

1  
2                   **“NAVIGATING INTEGRATED PLANNING IN SMALL MUNICIPALITIES:**  
3                   **LIMITATIONS, PATHWAYS FORWARD EMERGING OPPORTUNITIES. THE CASE**  
4                   **OF DIDYMOTICHO.**

5  
6   **Dimitrios V. Skiadas**

7   Professor, MJur, PhD, CFE, Jean Monnet Chair - <http://jeanmonnetchair.eubga.uom.gr/> University  
8   of Macedonia, Dept. of International and European Studies, [dskiadas@uom.edu.gr](mailto:dskiadas@uom.edu.gr)

9  
10   **Stergiani Zountsa**

11   Ph.D Candidate in University of Macedonia, Department of International and European Studies,  
12   Greece, [szountsa@uom.edu.gr](mailto:szountsa@uom.edu.gr)

13  
14   **Abstract**

15   Over the years, the European Cohesion Policy has undergone significant transformation. The  
16   targeting mechanisms and programming strategies have been continuously adapted and redefined to  
17   respond effectively to the evolving developmental challenges of EU regions.

18           During the 2014-2020 programming period a “place-based approach” emerged. In the current  
19   programming period the policy seems to be in its "mature" era characterized by integrated approaches  
20   and relevant financial mechanisms. We are no longer talking about regional inequalities’ recovery,  
21   emphasis is on comparative advantages of areas to boost their growth potential and build on its unique  
22   characteristics.

23           Using the “core-periphery” approach, this paper argues that small municipalities should  
24   change their developmental trajectory with synergies and interconnection that foster collaboration  
25   rather than competition. This model may assist the disadvantaged areas to overcome structural  
26   disadvantages. Through the theoretical lens of the core-periphery model, is examined how the  
27   networking of disadvantaged areas can rescale growth potential and create multiplicative benefits.

28 Such approaches require the empowerment of small municipalities to pursue integrated planning, find  
29 technical competence and ensure the political commitment to the partnership. Recent reforms in  
30 Greek legislation further support these efforts (such as Law 4674/2020) and provide new pathways  
31 for integrated sustainable development.

32 Using Didymoticho as a case study, this paper builds the theoretical assumption that remote  
33 or/and disadvantaged areas can benefit from integrated development plans and collaborative  
34 structures that enable holistic interventions and improve access to funding.

35  
36 **Key words:** European regional policy, territorial development, disparities, growth, Integrated  
37 Territorial Investments, Municipality of Didymoticho

38

39

40

41

42

43

44

45

46

47

48

49

50

51

52

53

## 54 **Introduction**

55           The fundamental values and principles of the European Cohesion Policy have been  
56 maintained and even strengthened over time: *a long-term framework for programming, partnership*  
57 *with stakeholders and civil society, multilevel governance, evaluation and data collection, and most*  
58 *of all, the place-based approach – where support is tailored to regional specific needs and*  
59 *opportunities*. The Treaty establishing the European Community sets out that Cohesion Policy aims  
60 to: ‘promote economic and social progress as well as a high level of employment, and to achieve  
61 balanced and sustainable development’ (Article 2) and ‘... reduce the disparities between the levels  
62 of development of the different regions and the backwardness of the least favored regions or islands,  
63 including rural areas’ (Article 174).

64           The European Union's regional policy has changed over the course of the programming  
65 periods as the needs, challenges and structures have also changed. Through the passage of time in the  
66 context of this policy, rules and directives have been developed; national legislative framework has  
67 been harmonized with the corresponding directives. Global challenges affect the European and  
68 national political agenda and new priorities have been highlighted. Development of new policies,  
69 strategies and funding targets, such the need for climate change, employment, smart and inclusive  
70 growth, social market economy and sustainable development have emerged. Territorial governance  
71 is important for the targeted and result-oriented implementation of EU Cohesion Policy, the Europe  
72 2020 strategy, the Territorial Agenda 2020 (TA 2020) and the Urban Agenda. Structural Funds and  
73 other available EU financial tools and resources have been diffused to meet the needs and respond to  
74 the EU objectives of Cohesion Policy (European Parliament, 2015).

75           From the period 2007-2013 we observe that the European Union is emphasized on concepts  
76 such as sustainability, citizens’ participation, green and sustainable urban development. These  
77 concepts are reflected in Greece’s National Strategic Reference Framework (NSRF) for development  
78 over the years. The country's urban policy was initially formulated with the concentration of  
79 development in two major centers of Athens and Thessaloniki and then additional developmental

80 poles were created enhancing new dynamics and polycentricity. The integrated character of spatial  
81 strategies can involve both development poles and regional partnerships of cities intraregional or  
82 interregional.

83

#### 84 **Theoretical framework for core-periphery approach.**

85 The theory of "core-periphery", proposed by Friedmann (1963), provides a framework for  
86 understanding spatial structure of economic activity in which a dominant, developed "core" is  
87 surrounded by a less developed "periphery". According to this theory, the core and periphery regions  
88 are interconnected and interdependent, and the relationship between them is not one of simple  
89 exploitation, but rather of mutual dependence. At the center of this theory is the notion that economic  
90 activity tends to be concentrated in certain regions, which serve as the engines of growth for the rest  
91 of the economy. These core areas are characterized by high levels of productivity, innovation, and  
92 technological development, as well by a dense network of economic, social, and cultural institutions.

93 The periphery, on the other hand, is characterized by low levels of productivity, innovation,  
94 and technological development, and a lack of institutional development. Friedman argues that the  
95 relationship between the core and periphery regions is not static, rather than dynamic and evolving.  
96 While the "core" constantly expands its economic activity, the periphery struggle to catch up the  
97 developmental course. Over time, however, the periphery regions may begin to develop their own  
98 economic activities and institutions, and the relationship between the core and periphery regions may  
99 shift.

