EUROPEAN SPATIAL POLITICS
OR
A SPATIAL POLICY FOR EUROPE?

Proposal for a Workshop to be held in the
ECPR Uppsala Joint Sessions
13-18 April 2004
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The motivation for the workshop

The workshop proposed here seeks to re-politicise spatial politics, a field largely
dominated by geographers and spatial planners. Are policies with a spatial effect
(within an EU perspective) only bureaucratic exercises in geographical terms (e.g.
Structural Funds interventions and their management, policies seeking to integrate
spatial planning with the goals of sustainability, the protection of cultural heritage or
polycentric development patterns, such as in the confines of ESDP = European Spatial
Development Perspective) or are we in fact faced with a deeply politicised process?
The organisers would argue the latter. The reasons for this are elaborated below.

The organising institution Nordregio is located in Stockholm, though its work
encompasses both Nordic and European themes. It is a newcomer to ECPR, but due to
its geographic location and academic focus (which is multi-disciplinary) it is
particularly interested in having a chance to play an active part in the Uppsala
workshops.

Introduction to the theme

While territorial politics and the process of regionalism connected to this thematic
have been at the heart of both national and European policy-making since the 1960s,
with the emphasis of state- and nation building being dependent on territoriality and
territorial politics (e.g. Rokkan and Urwin 1983, Hueglin etc.) and the idea of
territorially differentiated development paths forming one of the main axis on which
political mobilisation has been analysed (e.g. Keating), the European level focus
above the national level has perhaps been most connected with the political objective
of “regional cohesion” encompassed within the context of European regional policy.
This is where “spatial politics” in the European perspective first started to grow,
thereafter becoming a more multi-faceted whole, as we shall later see.

The Treaty of Rome included the idea of spatial politics in the form of promoting
throughout the Community the harmonious development of economic activities and
an accelerated rising of the standard of living (Article 2 of the TEU). This goal has
therefore been one of the key ideas in building a community of solidarity between the
member States from the earliest stages of the institutional drive towards European
integration. The national governments became gradually more active in involving
regions in national policy from the 1960’s onwards; though only with the introduction
of European regional policy did it become a more concrete question of economic
solidarity within the European community as well. During the first two decades of
the EEC’s existence the “regional question” was largely seen in similar terms to that of prevailing national perspectives on regional policy, i.e. as a means to address the “problem areas”, e.g. in the case of the EEC, of mainly improving the poorer areas, and in particular the Italian Mezzogiorno. By the 1980s however a more obviously ‘European’ regional policy existed in terms of the Commission’s responsibility for co-ordinating the Member States’ schemes for regional development, though the extent of the ‘European’ contribution, in terms of financial input, was still marginal (10-15% of the funds allocated; Middlemas 1995, 389). Major regional policy reform took place in 1988 and ‘European regional policy’ as it is today was gradually developed into a major policy area (both in financial terms and in terms of substantive policy content on the policy agenda). In European terms the establishment of the Single Market in 1993 was naturally an important date, as questions of cohesion and solidarity became increasingly central.

In its methodological approach to economic and social cohesion the first report on cohesion in the European Community took its inspiration from Article 130a of the Treaty on European Union, which set the policy goal of cohesion in terms of ‘harmonious development’ with a specific geographical dimension: ‘reducing disparities between the levels of development of the various regions and the backwardness of the least favoured regions, including rural areas’. This reflected a political commitment to, and an explicit recognition of, wide disparities being intolerable in a political community such as the EC/EU.

At the time of the publication of the First Cohesion Report (in 1996), national and Community level policies to promote cohesion had not yet been subject to a single, comprehensive examination and thus the first Cohesion Report was seen as representing an opportunity to systematically consider what kind of impact the policies at different levels had had on cohesion. Cohesion was thus seen in largely economic terms. The reduction of disparities between Member States and regions was held, following the Commission’s 1993 White Paper on these themes, to mean the convergence of basic incomes through higher GDP growth, of competitiveness and of employment. Improving the competitiveness of the weaker regions was therefore seen as particularly important in the context of the European Single Market. (First Cohesion Report, p. 11.) While much of the analysis was naturally already at that point on the territorial (regional) level, and specific policies were seen in territorial terms (territorial employment pacts, the Structural Funds in general and Interreg in particular), no specific reference to “territorial cohesion” was made at this point. The ‘territorial thematic’ became all the more important however with the development of a spatial focus for European development, most importantly with the ESDP.

These issues were always firmly rooted in the “territorial” part of the European debate, i.e. in the area where the political sovereignty of states over their territories was implicitly present, and administrative borders were those most often differentiating policy differences.

