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Territorial instruments of national policies as a tool for designing territorially sensitive policies (SENPO)

Zintis Hermansons, ESPON EGTC, 5 December 2025

ESPON contributing to Cohesion Policy since 2002



**ESPON
2006**



2002 - 2006



**ESPON
2013**



2007 - 2013



**ESPON
2020**



2014 - 2020



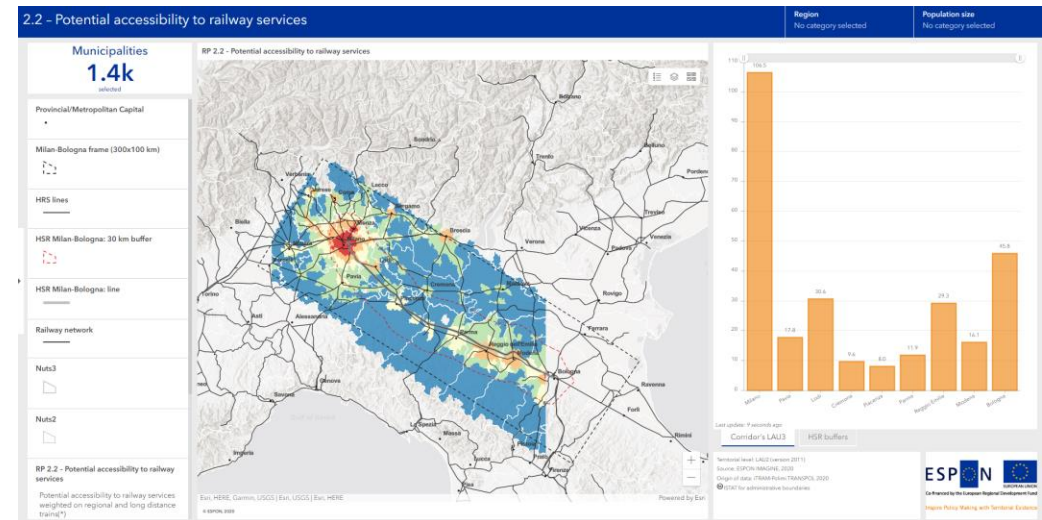
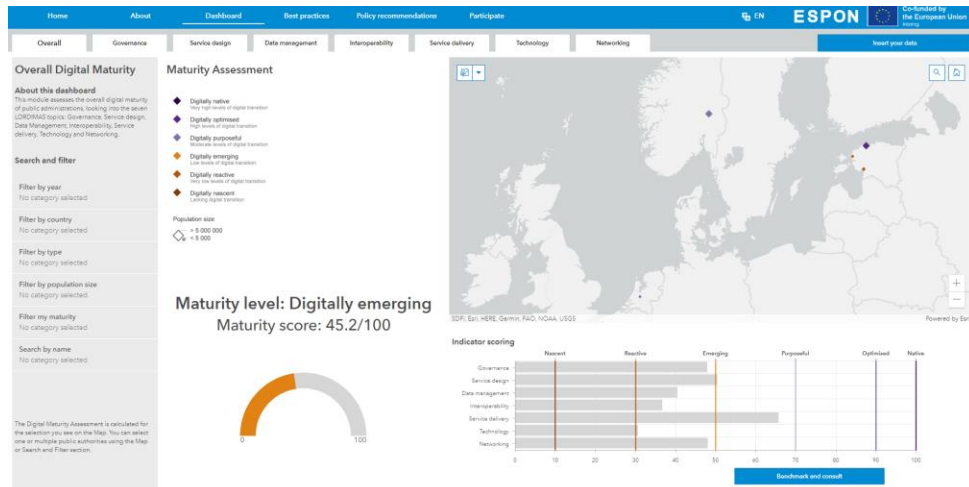
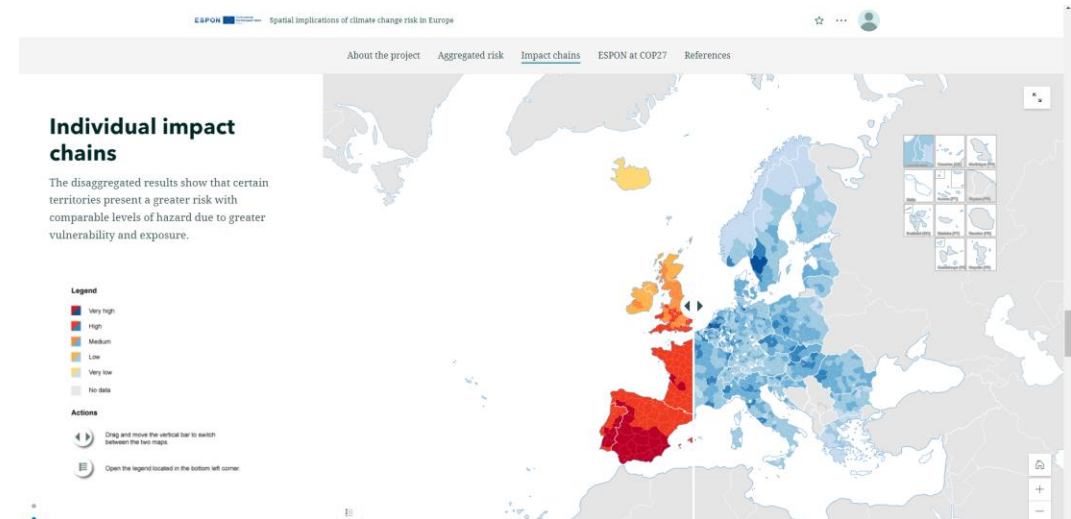
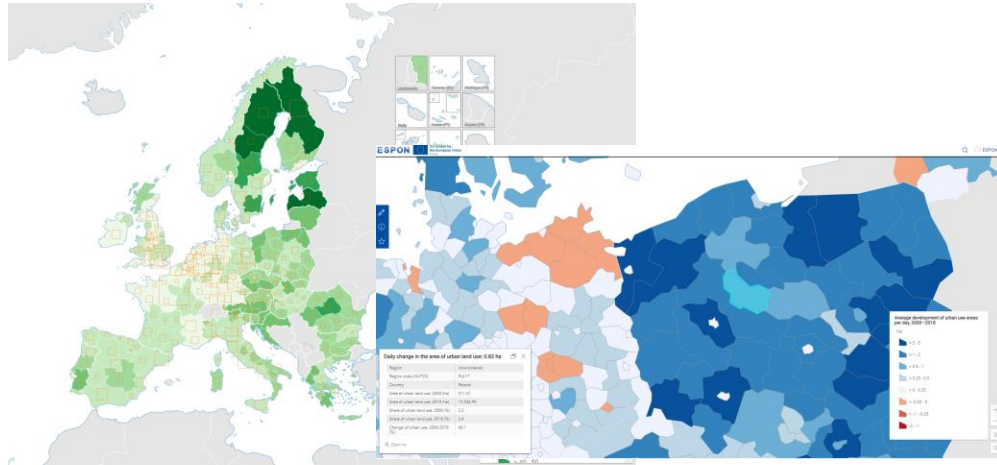
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2030**



2021 - 2027

ESPON Knowledge Portal: Webmaps, data stories, dashboards and applications

<https://portal.espon.eu>



Towns and cities dashboard

<https://gis-portal.espon.eu/arcgis/apps/experiencebuilder/experience/?id=e561b285ad2147fc8e5318015d49f422>

Towns and cities in Europe



Filter by trading block
No category selected

Filter by country
No category selected

Filter by regions (NUTS2)
No category selected

Filter by subregions (NUTS3)
No category selected

Search by metropolitan r...
No category selected

Select by FUA
No category selected

Filter by FUA type
No category selected

About

Spatial context is important to grasp when analysing towns and cities. Depending on the location and proximity from others, different type of settlements may have different development opportunities and challenges, offer different types of services, living and business environment.

This dashboard helps user to get a quick overview of towns and cities in Europe. You can apply different **filters** to define the area of your interest: EU? specific country, region, metropolitan area or functional urban area? Or you can search by a specific city by name or by selecting it on the map.

Select a category
No category selected

Filter by border towns and cities

No Yes

Filter by coastal towns and cities

No Yes

Filter by islands

No Yes

Filter by mountain massifs

No Yes

Filter by regional centres

Key observations

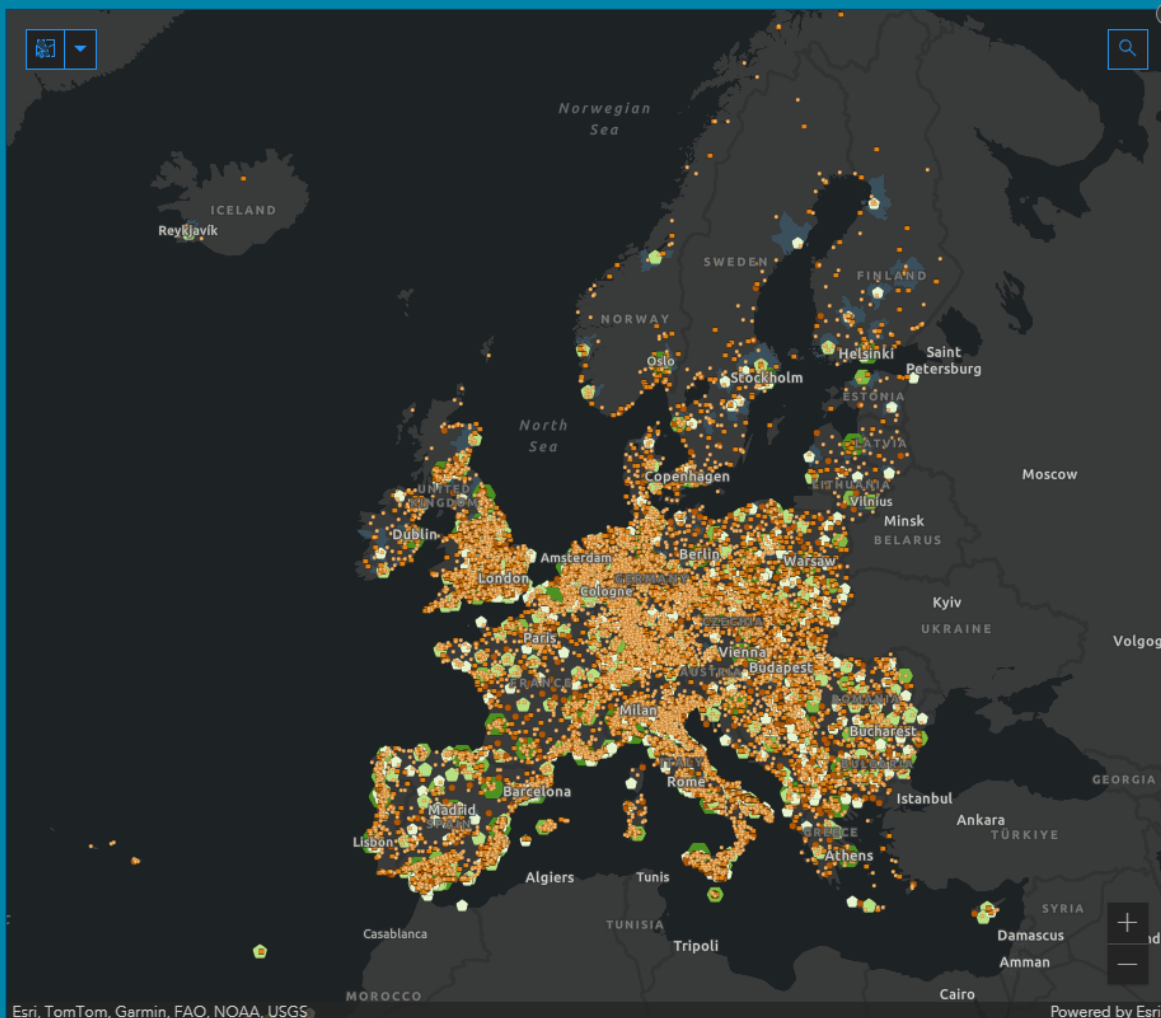
- There are 7 973 towns and 685 cities in the EU according to the harmonised definition of a city. As a result, city and town residents capture over half the EU population (55%).
- Small towns between 5 000 and 10 000 inhabitants are most numerous (4 872).
- Overall, one out of five EU residents lives in a town compared to one out of three who lives in a city. The residents living in towns account for about 95 million people or 21% of total EU population. This share is lowest in Cyprus (10%), France (15%) and Romania (16%) and highest in Slovakia (33%), Hungary (27%) and the Netherlands (26%).
- About half the EU cities are regional centres, but only about 4% of all towns are. Regional centres are more evenly distributed across the territory than the other cities and towns (see map), as all the settlements close to a bigger settlement are discarded. As a result, towns that are defined as regional centres are mostly located in remote