100 Initially this theory was considered to be a valuable tool to explain the disparities in European  
101 member states. The core-periphery theory is linked with urban sustainable development in several  
102 ways. First, the theory emphasizes the importance of promoting balanced regional development as a  
103 means of achieving sustainable economic growth (Davoudi, 2003). By reducing regional disparities  
104 and promoting development in peripheral regions, it is possible to achieve more sustainable economic  
105 growth and reduce the pressure on urban areas. Furthermore, the theory highlights the importance of

106 strengthening the links between urban and rural areas (Bosworth & Venhorst, 2018). In order to  
107 promote sustainable development, it is necessary to ensure that the benefits of economic growth are  
108 shared between urban and rural areas. This can be achieved through the development of transport  
109 infrastructure and the promotion of agglomeration economies, which can help to strengthen the links  
110 between urban and rural areas and promote sustainable economic growth.

111 As Kühn (2015) states, Friedman argues that transportation costs create a natural barrier to  
112 the diffusion of economic activity, reinforcing the concentration of economic activity in the core  
113 regions. However, he also notes that improvements in transportation technology may help to  
114 overcome this barrier, and may lead to the diffusion of economic activity to the periphery. Another  
115 important aspect of the core-periphery theory is the role of institutions. Friedman argues that the  
116 institutions in the core areas are essential for supporting the growth and development of the economy,  
117 and that these institutions tend to be lacking in the periphery. He suggests that government policies  
118 can play a key role in supporting the development of institutions in the periphery regions, and that  
119 this can help to promote economic growth and reduce regional disparities.

120 The core-periphery theory proposed by Friedman can be related to the concept of regional  
121 convergence, which refers to the tendency of poorer regions to catch up richer ones in terms of  
122 economic development. In the context of regional convergence, the theory suggests that the periphery  
123 areas, which are the poorer and less developed regions, can converge towards the core regions, which  
124 are the richer and more developed regions, through a process of diffusion of knowledge, technology,  
125 and investment (Barro et al, 1991).

126 To conclude, the spatial inequalities resulting from core-periphery dynamics often lead to  
127 processes of peripheralization, which require targeted integrated interventions to be mitigated.

128

### 129 **The European Framework for integrated planning.**

130 By 2020 the EU aims to meet five concrete objectives – on employment, innovation,  
131 education, social inclusion, and climate/energy. Each Member State has adopted its own national

132 targets in these areas. The Commission works with the Member States and the regions to draw up  
133 Partnership Agreements and Operational Programmes outlining investment priorities and  
134 development needs. The bulk of Cohesion Policy funding is concentrated on less developed European  
135 countries and regions in order to help them to catch up and to reduce the economic, social and  
136 territorial disparities that still exist in the EU. The previous programming period 2014-2020 was  
137 strongly influenced by the objectives of Europe 2020 Strategy. During this period has been  
138 highlighted the importance of holistic approaches that include economic, social and environmental  
139 dimensions in planning and implementation of projects. Cohesion Policy initially through Interreg  
140 and Urbact programmes, through cross-border and transnational cooperation, promoted a holistic  
141 approach for implementing projects using integrated planning as a mechanism. Additionally, the logic  
142 of integrated planning is known to local stakeholders from Jessica financial instrument that had been  
143 used during 2007-2013 period and focused on the sustainable development in urban areas promoting  
144 the leverage of public and private funds and using a strategy to implement an integrated plan for the  
145 city.

146 As a tool for territorial policy and integrated planning, Integrated Territorial Investment (ITI)  
147 was introduced in Article 36 of the Common Provision Regulation (No 1303/2013), which constitutes  
148 the legal basis for its use. The Regulation prescribes all details about how the ITI will be used and  
149 how it will correspond to the allocation of funds from each priority axis will be in the hands of the  
150 relevant Operational Programme(s). The ITI mechanism has significantly influenced local spatial  
151 planning, effectively shifting it towards more integrated, "Europeanized" approaches that foster  
152 territorial, rather than just sectoral, development. Further, in Chapter II of the Common Provision  
153 Regulation (2021) – articles 28-34 provide that the promotion of sustainable and integrated  
154 development of all territories must be delivered through territorial tools, namely Integrated Territorial  
155 Investments (ITI), Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) or 'any other integrated territorial  
156 tool designed within a national strategy'. Overall, these instruments are intended to facilitate a  
157 bottom-up approach for a territorial development by involving local and regional governments

158 (LRGs) (including in the initial design of programs), by facilitating dialogue between the various  
159 stakeholders and by increasing cooperation between the public and private sector, as well as by  
160 fostering cooperation and the transfer of information between the top and bottom levels of  
161 government. “Territorial authorities” should be responsible of the territorial strategies or at least be  
162 involved in the selection of projects to be financed by these tools, in cooperation with the Managing  
163 Authority.

164 During the 2014–2020 period, Member States adopted ITIs and Community- Led Local  
165 Development (CLLD) in different combinations. Some countries used ITIs in both urban and non-  
166 urban territories, while others limited ITIs to urban areas or relied primarily on CLLD. The innovative  
167 financial mechanisms of Integrated Territorial Investment (ITI) and the Community-Led Local  
168 Development (CLLD) are available also for the Greek cities and peri-urban or rural areas. Countries  
169 decide on whether to use ITI, a multi-thematic priority axis or a dedicated Operational Program, the  
170 decision is usually taken at an early stage (i.e. Partnership Agreement negotiation or OP negotiation).  
171 In some cases, such as in Poland and the Czech Republic, the decision to use ITI was taken by the  
172 central government. In other cases, there was strong pressure from the urban level to use ITI. In  
173 Member States in which regionalized OPs are implemented, approaches often vary and the option to  
174 use ITI as an implementation tool for sustainable urban development strategies could be taken in other  
175 implementation step (European Commission, 2017).

