Applied Research Project GEOSPECS (Geographic Specificities and Development Potentials in Europe) aims to provide a solid assessment of the current situation, trends, and perspectives of territories with geographic specificities, i.e. mountains, islands, sparsely populated areas, coastal zones, outermost regions, border areas and inner peripheries. In the context of the project, “geographic specificities” are understood to create both challenges and opportunities, thus departing from the previous perception of “natural handicaps”. On this basis, policy options and new opportunities shall be identified for EU cohesion policy and territorial development.

In order to disentangle the complex interactions between geographic specificities and different social, economic and institutional processes, the research consortium will carry out a number of activities: The delineation, description and mapping of the regions with geographic specificities naturally forms the first step, followed by the compilation of a database of social and economic structures and trends in areas with geographic specificities, qualitative analysis of development processes in these areas, case studies, consultations, and the formulation of policy options.



Photos: Anna Regelsberger, Jean-Pol Grandmont, Roland Zumbühl, Franzfoto

The applied research project does not only analyse the geographic specificities themselves but also includes transversal themes such as economic development conditions, social processes, and natural resources and risks, in order to quantify and qualify state and trends in the regions. The aim is not to run parallel studies on different geographic specificities, but to construct a coherent discourse on specific types of territories. A key ambition of the project is to strengthen the dialogue and knowledge exchange between the different types of geographic specificities. This implies that connections must be established between fields of research that have, until now, been envisaged in relatively isolated ways.

Members of the consortium are: the University of Geneva (CH), Alterra (NL), Perth College UHI (UK), the University of the Aegean (GR), Nordregio (SE), Louis Lengrand & Associés (FR), CEPS/INSTEAD (LU), the Leibniz Institute of Ecological and Regional Development (DE), the National University of Ireland Cork (IE), and the Federal Environmental Agency Austria (AT). The project will run from summer 2010 to summer 2012.

More information can be found on our website: [www.geospecs.eu](http://www.geospecs.eu).

## Kick-off conference in Les Marécottes, Switzerland, 13<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> September 2010

All project partners of GEOSPECS met in Les Marécottes for two days in September in order to officially get the ball rolling. It was the first chance for representatives from all partners to meet and to discuss their expectations for the project.

Debate on the first day focused on the different territories with geographic specificities and especially on their delineation for the purposes of GEOSPECS. How many people live in an area that is defined as “sparsely populated”? Is a territory an “island” if it is located closer than 1 km to the nearest mainland shore? How can the concept of “inner periphery” be operationalised? All these issues need solving before the project team can start to collect data about the different territories. Questions about the best available data sources and the choice of case study regions were addressed at the end of the day.

On the second day, workshops centred on the transversal themes of the project. GEOSPECS will explore eight transversal themes: economic vulnerability/robustness facing globalization, biodiversity and protected areas as factors of development, the role of information and communication technologies, regional identity and cultural heritage as factors of development, accessibility and access to services of general interest, residential attractiveness, ecological vulnerability/ climate change, and natural resource exploitation. Each project partner will investigate what role each of these transversal themes plays in their respective territory. As this is a complex task for the partners, one goal of the discussion was to break each transversal theme down into a manageable set of research questions.

All participants expressed that they look forward to a fruitful cooperation within the project team and to useful project results, which will not only inform stakeholders and the interested public but also form the basis for policy decisions.



## Consultation process: your input is valuable

Considering the novelty of a transversal analysis of the social and economic significance of geographic specificities across Europe, we believe that it is important to start the project with a consultation of relevant stakeholders to clarify your perspectives on such a study and your understanding of the key concepts.

We want to learn about your views on the links between geographic specificities and economic and social development, and on what you think priorities should be. If you would like to contribute, we will be glad to take your opinion into account. The questionnaires for the different areas with geographic specificities can be found [here](#). The process shall be concluded by 12 November 2010. For any questions, please contact [Diana.borowski@perth.uhi.ac.uk](mailto:Diana.borowski@perth.uhi.ac.uk).

## Other ESPON projects that might interest you

The ESPON 2013 Programme, the European Observation Network for Territorial Development and Cohesion, was adopted by the European Commission in 2007 and is financed in large part by the European Regional Development Fund. One of its main operations is to carry out applied research projects on different themes of European territorial dynamics, such as GEOSPECS. The projects focus on territorial structures, trends, perspectives and impacts of sector policies. For more information visit [www.espon.eu](http://www.espon.eu).

If you are interested in GEOSPECS, you may also want to have a look at the ESPON TEDI (Territorial Diversity in Europe) project. Its objective was to provide a better understanding of development processes in territories that are defined as insular, mountainous, sparsely populated, or peripheral. The analysis aimed mainly at highlighting how these territories may contribute to the achievement of overarching European objectives expressed in the Lisbon and Gothenburg Strategies.

The "Handbook of Territorial Diversity" and the final report of the project can be found [here](#).