The thrust of European territorial politics has however also been formed out of a collection of national debates, as regionalist movements and the social aspects of territoriality, as well as economic development patterns, and intervention policies in terms of national development policies, have been at the heart of domestic debates. The concept of “spatial” politics then, while closely related to territoriality has
however only recently made its entrance onto the European and national policy stage. What then are the differences between territorial and spatial politics?

The whole notion of “spatial politics” often causes confusion, and even amusement. We are here not of course referring to the politics of space, relating to either solar movements or even missile defence initiatives, though typical European acronym-itis here (i.e ESDP – also used for European Security and Defence Policy) does not help. Spatial politics does however have a certain vagueness about it, not least caused by the perennial confusion between territorial and spatial politics. Perhaps much of the confusion is caused by the nature of the field as a multi-disciplinary sphere of study: spatial politics forges a meeting point between territorial politics and planning, regional intervention policies and endogenous development activities. The multi-disciplinary nature of the field also finds expression in the formulation of policy aims that try to reconcile the social and economic claims for spatial development with the area’s ecological and cultural functions, thus hoping to contribute to a sustainable, large scale, balanced territorial development. All these activities relate to, occupy, or have the character of space, though the manifestations of these characters vary.

The differences between spatial and territorial politics often seem to be very unclear, and more often than not depend more upon the person discussing them than on actual theoretical, conceptual or ontological differences. It thus seems that political scientists on the whole take the spatial dimension of politics for granted and until very recently there has been relatively little attention paid to the other aspects of locality in political science, namely temporal and cultural. To exaggerate slightly, territorial politics and policy (also referred to in “regional” terms) has been the stuff of political scientists, while planners have increasingly talked about spatial politics. We intend to bring these two perceived fields closer together or ideally to build a bridge between them so that spatial policy can be seen as a politicised issue with a agenda, interests, power conflicts etc., not merely a question of “apolitical” planning, while territorial politics is not only about the politics of regional movements or policy with a territorial/regional focus, but rather it is something concerning spatial instruments and goals and is closely connected to the discourse on European spatial planning, as planning necessarily involves territorial units on different levels.

Politics with a spatial impact can in addition to territorial politics also be distinguished from the “politics of space”. The “Politics of space” has been most often discussed by planners or postmodernist geographers1, generally within the confines of identity politics (spatial social justice or post-colonial politics, politics of resistance and gender etc.) as a clarification of the time-space relationship in present circumstances, though spatial politics can also be taken to have a different nature; not merely a question of geography and identity, but also quite traditionally a question of power.

In the workshop proposed here the main focus would be on elaborating the connection between European spatial politics and the production of a spatial policy for Europe, i.e. the connections between that sphere of politics, policy making and governance where policies with a spatial impact are elaborated, and that agenda where a coherent

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1 Soja 1989, 1996 and 2000; Massey 1999a, 1999b, 1999c and 1999d.
From a EU perspective “spatial politics” usually refers to spatial policy, policies relating to spatial development and planning. It can however also be seen in a wider perspective, as relating to the national systems for spatial development more generally, or as a specific sector of policy making with spatial relevance (though there is increasing interest in European spatial policy, there is no European competence in this field, which means that national decision-making is the level where binding provisions for spatial planning can be made). This implies that a number of “power games” are going on between the various administrative tiers as well as among the various sectors claiming their stake in spatial policy-making. Another important field is that of trans-border spatial development (a field concerning co-operation and integration across borders within the EU context and elsewhere). European spatial policies (either sectoral with relevance to spatial planning and development, or “spatial policy” in the strictest sense, i.e. spatial planning). In most cases the determining division is that between spatial planners (practitioners) and territorial analysts (mostly comparativists interested in the systemic differences in regional development). Very seldom do these two groups meet or engage in constructive discussion and debate on what the relevance of ongoing developments within the field of European spatial development are with regard to policy-making, political power and influence.

Based on this background, Nordregio in co-operation with the university of Sheffield and the university Aalborg, has set out to focus critical research on the question of how European spatial policies are made and how this is played out in political terms.

A large body of literature on European integration as we know already exists, but very little of it explicitly touches upon the spatial dimension of integration. As a result, understanding of the many ways in which a new spatial focus is emerging across EU policy sectors remains at best, limited. Current work on EU spatial issues either remains relatively descriptive in its analysis of European policy-making, or focuses on the spatial development trends and impacts of existing EU policies on spatial development, and explores how new institutional arrangements can help in the operationalisation of the new policy field.