176 The 2014-2020 focus was on targeted local interventions and integrated spatial development  
177 in accompanying investments for the full utilization of the development potential of the selected areas  
178 and with multiple sources of financing. The focus is not only in metropolitan and city’s level, but it  
179 shifted to places with delayed development, located outside of the urban fabric and mainly described  
180 as disadvantaged areas. Evidence from regional cases illustrates this range of interventions. In Puglia,  
181 funding supported the renewal of urban infrastructure, the refurbishment of abandoned buildings, and  
182 improvement cultural sites. These investments were complemented by strengthened public services,  
183 improving quality of life and supporting local retention and attraction of residents and businesses. In

184 Toscana, urban regeneration in towns and smaller cities contributed to expanding green areas and  
185 cycle paths, while also improving public safety. Support was also channeled through CLLD and ITIs  
186 to strengthen resident participation and enhance coherence across interventions. This approach was  
187 accompanied by strengthening public services, thus increasing the quality of life for residents and  
188 attracting both businesses and people to move in and encouraging those already there to stay. In  
189 Středočeský, in Czech Republic, CLLD projects took place in almost 100 smaller municipalities,  
190 leading to the renewal of local roads and infrastructure, especially school buildings. At the same time,  
191 ITI projects were used to improve public transport and road connections to reduce the isolation of  
192 rural areas far from large cities.

193 The ninth cohesion report (European Commission, 2024) showed that the challenges for  
194 cohesion policy tend to be more acute in rural and thinly populated regions. During the 2014-2020  
195 programming period, cohesion policy represented almost 13% of total government investment in the  
196 EU as a whole, and 51 % in less developed Member States. Metropolitan areas, cities and their  
197 surroundings play a central role in regional development. They are centers in the provision of public  
198 and private services and employment offer and education opportunities to the surrounding areas.  
199 Better cooperation across EU regions can also contribute to achieving more balanced territorial  
200 development. Territorial imbalances could be mitigated by a more polycentric development model:  
201 building on small and medium-sized cities and enhance accessibility to public services in areas far  
202 from urban centers. Strengthening regional cooperation positively impacts the capacity of relevant  
203 authorities and stakeholders.

204 The 2014-2020 framework further reinforced partnerships and the involvement of regional  
205 and local actors, civil society, and social partners. It promoted territorial delivery models, such as  
206 Community-led local development (CLLD) or Integrated Territorial Interventions (ITI). With  
207 combined funding from multiple sources to serve the implementation of territorially based strategies.  
208 The approach relies on synergies, bottom-up models and flexible territorial governance structures.  
209 Moreover, the obligation was for each Member State to allocate at the very least 5 % of the European

210 Regional Development Fund resources to integrated actions for sustainable urban development or to  
211 use them to deliver territorial development strategies in other territories such as rural or coastal  
212 regions that require an integrated approach (European Parliament, 2018). This approach enhances  
213 cities' capability with new mechanisms and new tools to tackle the particular economic,  
214 environmental and social challenges in selected areas.

215 It is worth mentioning that during the period 2014-2020 a number of countries chose rather  
216 than using the multi-funding, or multi-thematic structure of an ITI, preferred to use a dedicated  
217 priority axis within a specific Operational Program (OP) to manage urban funds. In any case, ITIs  
218 tool aims to promote greater flexibility/cross-funding to promote an integrated approach to addressing  
219 issues within specific territories. tools An ITI can be a useful mechanism in designing and  
220 implementing community-led local development strategies and can be implemented by using one  
221 Fund or by using a multi-funding approach (e.g. ESF<sup>1</sup>, EAFRD<sup>2</sup> and ERDF<sup>3</sup>). One of the challenges  
222 in this process is the engagement of the local stakeholders in designing an integrated development  
223 plan in which the city should shape its own needs and targets. This bottom-up approach should be  
224 combined with a multilevel approach and a common designed strategy that includes relevant  
225 stakeholders for the city to gain the necessary technical assistance for attracting relevant funds. Thus,  
226 the experience of the previous programming periods, emphasize the need for integrated development  
227 plans that could promote a city's cultural and historical heritage in relation to well-designed  
228 administrative reforms and investments that boost the economic, social, environmental development  
229 of the selected area.

230 The Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR, 2022) in order to improve  
231 and facilitate the use of integrated territorial instruments in the future, recommends in its report that  
232 it is crucial to continue the use of integrated territorial tools since they are highly valued by local and  
233 regional governments. The analysis of this report, mainly concentrates on experience and lessons

---

<sup>1</sup> European Social Fund, (ESF)

<sup>2</sup> European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD)

<sup>3</sup> European Regional Development Fund (ERDF)

234 learnt during the 2014-2020 period, but also looks forward to what is foreseen in the new 2021-2027  
235 period. The framework of integrated spatial investments as a mechanism does not consist of strict  
236 application rules and a structured rigid model; on the contrary, it has particular flexibility as a  
237 development mechanism. During the new programming period 2021-2027 a new objective has been  
238 included in the Cohesion Policy entitled “Europe closer to citizens by fostering the sustainable and  
239 integrated development of all types of territories”. The tool of Integrated Territorial Investments can  
240 be used for “sustainable urban development” and non -urban sustainable development or in both  
241 areas. The selected areas show specific geographic features, such as islands, structurally weaker  
242 regions/districts, for example “Limburg case” in France, sub-regional areas which can include a  
243 number of often smaller urban regional centers as rural territories such as the Vlaanderen case. In the  
244 majority of the cases, the tool seems to be effective enough for the transformation of the involved  
245 spatial areas. CLLD is not part of our analysis as we conclude that it is based in different mechanisms  
246 and legal framework than it is and this is not part of the current paper.

