

The Soft Spaces Concept as a Framework for Territorial Reform

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Abstract

Depopulation erodes the administrative, financial, and human-resource capacity of small municipalities, yet territorially consolidating them often encounters strong historical, social, and political barriers. This study asks whether soft spaces—flexible, task-specific areas of governance that do not require changes to formal administrative boundaries—can provide a more feasible foundation for territorial reform. The analysis combines a review of multilevel territorial governance literature, demographic and financial data for 25 micro-municipalities over the period 1995–2025, and structured interviews with experts and local government representatives in the Lower Silesian and Podlaskie regions. The findings indicate that below a demographic threshold, municipalities lose the capacity to perform selected public tasks effectively. However, the appropriate response is context-dependent rather than uniformly territorial. County-level integration of specialist, administrative, and infrastructure services can generate economies of scale and strengthen systemic resilience, while municipalities retain proximity-sensitive functions that sustain local agency and identity. Soft spaces thus offer an adaptive alternative to amalgamation: they align the geography of service provision with functional needs while preserving formal territorial structures. Reform should therefore institutionalise flexible competence transfers, accompanied by clear accountability and locally differentiated arrangements.

Keywords

Soft spaces, territorial reform, depopulation, functional redistribution, counties, multilevel territorial governance.