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ESPON seminar

Plānotāju plenārs

2026. gada 4.–5. jūnijs, Cēsis

“Challenges for service provision in rural regions. Results of a European-wide analysis and conclusions for regional planning”

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ESPON EGTC, Luxembourg

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TCP International, Germany

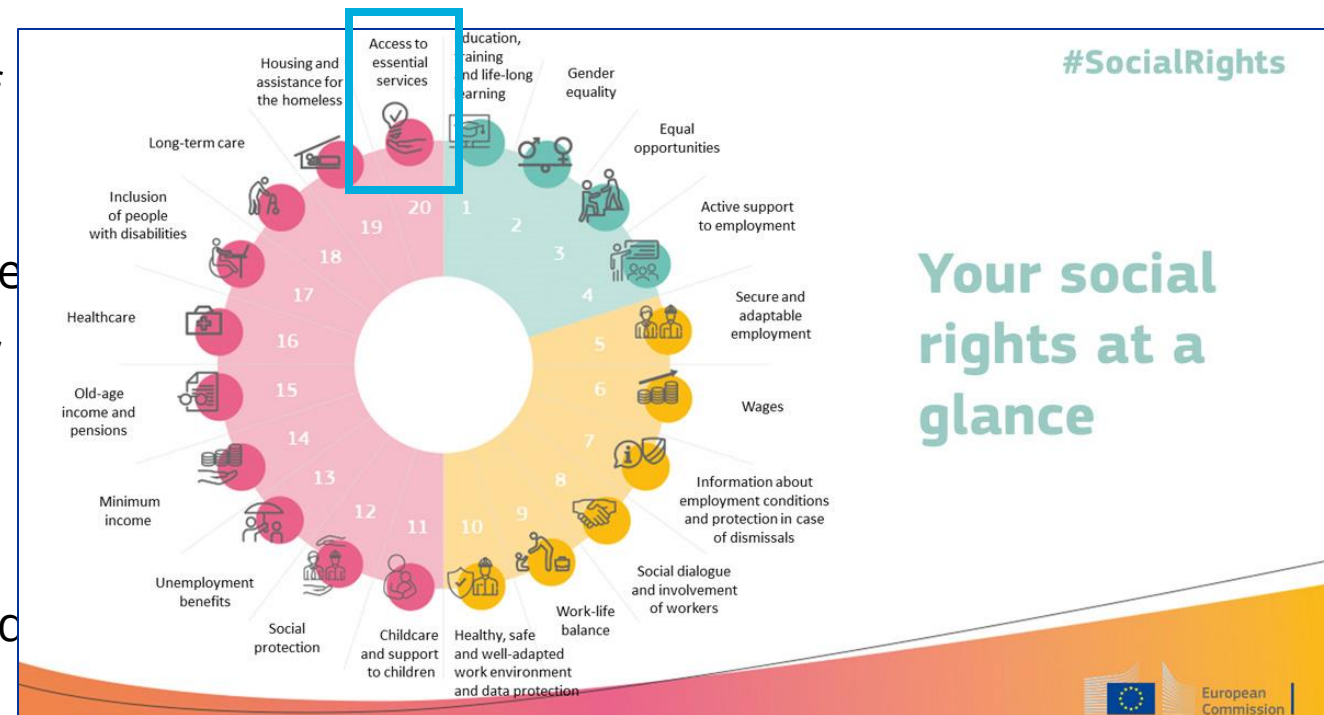


Presentation agenda

- Context of the ESPON DESIRE project
- Service provision in Europe
- Challenges of service provision
- DESIRE: Good practice examples in Europe
- Policy conclusions
- ESPON resources

The context

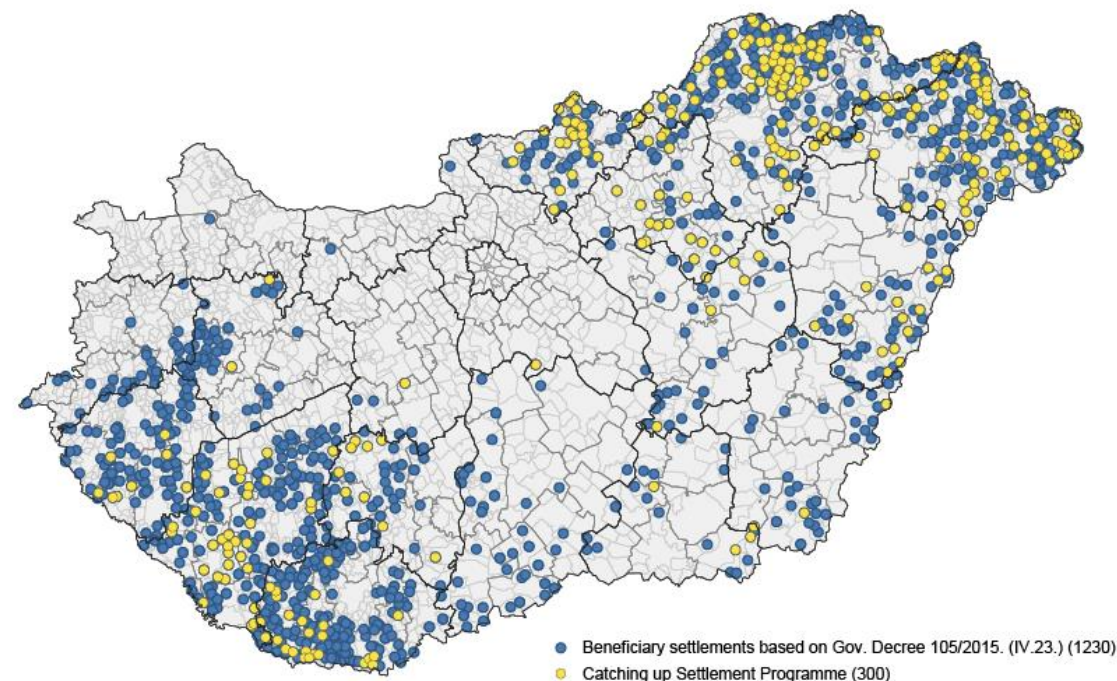
- Citizens' right to **affordable and good-quality services** is underlined in EU documents towards stronger social Europe (e.g. the European Pillar of Social Rights).
- This involves obligation of governments to provide such services as: childcare, education, healthcare, long-term care, housing, inclusion of people with disabilities, basic services (water, electricity, banking and internet).
- Various reports produced by EU institutions provide an overview of solutions applied in the Member States to satisfy the right.
- However, the **pan-European territorial perspective** on access to and sustainable provision of such services **is lacking**.



Interest of the Hungarian Presidency

- How the provision of services of general interest in lagging regions and areas with special needs is addressed in European countries and regions?
- Lagging regions** = “Low-growth regions” and “Low-income regions”.
- Areas with special needs** = lacking a critical mass; are demographically shrinking and/or aging; are remote from urban centres; and/or have a low potential accessibility in the European or national context.
- Focus on the existing solutions that are **innovative**, **unconventional** and **experimental**, but on the other hand, that also proved their value to be **sustainable** and **viable** for citizens, communities and businesses.

The beneficiary settlements and the catching-up settlement (FeTe)



Source: Ministry of Public Administration and Regional Development of Hungary

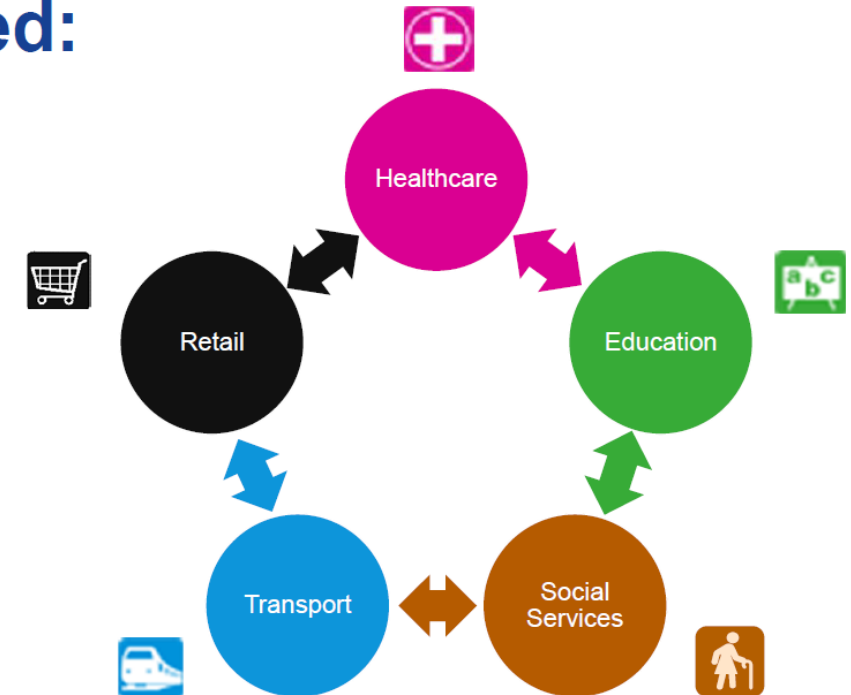
Policy support by ESPON

- A dedicated ESPON DESIRE project (*Delivery of Essential Services in lagging REgions: Transferable Experiences from across Europe*) to:
 - Analyse territorial distribution of five types of services of general interest (SGI).
 - Identify which SGI are essential at what territorial level, and how they could be organised to avert depopulation and offer pre-conditions for ensuring a good quality of life.
 - Identify patterns, successes and challenges in the delivery of SGI and explore alternative solutions (digital, mobile, private sector-driven).
 - Provide learning points and actionable insights that can support policy development in regions facing challenges.

- [Executive report](#) to synthesise the new evidence.

- [Policy brief](#) to extract main findings.