247 The previous implementation in several countries such as Czech Republic, Germany,  
248 Austria, Bulgaria and others showed that ITI and CLLD tools allow EU support to focus on the real  
249 needs of the local communities, while they seem to be more flexible compared to broader operational  
250 programs and contribute to better multi-level governance structures. The development of strategies,  
251 plans, projects in close cooperation with the real beneficiaries with the engagement of multi-level  
252 stakeholders and the combination of multiple funds will be the challenge for local authorities during  
253 the new programming period of Cohesion Policy 2021-2027.

254 The “Ex post evaluation of Urban Development and Social Infrastructures” (European  
255 Commission, 2016), showed that the amount of ERDF funding allocated to selected projects of urban  
256 development and social infrastructure at the end of 2013 was EUR 29 billion. This represents 11% of  
257 the total ERDF allocation of which 4% was allocated to urban development and 7% to social  
258 infrastructure. Also, is referred in the evaluation that only a low percentage of OPs around European  
259 states place integrated development into a specific context, such as the need for revitalizing urban

260 neighborhoods and industrial areas, build on cultural heritage or enhance local level partnerships.  
261 Therefore, integrated approaches should not be treated as panacea but they should be pursued where  
262 the nature of the problems calls upon them and the appropriate conditions exist. For integrated urban  
263 development, there is an inevitable tension between the level of programming and the integrated local  
264 strategies: if programming is done at the national or regional level, it is more difficult to reflect  
265 adequately the specific local- level problems as the program is most likely covering a larger number  
266 of local strategies. This is obviously true for national programs – which tend to have a sectoral focus.  
267 On the other hand, regional programs: needs to cover several local territories and strategies thus  
268 regional strategy takes into account the local strategies and tend to be rather general.

269 The theory and the European strategies provide useful tools to assist a local authority to build  
270 a holistic plan for its development. The Integrated Territorial Investment tools are not a one-size-fits-  
271 all solution for development, but a choice. Territorial governance is important for the targeted and  
272 result-oriented implementation of EU Cohesion Policy, the Europe 2020 strategy, the Territorial  
273 Agenda 2020 (TA 2020) and the Urban Agenda. At the European level there are guidelines for  
274 integrated planning. Each place has its own characteristics and identity that can be used as  
275 development assets and incorporated in its development strategy. Local -placed approaches should  
276 leverage the relevant funds at the regional level and “integrate” the relevant stakeholders from the  
277 initial phase promoting a sustainable structure passing though the implementation phase.

278

### 279 **Research Area: The Case of Didymoticho**

280 Our case study refers to the city of Didymoticho. The Municipality of Didymoticho is a  
281 newly established municipality of the Region of Eastern Macedonia and Thrace pursuant to Law  
282 3852/2010 "New Architecture of Self-Government and Decentralized Administration - Kallikratis  
283 Project". It resulted from the amalgamation of the pre-existing Municipalities of Didymoticho and  
284 Metaxades and includes the homonymous settlements and municipal communities of Didymoticho  
285 Ellinochori and the local communities of Asvestades, Asimeniou, Isa Kiikiou, Karotis, Koufobounou,

286 Kyani, Mani, Petrofikou, Petrofados, Alepochori, Asproneri, Vrysiki, Doxis, Elafochori, Ladi,  
287 Metaxadon, Paliouri.

288 As far as its geographic location, the Municipality of Didymoticho is located in the North-  
289 Eastern part of the Evros Regional Unit and is situated at a close distance from the Greek-Turkish  
290 border and is about 40 km from the Bulgarian borders. The area of the new Municipality is 565,4  
291 sq.km. and its permanent population according to the 2021 National Statistical Service census same  
292 16,060 inhabitants, while its actual population is 16,019 inhabitants. Didymoticho was designated as  
293 the seat of the new Municipality.

294 Didymoticho (Greek: Διδυμότειχο) is a town located on the eastern edge of the Evros  
295 regional Unit of East Macedonia and Thrace, in northeastern Greece. It is the seat of the municipality  
296 of the same name. Based on historical sources "Didymoticho" means the two opposite fortified cities,  
297 "castle didymariko". The two twin hills control the road that connected Traianoupolis and Adrianople.  
298 The fortification is kept in good condition without any particular problems.

299 The Municipality of Didymoticho is mainly a rural area, where primary sector is the main  
300 economic activity. Much of the area is used for farming. The main residential nucleus in the city of  
301 Didymoticho and the center of commercial activity is the old historical settlement. The built-up area  
302 developed mainly to the east and south of the historical settlement. In the settlement of Didymoticho  
303 where the highest density of urban fabric is found, free spaces and greenery within the historical  
304 settlement are limited, but the proximity of the large archaeological site of Kale Castle partially  
305 compensates the impression of this lack.

306 Despite its strategic location and cultural resources, the municipality faces structural  
307 developmental challenges. The municipality faces significant deficits in water supply and drainage  
308 infrastructure. The municipality faces limitations in transport connectivity and the lack of broader  
309 infrastructures and services constrain its accessibility and its economic activity.

310 The Municipality of Didymoticho has been significantly affected by the economic and social crisis,  
311 which has intensified long-standing structural problems. These include demographic decline,

312 population ageing, internal migration, unemployment, relatively low educational attainment, and low  
313 household incomes.

314 On the other hand, several Roman, Byzantine, and Ottoman monuments are dispersed in the  
315 city and its surroundings; this reflects the area's long historical trajectory. The notion that  
316 characterized the city was "multiculturalism", which continues to be expressed through the built  
317 environment and heritage sites located within its administrative boundaries. These cultural and  
318 historical assets represent an important development resource; thus, an integrated and place-based  
319 strategy should be considered. Alternative tourism approaches such as cultural or nature tourism may  
320 present a potential pathway for diversification and local regeneration.

