

The Small Towns Conundrum: What do we do about them?

Hungarian Central Statistical Office
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The Issue

- SMSTs have long been seen as an important element in Europe's urban structure - 24.2% European population
- Despite this we know relatively little about them – can have important role in services and employment
- There is a tendency to view them as a homogenous category – requires a more disaggregated understanding in order to develop policy approaches
- Drawing on research from the ESPON TOWN project I will try to throw some light on the issue

A Broad Categorisation

- We can place them into 3 categories -drawing on EC/OECD classification (not perfect)
- Also based on the assumption – In ‘most cases’ Location Matters :
 1. SMSTs in Metropolitan Regions – can be subdivided into
 - Thriving Metropolitan Regions
 - Declining Metropolitan Regions

A Broad Categorisation

2. SMSTs in Remote/Rural or Peripheral Regions
3. SMSTs in Intermediate Regions – can be subdivided into
 - Those close Metropolitan/Urban Regions
 - Those close to Rural/Peripheral Regions
- Two riders – both location and path-dependence matter but are not always determinant

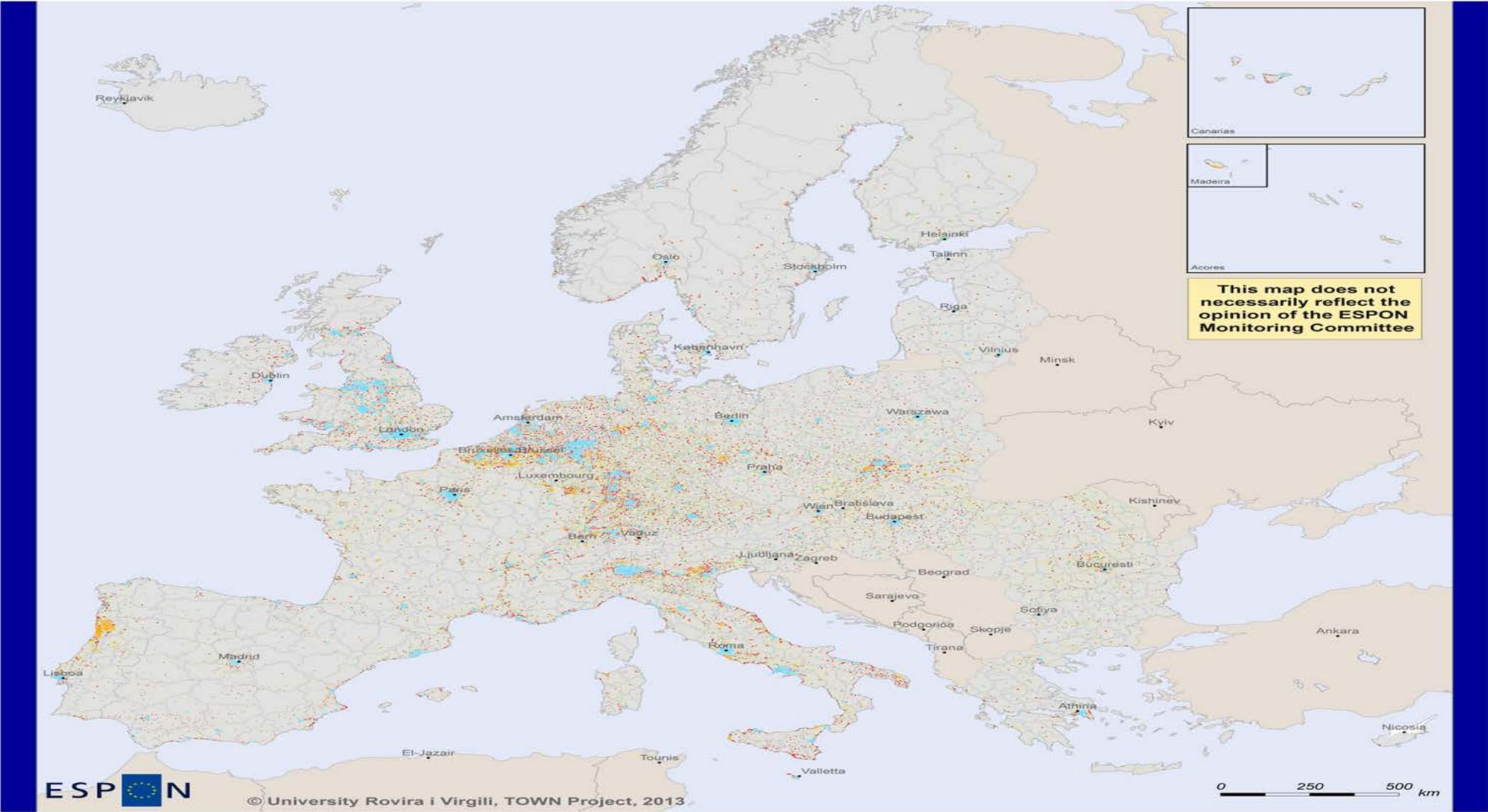
Number of SMSTs

- In the ESPON TOWN study from our data we identified:

Classes	Delimitation criteria	Count	Av. Pop	Av. Sq.km	Av. Density	Total pop. in this class	as % of ESPON space*
High-density Urban Clusters (HDUC)	Pop. > 50,000 Pop. Density > 1,500 inh/km ²	850	275,476.10	92.3	2,927.10	234,154,670	46.3%
Large SMST	Pop > 50,000, Pop. Density < 1,500 inh/km ²	100	132,331.4	101.8	1,299.6	13,233,142	2,6%
Medium SMST	25,000 < Pop < 50,000, Pop. Density > 300 inh/km ²	966	35,162.90	19.7	2,060.59	33,967,357	6.7%
Small SMST	5,000 < Pop < 25,000, Pop. Density > 300 inh/km ²	7348	10,241.50	7.6	1,470.09	75,254,510	14.9%
Very Small Towns (VST)	Pop. < 5,000 Pop. Density > 300 inh./km ²	69,043	1,193.10	1.7	699.3	82,376,586	16.3%

