



Co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund

Inspire Policy Making with Territorial Evidence

PRE-EVENT BRIEF

ESPON Conference: Challenges and Opportunities for Shrinking Areas

Virtual

16th February 2022, 09:30-16:30 (CET)

Introduction



Across Europe, regions, cities, and rural areas are facing different challenges and opportunities concerning shrinkage. The processes to mitigate the impact of this shrinkage depend on the pathways of economic restructuring, local capacities, the resilience of local public services, and on local initiatives. For shrinking areas and rural regions, new opportunities can transform certain perceived disadvantages into territorial assets.

The ESPON-TransNational Outreach programme will host an online conference on 16 February 2022 to address the challenges of shrinking areas across Europe, and to define potential areas for future action in line with the Territorial Agenda 2030 and the ESPON2030 programme. Drawing upon lessons from the ESPON ESCAPE project and the *Territorial evidence and policy advice for the prosperous future of rural areas*, the conference will bring together expertise on shrinking areas of Europe with the aim to present shared experiences and best practices for future development. One approach to better address shrinking and rural areas pertains to the functional ties that interconnect administratively separate, yet heavily interdependent areas, in Europe. The conference will, therefore, consider the functional dimensions of integrated territorial development within the framework for the new programming period. It will also be in line with the European Rural development initiative that is expected to “set out a vision for the future of rural areas by 2040 and [...] will also explore innovative, inclusive and sustainable solutions in the light of climate and digital transformation and the COVID-19 crisis.”

Throughout the conference, participants will bring together innovative concepts and case studies to stimulate exchanges between researchers, territorial authorities, and stakeholders over the following questions:

- What tendencies characterise territorial shrinkage in Europe today?
- What indicators can we use to observe and measure the diverse yet overlapping drivers of this phenomenon?
- How might territorial authorities draw upon these experiences and best practices to devise better, more place-adaptive policies to achieve more resilient European regions?

The conference will be held in English, with Hungarian interpretation.

ESPON evidence - The ESCAPE Project & Shrinking Rural Regions

Rural transformation in Europe is becoming a major policy concern for local authorities and policymakers. While the population of the EU-27 countries is projected to become predominantly urbanised by 2050, their rural population is expected to decline by nearly eight million people. As a result of these contrasting social, infrastructural, and economic changes, a recent ESPON policy brief – *Territorial evidence and policy advice for the prosperous future of rural areas* – has advocated for the creation of novel policy approaches to ensure a managed transition for regional development in depopulating territories tailored to the place-based opportunities present in these areas (ESPON, 2021).

In this context, from March 2019 to October 2020, the ESPON ESCAPE project conducted research on regions experiencing, or in danger of, demographic decline; it sought to identify processes driving these tendencies, in terms of mapping the differences between shrinking regions and generating potential integrated policy responses. The resulting recommendations offer strategies drawn from the territorial assets and opportunities observed in each area, while also accounting for the respective capacities and capabilities granted by EU Cohesion and ESIF policies available to local authorities. In order to develop place-based responses that are relevant to the particularities of different shrinking regions, ESCAPE targeted eight case studies from across Europe (Croatia, Bulgaria, Poland, Germany, Hungary, Spain, Greece, and Finland).

The lessons generated from the ESCAPE initiative are thus particularly relevant for reflecting further on several key issues and recommendations raised in previous ESPON policy briefs dedicated to rural areas. At a national scale, these include, for example, (i) how to best promote multi-scale strategic planning in rural contexts; and (ii) how to improve scenario planning, demographic checks, as well as institutional capacities using newly acquired territorial evidence. At a European scale, these include, (iii) how to improve comparative research for shrinking regions; (iv) how to enhance place-based cohesion policy funding; and (v) how to effectively roll-out and assess the concept of “Smart Villages” in geographically heterogeneous territories (ESPON, 2017).

Description of the Conference

The conference will provide an overview of the most recent research on rural shrinking areas.