321 However, the effectiveness of tourism strategies depends on a range of internal and external  
322 factors, including local stakeholder commitment, the wider regional and national economic context,  
323 and technical and administrative capacity to design and implement coherent interventions. By  
324 understanding these factors is identified both the constraints and the realistic prospects for  
325 strengthening the municipality's tourism product and supporting local entrepreneurship and  
326 economy.

327 The Municipality of Didymoticho could benefit from an integrated territorial approach and a  
328 partnership-based model that seems more resilient and feasible than isolated project-based  
329 interventions. Building on these assumptions, this paper examines whether a realistic scenario can be  
330 developed to reverse the current decline trajectory and support a more sustainable development  
331 pathway for Didymoticho. The analysis emphasizes that long-term regeneration requires synergies at  
332 a wider territorial scale, including cooperation with a major core beyond a cluster of poles based on  
333 the local unique characteristics and common territorial advantages that ensure resilience and long-  
334 term feasibility. The following section develops this argument further and links it to empirical  
335 findings and policy instruments available in the Greek and European context.

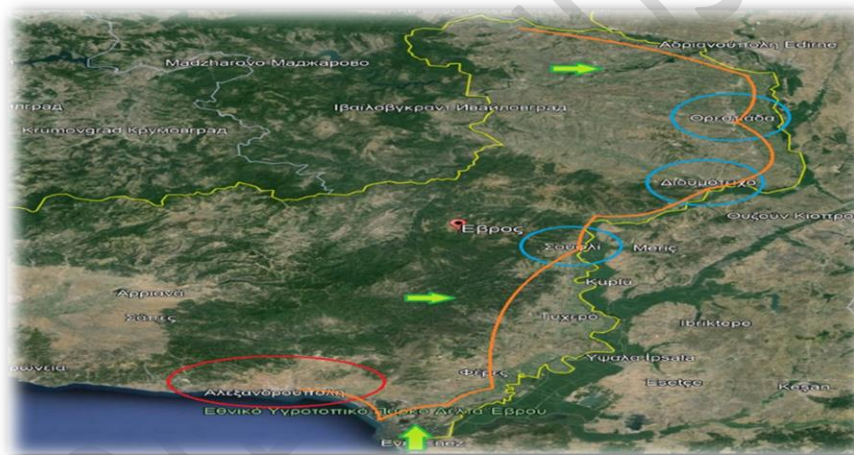
336

337

338 **Key findings: Integrated planning in the case of Didymoticho**

339 Based on the “core periphery” economic theory, this paper assumes that the central pole  
340 attracts all the development aspects such as infrastructure, public services, transport connections and  
341 pushes the peripheral cores to use their unique characteristics and advantages, connecting natural and  
342 cultural resources, building a common identity within a partnership. The cores and central pole are  
343 not competitive, but are supplements in the development arch. Each territory contributes with its  
344 distinct comparative advantages and benefits from stronger functional integration.

345 In this case, the core-Alexandroupoli provides critical infrastructure and services, while peripheral  
346 poles (E.G. Soufli, Didymoticho and Orestiada) can mobilize their unique cultural, natural and  
347 historical assets in this developmental arch.



348  
349 The creation of a shared territorial identity within the partnership, a common strategy and  
350 vision may support integrated planning and access to funding. The advantages of this approach refer  
351 to the empowerment of small municipalities to follow integrated planning, find technical competence,  
352 political commitment to the partnership, and ability to implement projects on time. This approach  
353 creates added value to the participating institutions and multiplier effects for the involved territories.  
354 When municipalities operate as part of the functional territorial network, they can jointly articulate  
355 development priorities, bundle complementary assets and increase scale and coherence of proposed  
356 interventions. This approach support municipalities to:

- 357 1) gain access to multi-source funding mechanisms

- 358 2) gain administrative and technical capacity
- 359 3) unlock development potential
- 360 4) change the quality of life for their citizens and service provision

361 When non-urban territorial units operate as part of a functional territorial network similar to  
362 the urban functional area, they can jointly articulate development priorities and increase the scale and  
363 coherence of proposed interventions. Joined strategies can unlock comparative advantages of local  
364 economies, support equitable distributions of services and improve long-term attractiveness in the  
365 territorial “cluster”. By pooling resources and administrative capacity such forms of cooperation can  
366 generate shared benefits across municipal boundaries and contribute to a more resilient and balanced  
367 territorial structure.

368 In general, the ability of local authorities to design and implement integrated strategies is  
369 questioned. The challenge is not primarily located in urban centers. The limitations are more  
370 pronounced in smaller municipalities, non-urban and disadvantaged areas, where developmental  
371 needs are often greater but administrative and technical capacity is limited. The administrative burden  
372 of designing and integrated strategy, ensuring stakeholders participation and coordinating  
373 implementation across multiple interventions often exceeds the capacity of a sole municipality.

374 Reforms in the Greek legislative framework increasingly support inter-municipal  
375 cooperation and integrated planning. The Law N. 4674/2020 as published in the Official Gazette A  
376 53 - 11.03.2020, provides an institutional basis for strengthening local implementation capacity and  
377 operate as complementary support bodies for municipalities where technical capacity is limited.  
378 Moreover, among other responsibilities these institutions may undertake the implementation of  
379 Integrated Territorial Investments (ITI) in spatial strategies, subject to the relevant governance  
380 protocols and the Management and Control System of National Strategic Reference Framework for  
381 development (NSRF).

382 Local government organizations can participate in any joint stock company for local  
383 development. Based on the presidential decree 410/95, the local government development

384 organizations operate as a complementary support body to the local government organizations in a  
385 multitude of issues. The development organizations provide scientific and technical support,  
386 participate in the development policy of local authorities, they also have a significant contribution to  
387 the maturation of studies and projects, but also to the implementation of actions of social cohesion,  
388 digital convergence, energy upgrading and sustainable development. The jointed entities provide a  
389 flexible framework and more integrated governance architecture (Florris & Serra 2025). Their  
390 capacity and expertise may be crucial to drive integrated planning processes, allocation of roles and  
391 management of regional economic resources. Additionally, their role is crucial in the defining of  
392 goals and indicators, and the monitoring of them for effective implementation of common strategies  
393 that build the network.