Key observations

Towns and cities in Europe

Size category

- Very large city (>500K)
- Large city (250-500K)
- Medium-sized city (100-250K)
- Small city (50-100K)
- Large town (25-50K)
- Medium-sized town (10-25K)
- Small town (0-10K)



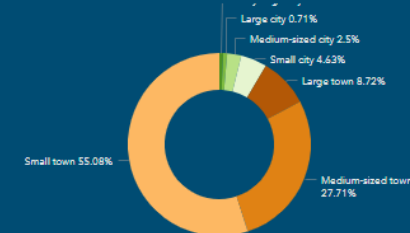
Descriptive statistics

Key figures

Number of regional centres
415 cities
487 towns

Regional centres

Towns and cities by type

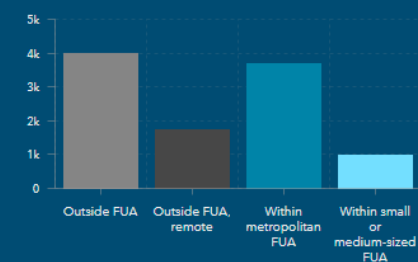


By count

By population

By area

Towns and cities by functional relationships



By count

By population

By area

Population structures in Europe dashboard

<https://gis-portal.espon.eu/arcgis/apps/dashboards/9ff67f0b91b24a919731e1f5e73b15e0>

Population structures in Europe

Step 1: Select reference year
2023

Step 2: Select NUTS level
3

Filter by country
No category selected

Select by trading block
No category selected

Apply additional filters

Filter by the degree of urbanisation
No category selected

Filter by metropolitan regions
No category selected

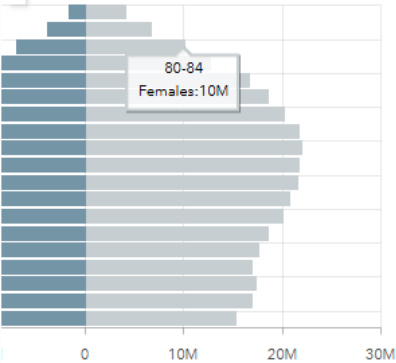
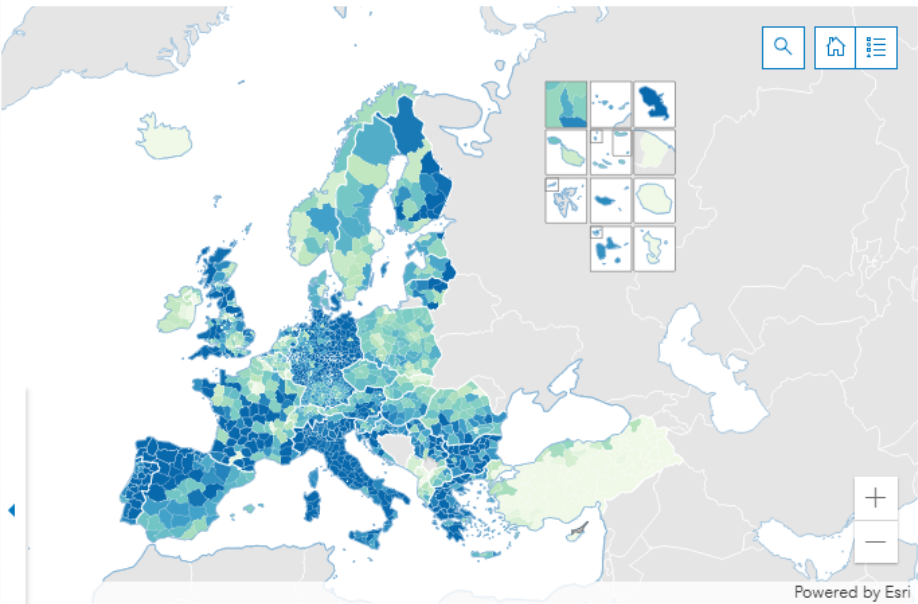
Filter by border regions
No category selected

Filter by coastal regions
No category selected

Filter by mountain regions
No category selected

Filter by island regions
No category selected

Filter by sparsely populated regions
No category selected



Median age of the selected area

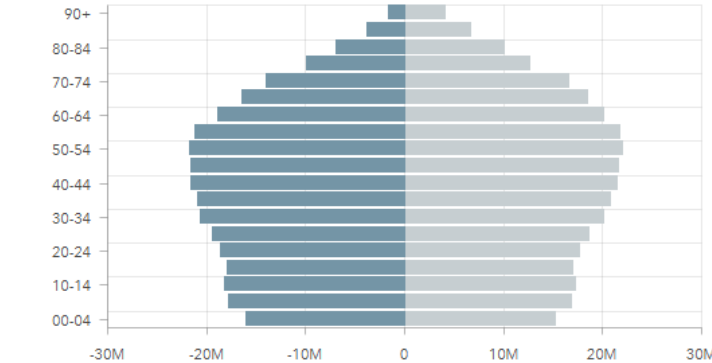
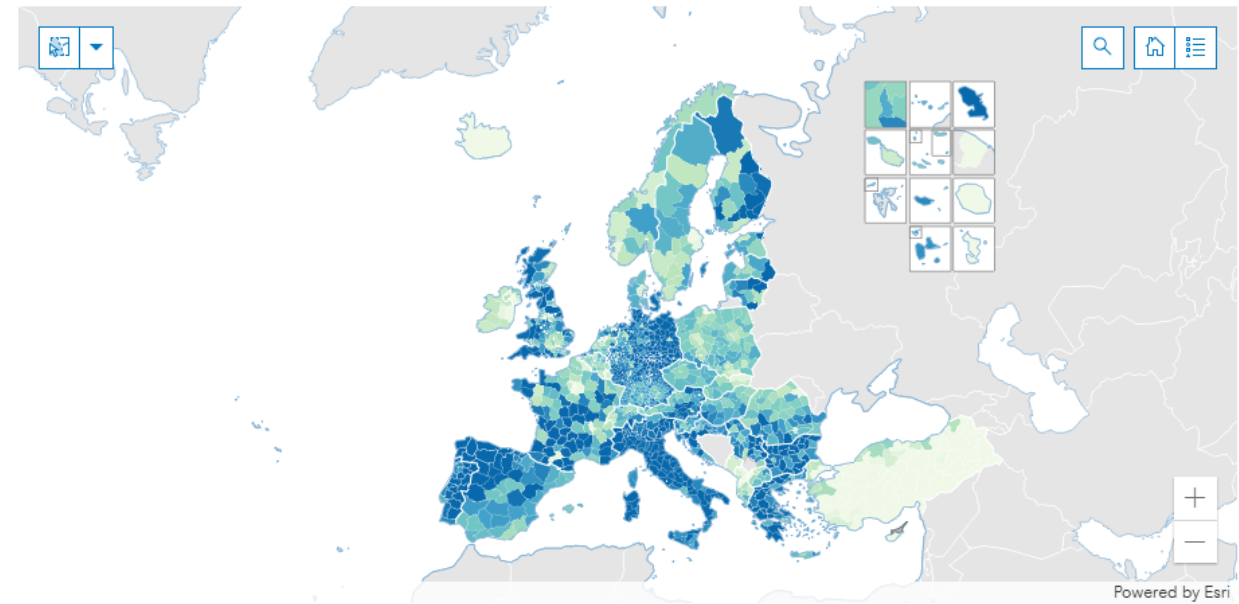
44.7

Step 1: Select reference year
2023

Step 2: Select NUTS level
3

Filter by country
No category selected

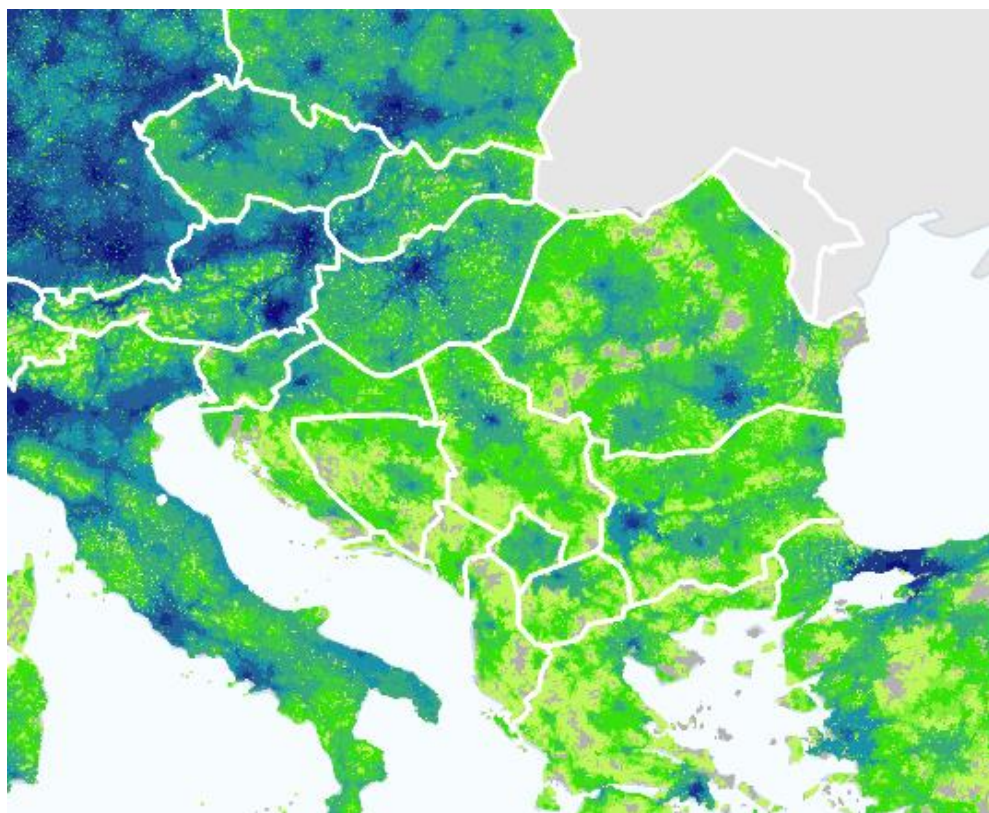
Select by trading block
No category selected



Median age of the selected area

44.7

Density of services: 8 types of service types which can be reached in a reasonable distance



