

## 2 Remoteness from urban centres

In the EU and OECD jargon, areas are characterise as remote if they are distant from cities of more than 50,000 inhabitants. The distance threshold used is 45 minutes. These two thresholds were chosen because ‘they marked the most marked distinction between rural regions’ (Brezzi et al., 2011; Dijkstra and Poelman, 2008).

TGS, and mountain areas and sparsely populated areas in particular, are in many contexts assimilated to rural areas. This is a misconception. Population in large parts of the NSPA essentially lives in small to medium-sized urban units. There are also cities and towns in mountain areas.

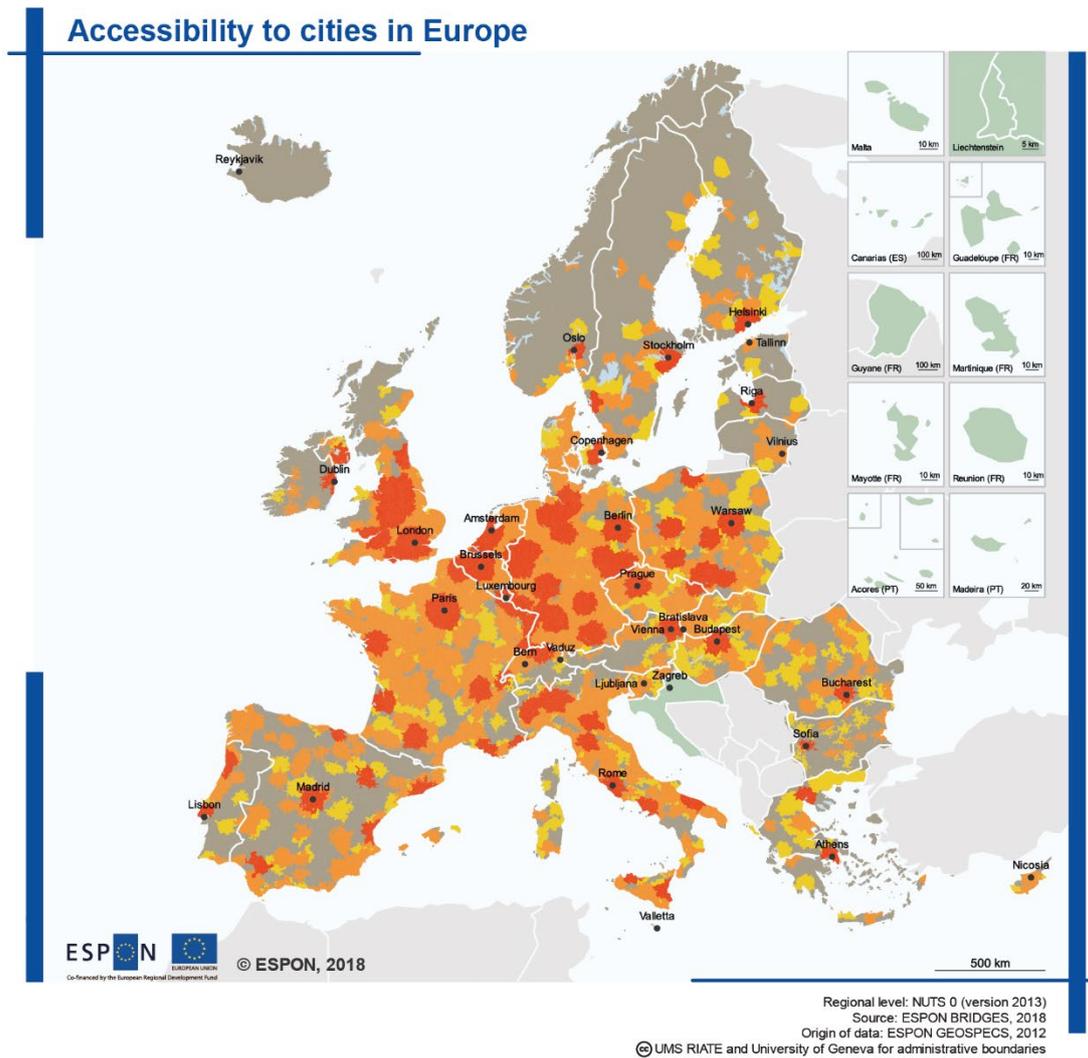
Each category of TGS relates to remoteness in different ways

- **Mountains:** Piedmont areas are attractive for urban development, as exemplified by the numerous metropolitan regions surrounding the Alps. As a result – and as long as the necessary transport infrastructure and services are in place – large parts of mountain massifs are within commuting distance from cities, or can capitalise on the proximity to urban areas through the development of tourism, secondary housing and leisure activities. In contrast, remote mountain areas do not benefit from such advantages. Their specific social and economic issues (compared to accessible mountain areas) tend to be the same as in other sparsely populated areas.
- **Islands:** Remoteness from urban centres give rise to a high dependence on external transport linkages. The standard of the service provided by sea ferries and other forms of physical connectivity has direct implications on the islands’ population levels, economy and quality of life. This objective factor of constraint also gives rise to urban migration, which in turn increases the depopulation challenges faced by some islands. However this objective factor of constraint also differs across islands with some islands, particularly the larger ones, developing their own urban areas and/or centres of economic activity while other islands are distant from such centres. Indeed the extent of distance from urban centres and accessibility differs across islands. The most remote islands face the greatest challenges compared to islands which can more easily access resources from their neighbouring regions.
- **NSPA:** In the direct surrounding of NSPAs, there are several ‘medium-sized’ urban centres (e.g. Umeå, Oulu or Tromsø). These centres are thriving economically. They attract in-migrants from their respective region and other areas. These centres are endowed with extensive educational and R&D infrastructure, have well-functioning service industries and are generally considered competitive in national, and often European, comparisons. Long distances to these centres limit spill-over effects of their economic dynamism to the more remote parts of their hinterland.
- **Other SPA:** Many of these areas are relatively close (within 2h) from large metropolitan areas (e.g. Madrid, Valencia or Barcelona in Spain, or Nice in the inland Côte d’Azur). They are often used as recreation areas, i.e. short-term regional tourists. Insufficient public transportation and road systems limits the increase of these flows.

## 2.1 Representation of remoteness from urban centres

Remoteness from urban centres can be represented through Potential Urban Strategic Horizons (PUSH, see definition in ESPON GEOSPECS). For a given urban area, a PUSH is defined as a selection of municipalities located with 45 minutes from its Morphological Urban Area (MUA) provided that its Functional Urban Area (FUA) reaches a certain demographic threshold. The following map displays PUSH according to three thresholds: 750'000 inhabitants; 100'000 inhabitants, 50'000 inhabitants.

Map 2-1 Accessibility to cities in Europe



### Municipalities located within 45 minutes from a Morphological Urban Area (MUA)

Population of the largest corresponding Functional Urban Area (FUA):

- more than 750'000 inhabitants
- more than 100'000 inhabitants
- more than 50'000 inhabitants
- no data

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### **2.2 Measurement issues**

The size of cities within mobility range, and their level of economic prosperity, are in some instances significant parameters to be taken into account as they will contribute to determine the volume 'externalities' linked to proximity to urban areas.

Different proximities to urban areas may also be relevant. As shown in the module on Labour Market Transitions, flexible solutions such as working from home some days every week make it possible to commute over longer distances. TGS may also be attractive as leisure destinations for urbanites beyond a travel time of 45 minutes.

### **2.3 Policy issues**

Remote TGS raise different issues than those that are part of the functional influence area of urban areas, e.g. with regards to the number and scope of employment opportunities, available capacities to address challenges such as climate change adaptation and potential conflicts between different types of land use. This is also a major reason for which no TGS are not significantly different from other regions when considering most social and economic indicators: distance to urban areas and the region or country to which each TGS belongs, are stronger determinants of social and economic 'performance'.

Demographic decline is most frequently observed in small, isolated islands and mountain valleys, parts of NSPA regions beyond commuting distance from regional capital cities and remote coastal areas. While remoteness is therefore an issue in its own right, it also affects the capacity of concerned communities to address the specific challenges and opportunities resulting from geographic specificity. Geographic specificity and remoteness are therefore complementary notions in the design and implementation of regional policy, as well as in the pursuit of territorial cohesion.