394 The experience shows that the integrated planning is hard to be exercised by an isolated  
395 small municipality. Its capacity remains constrained by understaffing and lack of technical services  
396 to act as a stand-alone implementation body. The proposed model of synergies allows a shared pool  
397 of resources and expertise. Coordination should be managed by a capable entity—beyond the regional  
398 authority—serving as a facilitator with specialized staff. The regional authority in the network can  
399 provide strategic alignment and ensure coherence with regional planning framework. The regional  
400 planning together with local planning enable integrated formations at the intra-regional level. This  
401 model is in line to EU prerequisites for financing an Integrated Territorial Investment in non-urban  
402 environment.

403 During the programming period 2014-2020, the European as well as the national practice  
404 showed that the tool of Integrated Territorial Investments was successfully implemented or at least it  
405 achieved the purpose of its design. Most integrated Territorial Investment mechanisms in the Greece  
406 have transferred their implementation to the current programming period 2021-2027. We are keeping  
407 a watchful eye on the results "taking a wait-and-see approach" despite the encouraging  
408 implementation during the pilot application of the tool.

409

410 **Conclusions**

411 This paper concludes that spatial inequalities are approached through a new “re-balancing”  
412 framework. The European Cohesion Policy has successfully transitioned towards to place-based,  
413 bottom-up and holistic approaches. Obviously, the interest of rural areas arise during the last few  
414 programming periods and as stated in Territorial Agenda 2030 links and flows between places,  
415 especially along corridors, affect the possibilities to realize potential or respond to challenges. The  
416 EU supports local authorities to strengthen cooperation on long-term place-based strategies and  
417 address sustainable functional links between neighboring areas.

418 Now than ever the smaller administrative units have available tools, mechanisms and  
419 legislative framework to build synergies for achieving sustainable development in their territories  
420 building in their unique characteristics and strengths. Territorial strategies must redefine visions of  
421 places with clear objectives, funding sources and measurable indicators.

422 As McCann (2021) states “while traditional regional policies were top-down in nature and  
423 designed by central government, modern place-based approaches aim to dovetail both bottom-up and  
424 top-down actions initiatives spanning the private, civil society and public sectors”. Modern place-  
425 based approaches aim to operate at the level of functional economic areas – which may involve  
426 different jurisdictional units working together – and to foster integrated development projects in  
427 which resources are targeted at a range of actors across different sectors, in order to construct a more  
428 realistic development plan. The development of the territorial pattern of the region inevitably leads  
429 to the creation of poles of different dynamics and roles. Each unit should accept its role in this cluster  
430 spreading the benefits for the entire region within a multipolar system that has been formed and work  
431 towards the development course and strategy of the overall structure. Networking across functionally  
432 defined polycentric territorial contexts enables diverse actors to collective capacities, know-how and  
433 expertise.

434 Speaking of Greek cities, these cities are not inferiors to their European counterparts. Cities  
435 despite their size are considered to be complex systems that develop under complicated interactions

436 among their human and environmental components. As such, they require multidimensional,  
437 integrated and holistic interventions, which could be seen within an integrated development plan  
438 despite the size of the city and its capacity. The integrated approach underlines the need for improved  
439 coordination between the spatial, sectoral and temporal aspects of territorial development policies  
440 and putting local authorities at the centre of the governance. The active engagement of the relevant  
441 stakeholders will make this process more realistic and sustainable while specific focus should be  
442 taken regarding the capacity and the expertise of the coordinating authority.

443 Overall, the findings of the current paper support the view that integrated territorial  
444 approaches may provide a viable pathway for small non-urban municipalities to strengthen their  
445 development capacity, to unlock growth potential, and to apply flexible governance structure and  
446 targeted legislative framework. Ultimately, EU and national policies recognize and invest in  
447 intermediate governance structures as critical drivers of territorial cohesion, enabling inner  
448 peripheries to shift from marginalization to active participation in shaping their spatial futures. The  
449 choice is up to the local authorities whether they choose a new direction or continue on the same path  
450 as they did in previous years.

451

452

453

454

455

456

457

458

459

460

461

462 **References**

463 **Andreou, G. & Papadakis, M.** (2012). *The implementation of EU cohesion policy in Greece, 2007-*  
464 *2013: A mid-term assessment*. *Region & Periphery*, 1(1), 93–116. <https://doi.org/10.12681/rp.16484>

465 **Barca, F. (2009).** *An Agenda for a Reformed Cohesion Policy: A Place-based Approach to Meeting*  
466 *European Union Challenges and Expectations*. Independent Report. Brussels: European  
467 Commission. [Online]. Available at:  
468 [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009\\_2014/documents/regi/dv/barca\\_report\\_barca\\_report](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009_2014/documents/regi/dv/barca_report_barca_report_en.pdf)  
469 [t\\_en.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009_2014/documents/regi/dv/barca_report_barca_report_en.pdf)

470 **Barro, R. J., Sala-i-Martin, X., Blanchard, O. J., & Hall, R. E.** (1991). *Convergence across states*  
471 *and regions*. *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity*, 22(1), 107–182.

472 **Bosworth, G., & Venhorst, V.** (2018). *Economic connections between cities and their hinterlands:*  
473 *A spatial perspective*. *Journal of Regional Science*, 58(5), 112-134.

474 **Common Provisions Regulation (CPR) (2013).** *Regulation (EU) No 1303/2013* of the European  
475 Parliament and the Council. [Online]. Available at: [http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-](http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:32013R1303&from=EN)  
476 [content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:32013R1303&from=EN](http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:32013R1303&from=EN)

477 **Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union** (2008). *Official Journal of the European*  
478 *Union*, C115/13, articles 174-178.

479 **Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR)** (2008). *Towards an EU approach to*  
480 *democratic local governance, decentralization and territorial development*. Brussels.

481 **Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR)** (2022). *The use of integrated*  
482 *territorial tools in cohesion policy: Implementation analysis from the perspective of municipalities,*  
483 *regions and their associations*. [Online]. Available  
484 at: [https://ccre.org/img/uploads/piecesjointe/filename/230124\\_EN\\_analysis\\_ITI\\_CLLD\\_final.pdf](https://ccre.org/img/uploads/piecesjointe/filename/230124_EN_analysis_ITI_CLLD_final.pdf)

485 **Council of the European Union** (2016). *Urban agenda for the EU ‘Pact of Amsterdam’*. Informal  
486 Meeting of EU Ministers responsible for Urban Matters, Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

487 **Davoudi, S.** (2003). European Briefing: *Polycentricity in European spatial planning: from an*  
488 *analytical tool to a normative agenda.* *European Planning Studies*, 11(8), 979–  
489 999. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0965431032000146169>

490 **Eurocities** (2005). *Competitive cities are key to boosting economic growth in Europe.* [Online].  
491 Available at: <http://www.eurocities.org>

492 **European Commission** (2010). *Investing in Europe's future, Fifth report on economic, social and*  
493 *territorial cohesion.* Report from the Commission.

494 **European Commission** (2010). *Communication (COM(2010) 2020 final) – Europe 2020: A strategy*  
495 *for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth.* [Online]. Available at: [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=LEGISSUM:em0028)  
496 [content/EN/TXT/?uri=LEGISSUM:em0028](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=LEGISSUM:em0028)

497 **European Commission** (2015). *Guidance for desk officers on Integrated Territorial Investment*  
498 *(ITI).* [Online]. Available  
499 at: [https://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/sources/wikiguide/gn0014\\_integrated\\_territorial\\_invest](https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/wikiguide/gn0014_integrated_territorial_investment.pdf)  
500 [ment.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/wikiguide/gn0014_integrated_territorial_investment.pdf)

501 **European Commission** (2015). *Communication: Investing in jobs and growth - maximising the*  
502 *contribution of European Structural and Investment Funds* (COM/2015/0639 final). [Online].  
503 Available at: [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/EN/legal-content/summary/cohesion-policy-to-deliver-the-](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/EN/legal-content/summary/cohesion-policy-to-deliver-the-europe-2020-strategy-2014-2020.html)  
504 [europe-2020-strategy-2014-2020.html](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/EN/legal-content/summary/cohesion-policy-to-deliver-the-europe-2020-strategy-2014-2020.html)

505 **European Commission** (2016). *Staff Working Document - Ex post evaluation of the ERDF and*  
506 *Cohesion Fund 2007-13* (SWD(2016) 318 final). [Online]. Available  
507 at: [https://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/sources/evaluation/expost2013/wp1\\_sw\\_d\\_report\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/evaluation/expost2013/wp1_sw_d_report_en.pdf)

508 **European Commission (2017)** *Integrated territorial and urban strategies: how are ESIF value in*  
509 *2014-2020?* Luxembourg: Publications office of the European Union. ISBN: 978-92-79-77222-1.  
510 [Online]. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/information-](https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/information-sources/publications/studies/2017/integrated-territorial-and-urban-strategies-how-are-esif-adding-value-in-2014-2020_en)  
511 [sources/publications/studies/2017/integrated-territorial-and-urban-strategies-how-are-esif-adding-](https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/information-sources/publications/studies/2017/integrated-territorial-and-urban-strategies-how-are-esif-adding-value-in-2014-2020_en)  
512 [value-in-2014-2020\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/information-sources/publications/studies/2017/integrated-territorial-and-urban-strategies-how-are-esif-adding-value-in-2014-2020_en)

513 **European Commission** (2020). *Handbook of Sustainable Urban Development Strategies*. Joint  
514 Research Center (JRC). Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. [Online]. Available  
515 at: <https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC118841>

516 **European Commission** (2022). *Eighth report on economic, social and territorial cohesion:  
517 Cohesion in Europe towards 2050*. Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy. Luxembourg:  
518 Publications Office of the European Union.

519 **European Commission** (2024). *9th Report on economic, social and territorial cohesion*. Edited by  
520 Jorge Durán Laguna. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. [Online]. Available  
521 at: [https://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/information-sources/cohesion-report\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/information-sources/cohesion-report_en)

522 **European Commission**. *Inforegio, Panorama archives*, N. 40 (2011), 48 (2014), 58, 59 (2016).  
523 [Online]. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/information-sources/panorama-  
524 magazine\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/information-sources/panorama-<br/>524 magazine_en)

525 **European Commission**. *STRAT-Board platform*. [Online]. Available  
526 at: <https://urban.jrc.ec.europa.eu/strat-board/?lng=el>

527 **European Investment Bank** (2008). *A new way of using EU funding to promote sustainable  
528 investments and growth in urban areas*. JESSICA Task Force. Luxembourg. [Online]. Available  
529 at: [https://www.eib.org/attachments/thematic/jessica\\_2008\\_en.pdf](https://www.eib.org/attachments/thematic/jessica_2008_en.pdf)

530 **European Parliament's Committee on Regional Development** (2015). *The cohesion policy  
531 dimension of the implementation of the Europe 2020 Strategy*. [Online]. Available  
532 at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2015/540361/IPOL\\_STU\(2015\)540361\\_  
533 EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2015/540361/IPOL_STU(2015)540361_<br/>533 EN.pdf)

534 **Floris A. & Serra S.** (2025). *Inter-Municipal Planning as a Framework for Managing Policies for  
535 Inner Areas: Insights from the Italian Context*. Sustainability, MDPI, vol. 17(15), pages 1-  
536 25, [Online]. Available: <https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/17/15/6896/pdf>

537 **Friedmann, J.** (1963). *Regional Economic Policy For Developing Areas*. Papers in Regional  
538 Science, 11(1), 41-61.

