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When soft planning and hard planning meet: Conceptualising the encounter of European, national and sub-national planning

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Abstract

Despite continuous research efforts, the role of the European Union regarding spatial planning remains unclear. This article proposes to employ the concepts of soft spaces and soft planning to better comprehend how European spatial planning finds its way into the national planning systems. The EU contributes to the creation of soft spaces, differing from administrative entities, while at the same time, it acts as a driver of soft planning, focusing – both for strategic and legal reasons – on coordination, cooperation and mutual learning, rather than ‘hard’, regulatory planning. The article claims further that instead of depicting the connections between the EU and its member states, research should pay increased attention to the encounter of European and domestic planning within a country. The scales, actors and instruments that deal with EU inputs within a country might prove to be crucial factors that ultimately determine the impact of EU policies on spatial planning. To illustrate the encounter of European and domestic planning in the light of soft and hard planning, the article introduces a conceptual framework and thereby provides an outline for further empirical research.

Keywords: *Europeanisation, European Union, planning system, spatial rescaling, soft spaces*

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1. Introduction

Over the past decades, the interest in the influence of the European Union on its member states has been growing, not least due to the gradual accession of new countries and the continuous extension of EU competences. The term Europeanisation has been introduced, summing up processes related to European Union politics, polity and policy and their impact on and incorporation into domestic systems (for more on Europeanisation see e.g. Radaelli 2004). The field of spatial planning is no exception to this trend, not least because European integration shows a significant territorial dimension (Fritsch & Eskelinen 2011), and various scholars have discussed the Europeanisation of planning systems, processes and practices. Findings show that the EU membership triggers different effects in different countries and that a broad level of convergence regarding planning systems and policies is currently not reached.

Adams (2008) identifies a certain degree of harmonisation in planning approaches and practices but reveals on closer inspection that convergence seldom goes beyond the level of rhetoric, leading to an emerging lacuna between rhetoric and reality regarding spatial planning throughout the EU. Waterhout (2008) argues that processes of Europeanisation will not trigger a harmonisation of planning systems and policies. Nonetheless, they may lead to more confluence and consequently to a better mutual understanding between the European planning community. Stead (2013) weighs up forces for and against convergence of spatial planning policy, concluding that “deeply embedded differences between nations in terms of political, professional, and administrative cultures and structures” (p. 19) still exist and can be expected to remain in place. However, as connections are complex and policy-making consists of a number of different dimensions (e.g. goals, content, instruments, outcomes, styles, settings), some might converge while others remain unchanged or even diverge. Faludi (2014) suggests to distinguish between Europeanisation – spatial planning becoming part of EU routines through treaties, regulations, directives or Commission services – and Europeanisation – processes of mutual learning about planning across Europe. While he identifies a long tradition of the latter and acknowledges the role of the EU as sponsor of Europeanisation, he considers Europeanisation stalled, deeming it unlikely for the EU to gain power over planning matters in the (near) future.

This article argues that another factor essential for understanding the influences of the European Union on spatial planning in its member states has been largely overlooked, namely the encounter of EU and domestic planning in the light of soft and hard planning. For several reasons, the EU practices soft, informal planning (or planning for soft spaces) while simultaneously imposing hard, formal regulations that also affect spatial development. The existence of soft and hard forms of planning, however, is not a phenomenon limited to the European Union. Thus, this article suggests that research should not only focus on what happens between the EU and its member states but rather on how EU influences are dealt with within a certain country. The distinction between soft and hard planning plays a crucial role in this process, as it

might determine how EU input is perceived and implemented.

This article introduces a conceptual framework aimed at gaining knowledge about the scales at which EU initiatives are dealt with, and the actors responsible for their implementation within the member states. It can be assumed that national planning systems show significant variations when it comes to their fixation on formal legislation and their ability to make use of soft planning approaches, particularly when implementing EU policies. Despite the same links to the EU level, countries might thus deal with EU inputs in an entirely different manner. The framework introduced in this article offers an outline for further research on the Europeanisation of spatial planning that pays particular attention to soft, informal planning practices. Although several scholars have acknowledged and addressed the informal dimension of European spatial planning (see e.g. Atkinson 2002; Böhme & Waterhout 2008; Clark & Jones 2008; Dammers & Evers 2008; Fritsch 2009), it has not been considered sufficiently when observing European influences within domestic planning systems, especially in a comparative manner.