Services addressed:



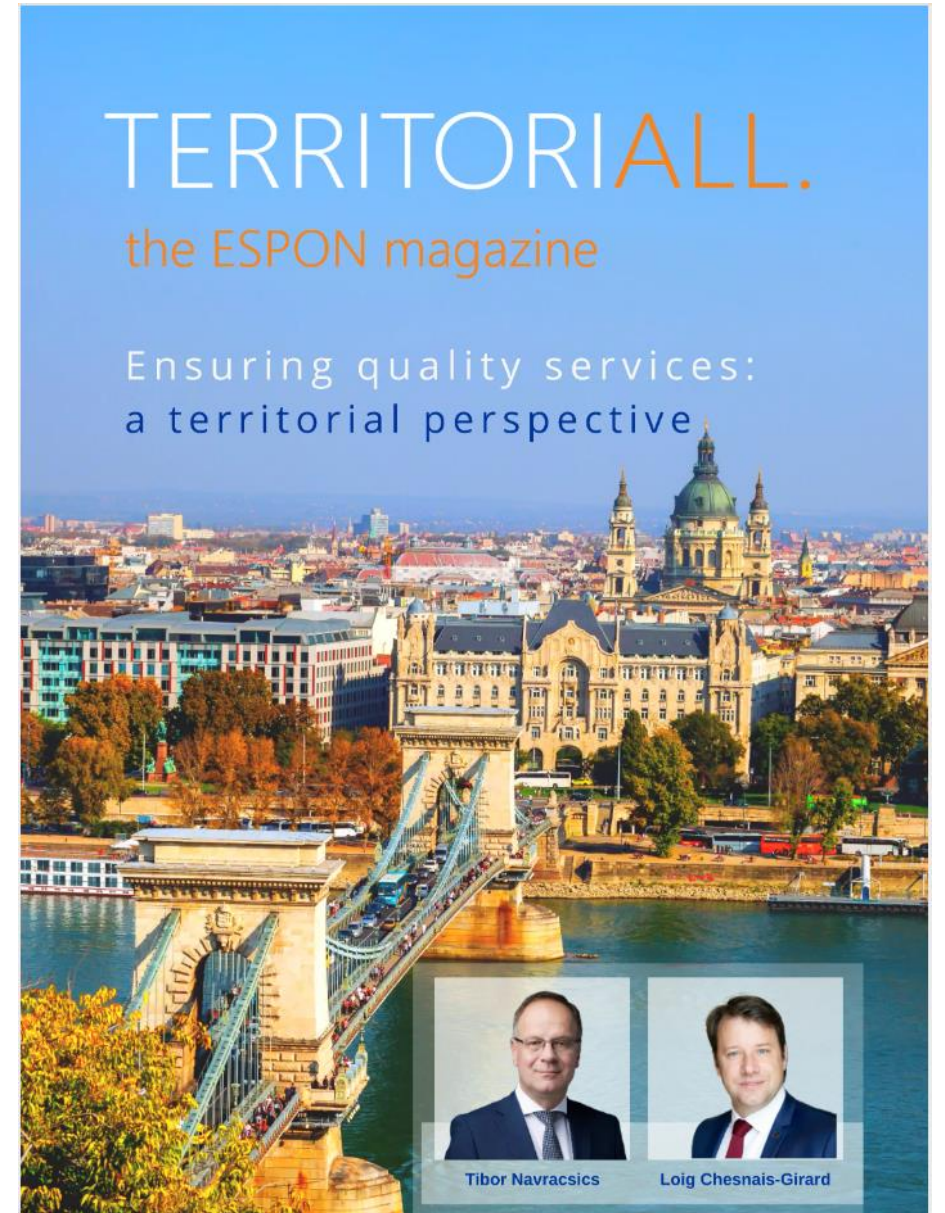


Services of general interest

Essential services

Public services

Services





Services of general interest (SGIs)

Increasing attention vs. strong pressure

- One of the 20 principles of European Pillar of Social Rights (2020)
 - Recent studies: JRC (2022), OECD (2024), 9th Cohesion Report (2024) addressed quality of access to services
 - Objectives:
 - Increasing well-being of populace
 - Balanced territorial development
 - Equity and fairness
 - Changing “Zeitgeist” away from neo-liberal concentration towards place-based approaches (smart, specialization, smart villages, ...)
- Demographic and social developments (depopulation, aging, migration, isolation)
 - Changing demand
 - Limited transport infrastructures (in particular regarding public transport)
 - Unfavorable market conditions for service providers
 - Limited political will to invest
 - New technologies with unequal access
 - Costs and micro-economic considerations