* including EU 27+ Iceland, Norway, Lichtenstein, Switzerland

Distribution of SMSTs



What can be done?

- No simple answer – because the type of region they are located in matters
- Even then not simple e.g. thriving vs declining Metropolitan Region
- Connectivity important, but can bring problems (e.g. dormitory towns)
- National, regional and local policy and planning approach adopted - Vilafranca del Penede`s or Colwyn Bay – EU can help
- Some stuck simply in ‘path dependent’ rut - Tredegar and Ust i nad Orlic
- Then there is great intangible local milieu which means even towns in adverse situations can succeed – e.g. Athienou

What can be done?

- The place-based approach appears to be the ‘answer’ but need to tread cautiously – it is not a cure all – requires ‘capacity to act’
- Requires long term ‘Strategic Vision’
- Governance:
 - local engagement
 - Cooperation and integration important but often hard to achieve
 - Local ‘competition’ often an obstacle
 - Territorial governance a perennial problem

What can be done?

- Process (how)
 - Systematic analysis of local potentials/assets (Territorial Capital)
 - Requires working across silos and sharing of information – ‘thinking outside the box’ (depends on ‘who’)
- Projects/programmes (what) – ‘Policy Bundles’
 - Identify how to build on existing TC and address deficits
 - Public realm/heritage projects popular
 - But limited number of ‘levers’ that can be pulled – requires additional finance/resources

What can be done?

- Balance between diverse economic structure based on SMEs and larger firms – ‘spread risk’
- Important to remember not every small town can be the focus of attention
- Choices have to be made and there will be ‘winners’ and ‘losers’

References

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- Servillo, L., Atkinson, R. & Hamdouch, A. 'Small and medium-sized towns in Europe: conceptual, methodological and policy issues' *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie*. Vol.108 (4), pp356-379.