To address this gap, this article first describes the terminologies behind European spatial planning and the complexity the concept entails. It then explores the emergence of soft spaces with fuzzy boundaries and the hesitant appearance of soft planning as counterpart and complement to statutory, 'hard' planning. Subsequently, the role of the European Union as creator of soft spaces and driver of soft planning is illustrated through examples of European soft planning. Finally, the article highlights how the approach of soft and hard planning could contribute to a better understanding of connections between the EU and its member states and offers a conceptual framework for further research on their encounter.

2. European spatial planning: a fuzzy matter?

Despite the undeniable interest scholars have shown towards the European Union and its role in spatial planning over the last decades, generally accepted statements on the matter are rare. Ambiguity arises when discussing labels and wording (Dühr et al. 2010) as well as concerning the rather fundamental question what European spatial planning embraces: Does it comprise all policies that have a spatial dimension, or is it somehow limited to spatial development or even planning in a more narrow sense? There is, of course, no generally valid answer to this question. From the perspective of policy tools and instruments, however, it is possible to distinguish between three different types of European policies relevant for spatial planning: strategic policy papers, regulations and directives, and funds and subsidies. Figure 1 summarises the three dimensions of influence between the EU and its member states.

Strategic policy papers, such as the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) or the Territorial Agenda, resemble planning documents within the member states the most, which is why they are fre-

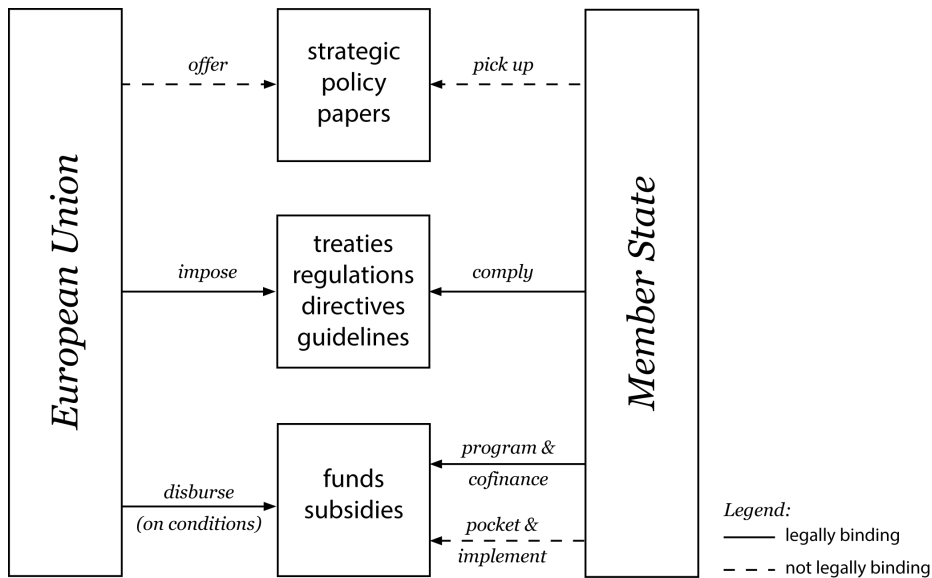


Figure 1. Classical understanding of the relation between EU and Member States regarding spatial planning.

quently referred to as European spatial planning¹. The emergence of the term spatial planning, a Euro-English word introduced by the EU in the 1990s that has since then found its way into planning theory and practice (Faludi & Waterhout 2002), originates directly from processes leading to the formulation of these strategies. As spatial planning referred both to different national planning systems encountered within the EU (see e.g. CEC 1997) and the idea of planning at a European level itself, the term was quickly replaced in official documents, first by spatial development and later by territorial cohesion (Dühr et al. 2010; Faludi 2004; Faludi 2006). While previous terms caused resentment among the member states, fearing for their exclusive competence in the field of planning, territorial cohesion is an objective rather than means (Dühr et al. 2010), allowing the EU to develop actions towards its pursuit without diminishing national sovereignty. One might infer, though, that leaving unclear whether territorial cohesion amounts to spatial planning is a “deliberate obfuscation [which] helps fuzzy the European Commission’s mandate to include spatial planning when no such actual mandate currently exists” (Allmendinger et al. 2015, p.13). When it comes to these strategic policy papers, countries can choose to pick up the ideas offered in these documents, give them a meaning in their national contexts and decide upon the way of their implementation. However, if a country does not attach importance to these policy papers, there are no legal or financial consequences.