Services considered in DESIRE



Childcare



Elderly care



Doctors



Hospitals



Primary schools



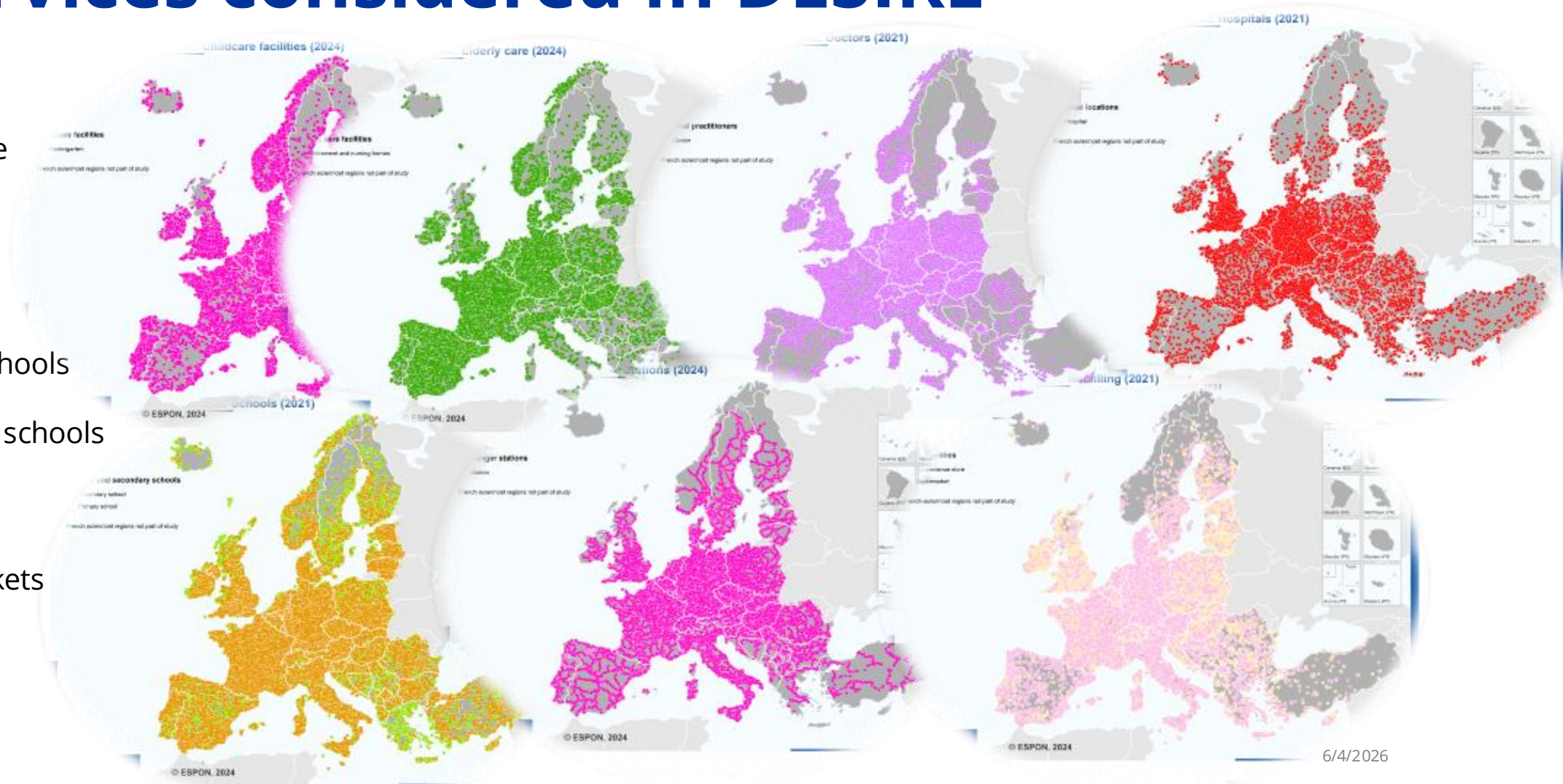
Secondary schools



Stations



Supermarkets

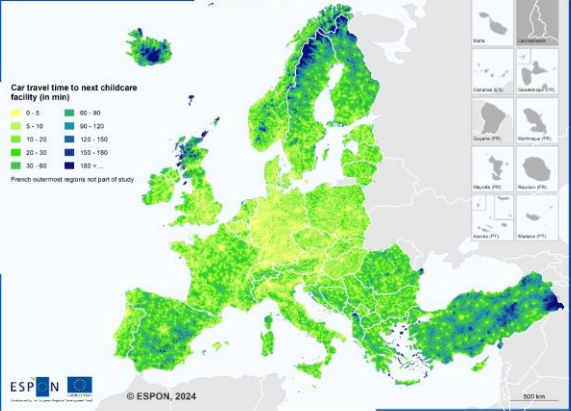




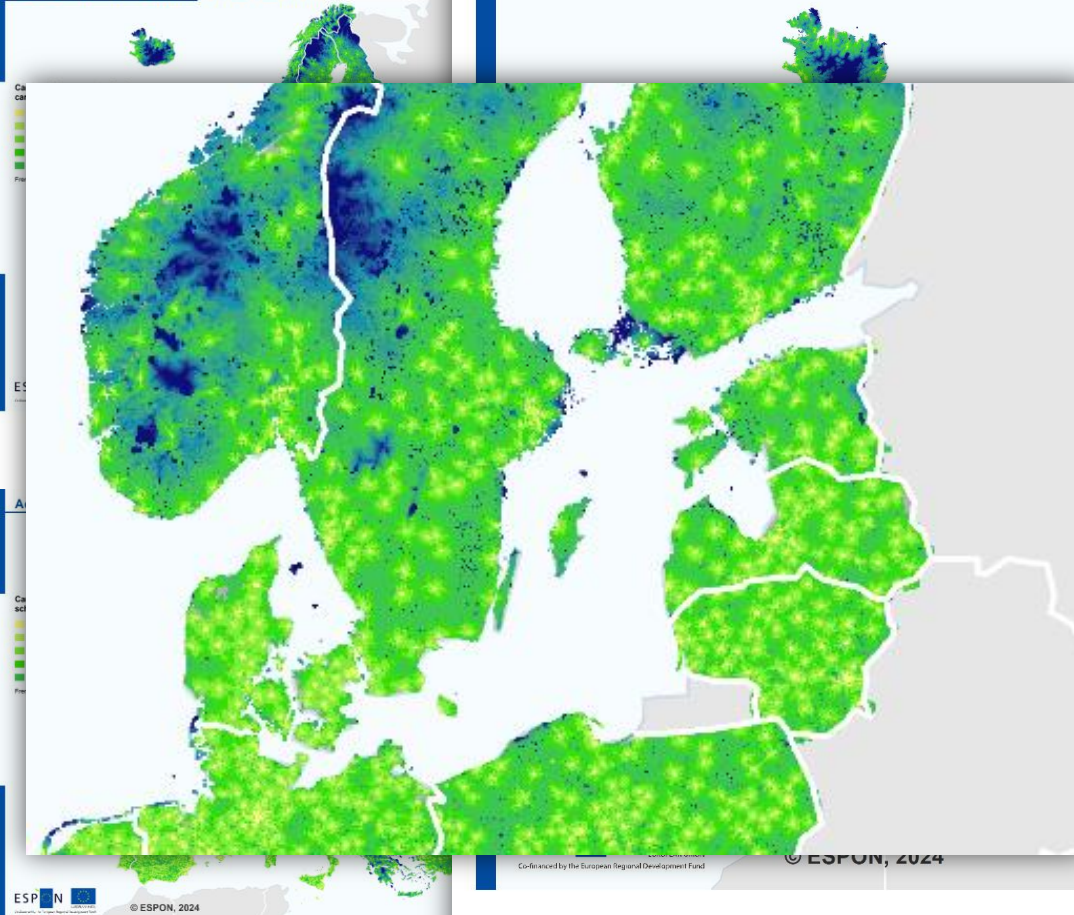
Access to services

Access to hospitals by car 2024 (in min)

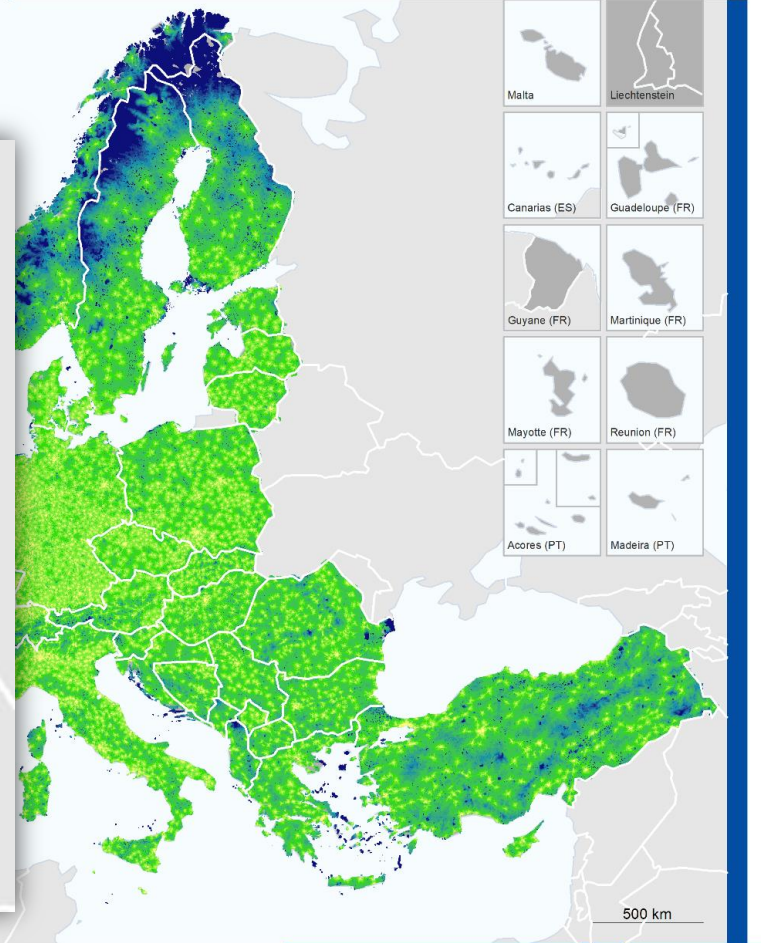
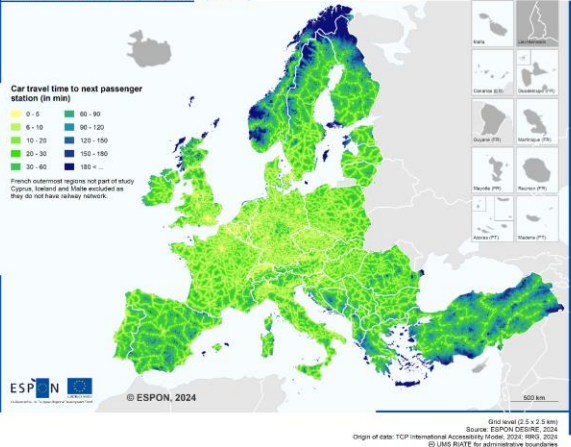
Access to childcare facilities by car 2024 (in min)



Access to elderly care facilities by car 2024 (in min)



Access to stations by car 2024 (in min)



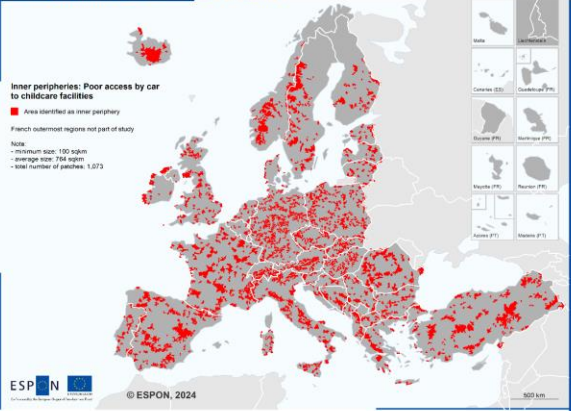


Hospitals: Population living in different time bands (%)

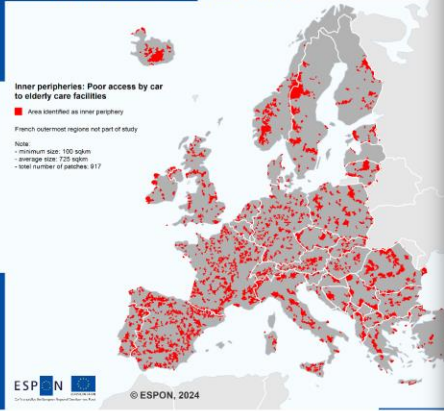
Selected countries	0-30 min	30-60 min	60-120 min	120 < ... min
Czech Republic	96.62	2.84	0.51	0.03
Denmark	96.69	2.95	0.22	0.14
Estonia	94.88	4.68	0.23	0.20
Finland	86.40	10.17	2.67	0.79
Germany	98.25	1.34	0.37	0.05
Latvia	96.64	3.13	0.13	0.10
Lithuania	97.73	1.67	0.47	0.08
Norway	78.09	12.26	6.58	3.04
Poland	93.54	5.78	0.53	0.16
Sweden	89.10	9.08	1.42	0.39
All ESPON countries	92.4	6.1	1.2	0.4

Inner peripheries

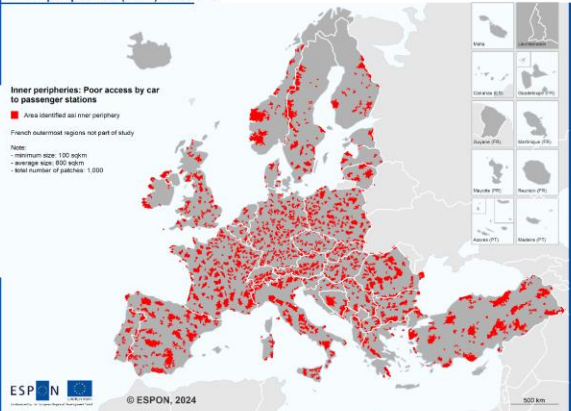
Inner peripheries (2024): Childcare facilities



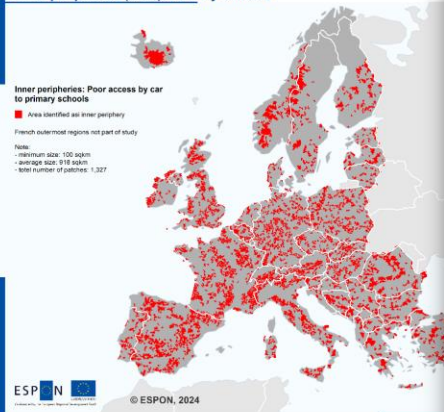
Inner peripheries (2024): Elderly care facilities