Density of service facilities in reasonable distance (2024)

Density of facilities of 8 service types that can be reached from each point in reasonable distance

Number of accessible facilities per sqkm



Following travel time thresholds are applied for the different service types, reflecting the different needs:

Childcare: 15 min
Elderly care: 30 min
Doctors: 30 min
Hospitals: 60 min
Retail: 15 min
Stations: 20 min
Primary schools: 15 min
Secondary schools: 60 min

French outermost regions not part of study

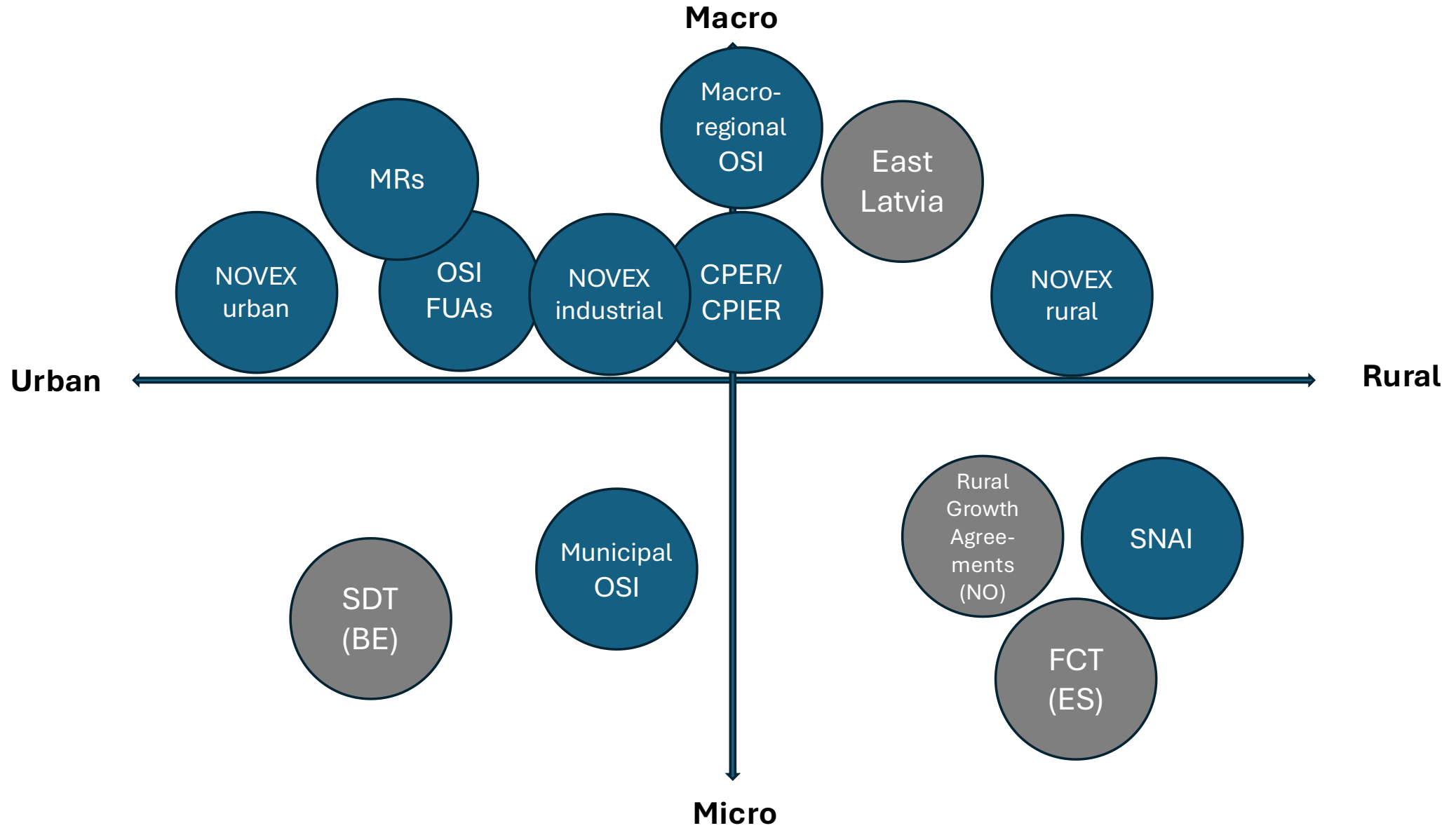


Analytical framework of the SENPO study

	Component
Organising principles	Territorial focus
	Integration & synergies
	Governance
Design and operation	Rationale or intervention logic
	Type of instrument
	Level and sources of funding
	Interaction with EU-funded instruments
Specific research issues	'Do no harm to cohesion', including TIA and equivalents
	Spatial planning dimension

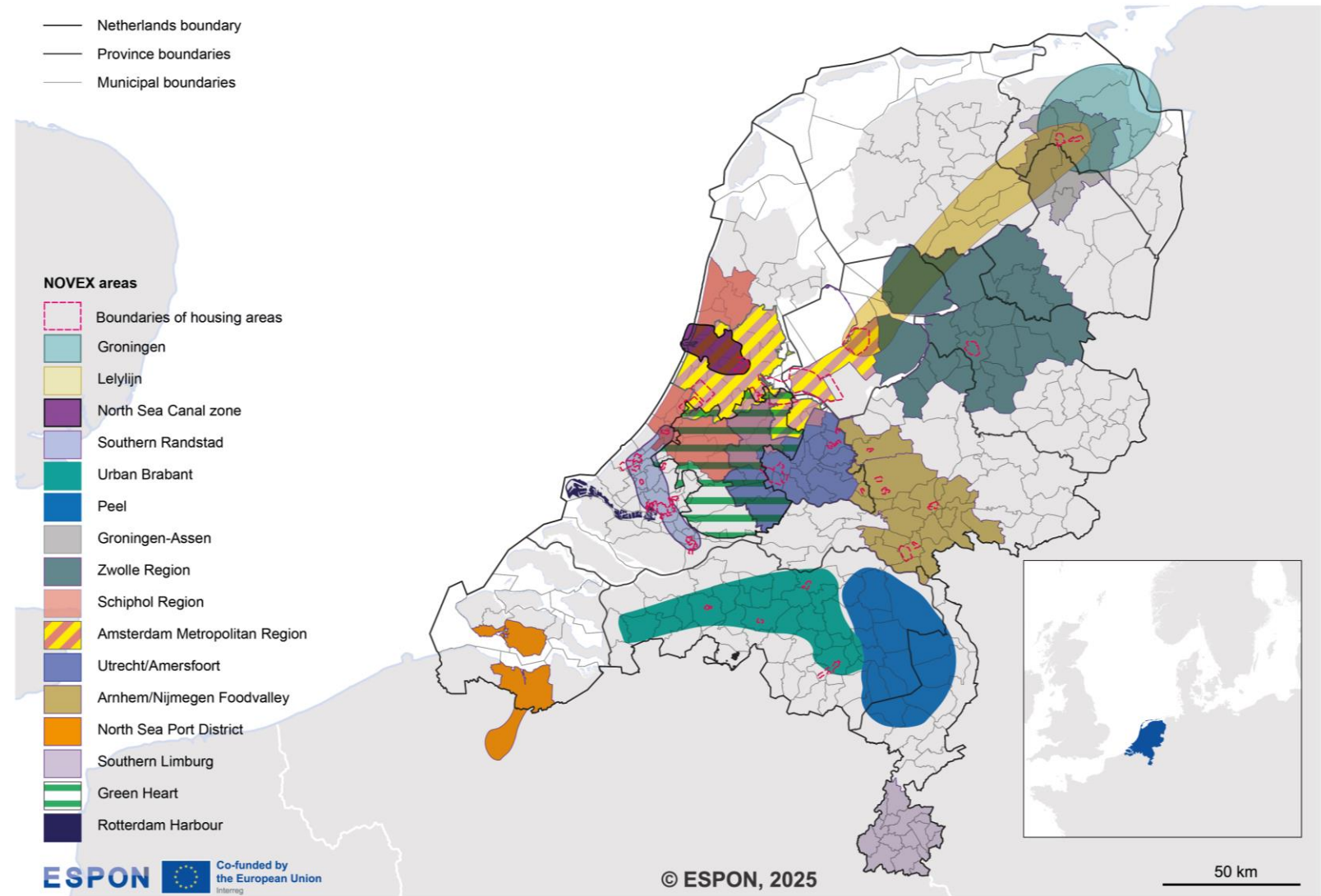


Territorial focus of selected territorial instruments



- ❖ The national government has designated multiple areas where the spatial challenges are so extensive and complex that they require synergistic coordination between the national government and the region. These areas are called **NOVEX areas**.
- ❖ To effectively address these challenges, the national government, the region, provinces, water boards, and municipalities are joining forces and collaborating on an area-specific basis.
- ❖ Every NOVEX region will design their area-specific "development perspective" that includes a vision for the future of the region.

NOVEX areas in the Netherlands as of 2025

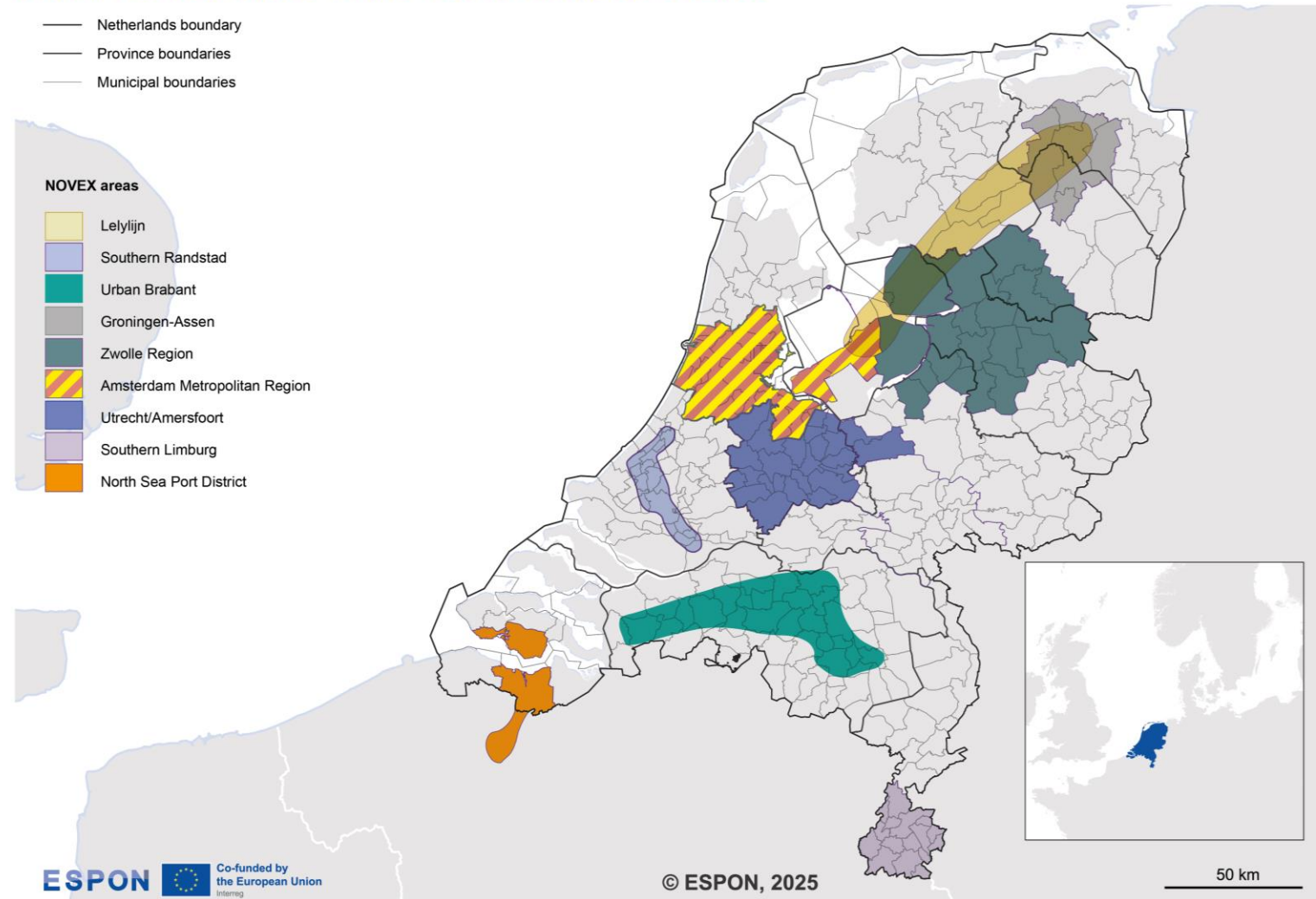


Territorial level: NUTS 0
 ESPON Project: SENPO, 2025
 Origin of data: Kadaster, 2024; Ministerie van Volkshuisvesting en Ruimtelijke Ordening (n.d.)
 © EuroGeographics for administrative boundaries

❖ In the NOVEX urbanisation areas, the national government and other government bodies are working on a major urbanisation challenge: housing construction, economic development, amenities, energy, and greening all require space.