539 **Hellenic Republic.** (1995). *Presidential Decree 410/95.* [Online]. Available  
540 at: [https://www.kodiko.gr/nomologia/download\\_fek?f=fek/1995/a/fek\\_a\\_231\\_1995.pdf](https://www.kodiko.gr/nomologia/download_fek?f=fek/1995/a/fek_a_231_1995.pdf)

541 **Hellenic Republic.** (2010). *Law 3852/2010: New Architecture of Self-Government and*  
542 *Decentralized Administration - Kallikratis Project.* Official Gazette A' 87/07-06-2010.

543 **Hellenic Republic.** (2020). *Law 4674/2020: Strategic development perspective of Local Government*  
544 *Organizations.* Official Gazette A' 53/11-03-2020.

545 **Hellenic Republic.** (2021). *Law 4875/2021: Model Integrated Management Tourist Destinations,*  
546 *Destination Management and Promotion Organizations.* Official Gazette A' 250/23-12-2021.

547 **Hellenic Statistical Authority (ELSTAT).** [www.statistics.gr](http://www.statistics.gr)

548 **Howlett, M. & Rayner, J.** (2006). *Convergence and divergence in 'new governance' arrangements:*  
549 *Evidence from European integrated natural resource strategies.* Journal of Public Policy, Cambridge  
550 University Press, 26(2), 167-189. [Online]. Available:  
551 [https://www.cambridge.org/core/product/identifier/S0143814X06000511/type/journal\\_article](https://www.cambridge.org/core/product/identifier/S0143814X06000511/type/journal_article)

552 **Katsavounidou, G.** (2017). Implementing ITI for urban development locally. *TeMA - Journal of*  
553 *Land Use, Mobility and Environment,* 10(3), 279–298. [Online]. Available:  
554 <https://doi.org/10.6092/1970-9870/5245>

555 **Kühn, M.** (2015). *Peripheralization: Theoretical concepts explaining socio-spatial*  
556 *inequalities.* European Planning Studies, 23(2), 367-378.

557 **Liargkovas, P. & Andreou, G.** (2007). *The new cohesion policy of the European Union and Greece.*  
558 Athens: Papazisi.

559 **Magnaghi, A.** (2005). *The urban village: A charter for democracy and local self-sustainable*  
560 *development.* Zed Books.

561 **McCann, P.** (2021). Space-blind and place-based policies: Initiatives for Fostering Innovation and  
562 Growth”, GOLD VI Working Paper Series04, United Cities and Local Governments available at  
563 [https://gold.uclg.org/sites/default/files/gold\\_vi\\_working\\_paper\\_04.pdf](https://gold.uclg.org/sites/default/files/gold_vi_working_paper_04.pdf)

564 **Mitoula, R.** (2006). *Sustainable Regional Development in EU and the reconstruction of the Greek*  
565 *urban environment*. Athens: Stamouli.

566 **Municipality of Didymoticho.** Official website: <https://www.didymoteicho.gr/el/>

567 **Munier, N.** (2006). *Process for a sustainable city*. Handbook on Urban Sustainability. Netherlands:  
568 Springer.

569 **NSRF 2021-2027.** *Regional Development Partnership 2021-2027*. [Online]. Available  
570 at: <https://www.espa.gr/el/Pages/espa2021-2027.aspx>

571 **OECD.** (2006). *OECD Rural Policy Reviews: The New Rural Paradigm: Policies and Governance*.  
572 Paris.

573 **Psyxaris, J.** (2011). *Urban Development in Greece and in EU: trends and prospective*. Athens:  
574 Kritiki.

575 **Regional Operational Programme of Eastern Macedonia and Thrace 2014-2020.** [Online].  
576 Available at: <https://2014-2020.espa.gr/el/Pages/staticOPAnatMacedoniaThraki.aspx>

577 **Regulation (EU) 2021/1060** of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2021 laying  
578 down common provisions on the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund  
579 Plus, the Cohesion Fund, the Just Transition Fund and the European Maritime, Fisheries and  
580 Aquaculture Fund and financial rules for those and for the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund,  
581 the Internal Security Fund and the Instrument for Financial Support for Border Management and Visa  
582 Policy. [Online]. Available at: [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32021R1060)  
583 [content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32021R1060](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32021R1060)

584 **Sarantaki, S.** (2013). *The eternal evolution of the city of Didymoteicho: emphasis on the*  
585 *development of the residential body during the modern era*. Master's Thesis, University of the  
586 Aegean, Department of Geography.

587 **Territorial Agenda 2030.** (2020). *A future for all places*. Informal meeting of Ministers responsible  
588 for spatial planning and territorial development, Germany. [Online]. Available  
589 at: <https://territorialagenda.eu/>

- 590 **UN-HABITAT.** (2016). *What is a city.* [Online]. Available  
591 at: [https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2020/06/city\\_definition\\_what\\_is\\_a\\_city.pdf](https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2020/06/city_definition_what_is_a_city.pdf)
- 592 **Van der Zwet, A., & Mendez, C.** (2015). *Towards a Europe of the localities? Integrated place-*  
593 *based approaches in cohesion policy in 2014-20 and beyond. In Challenges for the New Cohesion*  
594 *Policy 2014-2020*, 2nd Joint EU Cohesion Policy Conference, Riga, 2-4 February 2015. [Online].  
595 Available at: <http://strathprints.strath.ac.uk/52705/>
- 596 **Zafeiropoulos, K.** (2015). *How to do a scientific paper: Scientific research and writing papers.*  
597 Athens: Kritiki Publications S.A.

598

---