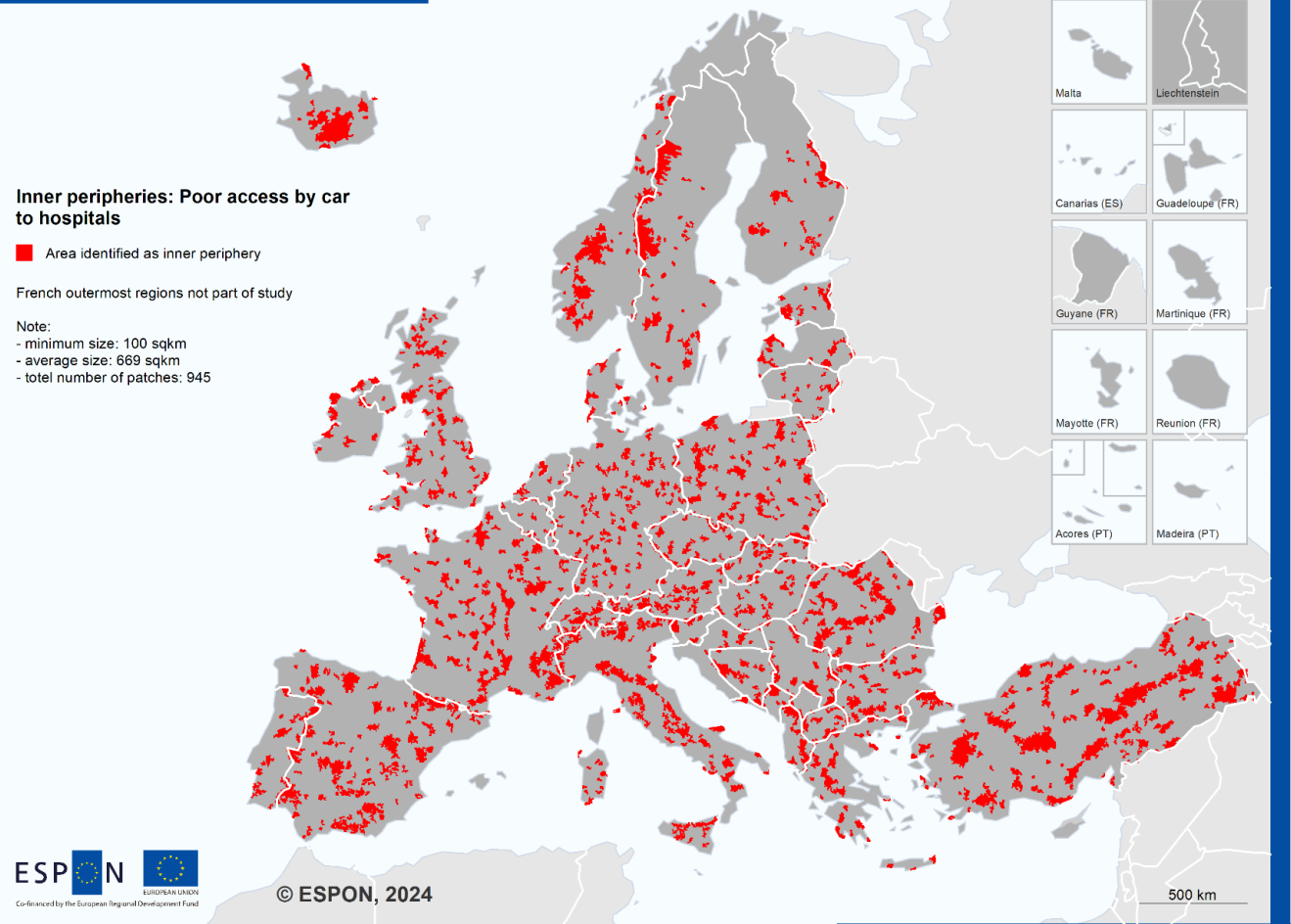
Inner peripheries (2024): Stations



Inner peripheries (2024): Primary schools

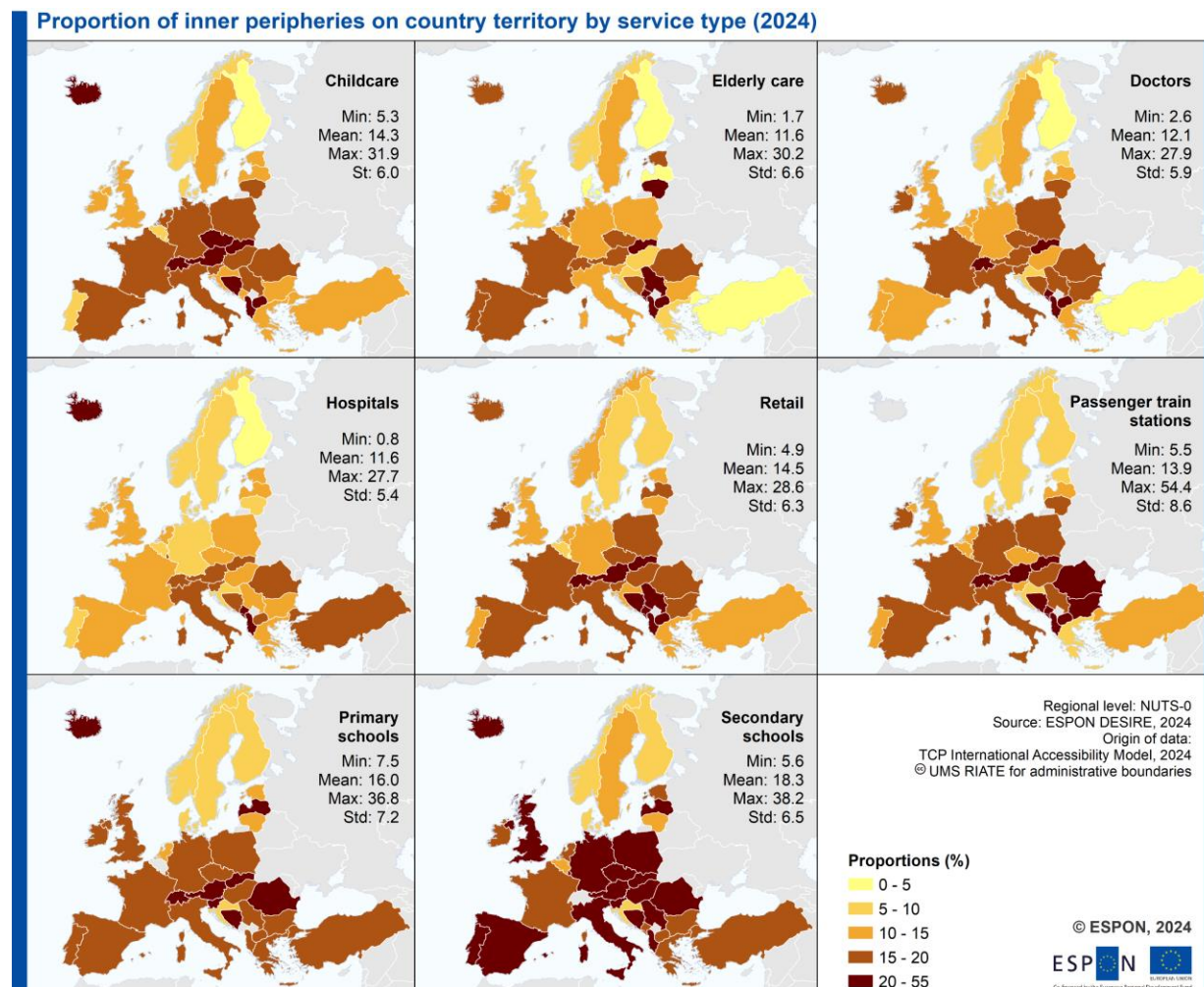


Inner peripheries (2024): Hospitals

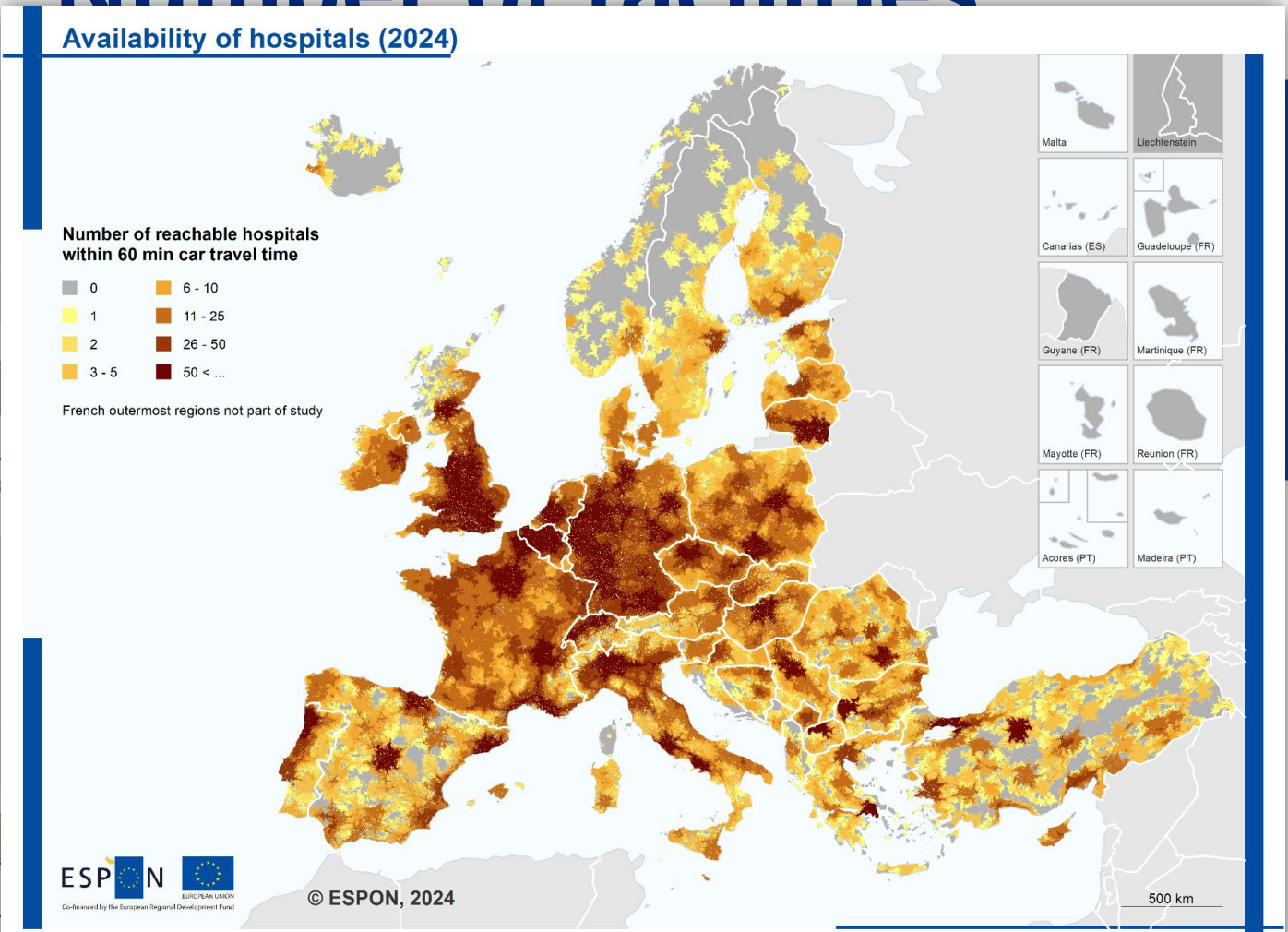
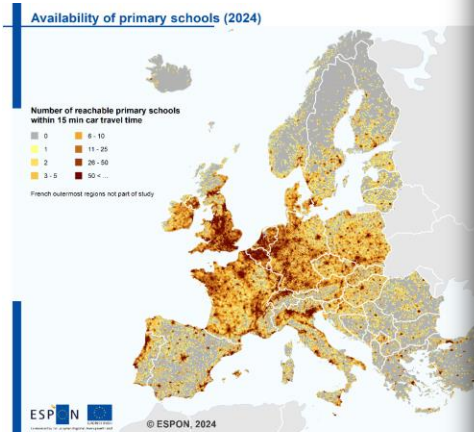
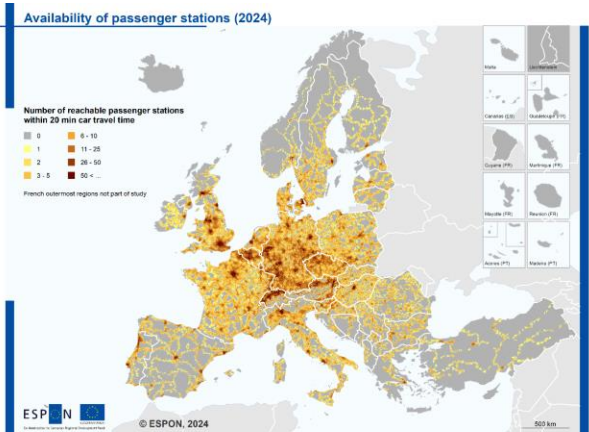
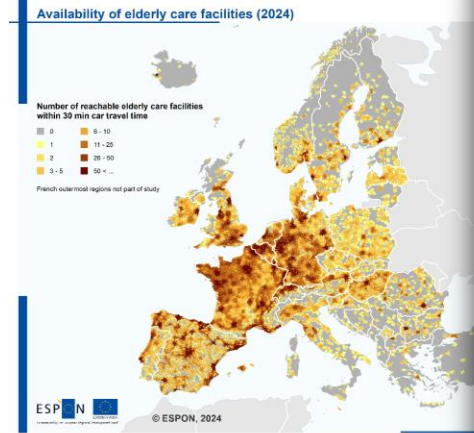
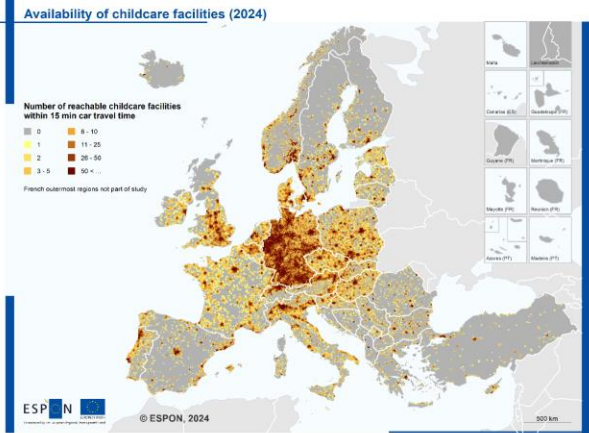


Proportion of inner peripheries

Selected countries	Hospitals - Share of IPs (%)	
	Area	Population
Czech Republic	13.52	2.94
Denmark	7.79	1.77
Estonia	13.03	0.74
Finland	3.93	0.27
Germany	7.92	2.62
Latvia	11.52	1.68
Lithuania	7.65	0.74
Norway	6.28	0.22
Poland	12.70	3.40
Sweden	8.50	0.38
All ESPON countries	11.6	2.2

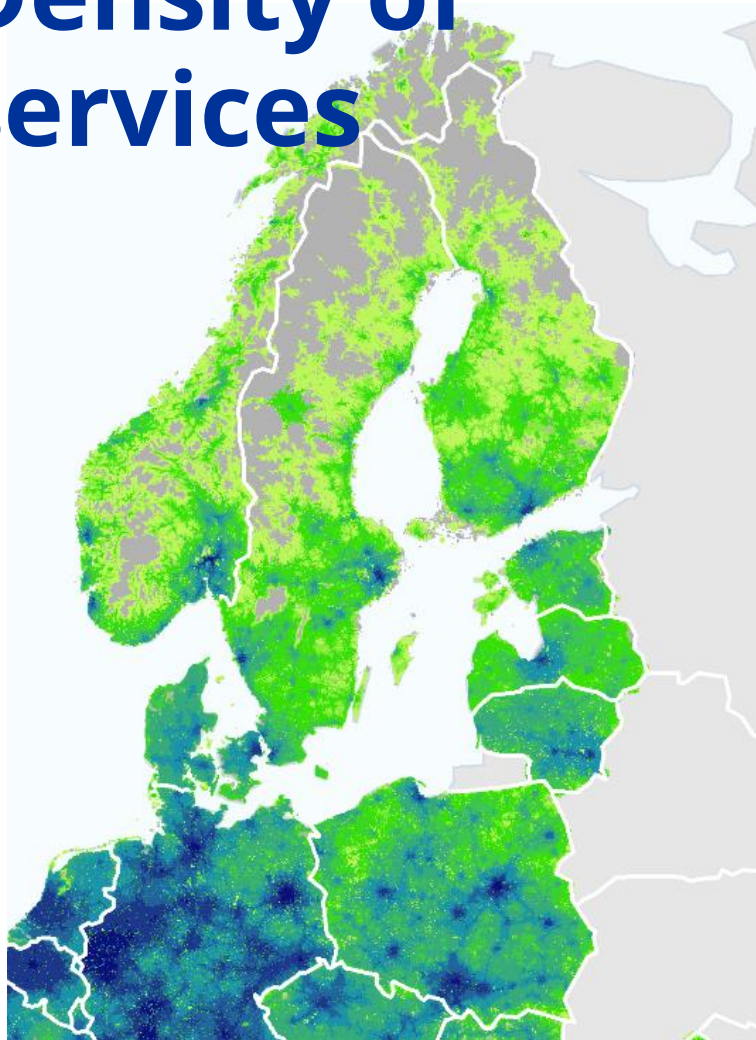


„Having a choice“ - Number of facilities





Density of services



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:

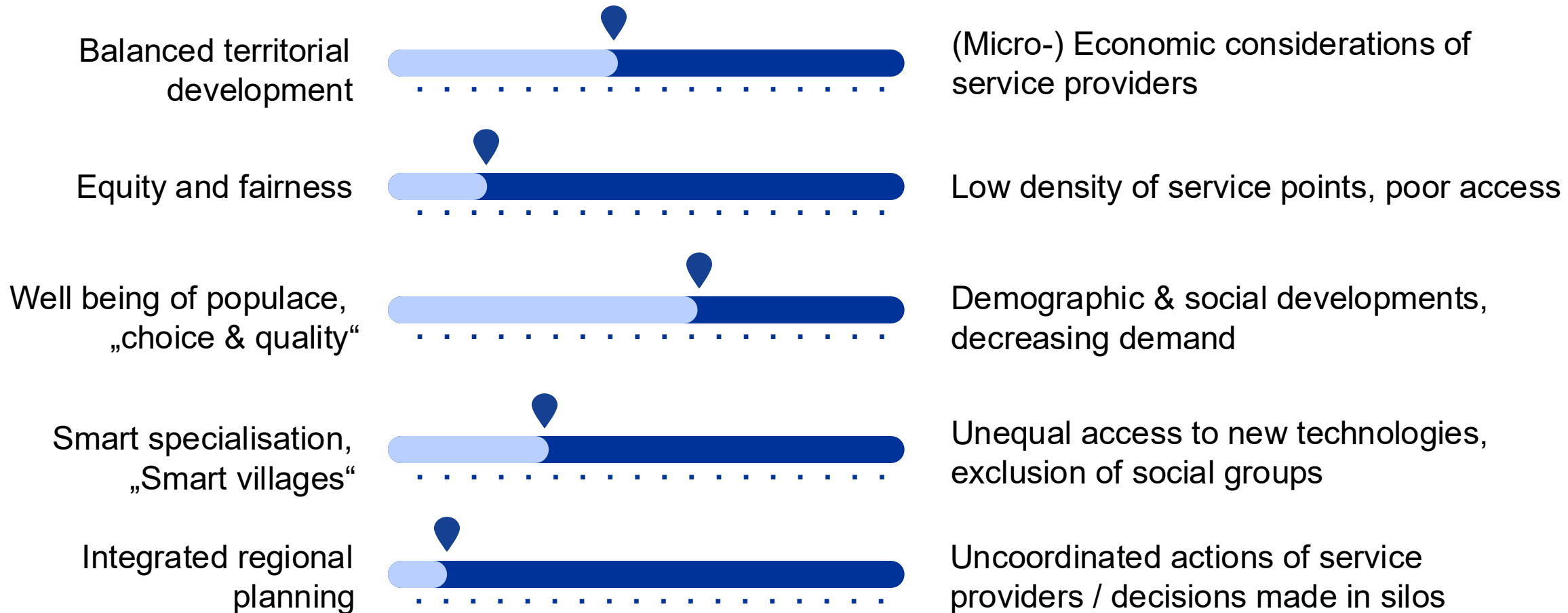
- Childcare: 15 min
- Elderly care: 30 min
- Doctors: 30 min
- Hospitals: 60 min
- Retail: 15 min
- Stations: 20 min
- Primary schools: 15 min
- Secondary schools: 60 min