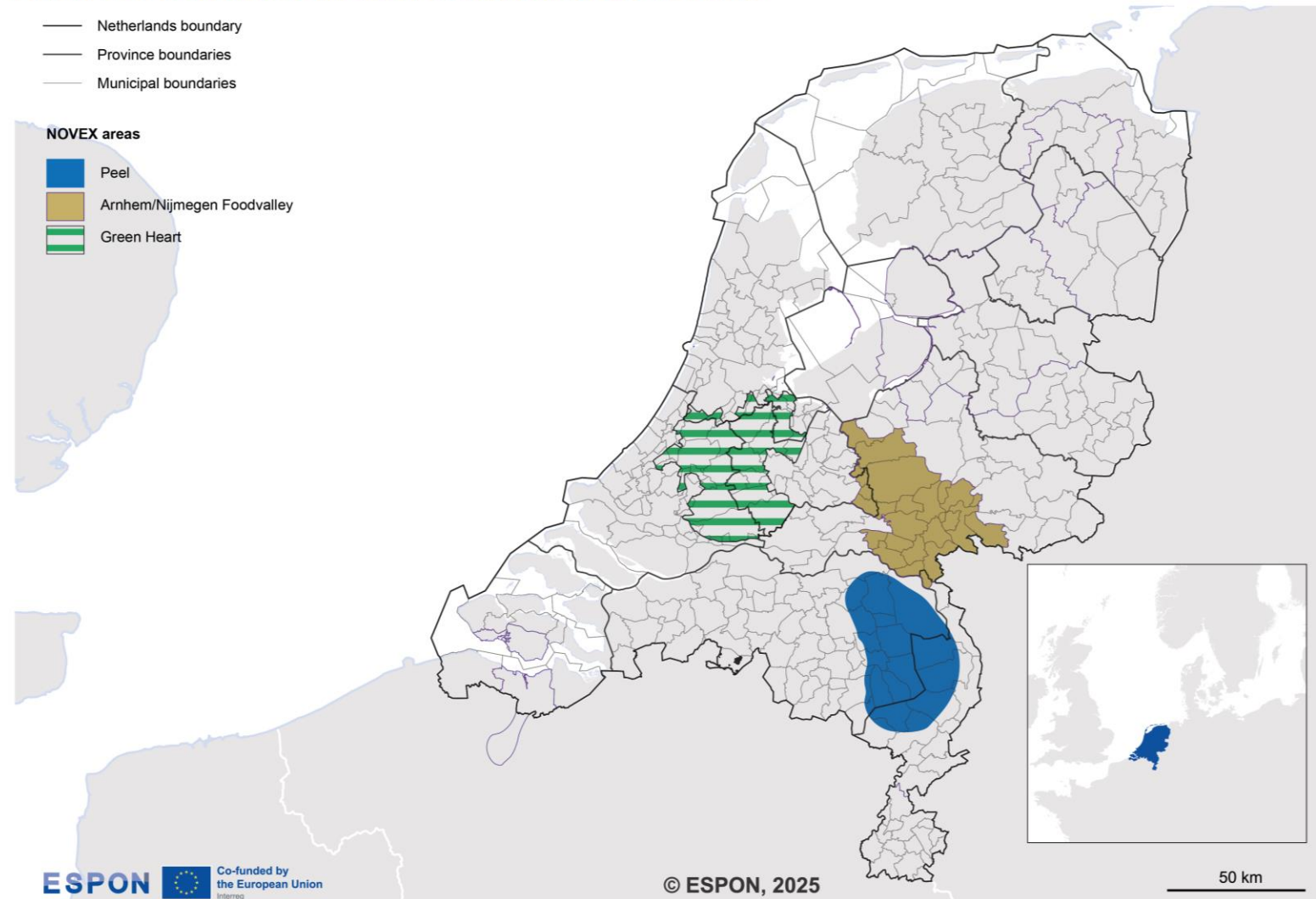
❖ Based on urbanization strategies, governmental bodies on different levels are working to integrate these major challenges in a future-proof way

Urban NOVEX areas in the Netherlands as of 2025



In the rural NOVEX areas, the challenges are primarily sustainable entrepreneurship in agriculture and livestock farming, nature conservation and enhancement, and a healthy living environment.

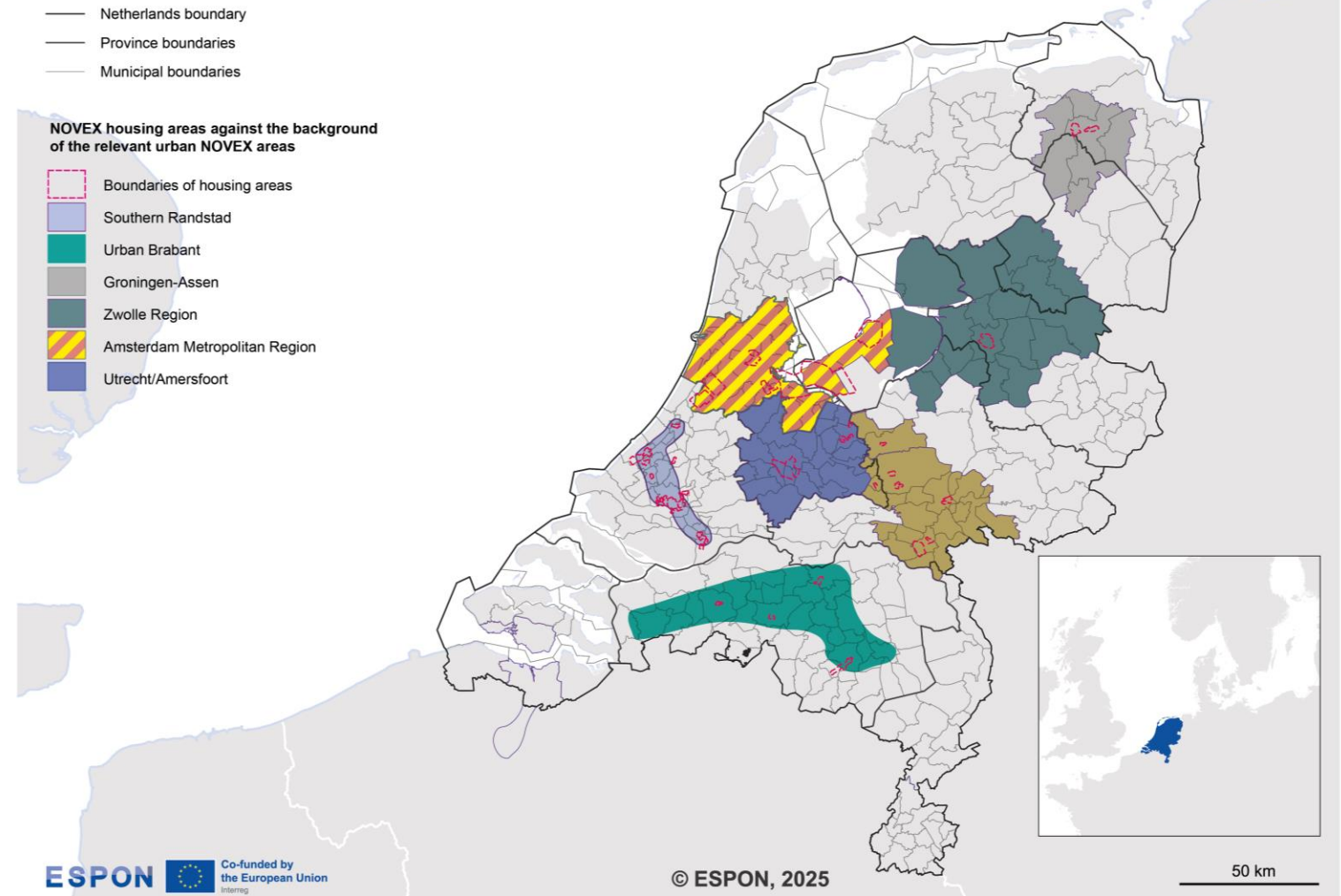
Rural NOVEX areas in the Netherlands as of 2025



❖ Within the NOVEX areas, some areas are categorised as "large scale housing areas"

❖ These regions receive a budget of 7,5 billion euro to improve mobility and accessibility of the new housing areas. The goal is to build more than 980.000 houses until 2030.