The morning sessions will be dedicated to introducing the results and conclusions drawn from recent research. The first presentations will summarise the findings of the ESCAPE report, followed by a focus on the characteristics and trajectories of shrinkage that have been observed in different regional contexts. The final presentations from the morning will elaborate on the various outcomes arising from the diverse pathways to regional shrinkage.

After the lunch break, the afternoon sessions will be dedicated to stimulating discussions regarding new policy visions for shrinking areas. The first afternoon session will focus on recent changes in best practices and policy-making for shrinking areas. This will be followed by an introduction and debate concerning the relevance of the “functional area” concept for policy-making in shrinking regions. The conference will close with a roundtable to kick-start future-oriented discussions about the next stages of policy-making for shrinking areas.

Agenda (Hungary Time)

9:30 - 9:45

Conference introduction

Keynote speech by **Wiktor Szydarowski** (ESPON-EGTC)

Térézia Fanni Somhegyi (ESPON Contact Point for Hungary)

9:45 - 10:45

Territorial evidence for policymaking in shrinking and rural areas: the ESPON ESCAPE report (20 min each)

The ESCAPE project: recent perspectives on shrinkage failures by **Gergely Tagai** (Centre for Economic and Regional Studies, Hungary)

The ESPON policy paper for the future of rural areas : a new policy vision building upon and going beyond the ESCAPE project by **Andreea China** (ESPON-EGTC)

Followed by Q&A

10:45 - 11:00

Break

11:00 - 12:15

Pathways to shrinkage: diversity of processes and challenges across European shrinking areas (20 min each)

Pathways to shrinkage across European rural and peripheral regions by **Katalin Kovács** (Centre for Economic and Regional Studies, Hungary)

Effects of economic restructuring and recent history : the case of Osječko-baranjska County by **Aleksandar Lukić** (University of Zagreb, Croatia)

Specificities of Austrian shrinking regions by **Elisabeth Stix** (Rosinak & Partners, Austria)

Followed by Q&A

12:15 - 13:30

Lunch Break

13:30 - 14:45

Pathways through shrinkages: place-sensitive approaches and functional area development for rural and shrinking areas (20 min each)

Reflections on the goals and guiding principles of policy to address rural shrinking by **Andrew Copus & Petri Kahila** (University of Eastern Finland)

The functional areas concept as an entry point to the development of rural regions - focusing on large lake regions by **András Igari** (Hétfa Research Institute, Hungary)

Károly Fekete (Lake Balaton Development Coordination Agency)

Followed by Q&A

14:45 - 15:00

Break

15:00 - 16:00

Roundtable: opportunities and policy tools for European rural and shrinking areas

Moderated by **Gabriel Barrès** (University of Paris, France)

Andreea China (ESPON-EGTC) (*tbc*)

Erik Gløersen (Spatial Foresight, France)

16:00 - 16:30

Conclusion by **Tom Goosse** (Assistant Project Leader TNO)

References

ESPON (2017). *Shrinking rural regions in Europe – Towards smart and innovative approaches to regional development challenges in depopulating rural regions*. ESPON Policy Brief. Published on October 23 2017. Available online: <https://www.espon.eu/rural-shrinking>

ESPON (2021). *Territorial evidence and policy advice for prosperous future of rural areas – Contribution to the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas*. ESPON Policy Brief. Published on June 14 2021. Available online: <https://www.espon.eu/rural>

ESPON ESCAPE (2020). *European Shrinking Rural Areas Challenges, Actions and Perspectives for Territorial Governance (ESCAPE)*. ESPON project conducted from March 2019 to October 2020. Available online: <https://www.espon.eu/escape>



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ESPON 2022

ESPON EGTC
4 rue Erasme, L-1468 Luxembourg
Grand Duchy of Luxembourg
Phone: +352 20 600 280
Email: info@espon.eu
www.espon.eu

The ESPON EGTC is the Single Beneficiary of the ESPON 2020 Cooperation Programme. The Single Operation within the programme is implemented by the ESPON EGTC and co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund, the EU Member States and the Partner States, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland.

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