French outermost regions not part of study





SGIs: Policy objectives and interventions

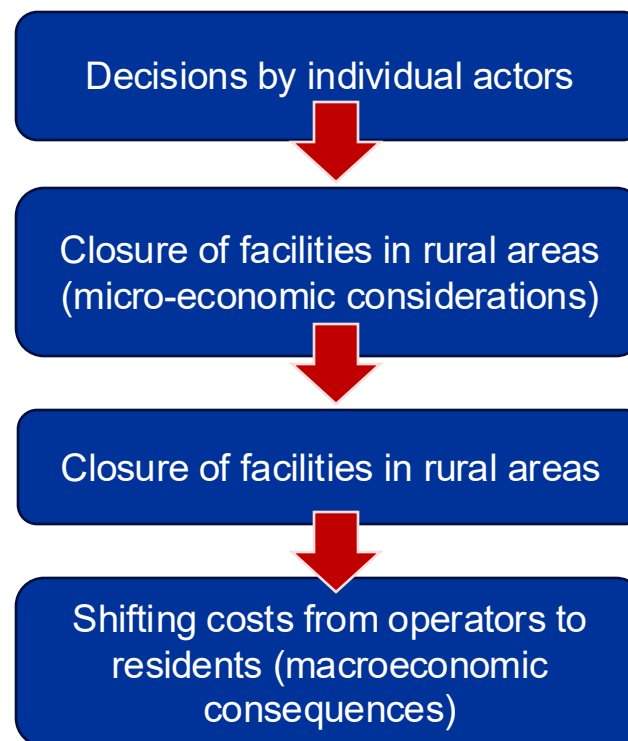
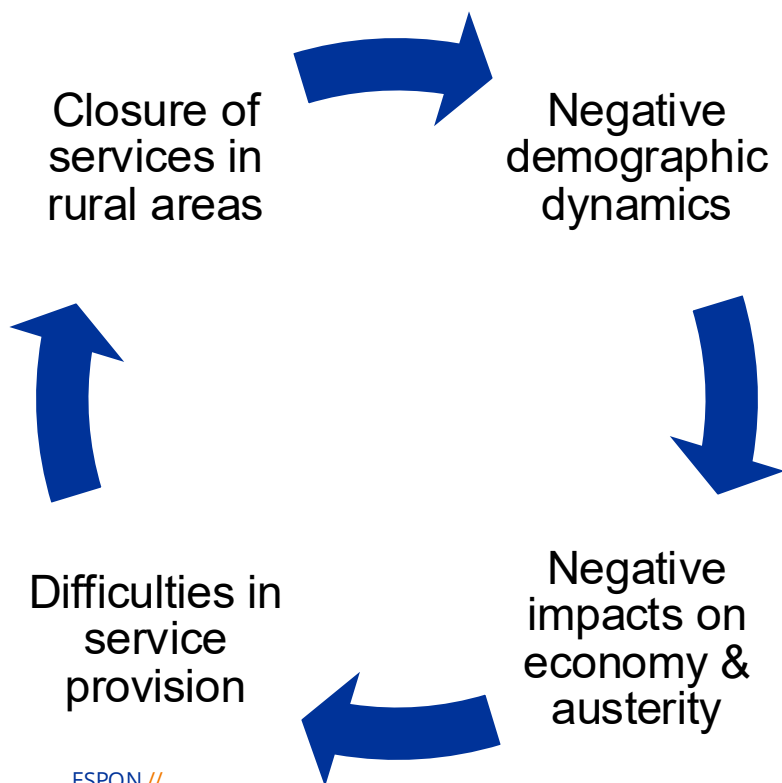


SGI provision: Challenges in rural areas

- **Demographic trends:**
 - overaging
 - out-migration
 - population decrease
- **Economic development:**
 - household income,
 - concentration of activities,
 - lack of labour force and business successors,
 - austerity and micro-economic considerations
- **SGIs:**
 - different providers / actors / decision-makers involved
 - Difficulties in providing high-quality SGIs
- **Data and information:**
 - Lack of data, poor data quality
 - Lack of data and information exchange
 - Lack of coordination of service providers = poor decisions

SGI provision: Risk of vicious cycle

- **Conflict:** need for optimization of service provision vs. persistence of current structures



” If you tell people to close a facility to save money, you’re telling them they’re worthless

Good practice examples: overview

- short good practices: 32 examples across 19 countries presented in standardized fact-sheets

Thematic area	Examples	Countries
Health care	5	FI, SE, RO, IE, PT-ES
Retailing	8	DE, EL, HR, FR, IE (2x), ES, NO
Social infrastructures	4	HU, LV, NO, IT
Transport	6	PT, LT, CZ, DE, UK, AT
Education	4	FI, SE, HU, FR
Multi-sectoral solutions	4	LV, SE, CH, RO

- plus 5 in-depth case studies: Hungary, Finland, Ireland, Spain, **Latvia**
- lessons learnt
- not meant for 1:1 transfer, but source of inspiration, adaptations needed to local context

CASE STUDY n°29

Joint state and municipality customer service centers (Latvia)

OVERVIEW OF THE BEST PRACTICE

Service: Customer Services
Most importantly: The possibility to apply for a large number of state and local government services in one place close to the place of residence
Provider: Public administration (national, regional, local)
Starting date: 2014
Context: Ensuring the availability of services throughout the territory of Latvia
Location: Town, Region (Country).

DESCRIPTION OF THE INITIATIVE AND CHALLENGES

Joint State and Municipality Customer Service Centres provide opportunities to get direct access to services (for example, apply for benefits), improve digital skills by receiving instructions from centre employees, and access devices and the Internet. The infrastructure of unified customer service centres includes Wi-Fi, computers, and workplace for customers, and there are also e-consultants for e-services and the possibility to receive different state and municipality public services.

The first centre pilot project was launched in 2014, and since then, an extensive network has flourished throughout Latvia, with the latest centres being opened in March 2024. At present, Joint State and Municipality Customer Service Centres are operational in 35 municipalities, spanning 215 locations. These centres are the result of a collaborative effort between the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Regional Development (VARAM), local governments, and the Union of Local Governments of Latvia.

The aim of the development of the network of Joint State and Municipality Customer Service Centres was to provide accessible public services that are people and business-friendly. It was developed within a conception of the Improvement of the Public Service System and in close collaboration with ministries, local governments, NGOs, and society. Before the development of these centres there was a very fragmented approach in public service delivery in Latvia. An important aspect of this initiative is also the implementation and coordination of e-Governance both at the national and municipal levels. It includes the establishment of a one-stop principle for the provision of state and local government services and the implementation of modern and effective information and communication technologies in the public sector.

In each service centre, the client can receive information about the e-services of the State Employment Agency, the Register of Enterprises, the Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs, the State Labor Inspectorate, the State Revenue Service, the State Social Insurance Agency, and the State Land Service and assistance in using e-services, as well as information about the nearest municipal and state institutions, their working hours and application procedure.

Objectives of the initiative or best practice:

- Improve access to services.
- Enhance the digital skills of Latvian residents and promote the use of e-services.
- Strengthen the efficiency of public administration.
- Minimize administrative burdens.
- Increase government transparency.

GEOGRAPHIC CONTEXT

Sources: Esri, HERE, Garmin, FAO, NOAA, USGS.

Source: Maris Priekulis, 2020.

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Social Services in Latvia (Case study)

Key Conclusions & Findings

Three service types analysed

01

Long-Term Institutional Care

Residential care in social care institutions for persons who cannot live independently.

02

Day Care Centres

Community-based day services providing support, social activities and assistance during the day.

03

Home Care

Social care delivered at home, enabling people to remain in their own environment as long as possible.

Key Challenges in Social Care

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Geographic Inequality

Social care services are unevenly distributed. Day centres and home care are far better available in the Riga region than in other parts of Latvia.



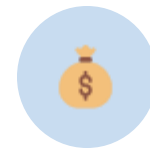
Ageing Population

An ageing society increases demand for care services and places a growing burden on families — driving the need for accessible, community-based solutions.



Institutional Care Gaps

Latvia recognises the inadequacy of institutional care models and is investing in family-environment services closer to home for retirement-age persons.



Unequal Resources

The Latgale region shows lower inter-municipal cooperation, likely linked to fewer financial resources for purchasing services from other municipalities.

POSITIVE DEVELOPMENTS

- 01** Administrative reform (2021) ensured every municipality now offers at least some home care services.
- 02** All 3 service types — institutional, day centre, and home care — are now available across all municipalities.
- 03** Inter-municipal cooperation is growing, especially at the regional and national level.
- 04** Innovative models like the Kurzeme 'Samaritan Mobile Care Complex' are proving effective for remote, rural areas.

Key Enablers for Better Services

Political Support

Municipal leaders who champion social care see significantly better service development.

Management Capacity

The skills of social service managers directly determine the range and quality of local services.

NGO Engagement

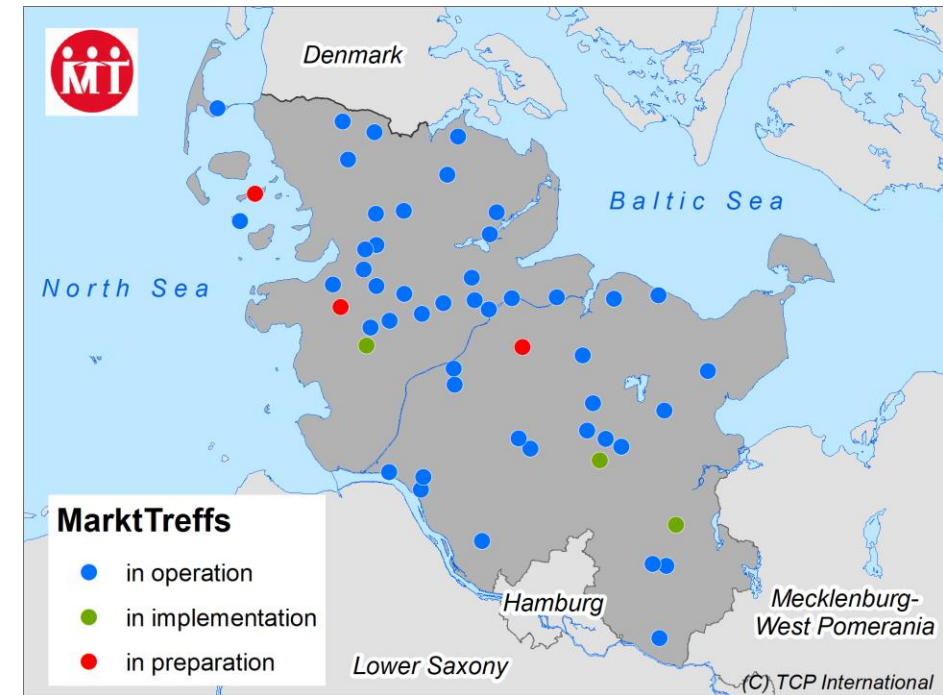
Active NGO participation fills gaps and drives innovation in underserved communities.