Secondly, planning can also be influenced directly by the treaties, laws, regulations and directives the European Union adopts (see e.g. Fritsch & Eskelinen 2011; Giannakourou 2011; Waterhout 2008). The impact of these legally binding documents on spatial planning and territorial governance varies greatly. While some directives have immediate spatial relevance (e.g. Natura 2000), others limit the leeway of domestic planning authorities (e.g. Environmental Noise Directive) and others again do not influence planning itself but might affect the development of cities and regions (e.g. State aid guidelines).

Thirdly, the European Union disburses funds and subsidies to sup-

port its goals and objectives in certain policy fields. From the viewpoint of spatial planning, regional policy and common agricultural policy (especially through support measures for rural areas) are the most important EU sectoral policies. Member states and domestic actors have the chance to get their share of the European structural and investment funds if they develop programmes that are in line with the EU goals and if they are willing to add national co-financing to the European funds.

The degree of formalisation of this process is fairly hard to define. On the European side, regulations for each fund exist which prescribe its functioning and thematic focus. On the national side, partnership agreements and operational programmes are developed, proposing the planned use of the EU funds. Though rubber-stamped by the European Commission and therefore formalised, to some extent, the partnership agreements are strategic documents without any direct relation to the statutory planning system. This is partly due to the unclear relation between regional policy and (regional) planning. One could say that this third group of EU activities is characterised by a fairly hard institutional framework, while it, nevertheless, influences planning in a soft way, giving member states the chance of additional funding if they pick up the regional development ideas the EU suggests.

Admittedly, summarising these three types of policies under the umbrella term 'planning' might appear far-fetched, but, for the scope of this paper, this delineation seems accurate. As the following section demonstrates, the notion on what planning comprises is becoming broader, and it is partly turning away from traditional views of planning as regulatory land-use policy. Though it is crucial to avoid overt generalisation of the term planning, it is equally dangerous to stick to a too narrow conception, especially in the light of the research question addressed in this article. As the EU has no authority regarding planning, it is necessary to look beyond the traditional understanding of planning in order to identify and analyse the EU influences. Although neither regional policy nor directives and guidelines, such as those on environmental policy, can be understood as planning policies themselves, they influence planning in the member states to a certain degree.

3. The emergence of soft spaces and the hesitant appearance of soft planning

As the previous section demonstrates, the European Union's involvement in and relation to spatial planning is a highly complex matter. To better comprehend this multi-layered relationship, this article suggests to employ the theoretical concepts of soft spaces and soft planning.

The emergence of soft spaces

The term soft spaces was first introduced when investigating planning processes in the Thames Gateway (Haughton & Allmendinger 2007), a large scale regeneration project in the UK. The project area covers parts of three regional and sixteen local government districts, leading to a plurality of plans and strategies, regarding for example spatial and eco-

conomic development, housing, regeneration and transport. Coupled with a multitude of governmental and non-governmental actors and organisations, as well as private stakeholders involved in the project, it is arguably the UK's "most demanding contemporary governance challenge" (Allmendinger & Haughton 2009, p.617). The highly complex setting of actors and institutions leads to the emergence of entirely new planning scales, taking the form of soft spaces with fuzzy boundaries.

While the notion of soft spaces appeared for the first time in the context of the Thames Gateway, similar processes of spatial rescaling have also been identified elsewhere, leading to a shift of policies and politics from one scale to another. These processes "reshape the practices themselves, redefine the scales to and from which they are shifted, and reorganize interactions between scales" (McCann 2003, p.162). Spatial rescaling is a complex and multidimensional process, however, from the viewpoint of spatial planning, the creation of new spaces or territories can be seen as the most crucial outcome (Stead 2014c).

These new planning spaces can be regarded soft in two respects: institutionally and geographically. They are not identical with administrative entities but can rather be understood as functional units and relational geographies, facing common challenges. This approach of defining territory is considered to respond better to specificities of particular places but also poses challenges regarding democratic legitimacy. Despite their lack of a statutory basis, legal and institutional framework and political legitimisation, these new areas might take up tasks of policy-, strategy- and possibly decision-making, operating "between or alongside formal processes and institutions" (Stead 2014b, p.682). Faludi (2015) sees places cutting across administrative and jurisdictional boundaries as 'ambiguous' lands, lacking the accountability of politicians which remains tied to clearly defined constituencies.

