

ESPON



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POLICY BRIEF

Integrated territorial development in lake regions in Europe

FIVE KEY POLICY MESSAGES

- **Strengthening an integrated place-based approach of policies in lake regions requires shifting regional actors' perspective**

Lake regions are not very often considered integrated systems or single entities in the frame of territorial cooperation practices. Although specific territorial contexts would justify such an approach, it would require a major shift in the perspective of regional actors, from seeing lakes as subordinate (e.g. at the margins of metropolitan areas or major urban nodes) to making them the centre of attention in spatial planning instruments; and from living with them as barriers (divergent interests between actors and places around the lake) to using them as catalysts for regional cooperation.

- **A framework concept developed by ESPON enables more integrated development in lake regions**

The framework concept is aimed at strengthening the visibility of, and raising awareness of, lake regions in Europe, and facilitating cooperation among local and regional players. It includes 12 policy options related to five dimensions of integration: regional integration – EU place-based policies and investments in lake regions; land–lake integration – where land meets water; policy integration – cooperation between sectors; vertical integration – lakes in overarching policies; and European integration – European lake communities.

- **Cross-border integration can strengthen a functional approach in lake regions**

In many cases, lake regions can be considered functional territories. Integrated strategies for these regions are all the more meaningful for cross-border lakes. In lake regions it is important to implement a place-based approach beyond administrative borders, allowing the establishment of integrated functional regions. For cross-border lakes, Interreg programmes offer useful funding opportunities. In the 2014–2020 programme, 32 lake-related projects were funded, mainly around Lake Constance and Lake Maggiore.¹

- **Increase the use of integrated tools within EU Cohesion Policy**

The regulatory framework for the EU Cohesion Policy 2021–2027 includes tools to promote integrated territorial development, namely integrated territorial investments (ITI) and community-led local development (CLLD). To promote place-based policymaking in lake regions, policies need to be adapted to the specific contexts, assets and development needs of the regions. Integrated territorial tools can be applied not only within single countries but also across national borders.

- **Link lake regions to the Territorial Agenda 2030**

The evidence gathered by ESPON indicates the opportunity to further test a territorial approach to the development of lake regions through a dedicated pilot action as part of the EU Territorial Agenda 2020. It could demonstrate a practical way to achieve better cross-sectoral and vertical planning in these territories.

¹ These projects are specified in the keep.eu database (<https://keep.eu/>).

1 Setting the scene: introduction

Article 174 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union states:

the Union shall aim at reducing disparities between the levels of development of the various regions and the backwardness of the least favoured regions.

Among the regions concerned, particular attention shall be paid to rural areas, areas affected by industrial transition, and regions which suffer from severe and permanent natural or demographic handicaps such as the northernmost regions with very low population density and island, cross-border and mountain regions.

Overall, the focus of policy has been on certain categories of regions, such as mountains, islands, sparsely populated areas, cross-border regions, rural areas and areas affected by industrial transition. This policy brief describes the value of considering lake regions specific territories requiring similar attention from a policy perspective. The evidence presented in this publication is based on the results of ESPON's LAKES project,² which explored how the notion of integrated territorial development, a guiding principle of EU Cohesion Policy, could inform and inspire actors of lake regions.

Reflections on territorial diversity in Europe have developed over the last 20 years. The European policy debate on the development of territories with geographical specificities in recent years has been moving away from the need to compensate for the natural handicaps towards acknowledging that the specific challenges of these places require tailored solutions, as well as place-based, integrated and long-term policy approaches. Addressing the opportunities and challenges of specific types of territories requires these territories to be considered in a broader perspective, through a territorial approach rather than by singling out territories.

The EU Territorial Agenda 2030 emphasises the importance of territorial approaches to policy design and implementation, which can also be applied to lake regions. It provides guidance on strategic spatial planning and highlights the need for strengthening the territorial dimension of different (sectoral) policies at all levels of governance. This raises questions about the need for new forms of cooperation and partnerships across regional and national borders. The key question is how to turn the diversity into a competitive advantage to strengthen economic, social and territorial cohesion in different types of territories and in Europe as a whole.

European lake regions have many assets and competitive advantages: they can offer attractive living environments, extensive leisure opportunities and proximity to nature. Lakes offer opportunities for tourism, fisheries, agriculture and water transport. Thanks to these assets, lake regions often have a rich cultural heritage. However, large lakes are confronted with many challenges, as their ecosystems are fragile. Climate change can generate more frequent droughts and floods. The concentration of resources around and resulting attractiveness of large lakes generates conflicts of interest in terms of land use. Furthermore, large lakes are frequently located at the border between multiple regions or countries, creating challenges in relation to governance and planning.

Taking into account this framework, this publication provides recommendations for fostering an integrated place-based approach to territorial development in lake regions and cooperation between them, maximising people's quality of life by balancing economic, environmental and social concerns. By doing so, it is possible to bring Europe closer to its people through better combining European priorities with local needs and preferences, as stated in policy objective 5 of the EU Cohesion Policy 2021–2027.

² <https://www.espon.eu/lakes>. The project was initiated in response to the needs of the Lake Balaton Development Coordination Agency (with Hungary as the lead stakeholder), the Lake Constance Foundation (Germany) and Västarvet, part of the Västra Götaland Region (Sweden), and explored territorial challenges, governance frameworks and integrated development options in these three lake regions, but also in nine additional lake regions (Fertő–Neusiedl, Lake Peipus, Lake Päijänne, Lake Geneva, Lake Maggiore, Mjøsa, Lake Prespa, Lough Neagh and Étang de Berre).

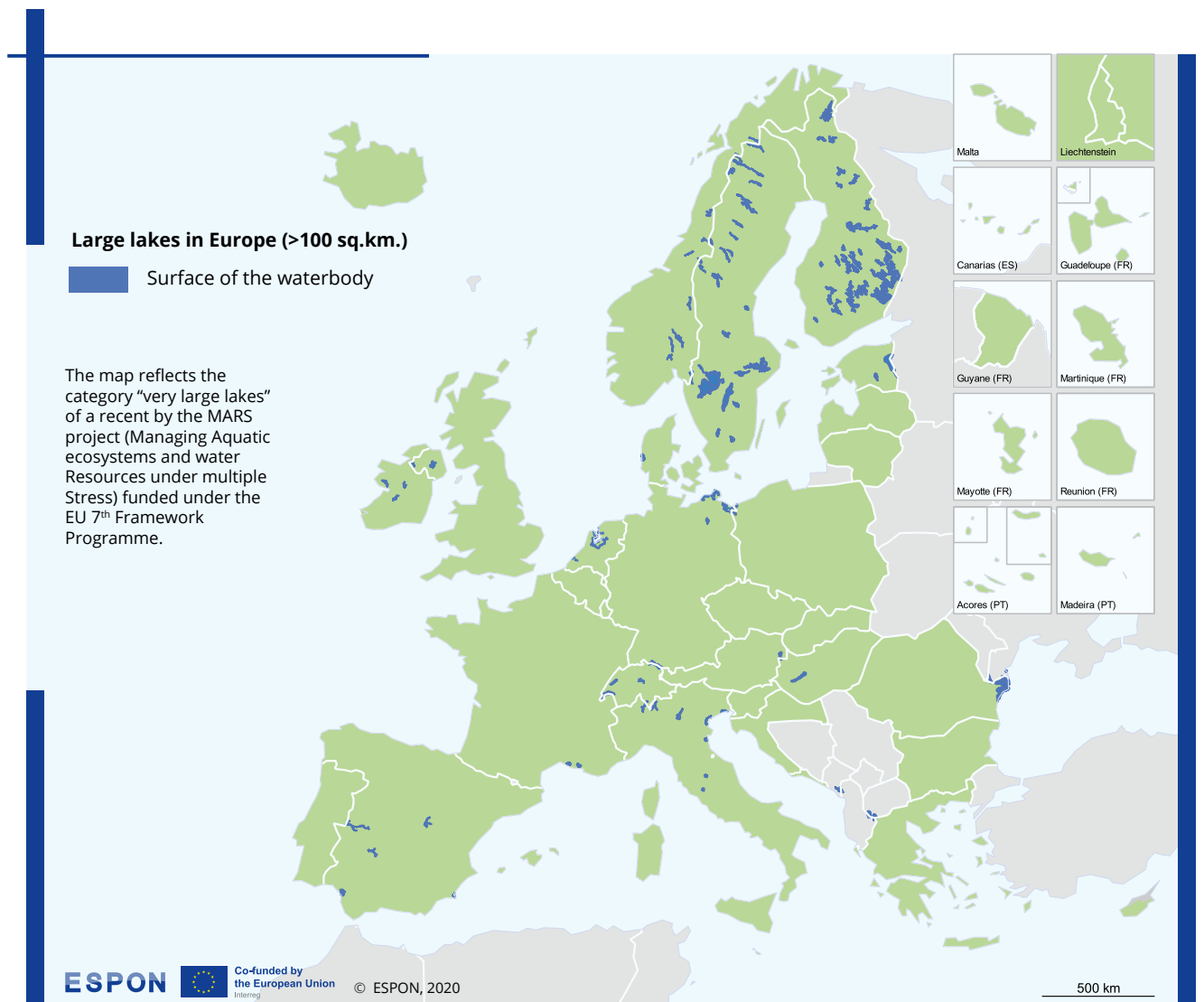
2 What is a lake region?

It is not necessarily purposeful to apply quantitative criteria for the definition of lake regions. Rather, a lake region is interpreted as a region around a lake in which a regional development approach may be meaningfully elaborated. Lake regions concentrate competing economic interests, ecological concerns and strong sociocultural identities. The significance of a lake for regional development depends on the quality and number of amenities it offers, and on

the extent to which people living around it consider it a component of their territorial identity.

There is no standard definition of large lakes in Europe. Map 1 displays ‘large lakes’ according to a recent typology (i.e. inland water bodies covering more than 100 km²). ESPON does not provide a geographical definition (e.g. with a size threshold), but acknowledges large lakes as a category that stakeholders recognise themselves.

Map 1
Large lakes in Europe (indicative location)



Source: ESPON LAKES, 2020
© UMS RIATE for administrative boundaries

From a territorial perspective, lake regions can be described as follows.

- They are **pools of resources**, where bio-physical assets (water, fish stocks, landscapes) and sociocultural assets (cultural heritage and identities) require specific management measures and trade-offs.
- They are **functional areas**, where accessibility from and to surrounding urban centres and services of general interest around large lakes are key factors. Inclusion in international value chains and innovation are important assets for the vitality of the regional labour market in these regions.
- They are **fragile ecosystems**, where manifold interests put significant pressure on lake-based ecosystems and biodiversity. Spatial planning may help solve contradictions between the development of human activities and environmental preservation.

The territorial specificities mentioned above are related to four main policy fields.

- **Water management:** Climate change destabilises hydrological processes and makes river discharges and water levels more difficult to predict and manage.
- **Ecosystem preservation:** Lake biodiversity is affected by numerous factors, including climate change and human activities.
- **Development of tourism, leisure and residential functions:** The COVID-19 pandemic has affected tourism patterns and settlement dynamics, with increased local tourism and remote working.
- **Transport and accessibility:** Inland waterway transport is receiving increasing attention as a potentially energy-efficient alternative to road and rail transport.

3 Development challenges in lake regions and existing cooperation practices

Normally, European lake regions are confronted with a unique set of challenges (to be turned into opportunities) related to particular territorial specificities, which can be grouped in five categories.

- (i) **Administrative and territorial fragmentation:** Most lake regions extend over multiple regions and some cross-national borders are with non-EU countries. For example, Lake Constance crosses the borders of Austria, Germany and Switzerland, and Lake Peipus is at the border between Estonia and Russia. This fragmentation may lead to inconsistent policies around the lake. Different solutions, from cooperation initiatives to governance frameworks, deliver policies for lakes and their surrounding regions.
- (ii) **Cross-sectoral cooperation and multilevel governance:** Integrated development in lake regions requires coordination between many different policy fields and many different actors. In particular, it includes the fields of water management, ecosystem preservation, the valorisation of cultural and natural heritage, economic development, the provision of services of general interest, tourism development, fisheries, transport and spatial planning. Delivering policies in lake regions often requires decision-makers to be brought in from different territories around the lake and multiple sources of expertise. Multilevel governance in lake regions may require inclusive frameworks for action, involving soft territorial cooperation approaches.
- (iii) **An 'inner periphery':** Some large lakes border metropolitan regions. Others are located in more isolated, predominantly rural regions. Improving the quality of connections and accessibility to major urban centres is in all cases a recurring concern.
- (iv) **Sustainability and land use:** Lake regions normally face conflicts between the development of human settlements and activities and the preservation of water quality, ecosystems and biodiversity. The EU Water Framework directive adopted in 2000 has contributed to further institutionalising joint efforts to preserve and monitor lake waters and ecosystems. However, the protection of these ecosystems remains a challenge, especially in a context of climate change.
- (v) **Limited institutional recognition of specific challenges and development opportunities:** Large lakes are often a peripheral concern from the perspective of both institutions managing maritime issues (e.g. with regard to transport and fisheries) and those providing frameworks for territorial planning.

The implementation of policies in this type of region has led to the development of a wide range of cooperation practices around large lakes, including, in particular, the following.

- **Intermunicipal cooperation** (or cooperation primarily led by municipalities, which is common around large lakes) can play a key role in local development initiatives and strategic planning on lake shores. Intermunicipal cooperation initiatives around Lake Vänern (Sweden), Lake Peipus (Estonia) and the Mjøsa lake (Norway) have contributed to development strategies and produced concrete results.
- **Binding agreements** often provide a framework for cooperation around cross-border lakes. Interreg programmes often provide relevant funding opportunities. A permanent Conference has, for example, been established by regional governments around Lake Constance. However, many cooperation initiatives are limited to the portion of the riparian area belonging to a specific country.
- **Water basin management associations** are key players in the implementation of the EU Water Framework

Directive. In some countries, these associations provide useful forums for dialogue and exchange, in addition to ensuring water quality surveillance, and setting water quality objectives for and informing the general public on water-related issues. In other countries, stakeholders instead describe them as ‘empty shells’.

- **Multistakeholder thematic alliances** can be established for specific purposes. Around Lake Päijanne (Finland), such alliances were formed to join the World Network of Biosphere and the Global Geopark Network of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. Networks of non-governmental organisations are sometimes established, for example, to coordinate responses to public consultations or to act as mediators of and event managers for lake-based activities.
- **Public and private companies** may establish **business consortia**, for example to develop tourism, to coordinate the provision of transport services or to act as event managers for lake-based activities.

Lake-centred cooperation in the Lake Balaton Development Council (Hungary)

Established in 1996, the Lake Balaton Development Council is a platform for dialogue and cooperation between organisations involved in developing the region. The council is responsible for all areas within the Lake Balaton resort area (including 180 settlements, shared by three counties); and monitors economic, social and environmental processes in the region and provides feedback for spatial development. The work of the council is supported by the Lake Balaton Development Coordination Agency, which promotes the development of the area for the council. Over the years, the council has become a focal point for spatial development around Lake Balaton.

Intermunicipal cooperation around Mjøsa: Mjøsbyen (Norway)

Ten municipalities on the north-eastern side of Mjøsa, with the support of Innlandet County Council, contribute to the spatial planning and transport strategy for the territory. Mjøsbyen has organised workshops and project group meetings, and compiled evidence for and drawn up a strategy to manage daily mobility and urban development. All these initiatives contribute to the grassroots resolution of lake-related issues. The steering group includes county governors (state representatives), municipalities, regional road administration for the eastern region and the national railway administration.

Community-led development around Lough Neagh (Northern Ireland, UK)

Lough Neagh Partnership Ltd is a successful example of a community led-development initiative. It was established as a non-profit company in 2003, initially for the purpose of administering rural development grant funding. It brings together the five district councils that surround the lake, the private sector, the community sector and special interest groups (fishers, sand traders, state managers). In 2011, after years of fruitful cooperation, the partnership remit was extended to cover a wider range of responsibilities, including the integrated management, marketing and development of activities related to tourism, recreation, the environment, heritage and culture around the lake.

The International Lake Constance Conference (Germany)

The International Lake Constance Conference (*Internationale Bodenseekonferenz*, IBK) was established in 1972. In the early years of the conference, environmental protection and water management were the main issues, but the focus has since broadened to overarching intergovernmental exchange. The Spatial Development Commission Lake Constance was initiated in 2001. It works closely with IBK but is formally independent. It is currently drafting a 'Spatial Development and Transport Concept (*Zielbild Raum und Verkehr*) that aims to overcome cross-border frictions that hamper sustainable spatial development.

Overall, existing policy and management practices still lack an integrated place-based approach to territorial development in lake regions, as they are fragmented between territorial units, policy sectors, interest groups and sources of legitimacy for action. Planning in lake regions mobilises a spectrum of sectoral policy fields: water management, ecosystem management, the protection and valorisation of cultural and natural heritage, economic development (territorial attractiveness and the provision of services of general interest), tourism development, fisheries, transport and spatial planning. Each of these policy

fields is affected by the presence of lakes and requires inter-territorial efforts to establish cooperation adapted to the regional context of these functional regions. Policy responses require extensive horizontal and vertical cooperation, often involving regional, national and European authorities, and adequate governance arrangements to manage lake regions in an integrated way. By doing so, the territorial challenges mentioned above can be turned into development opportunities and lakes can become laboratories for integrated development and sustainable planning in Europe.

4 From cooperation to integration: a framework concept developed by ESPON enables more integrated development in lake regions

An overview of topics and policy delivery in lake regions included in ESPON's LAKES project showed that lakes can play an important role in spatial development and received much attention from stakeholders. However, many stakeholders focus on single resources or activities and do not necessarily consider the lake as embedded in a complex network with other surrounding territories. The diversity and complexity of stakeholder interests and perspectives, and mutual interdependencies and reciprocal impacts, pose an important challenge to sustainable development in lake regions. The aim is to ensure an integrated perspective in sectoral policies and to consider their manifold interrelations with other territorial scales and places.

Indeed, it is important that policymakers consider this diversity and complexity. It is necessary to bring various stakeholders together and to strengthen the lake dimension in policies. This applies to individual policy fields, and to cross-cutting policy areas, such as spatial planning. Only then is it possible to find a balance between different interests and needs while considering lake regions as functional areas. When relevant, stakeholders from local to EU level and from different policy sectors would benefit from considering large lakes as integrated systems, rather than as single entities, to implement integrated territorial strategies in these regions.

In general terms, integrated place-based approaches should optimise endogenous growth potentials and support sustainable development in these territories. There is no one-size-fits-all solution, and local actors should express their views, build trust and cooperate. These approaches were supported by the EU Cohesion policy 2014–2020, which established community-led local development' (CLLD) initiatives to empower people and local communities to become actors of local development rather than mere beneficiaries. In the 2021–2027 programming period, Cohesion Policy support for integrated place-based approaches will be further broadened. Policy objective 5, aiming for a 'Europe closer to its citizens', makes it possible to support a broad range of measures insofar as they are part of an integrated territorial strategy drawn up together with local authorities and bodies. Therefore, there is substantial potential for applying an integrated place-based approach in lake regions.

Considering this context, ESPON has developed a 'framework concept for the integrated development of lake regions'³ to (1) strengthen the overall visibility, and raise awareness, of lake regions in Europe, especially among national and EU decision-makers; and (2) facilitate cooperation among local and regional players in lake regions. The main output of the framework concept is a set of 12 policy options for lake regions that stakeholders from these regions could decide to implement (see Table 1).

The framework concept highlights policy options through five access points or dimensions of integration.

- **Regional integration – EU place-based policies and investments in lake regions:** The first access point refers to the integration of lakes into adjacent areas, mainly regions and municipalities, through the support of European Structural and Investment Funds and related instruments.
- **Land–lake integration – where land meets water:** Zooming further into the features of lakes, the interface of lake-based and land-based activities along the shoreline should be given more attention to better address land–lake interactions.
- **Policy integration – cooperation between sectors:** Various players rely on lakes for their activities. Their variety of needs may, however, lead to conflicting interests and high pressure on the lake and its surrounding areas. This suggests that there is a need for cooperation between relevant policy sectors.
- **Vertical integration – lakes in overarching policies:** Going beyond the immediate context, lake regions are embedded in multilevel governance systems from local to EU level.
- **European integration – communities of European lakes:** On a larger scale, the joint interests of lake regions in Europe should be identified and used for community building. European integration refers to the representation of interests of lake regions at EU level and European communities of learning, exchange and capacity building.

³ This concept is explained in a document compiling recommendations for integrated development in lake regions in Europe (<https://www.espon.eu/lakes>).

Table 1
Policy options for lake regions

DIMENSIONS	POLICY OPTIONS	
Regional integration	Use EU funding to promote sustainable development	Sustainable development is an important policy objective in lake regions. Lake regions can make use of EU Cohesion Policy funding and the Next Generation EU recovery instrument to support connectivity, the competitiveness of small and medium-sized enterprises, and environmental protection.
	Increase the use of integrated tools with EU Cohesion Policy	Specific tools, such as Integrated Territorial Investments (ITI), community-led local development (CLLD) and other territorial strategies, have proved effective in supporting sustainable development in various territorial contexts. Using these tools around large lakes could help meet local stakeholders' expectations of being involved in implementing EU funds.
	Support cooperation beyond national borders	European territorial cooperation can support the implementation of projects in cross-border lake regions (Interreg A) and provide resources for lake-related transnational projects. Applying the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation instrument could support services of general interest in lake regions.
Land-lake integration	Promote integrated land-lake management	Bridging the common gap between terrestrial planning and lake-based planning requires the assessment of critical land-lake interactions related to social, economic and ecosystem-based activities. The principle of Integrated Coastal Zone Management (ICZM) applied in coastal regions, and the ecosystem approach could both promote integration.
Policy integration	Strengthen the role of spatial planning in policy coordination	The limited availability of land around large lakes results in cross-sectoral trade-offs. Preparing a spatial plan for a lake region could trigger interactions between policy sectors and prospective thinking.
	Capitalise on integrated river basin management practices	The EU's large lakes are part of wider river basins whose activities are monitored through river basin management plans. Lake regions should capitalise on communities responsible for these plans to implement sustainable development beyond a strict understanding of water management.
	Establish and support lake-centred economic clusters	Economic clusters can aid cooperation along territorial value chains. They can create additional value from lake resources, and the lake can be a catalyst (a common reference) to strengthen sectoral interactions.

DIMENSIONS	POLICY OPTIONS	
Vertical integration	Link lake regions to the Territorial Agenda 2030	The Territorial Agenda 2030 is a European strategic policy document for spatial planning and territorial development. A proposal for a new pilot action with a focus on lake regions could be developed and launched. This would highlight the specificity of lake regions in Europe and support place-based solutions for their integrated development.
	Illustrate contributions to policy goals	Highlighting the contribution of lake regions to EU or global policy goals would help to position lake regions in broader policy discourses. Two examples are the EU Territorial Agenda 2030 and the UN Sustainable Development Goals. This could be done through screening local and regional strategies, communication and a monitoring system for these regions.
	Empower local and regional players through capacity building	Policy integration and strengthening the position of lake regions in EU policies entails new requirements, especially for local and regional authorities. These include ensuring capacity is available to implement EU policies. In addition, different programmes and arenas could be mobilised by lake regions, such as the EU Policy Learning Platform, the Technical Assistance and Information Exchange instrument, the Smart Specialisation Platform and the European Commission’s Urban Development Network.
European integration	Give lake regions a voice in Brussels	Having a unique voice in the EU policy debate could help lake regions to promote their interests in EU institutions. These regions could establish a network that would provide a place for exchanging experiences, support lake-related events and be a contact point for those seeking EU expertise.
	Promote European exchange and learning	Exchange arenas and dialogue platforms can bring together local and regional development practitioners. An online platform for integrated lake development, working on joint projects and ensuring visibility at major EU events could raise interest in lake regions and keep the discussion on their future alive.

Further reading

ESPON (2021), 'LAKES – Territorial analysis of spatial progress and integrated development opportunities of large lakes in Europe' (<https://www.espon.eu/lakes>).

ESPON (2022), *Synthesis and Proposals: Integrated development of large lake regions in Europe*, Luxembourg: <https://www.espon.eu/sites/default/files/attachments/ESPON%20LAKES%20-%20Synthesis%20and%20Proposals.pdf>

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