Community Solutions

Mobile care models tailored to sparsely populated areas help elderly people remain at home.

Retail: MarktTreff (Schleswig-Holstein, DE)

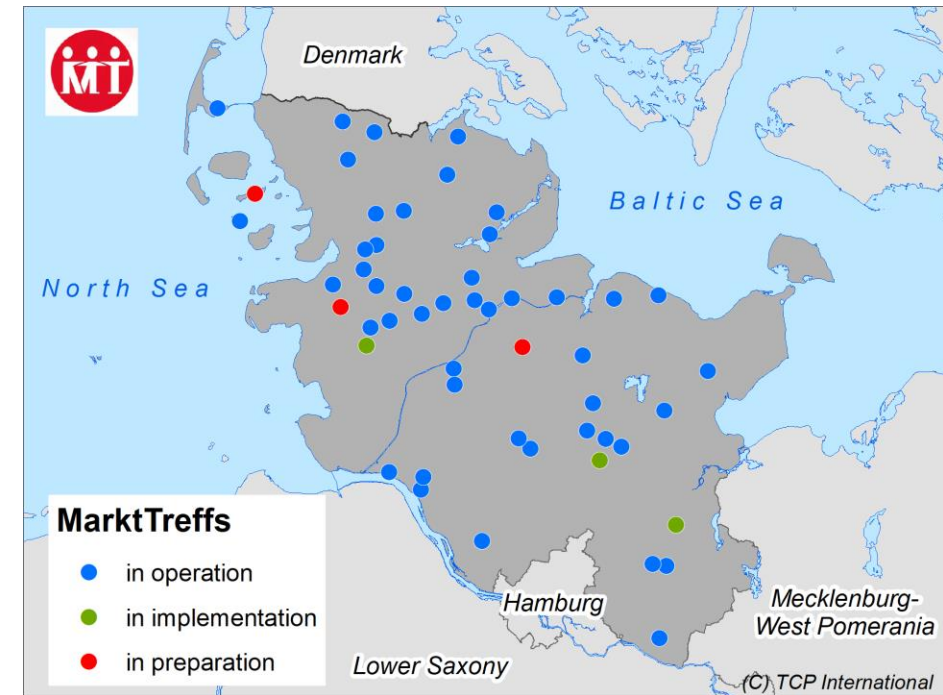
- MarktTreff service points combine
 - Food retail
 - Services: post office, bank, cafe, restaurant, or public admin
 - Meeting place: community centre, town hall, sports
 - Combination depends on local situation
- In villages < 2,500 residents
- Detailed planning by local actors
- State support:
 - Programme started in 1999
 - Implementation and operational support by Government of Schleswig-Holstein
 - Financed through LEADER



46 MarktTreffs in operation, 3 in implementation and 3 planned (June 2024)

Retail: MarktTreff (Schleswig-Holstein, DE)

- Key takeaways
 - Mixture of top-down (concept, financing, support) and bottom-up (planning, adjustment, application) approaches
 - Central concept tailored to local situation by local actors
 - Owners: municipalities, operated by private entity
 - Operation support: flyers and marketing, regular business meetings
 - Hybrid and flexible solution of service provision
- Website: <https://markttreff-sh.de/>



46 MarktTreffs in operation, 3 in implementation and 3 planned (June 2024)



Conclusions

- Significant differences in access to services across Europe and between urban and rural areas
- Inner peripheries (IPs) to be found in all countries
- IPs = Early warning indicator for regional planning
 - Services gaps / low density of service points gives residents feeling of being disadvantaged
 - Risk of falling into vicious circle
 - Risk of widening development gaps between urban and rural areas
- Local population potential needs to be strengthened
 - Pro-active interventions (labour and housing markets, provision of services, ...)
 - Better coordination of provision of services between public and private providers
 - „hear what locals say“ / place-based approaches
- Definition of clear policy objectives, thresholds and regulations
- Future: combined analysis of IPs and population potential to support regional planning



Policy recommendations: 6 „Pathways“

Tailored and equitable service delivery

- Regional needs assessment
- Flexible/adaptable service models
- Innovative solutions „out-of-the-box“
- Prioritise equity in design
- Robust monitoring and evaluation

Strengthening community engagement and ownership

- Empower local communities, „bottom-up“ planning
- Transparent decision making
- Collaboration among stakeholders
- Ensure continuation of interaction

Building resilient and sustainable service models

- Diversify funding sources
- Integrate innovative technologies
- Implement adaptive management practices
- Promote environmental sustainability

Strengthening governance through collaborative approaches

- Establish formal cooperation frameworks
- Enable resource sharing and joint funding
- Share knowledge and best practices
- Build cross-sector partnerships

Data driven planning for service accessibility

- Analyse spatial accessibility
- Identify and safeguard critical service points
- Adaptive planning and monitoring
- Share data and information

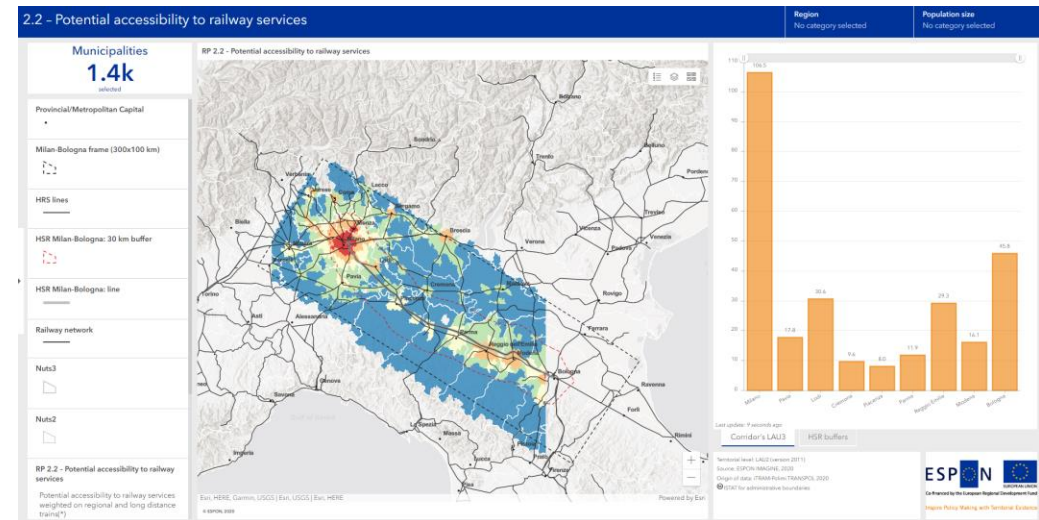
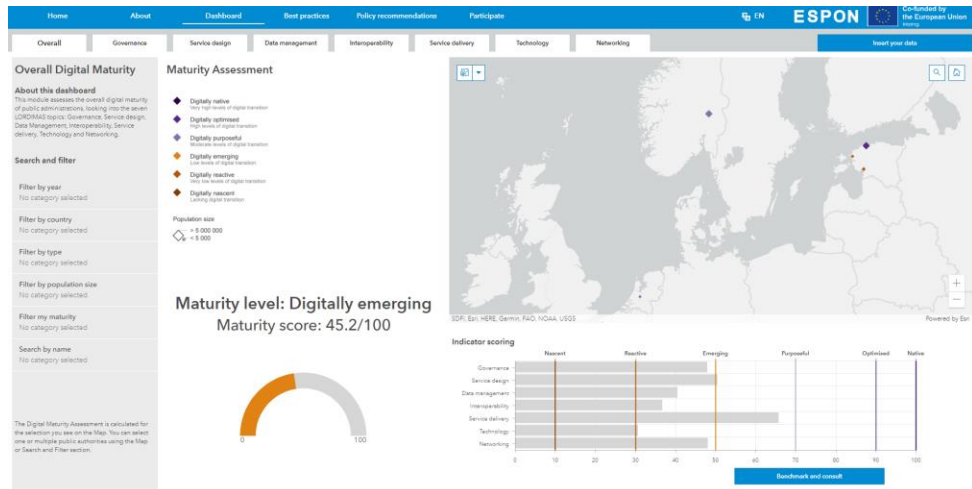
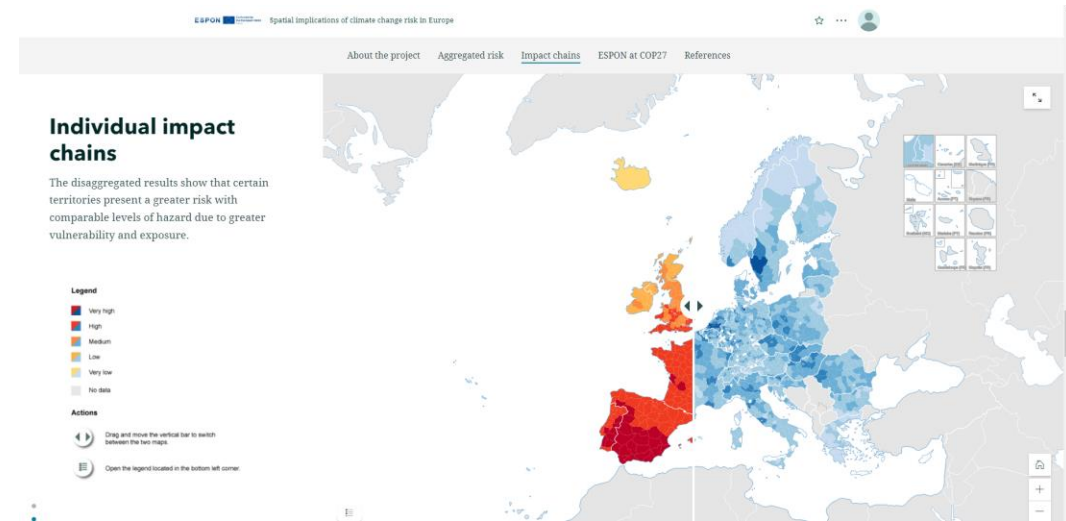
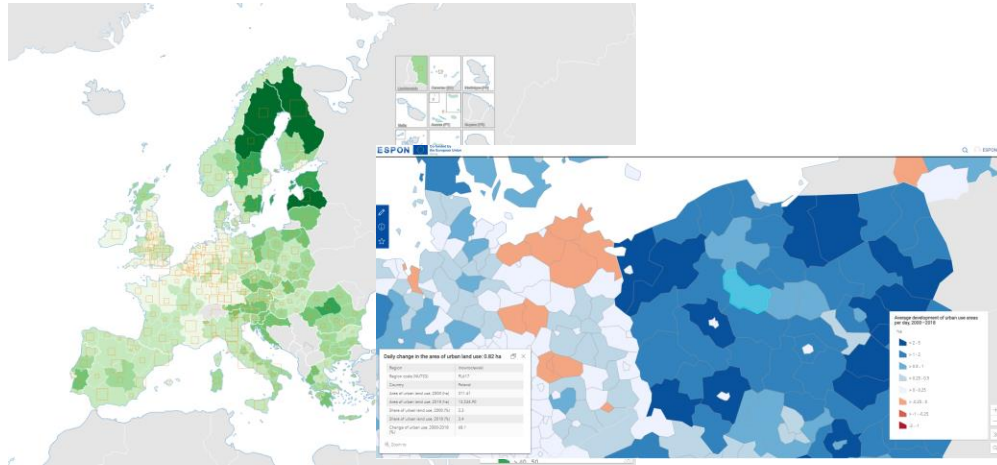
Strengthening retail resilience and accessibility through digital innovations