Additionally, these spaces are soft when it comes to the definition of their boundaries. Haughton and Allmendinger (2007) speak of 'fluid areas' with 'fuzzy boundaries', both terms indicating that soft spaces are not only differing from administrative units but also potentially overlapping, changing over time and blurry in their demarcation. The tactical use of fuzzy boundaries allows actors to break away from existing patterns, preserves flexibility for actors to join or refrain from certain activities but also distances soft spaces from traditional administrative units, giving room for depoliticised decision-making (Olesen 2014) and avoiding potential political tensions (Davoudi & Strange 2009). Fuzziness, however, is not necessarily limited to the spatial dimension of soft spaces, but can (and does) also spread to terminologies and governance arrangements, highlighting how tightly institutional and geographical softness are enmeshed.

Soft spaces are contrasted by hard spaces (although this term has barely found its way into scientific discussion), understood as being clearly defined spatially, legally and institutionally. Their boundaries are certain, as are the actors responsible for decision-making and the laws these processes are based on. Hard spaces exist at different scales, for example as municipality, federal or unitary state, and can be under-

stood as “formal visible arenas and processes, often statutory and open to democratic processes and local political influence” (Haughton & Allmendinger 2007, p.306). Faludi (2010a) compares hard spaces to containers with clear boundaries in the form of walls around them, fitting seamlessly into larger containers – resembling the hierarchical structure of government.

Hard spaces provide actors with legal certainty and ensure democratic legitimacy at the cost of rigidity, inflexibility and bureaucracy. They are considered to be “slow, bureaucratic, or not reflecting the real geographies of problems and opportunities” (Allmendinger & Haughton 2009, p.619) which rarely coincide with administrative borders. Although soft spaces might in some cases provide solutions to these challenges, their emergence does not imply that hard spaces become less important. While Stead (2014b) argues that “spatial planning is increasingly dealing with both hard and soft spaces” (p. 682), Metzger and Schmitt (2012) emphasise the importance of seeing ‘softness’ and ‘hardness’ not as mutually exclusive dualistic properties but as relative positions on a continuum of spatial closure and territorial definition. Crude binaries comprise the danger of ignoring transitions between the two forms and hybrid practices that show both soft and hard characteristics (Allmendinger et al. 2015; Metzger & Schmitt 2012).

The hesitant appearance of soft planning

The distinction between soft and hard spaces has found its way into planning theory and practice, seemingly resulting in the appearance of soft planning. It has to be mentioned, however, that original contributors to the debate on soft spaces, such as Allmendinger and Haughton, largely refrain from using the term soft planning and rather speak of planning for soft spaces, or understand soft spaces both as new, non-statutory planning spaces and processes (Allmendinger et al. 2015). Already at the beginning of the century, Faludi (2001b) spoke of planning as a soft process and later (2010a), in the context of territorial cooperation, he draws a clear connection to the concept of soft spaces and identifies soft planning for soft places as “the preferred, indeed the only, realistic model” (p. 21). Stead (2011) claims that there is a hard and soft side to planning and refers to soft strategies in planning, soft processes of negotiation and learning and a softer and fuzzier approach to European regional policy. With reference to the European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region, he identifies a “complex, overlapping, ‘soft’ patchwork of activities, relationships and responsibilities” (p. 165) and speaks of European ‘soft powers’ on spatial planning complementing ‘harder’ elements of European governance.

Although a generally accepted definition of soft planning is lacking, the term is usually used to describe processes outside the statutory planning system that nonetheless contribute to the development of an area. These processes might take a variety of forms such as cooperation, coordination, negotiation and learning between different actors and stakeholders. While public actors and administration are by no means generally excluded, soft planning is often associated with less state-in-

volvement and a turn away from government-led planning approaches. Instead, it attempts to promote and manage spatial development via cooperative arrangements between the private and public sector (Stead 2014b).

Soft planning can be seen as a counterpart (or rather as a complement) to the traditional sphere of planning – which could be titled hard planning accordingly – consisting of statutory, formal planning laws, instruments and institutions, amounting to a country’s planning system. Highly dependent on historical, legal, political, societal and economic factors, the planning systems in Europe have developed quite varyingly (Stead & Cotella 2011). Despite significant differences (CEC 1997; ESPON 2007; Nadin & Stead 2009; Newman & Thornley 1996), most planning systems share their basic structure: They are hierarchical top-down systems, set in national legislation, which form a framework of legally established objectives, tools and procedures in which spatial planning processes and decisions occur (Stead & Cotella 2011).

Soft planning challenges hard planning in many regards: It creates new spatial entities, introduces new scales and mechanisms of policy- and decision-making and brings new actors to the table – but at the same time the ‘rules’ how these processes are established are neither universal nor transparent. Lacking a legal basis, it is not clear who has the right to participate, make proposals and decide when it comes to soft planning, let alone how plans are implemented and who has to abide them. Democratic legitimacy and accountability are thus not ensured, leaving soft planning in a legally, geographically and technically fuzzy state.

Parallels with other concepts

Parallels between hard and soft planning and other conceptions can be found: regulatory and spatial planning (Allmendinger & Haughton 2009), Euclidean and relational planning (Healey 2002), Type I and Type II governance (Hooghe & Marks 2003) as well as land-use and strategic spatial planning. While “the existence of a hard space in need of being administered is the rationale for land-use planning” (Faludi 2010a, p.17), strategic spatial planning is associated with informal, flexible instruments and the potential detachment from the planning system. Neither soft planning nor strategic spatial planning replaces hard planning, or traditional land-use planning respectively, but rather aims to complement the other when traditional planning tools are insufficient or unfit to govern processes of territorial transformation (Albrechts & Balducci 2013). This might be necessary when challenges exceed administrative boundaries, but it also originates in the inability of traditional planning instruments to frame broader development processes.

While there is a general agreement that both formal and informal planning approaches are justified and even necessary, their relationship remains unclear. Mäntysalo (2013) highlights the threat of a serious legitimacy problem if a “possible detachment of strategic spatial planning from the statutory planning system into a parallel ‘informal system’” (p.51) occurs. Thus planners would “end up in an impossible choice be-

tween a legitimate rigidity of statutory planning and an illegitimate flexibility of strategic planning” (p.51). This detachment can only be avoided if it is accepted that goals and objectives of the approaches and instruments differ (van den Broeck 2013) and if the necessity to accommodate mutually contradictory goals and tools of planning – possibly even in a strategic manner – is acknowledged (Mäntysalo et al. 2015). “Planners seem to prefer space to be hard” (Faludi 2010a, p.20), giving them legitimacy and clear jurisdiction, while in soft spaces problems of accountability, responsibility and sectoral integration may be faced. However, as recent developments have shown, soft planning processes are gaining importance and popularity, also among planners. Yet, the – currently unanswered – question remains “whether there is ‘soft’ democratic legitimacy” (Faludi 2015, p.15).

4. The European Union as creator of soft spaces and driver of soft planning

As the previous sections illustrate, there is a clear connection between the European Union and current discussions on soft and hard spaces, suggesting that the EU acts both as creator of soft spaces and as driver of soft planning. Figure 2 presents a selection of European Union initiatives and documents that promote the establishment of new territorial scales or informal planning tools. One well-known example is the ESDP, which:

neither prescribes concrete institutional requirements for the member states (positive integration) nor excludes certain options from the range of national policies (negative integration), but – due to its strategic and non-compulsory character – aims mainly at ‘shaping the minds’ of actors involved in spatial planning (Giannakourou 2005, pp.326–327; see also Faludi 2001a).

On the one hand, the EU is one of the main drivers for spatial rescaling, and it therefore contributes to the creation of new territorial units and soft spaces throughout Europe. Spatial rescaling through Europeanisation, however, “does not mean that powers are simply shifting to the European level” (Stead 2014a, p.680) but it happens in different directions: ‘upwards’ to the supra-national EU-level or international institutions, ‘downwards’ to sub-national actors, and ‘sideways’ to civil society actors (Stead 2014b). The soft spaces created by the EU are frequently based on ‘post-territorial’ ideas, understanding territories as networked, depoliticized spaces (Luukkonen 2015). According to Faludi (2010), the EU itself, contrary to the nation states, is a rather soft space, given that its borders are not static but have evolved gradually over the last decades. Moreover, the EU contributes to dissolve the formerly hard nation states by reducing barriers and borders between countries, making it increasingly difficult for them to act autonomously.

On the other hand, the European Union acts as a driver of soft planning, promoting coordination and learning instead of hard planning instruments. At first sight, this might seem inevitable, given that the EU

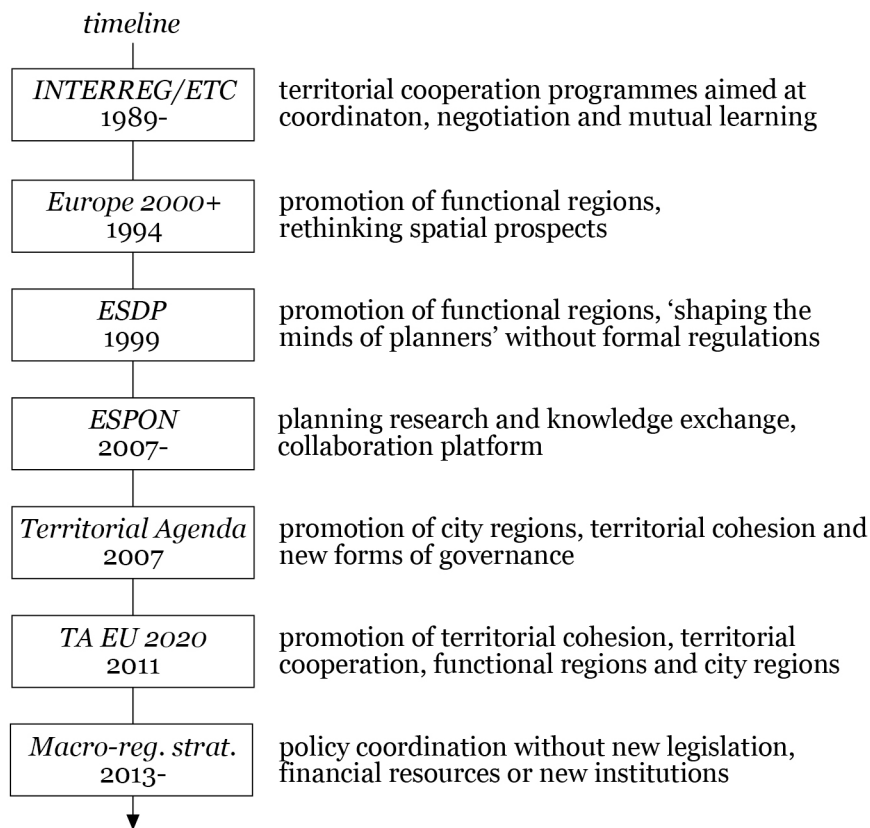


Figure 2. Examples for EU initiatives and documents promoting soft spaces and soft planning.

does not formally hold any competences regarding spatial planning (Faludi 2010b). The move of the sole planning responsibility away from the member states was debated in the 1990s during the making of the ESDP, but the discourse turned out to be wishful thinking of (some) planning researchers rather than political reality (see e.g. Faludi 2002). Nevertheless, with the Treaty of Lisbon, entering into force in 2009, territorial cohesion was added as a main objective alongside economic and social cohesion to foster European integration, and a shared competence between the EU and its member states was established. Though a spatial dimension cannot be denied from territorial cohesion, planning scholars currently debate its connection to and relevance for spatial planning (see e.g. Allmendinger et al. 2015 as referred to earlier in this article).

However, the lack of legally established competences regarding spatial planning is not the only rationale behind the soft planning approach. There is also a growing agreement on the transboundary nature of the challenges that spatial planning is facing, such as environmental problems (see Stead 2014b), economic disadvantages and lack of transport connections. These problems cannot be solved within the national statutory planning systems but call for coordinated solutions across jurisdictions and national boundaries, which is why the European Union aims to provide a framework for cross-border cooperation in planning. Moreover, the EU deliberately makes use of the strategic potential that informal planning approaches hold. Luukkonen (2015) argues that European spatial policies are especially powerful because they lack formal or high-level political status. The status of spatial policies as “seemingly non-political, evidence-based management of spatial development” (Luukkonen 2015, p.188) thus enables policymakers to justify their aims as ‘necessities’ for the common good¹¹.

As described earlier in this article, the EU also affects planning through formal rules and regulations. Though it cannot be claimed that the regulations themselves soften, it is worth noting that also policy fields traditionally characterised by their focus on legally binding directives might have recently taken a turn towards soft planning. Stead (2014a) analyses environmental policy within the macro-regional strategy for the Baltic Sea Region and concludes that although its impacts on spatial rescaling of environmental governance may seem small or intangible, they do exist.

Also regional policy, though very formalised and bureaucratic in its procedures, shows soft planning characteristics and is currently pushed as a “new frame for emerging soft spaces of spatial development” (Haughton et al. 2009). On the one hand it contributes to the creation of soft spaces by operating at the NUTS 2 level (Davoudi 2007), a sub-national territorial unit that is in most countries not part of the statutory planning system. On the other hand, its approach can be considered partly soft, with the EU not assuming the top-down planning role but providing funds for local or regional actors, who manage to develop projects that meet the EU objectives. At the same time, however, government actors continue to be responsible for the negotiation of agreements and programmes framing the use of the funds, representing clearly a hard element in regional policy. Mendez (2011) thus describes regional policy as a “hybrid mix of soft and hard new modes of governance” (p. 519).

Challenges of European soft planning

Although new, soft scales might be suitable to address certain spatial issues in Europe, their emergence also poses challenges.

The ideal construct of the nation-state with a fixed set of policy boundaries and a perfectly hierarchical structure is being eroded by processes of rescaling and the emergence of new boundaries above and below the national level, as well as transnational spaces cutting across the system (Stead 2014a, p.681).

These processes change the notion of the nation-state itself and raise questions of territoriality and national sovereignty (Faludi 2009). Responsibility for and exclusive power over their territory is a defining characteristic of the nation-states. This responsibility is challenged, if “the planning object is no longer a clearly delineated territory, nor the area for which that subject has a legal mandate and political responsibility” (Faludi 2009, p.3). At the same time, this legitimacy threat exists within countries through the development of informal strategic planning alongside traditional land-use planning, as the former “with its neoliberal and managerialist emphases, draws on a different kind of legitimation, when compared to statutory planning that relies on rules of administrative conduct” (Mäntysalo et al. 2015, p.352).

Practice shows that although actors in soft spaces take up an important role in the planning process, they often lack the means to exercise power over territory and fail to find ways of governing. Therefore, tradi-

tional administrative modes of power still control new forms of cooperation. Planning actors find themselves

in a situation where the new spatial frameworks promoted by the EU are not in tune with the territorially bounded administrative systems of the EU's Member States. The creation of the new governance framework becomes necessary, but [...] the integration of the frameworks to the existing administrative structures of regional development is a challenging task (Luukkonen & Moilanen 2012, p.483).

In addition, traditional planning levels remain powerful, and national borders, as “complex social constructions” (Haselsberger 2014, p.507), continue to present significant challenges to spatial development, despite efforts throughout Europe to reduce their separating force (Stead 2014b; Walsh 2014).

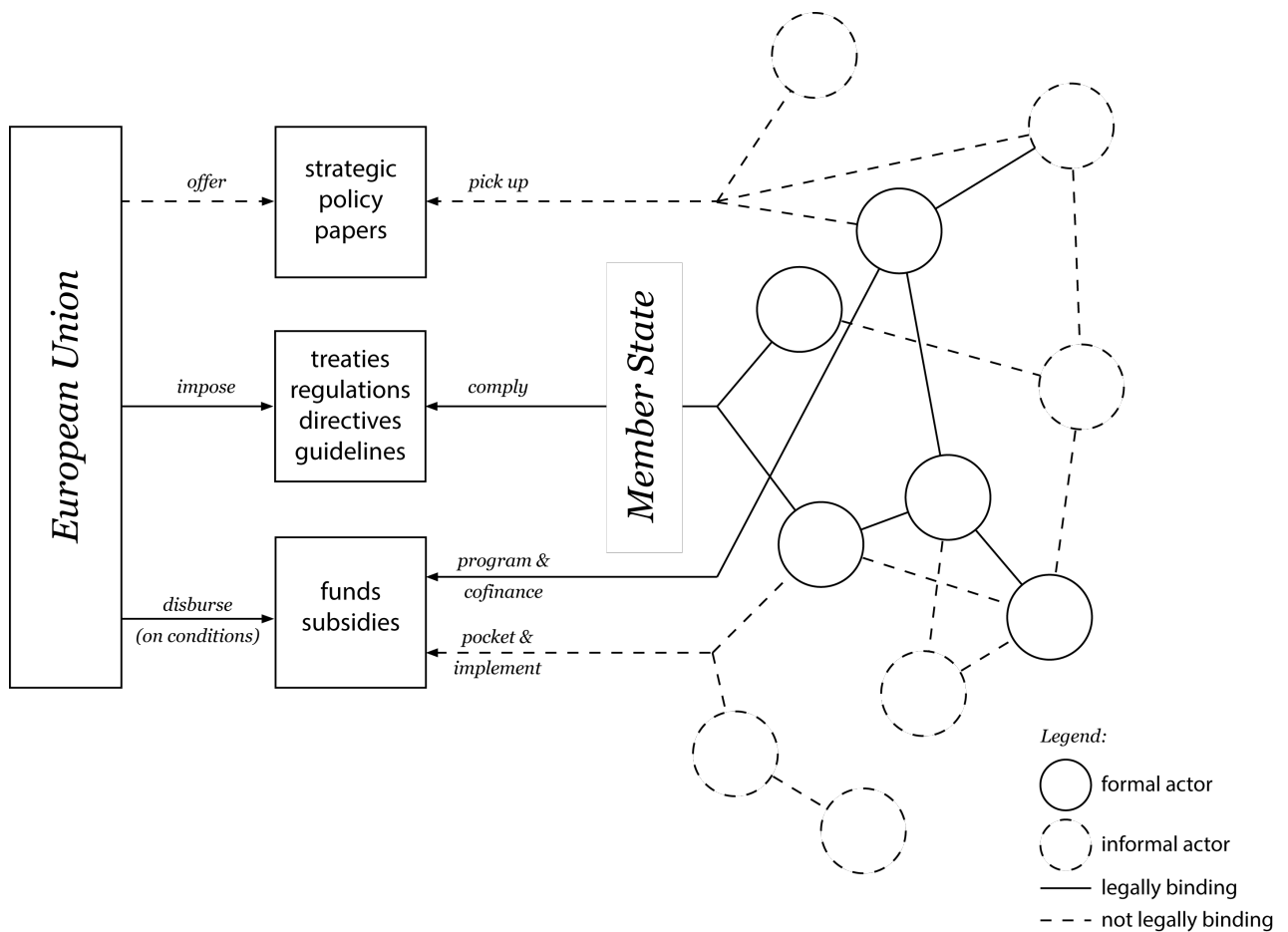
Even if ways to govern soft spaces are found, it cannot be ensured that democratic principles are followed and that solutions reflect the public interest. A questionnaire, released by the European Commission in the course of the preparations for the Green Paper on Territorial Cohesion (CEC 2008), provides an example: Austrian actors replied that “‘fuzzy terminologies’ could open the way for policy innovation but – and this is evidently also the case for territorial cohesion – fuzziness could also serve as paravent to hide political interests (very often concerning financing, institutional competences and distribution of power)” (Luukkonen & Moilanen 2012, p.490). Fuzziness in terminologies and implementation of EU policies might therefore widen the gap between political rhetoric and actions on the ground, diluting democratic mechanisms and favouring particular interests over the public ones.

5. A conceptual framework to analyse the encounter of EU spatial planning and national planning systems

There is general agreement that the domestic changes that EU politics, politics and policies trigger “are differential and sometimes controversial, advocating various responses to Europeanization” (Giannakourou 2005, p.319) across Europe. Also;

the processes of spatial rescaling of policies and programmes are by no means leading to uniform changes across different territories: substantial variations in the nature of new territorial spaces are apparent (Stead 2014a, p.324).

Spatial shifts have given rise to new actors and created new levels of governance and planning in which policy-making, programming and decision-making occur. The European Union makes use of soft, strategic planning approaches that are not bound to the member states' statutory planning systems. The informal character of the EU initiatives related to spatial planning leaves scope for interpretation, suggesting that different national planning systems encounter these soft planning policies differently.



Examples on the ground...

Examples for variations can be found rather easily. Austria and Finland, for instance, joined the European Union simultaneously in 1995, when the mentalities and technicalities of the EU had already been developed for several decades. Both countries thus found themselves in a position where they were forced to adapt to a *fait accompli* (though at the same time they gained the right to codetermine the future development of the EU). Regarding planning, the incompatibility of the domestic system with the institutional architecture of the European Union constituted a problem in both countries. In response, each country found its own way of adapting to the European requirements.

In Finland, the establishment of Regional Councils (*'maakunnan liitto'*) can be seen as the most visible institutional impact of the EU membership. The rationale behind was the misfit between Finland's traditional Nordic bipolar structure, comprising the central government and relatively strong local governments, and the principles and institutional demands of EU regional policy (Fritsch & Eskelinen 2011). Though now a formalised part of the Finnish planning system, the Regional Councils are more than an additional layer between the national and municipal planning authorities. They represent "a step towards overcoming the traditional division between (physical) regional planning and (economic) regional development" (Böhme 2002, p.240). In contrast to regional authorities in many other countries, the Finnish Regional Councils are, however, not elected by the general public. Instead, they are composed

Figure 3. A conceptual framework to illustrate the encounter of European and domestic planning.

of political representatives of local governments, elected by municipal councils.

In Austria, the accession to the EU triggered different effects (see also Purkarthofer 2013). Consisting of nine federated states (*Länder*), the statutory planning system acts at the levels of federated states and municipalities, while the nation-state holds powers only concerning certain sectoral policies. Joining the European Union, Austria was forced to develop a stronger national authority to enable communication and coordination between the EU and the federated states. The task was taken over by the Austrian Conference on Spatial Planning (ÖROK), a para-constitutional institution comprising federal, state and local representatives, founded already in the 1970s. