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Territorial Cohesion at the Crossroads. Is there life after the EU budget debate?

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Territorial cohesion and spatial planning

The difficulty of defining territorial cohesion in Europe is a problem of language and conceptual origin. The notion of territorial cohesion originated in the French history of “spatial planning”, a term that does not refer to land use planning. In France, the understanding of “territorial cohesion” goes much farther than in other European countries.

A European planning programme

Territorial cohesion has a long history of discussion at the European level.

In his 1956 report, Henry Spaak proposed a regional fund for European projects and financing for disadvantaged regions. The aim of this was to ensure the coherence of the new economic community. The Member States, however, did not accept this kind of policy coordination and the Treaty of Rome paid only lip service to “harmonious community territory”.

In 1963, a conference on regional economies was organised and Robert Marjolin, the French president of the Commission at the time, proposed to institute regional policy. In 1965, Walter Hallstein proposed to finance a Common Agricultural Policy, create own resources for the EEC and revise institutions but Charles De Gaulle rejected this proposal. This resulted in the empty chair crisis. Finally this conflict was settled by the Luxembourg Compromise of 1966. The discussions underscored differences in national planning traditions.

The Council of Europe has become an important arena in which planners from different countries discuss regional planning as a European issue. Regions here were not considered as administrative units but rather as a generic term. In 1983, at the sixth session of the Council of Europe’s European Conference of Ministers responsible for Regional/Spatial planning, the Regional/Spatial Planning Charter known as CEMAT was adopted. It affirms the need for pursuing balanced regional development and proposes a strategy for better organisation of Europe.



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Following the Gendebien report (1983), the Commission set up the DGXVI (today DG Regio) to study regional development and the differential effects of integration. The Gendebien report invites the European Commission to implement regional policy in order to coordinate community policies and for a balanced and integrated development to preserve European heritage. It asks that a Commissioner for Regional Planning be created.

In 1985 Jacques Delors pursued the idea of a European social model. He recognized competitiveness as necessary but wanted to soften the effects of liberalisation and promote inclusive governance. He won agreement from Member States to double the size of the structural funds. He sought to increase development investment (hardware) but also to ameliorate governance and policy coherence (software). During Delors' first presidency, the French and the Dutch organized an informal meeting of ministries responsible for spatial planning. The European Commission had no competency in the area but, in 1999, this 10 year long process resulted in the creation of the ESDP (European Spatial Development Perspective), which was inspired by the CEMAT and the Gendebien report. The ESDP resulted in three main guidelines for polycentric development, parity of access and management of heritage. This represented an important learning process.

Territorial cohesion policy and the crisis

Robert Savy's 1995 report for the Assembly of European Regions advanced the concept of territorial cohesion, closely tying it to the issue of general interest services. Michel Barnier promoted the concept. A reference to territorial cohesion was introduced in the Amsterdam treaty in 1997. The Convention on the future of Europe introduced the concept of territorial cohesion described as an objective and shared competence. In the end, the Lisbon Treaty reproduced this description.

In 2004, the territorial agenda was reinforced by another French-Dutch initiative bringing together EU planners. ESPON results gave rise to the notion of evidence-based planning. The notion of territorial capital was then introduced by the OECD as evidence-based planning. In 2007, the informal meeting of the Ministries for planning and territorial cohesion in Leipzig led to signature of the territorial agenda of the European Union, resulting in the first action programme for the implementation of the European Union's territorial agenda.

In 2008, the Green Paper on Territorial Cohesion endorsed the World Bank's world economic report, including the notions of density, distance and division, which it referred to as concentration, connexion and cooperation. The Green Paper identified particular geographical regions as recipients of cohesion funds. This brought about mixed reactions during consultations with the various Member States. With Commissioner Hübner's departure from the Commission, it ceased to be functional and lost its main territorial cohesion advocates. Moreover, some reports, such as those of Kok and Sapir (2003, 2004), were very critical of cohesion policy, claiming that the EU should invest in the most competitive regions if its aim was to increase its competitiveness. The governance of cohesion policy was also criticized. In the Lisbon strategy, cohesion policy funds are earmarked for competitiveness.

In 2005, negotiations were launched regarding the present budget framework and the question of cohesion reform was raised, with many tending towards a "renationalization" of cohesion. Decisions were postponed.

The EU2020 Strategy as well as the 4th report on cohesion maintained the role of territorial cohesion. But many member states fought to reduce its role. The 2009 Barca report in some ways represented an answer to the Sapir report. In this report, Fabrizio Barca advocates a place-based development approach in which issues of location are taken into consideration (geography matters!). Barca offered no definition of 'place' nor did he seek to determine geographical responsibility. Indeed, he refers to region but place is a more generic term.



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Considering the issue of place, the Baltic Sea Strategy is an interesting initiative taken by the Baltic Group of the European Parliament. Indeed the Baltic Sea Region has no fixed border. It represents a diffuse region including a combination of various functional regions depending on the problems at stake.

Conclusions: After the budget debate

Cohesion policy relates to hardware (investment) and software (the methods of governance and learning processes). It is important to look at the territory as a platform for achieving coherence and for integrating policy. It is time to pay attention to the territorial dimension of the European social model. The EU2020 Strategy underscores the importance of geography since its guidelines are obliged to address the territorial dimension. Will a sector-based approach predominate or will the approach be integrated?

The present budget debate represents a challenge to the software of cohesion policy. We thus need to understand the spatial context but also need to go beyond thinking of the territory as a sort of container for which unique responsibility can be assigned. In this respect, the Baltic Sea Strategy constitutes an important step in the learning process for developing new approaches.

General discussions

- You showed how cohesion policy is embedded in the construction of EU integration but what should this policy be?
- Importance of the Single Act of 1986 for economic and social cohesion.
- When you say “geography matters”, which geography are you considering?
- What does “shared competence” mean? If the European Union uses this competence what will be the responsibilities of the Member States?
- What is territorial cohesion? Does it mean a firewall against the renationalisation of cohesion or a struggle between the Commission and the Member States?
- There are many groupings such as Baltic Sea Region, Danube region etc. How to make the whole work while avoiding redundancy? Is there a way to get this under one umbrella?
- Do you explain the lack of promoters of cohesion policy in DG Regio by the fact that new Member States are less socialised concerning the notion of cohesion?
- Do you think that the budget will be influenced by the way Member States absorb funds?
- In his report, Barca does not define the notion of place. Is this to encourage creativity in identifying the appropriate site for implementing cohesion policy?
- Is there a consensus on how the notion of cohesion should be understood?
- What is the space for policy actors at the regional level? How can EU planners cooperate with regions with different profiles?
- What is the place of the regions in the present debate? What could be the role of territorial pacts?
- How to create unity out of diversity? How is the administrative process to be made to converge with the political process? How can one go beyond administrative borders? This raises the question of political legitimacy.

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