- Digital infrastructures for rural retailers
- Subsidies digital tools
- Develop local digital marketplaces
- Encourage PPPs for retail innovation
- Develop centralized supply chain platforms



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

<https://portal.espon.eu>

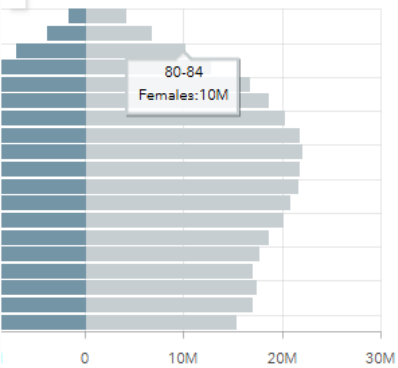
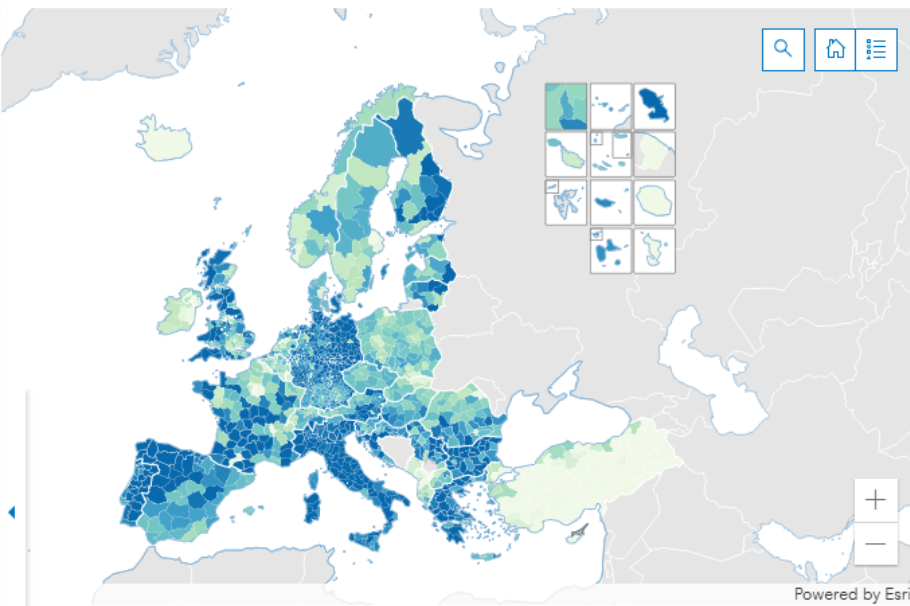


Population structures in Europe

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

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
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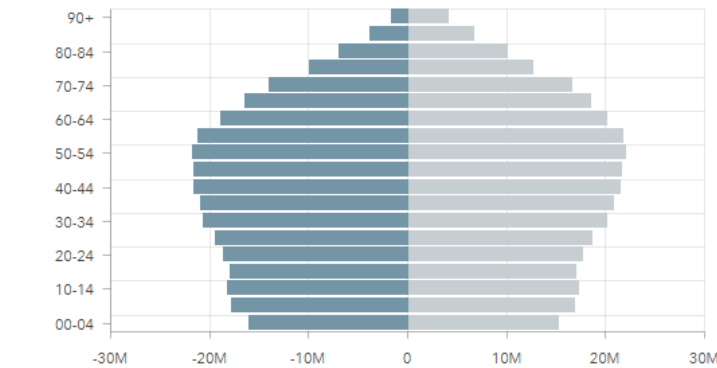
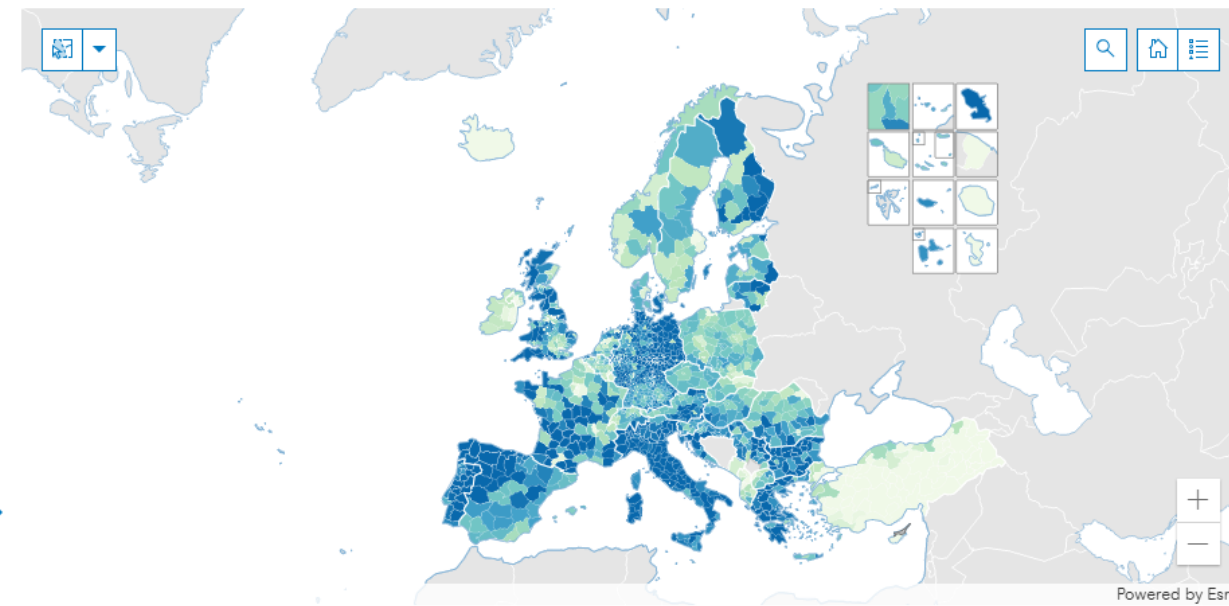
- Apply additional filters**
- Filter by the degree of urbanisation
No category selected
 - Filter by metropolitan regions
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 - Filter by border regions
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 - Filter by mountain regions
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 - Filter by island regions
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 - Filter by sparsely populated regions
No category selected



Median age of the selected area

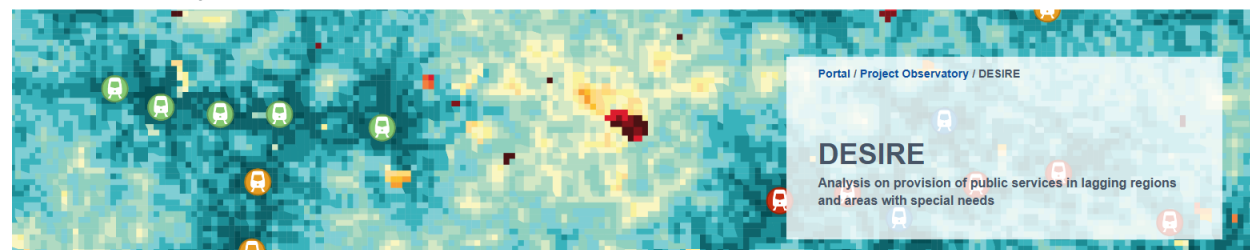
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Step 1: Select reference year 2023	Step 2: Select NUTS level 3	Filter by country No category selected	Select by trading block No category selected
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Median age of the selected area

44.7



Downloads and links

Download ESPON DESIRE data

Item	Last updated	
Travel times by car to the nearest SGIs (grid data)	30/10/2024	
Standardised travel times by car to the nearest SGIs (grid data)	30/10/2024	
SGIs within reasonable travel time by car (grid data)	30/10/2024	
Hospitals (point data)	30/10/2024	
General practitioners (point data)	30/10/2024	
Primary schools (point data)	30/10/2024	
Secondary schools (point data)	30/10/2024	
Childcare facilities (point data)	30/10/2024	
Elderly care facilities (point data)	30/10/2024	
Supermarkets and convenience stores (point data)	30/10/2024	
Railway stations (point data)	30/10/2024	

ESPON DESIRE Project page with interactive content + download of data

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Thank you!

Presentations will be made available to all seminar participants after the event.