NOVEX housing areas in the Netherlands as of 2025

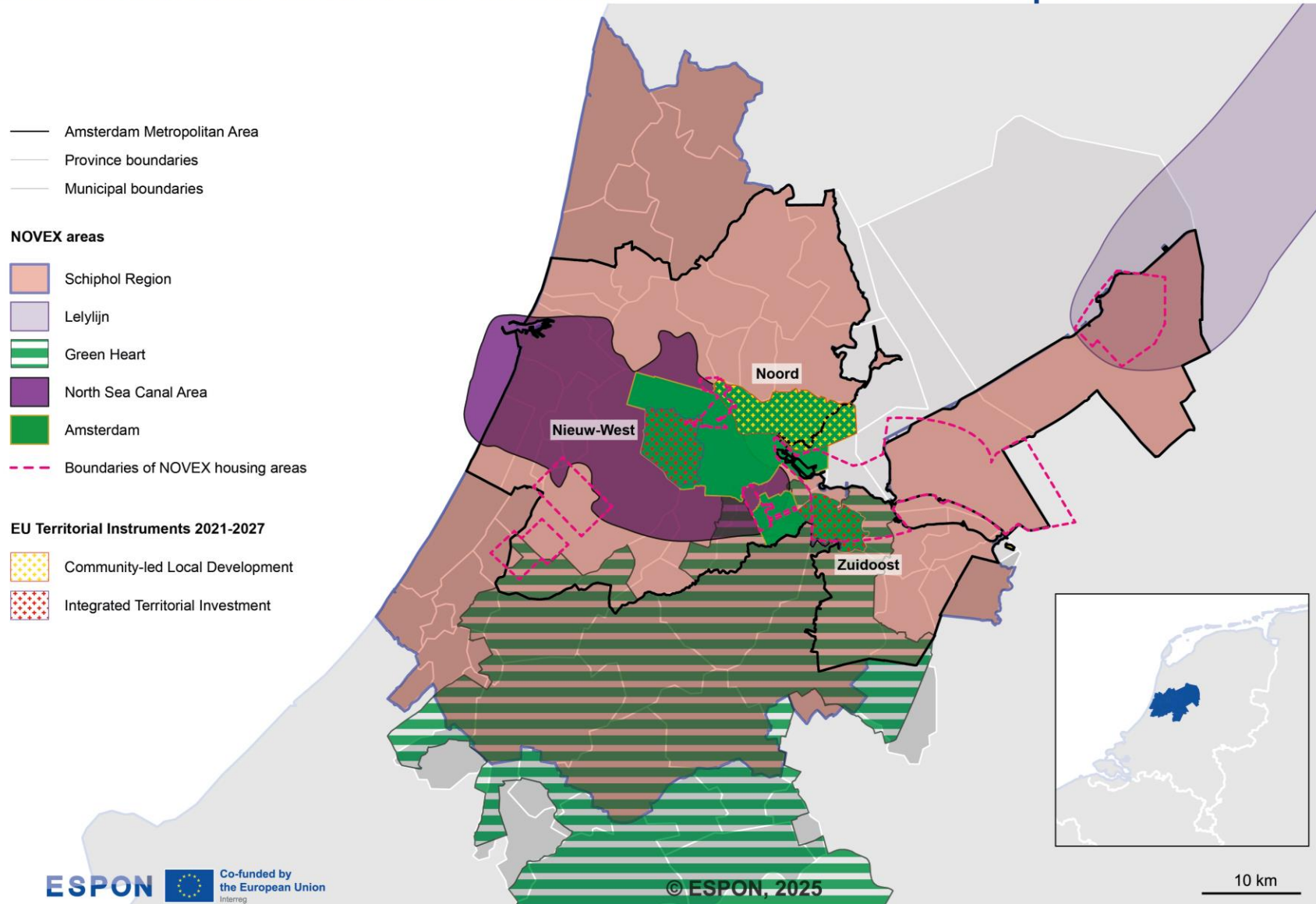


Territorial level: NUTS 0
ESPON Project: SENPO, 2025
Origin of data: Kadaster, 2024; Ministerie van Volkshuisvesting en Ruimtelijke Ordening (n.d.)
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NOVEX areas and EU territorial instruments in the Amsterdam Metropolitan Area as of 2025

❖ In the Netherlands, there is no spatial coordination between NOVEX and Cohesion Policy-funded instruments

❖ There is some spatial overlap between EU-funded ITI and CLLD strategies and NOVEX areas in the case of Amsterdam, but this is coincidental and not the result of concerted planning efforts



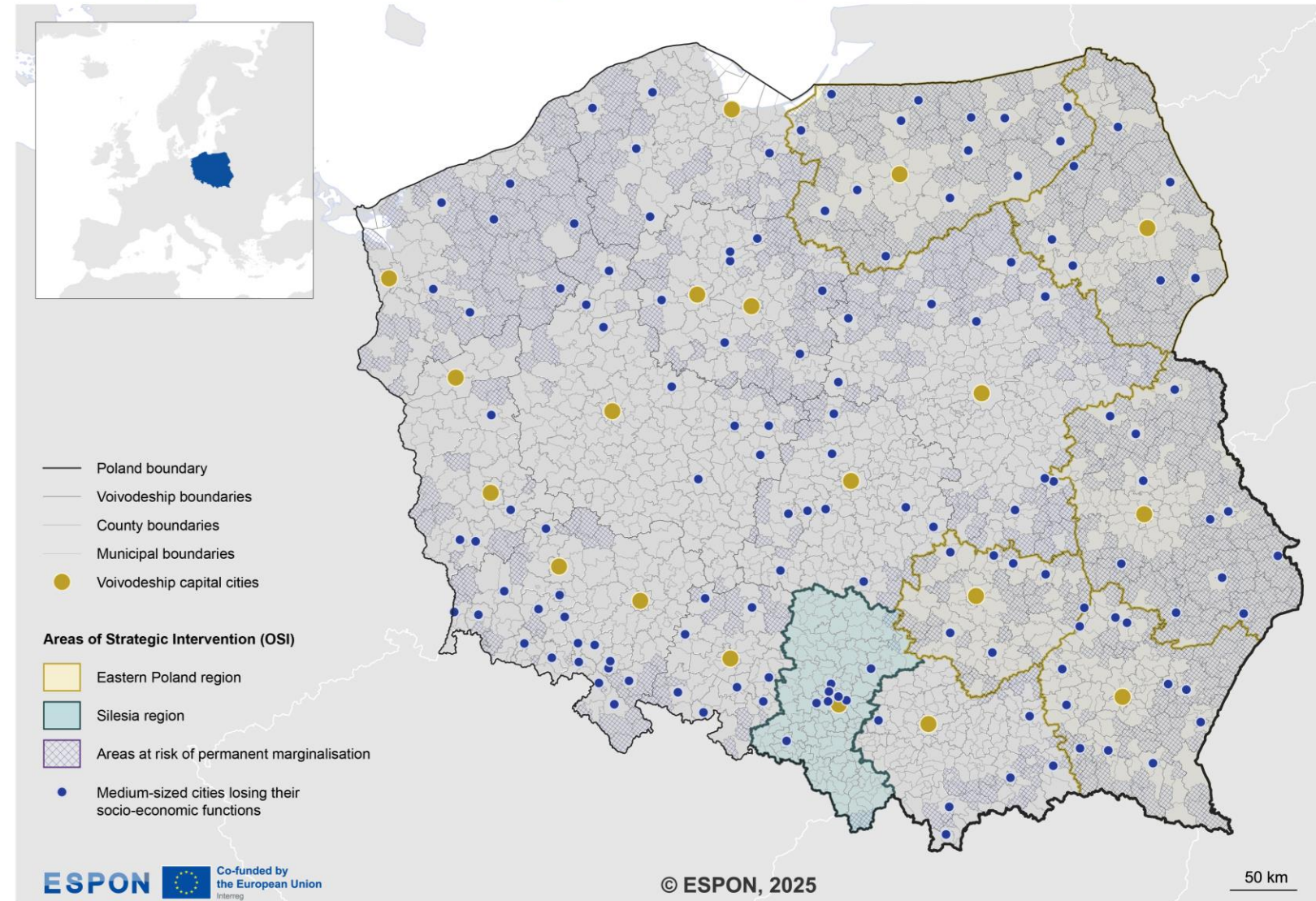
Territorial level: NUTS 3
ESPON Project: SENPO, 2025
Origin of data: Kadaster, 2024; data on ITI/CLLD acquired from Ministerie van Volkshuisvesting en Ruimtelijke Ordening, 2025; Gemeente Amsterdam, 2022.
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Poland's OSI

- ❖ Areas of Strategic Intervention (Obszary Strategicznej Interwencji – OSI) are a key territorial tool in Poland's regional development policy. They implement a place-based approach tailored to specific local challenges and opportunities.
- ❖ OSIs identify territories with shared functional linkages, socio-economic vulnerabilities, or development potential. They serve mainly as a framework for channeling EU Cohesion Policy funds, and to a lesser extent national funding, toward infrastructure, urban regeneration, innovation, and social services. A central aim is to promote inter-municipal cooperation and multi-level governance.
- ❖ In Poland, some OSIs are defined centrally by the national government, while others are established by regional authorities.

- ❖ National level OSI delimitation includes two types of areas delimited on the basis of socio-economic and environmental indicators
- ❖ Medium-sized cities that lose their socio-economic functions and municipalities at risk of marginalisation)
- ❖ Two larger areas facing specific development challenges (macro-region of Eastern Poland and Silesia region).

Nationally-delimited Areas of Strategic Intervention (OSI) in Poland as of 2025

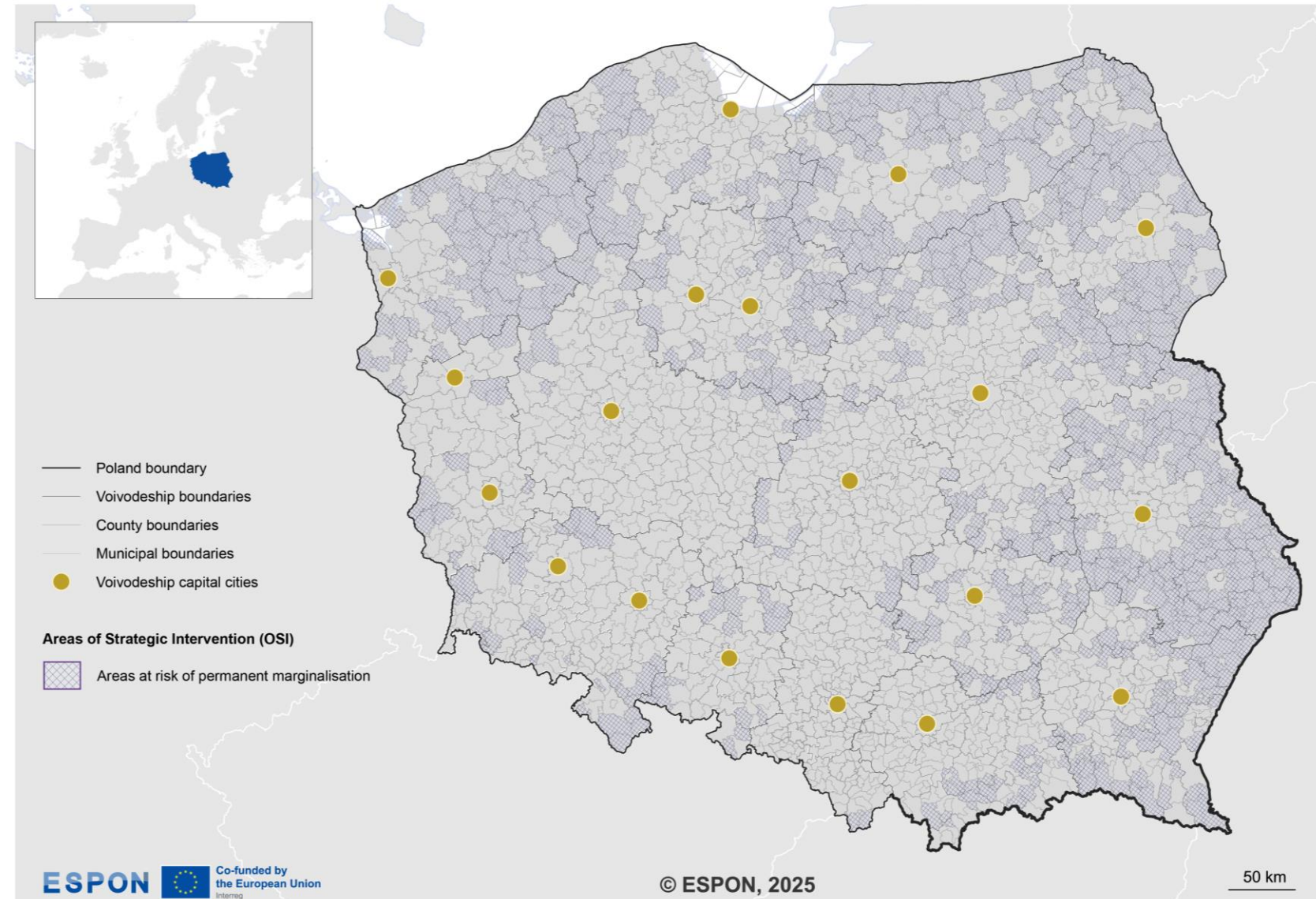


Territorial level: NUTS 0
ESPON Project: SENPO, 2025
Origin of data: adapted from Ministry of Regional Development, 2010; Śleszyński et al., 2019; Ministerstwo Funduszy i Polityki Regionalnej, 2019; Główny Urząd Geodezji i Kartografii, 2025
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National OSI delimitation includes municipalities at risk of permanent socio-economic marginalisation - typically peripheral, rural, or border areas with low accessibility and limited institutional and financial capacity.

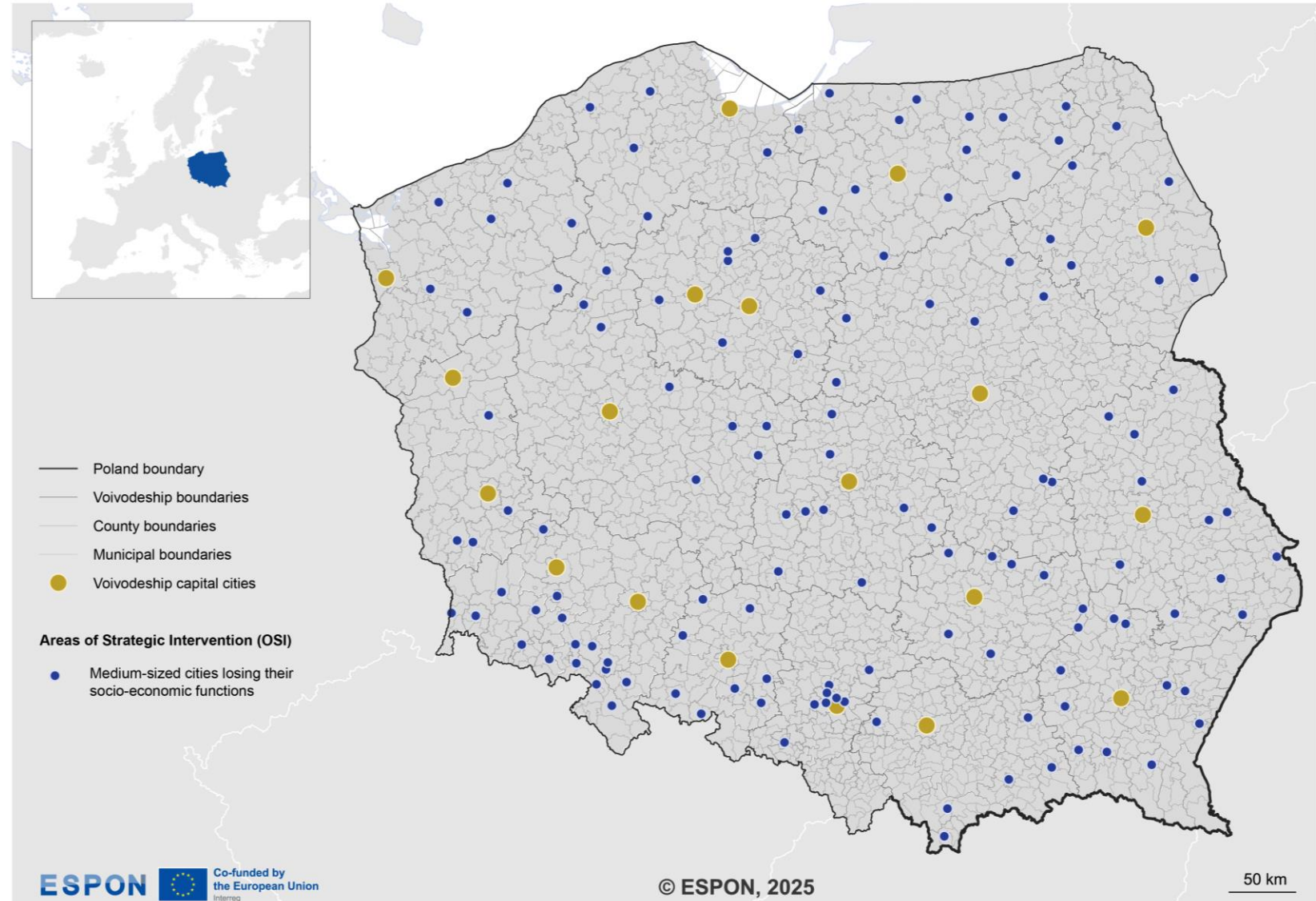
OSI interventions in these areas have channeled significant resources into basic infrastructure, social inclusion, and education, addressing long-standing capacity constraints that hinder participation in mainstream programmes.

Areas of Strategic Intervention (OSI) in Poland as of 2025: areas at risk of marginalisation



- ❖ Polish medium-sized cities recognised as losing socio-economic functions were picked as a key national OSI category.
- ❖ These cities face persistent outmigration, industrial decline, remain stuck in development traps, and/or suffer from a weakening local service bases.
- ❖ The policy rationale was to reverse these processes of decline through targeted interventions. The OSI mechanism facilitated channeled substantial investment into urban renewal and infrastructure in these cities

Areas of Strategic Intervention (OSI) in Poland as of 2025: medium-sized cities losing socio-economic functions



Polish government also designated Silesia region and the macro-region of Eastern Poland as OSI areas having distinct territorial challenges.

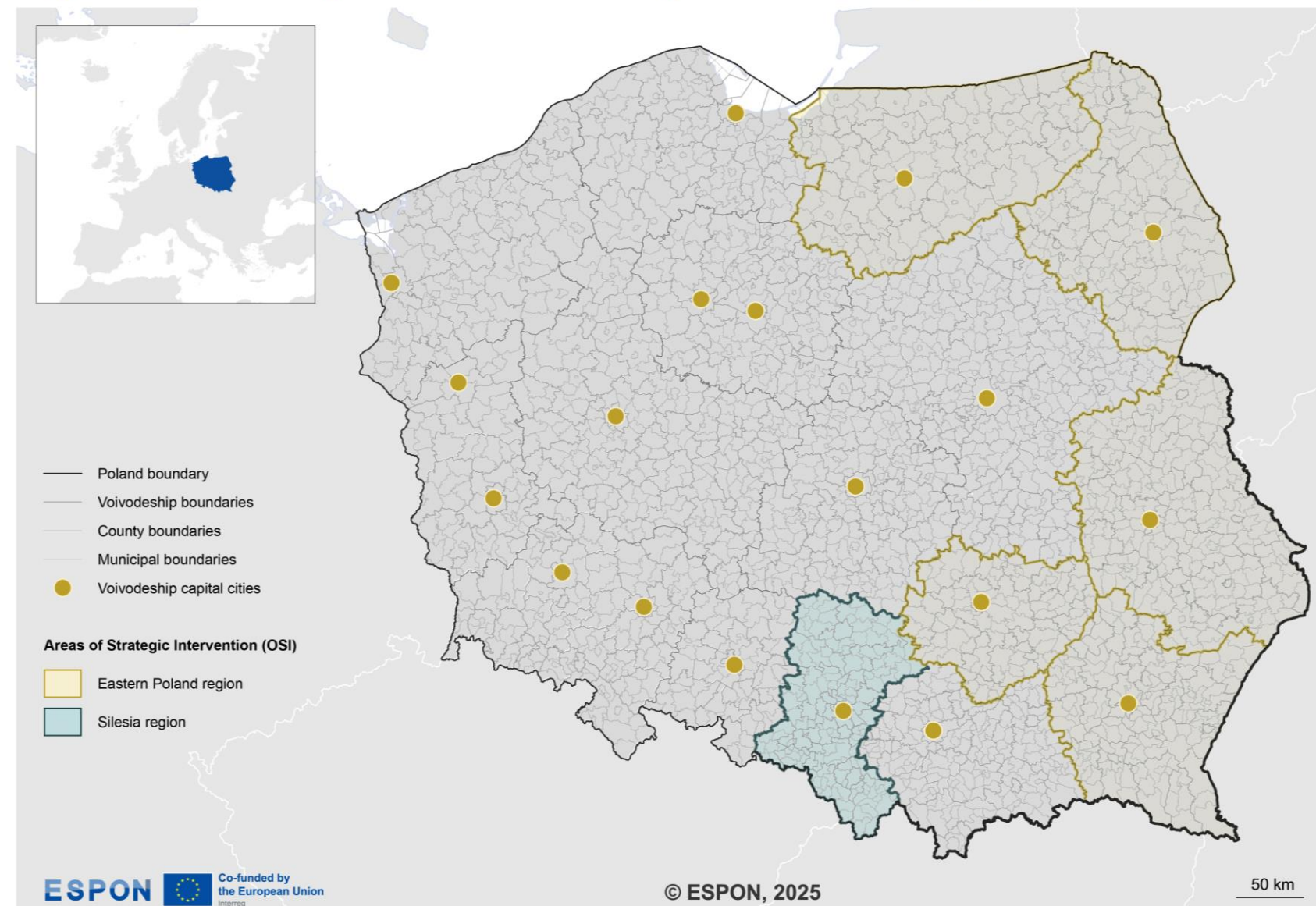
In Silesia, the focus lies on managing industrial restructuring and a just transition beyond coal mining, fostering diversification and environmental improvement.

In Eastern Poland, OSI investments have aimed to overcome long-term structural lag by boosting innovation, mobility, and entrepreneurship.

Both of these OSI areas are supported by specific Operational Programmes (OP) funded by EU Cohesion Policy, the Regional OP for Silesia and a dedicated national OP for Eastern Poland.

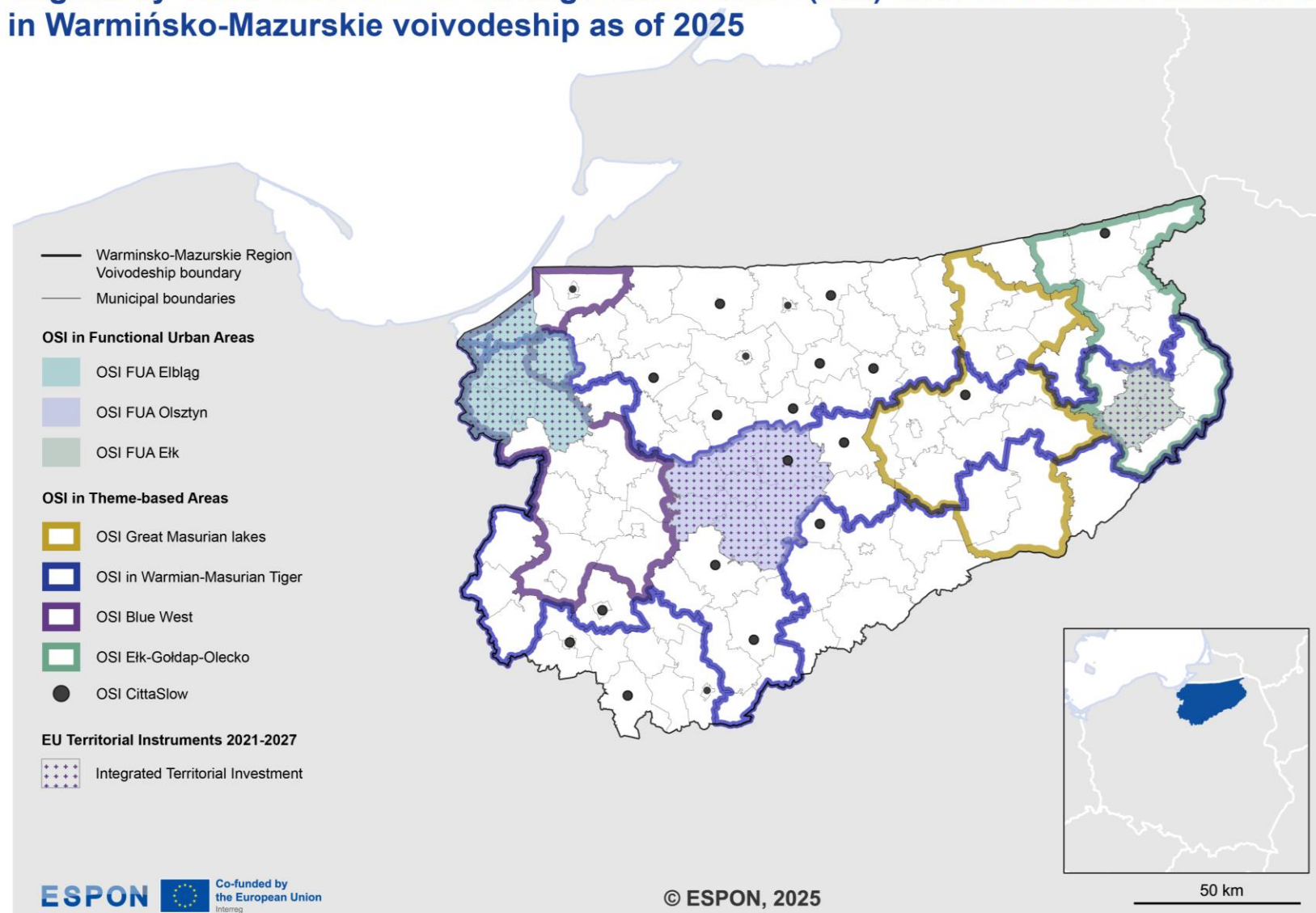
Both regions have seen tangible impacts of interventions, with numerous impactful projects being funded, but territorial disparities persist and the new pressures related with the war in Ukraine have disrupted development dynamics in the border areas

Regions targeted as part of Areas of Strategic Intervention (OSI) in Poland as of 2025



Regionally-delimited Areas of Strategic Intervention (OSI) and EU territorial instruments in Warmińsko-Mazurskie voivodeship as of 2025

Regional OSIs are defined by regional authorities (Marshal Offices) to address functional linkages and local development potentials within their territory

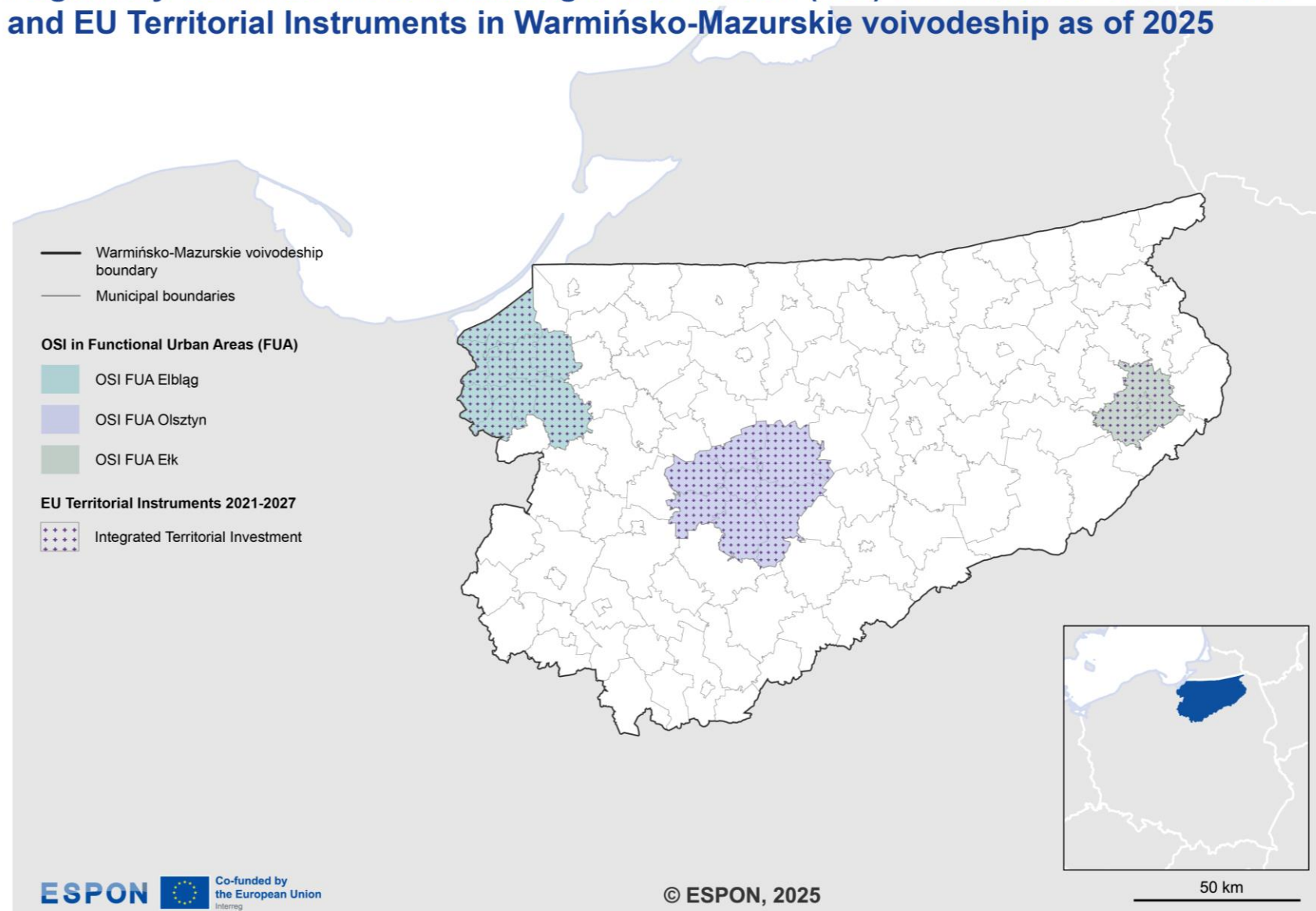


Territorial level: NUTS 2
 ESPON Project: SENPO, 2025
 Origin of data: adapted from Ministry of Regional Development, 2010; Śleszyński et al., 2019; Ministerstwo Funduszy i Polityki Regionalnej, 2019; Główny Urząd Geodezji i Kartografii, 2025; shape files acquired from the Marshal Office of Warmińsko-Mazurskie Voivodeship, 2025.
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In Warmińsko-Mazurskie, OSIs within FUAs, have been instrumental in promoting joint development strategies across municipal boundaries. They supported integrated projects in mobility, social infrastructure, and crisis management

OSI in FUAs in Warmińsko-Mazurskie overlapped with the EU territorial instruments, supported by Cohesion Policy. Namely their territories overlapped with the delimitation of Integrated Territorial Investments (ITI) in the region, creating scope for synergies between the two instruments.

Regionally-delimited Areas of Strategic Intervention (OSI) in Functional Urban Areas and EU Territorial Instruments in Warmińsko-Mazurskie voivodeship as of 2025



Funding source to support OSI in Warmińsko-Mazurskie

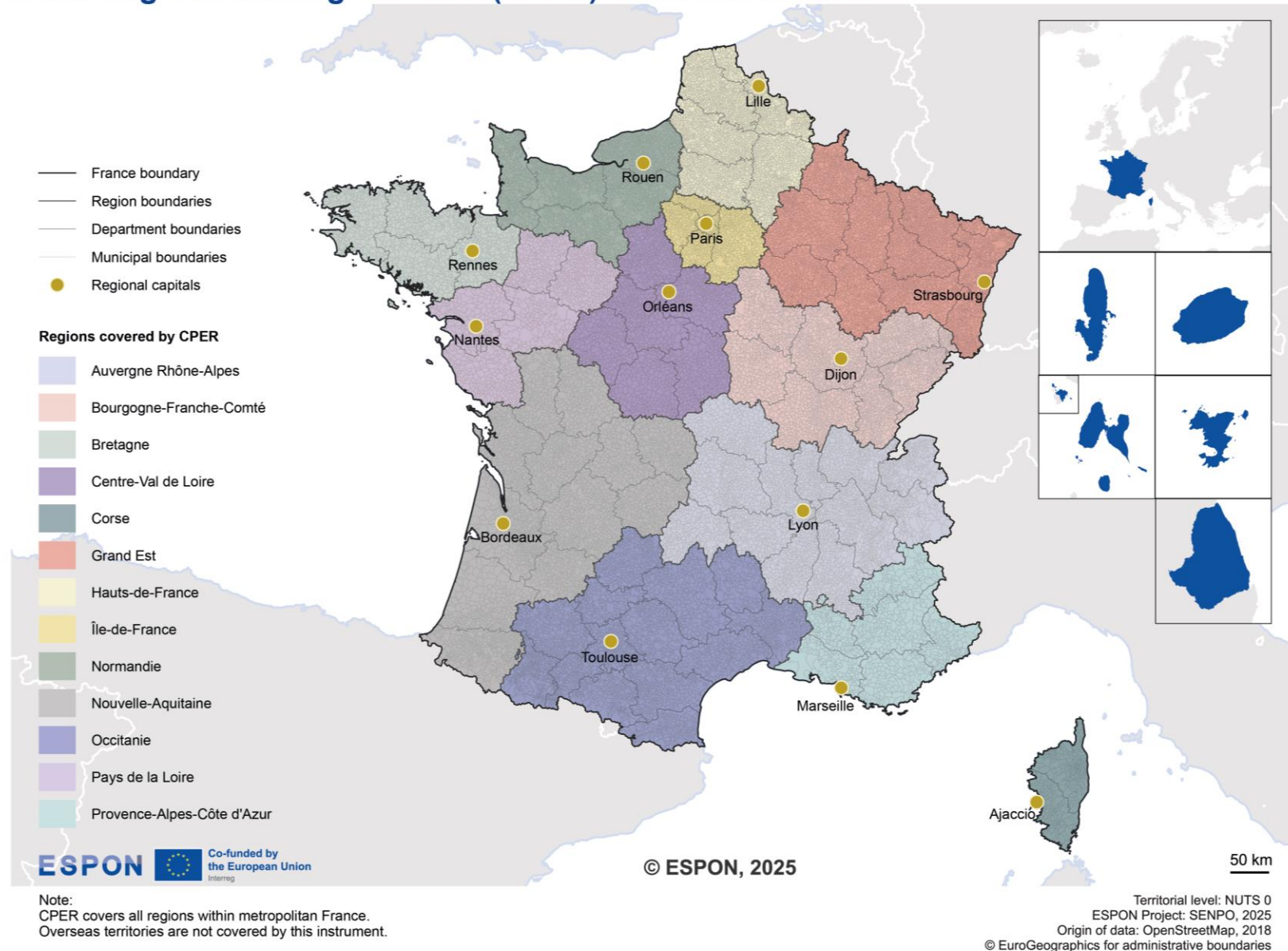
OSI/Partnership	EU Funding (€)	State Budget (€)	TOTAL (€)
1. Great Masurian Lakes Functional Area / Association "Great Masurian Lakes 2020"	101,356,876	5,699,947	107,056,823
2. Blue West / Association of Municipalities and Counties of the Elbląg Canal and Iława Lake District	87,752,642	5,161,919	92,914,561
3. Cittaslow Towns / Association "Polish Cittaslow Towns"	52,356,221	2,646,386	55,002,607
4. Olsztyn Functional Urban Area / ITI Association of FUA Olsztyn	51,787,200	2,682,647	54,469,847
5. EGO / Association EGO – Land of the Stork	36,012,112	2,118,360	38,130,472
6. Marginalised Areas / Association of Warmian-Masurian Border Municipalities	19,776,666	0	19,776,666
7. Ełk Functional Urban Area / ITI Association of FUA Ełk	6,086,111	358,007	6,444,118
8. Elbląg Functional Urban Area / ITI Association of FUA Elbląg	3,244,444	190,849	3,435,293
9. Warmian-Masurian Tiger	No data	No data	No data
TOTAL (EUR)	358,372,272	18,858,115	377,230,387

Conclusions on Poland's OSI

- ❖ In sum, OSI have played an important role in shaping a more territorial approach to regional policy in Poland. Closely linked with EU Cohesion Policy and its territorial tools such as Integrated Territorial Investments (ITI), OSIs help focus support on places with specific needs.
- ❖ They have encouraged cooperation between municipalities, improved coordination across government levels, and strengthened regional planning based on local conditions and opportunities.
- ❖ At the same time, the experience shows clear challenges. Many OSI projects have been small and scattered, often driven by the need to use available funding quickly rather than by long-term strategies.
- ❖ Limited administrative capacity, legal barriers to cooperation, and overlapping territorial boundaries have made it difficult to plan and deliver larger, more strategic initiatives.
- ❖ In some regions, the desire to distribute funds evenly has weakened OSI's territorial focus.
- ❖ Looking ahead, OSI can become a stronger tool for balanced development if more attention is given to building local capacity, clarifying how OSI areas are defined, and supporting genuine cooperation between municipalities within functional areas and spatial planning therein.
- ❖ Better coordination between national and regional levels will also help ensure that OSIs guide investment toward shared, long-term goals for Poland's diverse territories.

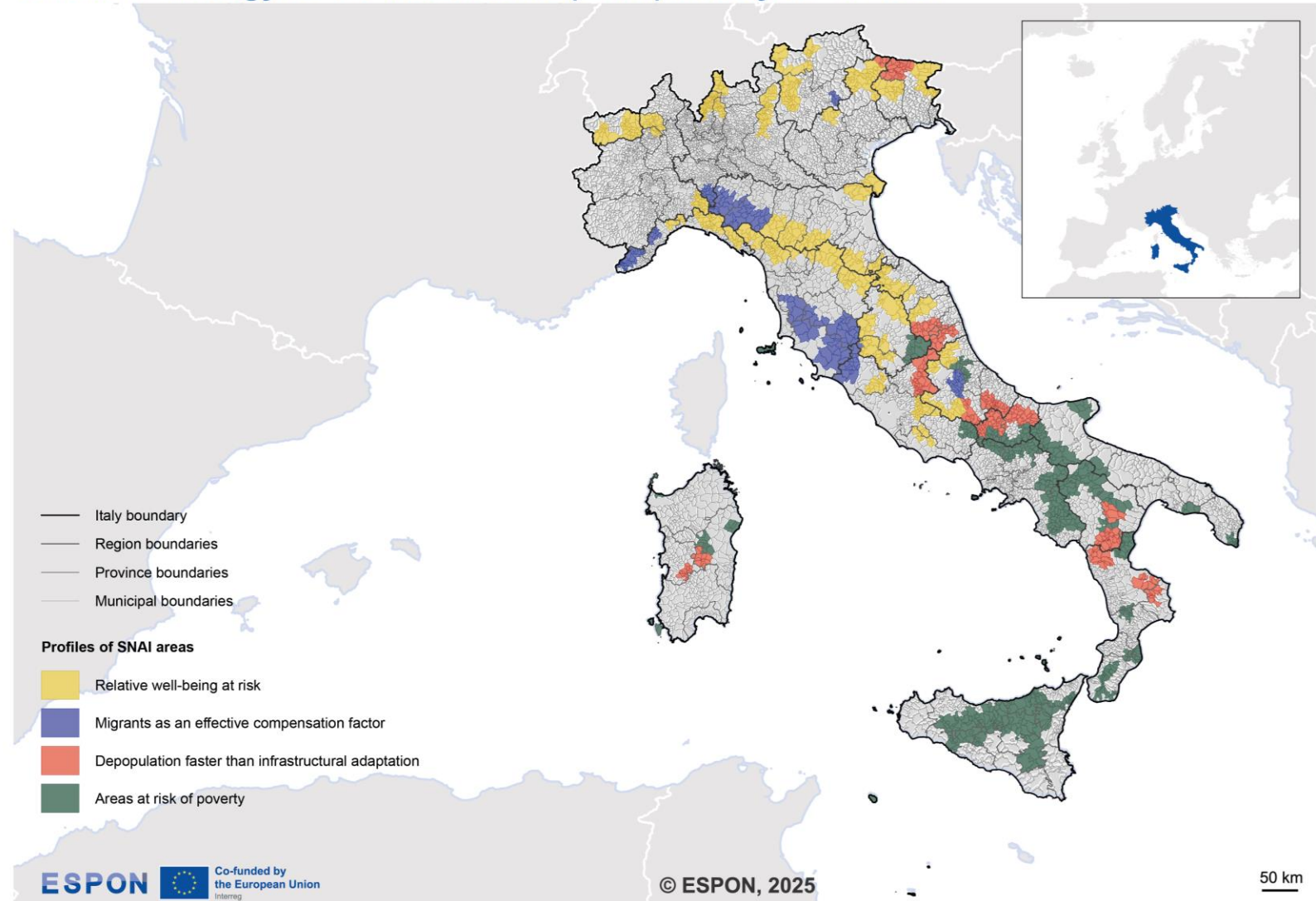
- ❖ The State-Region Planning Contracts, known as Contrats de Plan État-Région (CPER), are the central instruments of territorial planning and investment in France.
- ❖ Established under the 1982 decentralisation reforms, they formalise cooperation between the national government and regional councils through multiannual contractual agreements.
- ❖ Each contract defines shared strategic priorities and sets out the co-financing of structural projects designed to strengthen regional development, competitiveness, and social cohesion.
- ❖ For the 2021–2027 programming period, the CPERs reflect an updated approach that places greater emphasis on the ecological and energy transition, research and innovation, social cohesion, and the modernisation of infrastructure. This generation of contracts represents more than €40 billion in joint investment, with roughly half contributed by the State and half by regional councils

State-Region Planning Contract (CPER) in France as of 2025



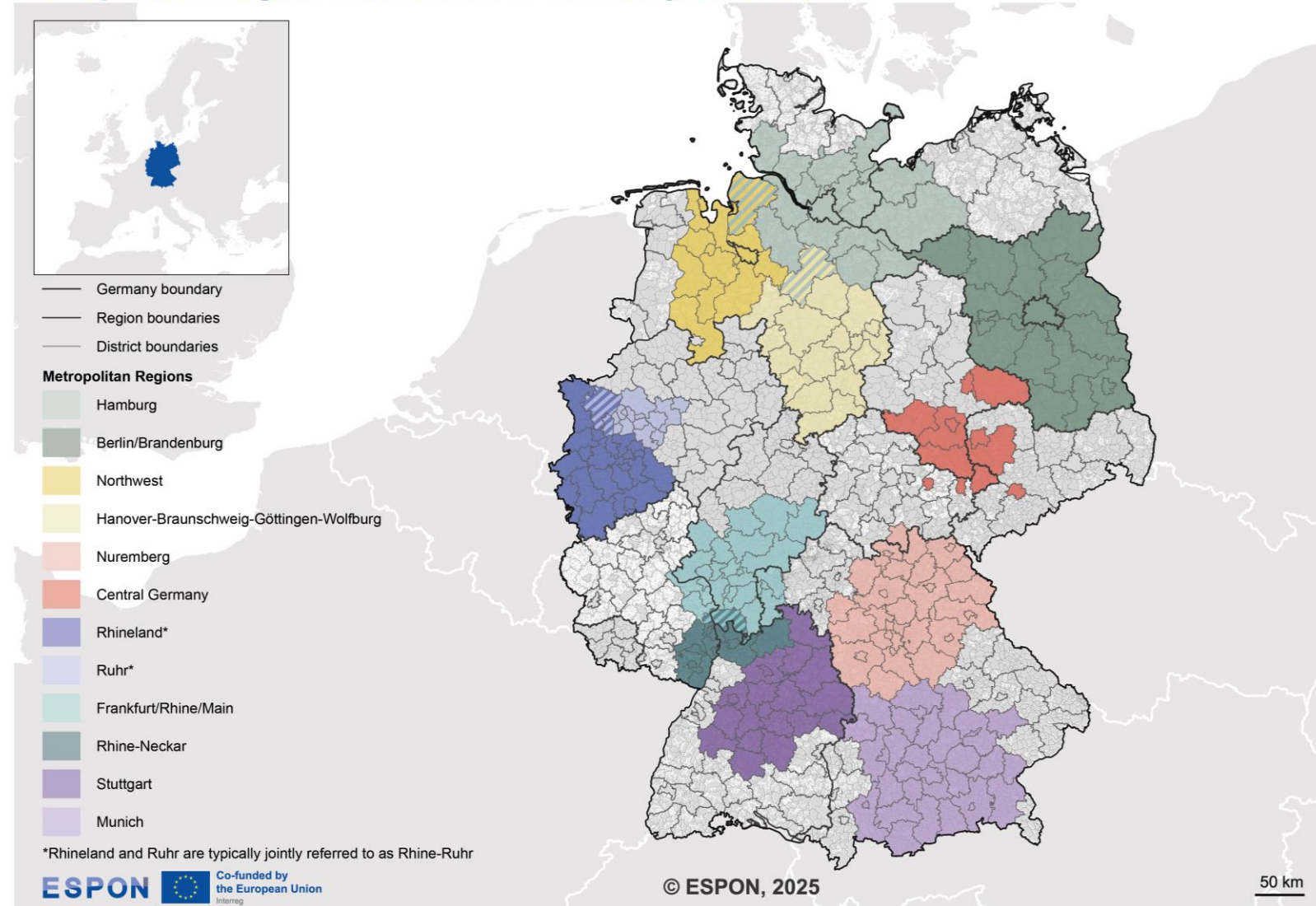
- ❖ The Italian National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI) is a place-based framework for investment in service provision and local development that aims to promote the re-population and revitalisation of rural and peripheral territories
- ❖ The SNAI targets rural, remote and peripheral territories facing demographic decline, low population density and limited access to essential services such as healthcare, education and transport

National Strategy as for Inner Areas (SNAI) in Italy as of 2025



- ❖ In 1995, the German Ministerial Conference on Spatial Planning (MKRO) coined a new spatial planning category called “European Metropolitan Regions”
- ❖ Each metropolitan regions, cities and rural areas cooperate across administrative boundaries, strengthening cooperation and promoting territorial cohesion.
- ❖ Their fields of capacities vary, covering tasks such as planning and investment measures, and are conditioned by the whether the MRs are formal government levels in the German multi-level system. Accordingly, some carry out statutory tasks, while others are registered associations engaging in business promotion, marketing etc.

Metropolitan Region instrument in Germany as of 2025



Note:
Diagonal lines indicate overlapping territories of Metropolitan Regions

Origin of data: adapted from Bundesamt für Kartographie und Geodäsie, 2024; Initiativkreis Europäische Metropolregionen in Deutschland (n.d.)
Territorial level: NUTS 0
ESPON Project: SENPO, 2025
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