The former body of research has tended to chart the progress towards one of the core documents of European spatial planning policy, namely the ESDP, providing accounts of the politics which have shaped its preparation Williams (1996), Faludi (various) Faludi and Waterhout (2002), and exploring the application of the ESDP in various situations (e.g. Tewdwr-Jones and Williams, David Shaw and Oliver Sykes, Umberto Janin Rivolin). The spatial analysis is largely being carried out through the Study Programme on European Spatial Planning (SPESP), and ESPON, though many localised studies are now beginning to explore strategic spatial issues through a more Europeanised vocabulary (e.g. spatial development strategies or the studies on the construction of a balanced and polycentric development model for the European territory as the one carried out on behalf of the Conference of Peripheral and Maritime Regions of Europe). An active area of research addresses the institutional
strengthening and redesign required to make cross-border and trans-national spatial policy more effective and slowly but surely a critical body of literature is developing (e.g. Jensen and Richardson).

In the proposed workshop these lines are to be taken further towards an analytical framework which could support a critical research agenda, probing at the ways in which construction of the new spatial agenda is taking place through the deployment of policies and programmes across EU space, and their playing out across multiple scales and sectors. There are some policy initiatives of potential relevance for “spatial politics” within the EU, though these are more often concerned with the analysis of policy impacts and not necessarily always equally interested in theoretical elaborations of these themes. This applies for instance to the European Spatial Planning Observation Network (ESPON). In addition to analysing policy impacts there clearly remains a need for a critical analysis of how spatial policy making is being shaped and carried out in Europe: step forward then an alternative critical research network focusing on spatial governance.

The intended debate can gain conceptual and methodological insights from the broader field of European integration studies, in particular from the diverse literature generated from different disciplinary perspectives on multi-level governance and regional level in the EU (e.g. Ian Bache, Gary Marks and Lisbeth Hooghe, Charley Jeffery, Michael Keating, John Loughlin); (transnational) policy networks (e.g. Jeremy Richardson, Sonia Mazey, Beate Kohler-Koch, W.J.M. Kickert), anthropology (e.g. Chris Shore), political sociology (e.g. Chris Rumford) and social movements (e.g. Sidney Tarrow). As the actors within European spatial policy represent different levels of European (multi-level) governance, their interests, motivations and constituencies are of relevance for the analysis of the content and direction of European spatial policy.

Potential participants

The organisers of the workshop work at a Nordic institution dealing with questions of territorial and spatial relevance (mostly highly policy relevant issues, as the commissioner of Nordregio’s work is most often either the Nordic Council of Ministers, national authorities or the European union. As their work is necessarily undertaken in a multidisciplinary setting, they are aware of the need to further promote corresponding approaches in the academic field. The organiser in co-operation with the university of Sheffield and the university of Aalborg is about to create a research network on inter-disciplinary multi-level analysis of the governance of European space.

The potential participants of the workshop would range from political scientists to planners, who often seem to exist in completely separate universes. Furthermore, potential participants would carry out research in targeting the question of repoliticising spatial politics and thus going beyond the existing debate on spatial policies. Special attention will be given to contributions addressing the multi-sectoral and/or interdisciplinary nature of spatial politics.

Type of paper: what kind of paper are you hoping to attract (empirical, comparative, theory or other…) The contributions invited to the workshop would in
most cases be theoretical in nature, though empirical and/or comparative studies interesting from a theoretical viewpoint are also encouraged. Preference would be given to papers that manage to integrate the geographical focus on the spatial effects of policies and the political concern with governance (including issues of agenda-setting, discourse and power apparent in the formulation of European spatial policy).

**Possible additional funding sources**

Other potential funding sources would include Nordic, national and European sources supporting academic mobility and research. As Nordregio is a Nordic institution, Nordic financing sources seem to be the most natural choice (e.g. Nordic Cultural Fund = Nordiska kulturfonden, NorFA = Nordisk Forskerutdanningsakademi, NÅRP = Nordic Civil Servants’ Committee for Regional Policy). Additional funding could also be considered by Nordregio itself, as the organisation of the workshop eligible for, and indeed is even a typical example of the kind of project that attracts ‘internal’ funding.

**Biographical note:** The organisers represent a Nordic research institution dealing with spatial planning and development (for more information on Nordregio see [www.nordregio.se](http://www.nordregio.se)), where they work as senior research fellows. They share an academic interest in European governance, spatial policies and policies with spatial impacts. While Nordregio’s research and evaluation projects are commissioned by public authorities on the national, regional and local levels (as well as by the European Commission), the workshop organisers are especially interested in achieving a mix of contributions from both the “policy” and “theory” sides of the debate, as one cannot exist without the other.

Lähteenmäki-Smith received her PhD from the University of Turku in Finland (Department of Political Science) in 1999, while Böhme received his PhD in Management Sciences at the University of Nijmegen, the Netherlands in 2002.

For more information, including the publications list see section “staff” on Nordregio’s homepage referred to above.

**References**


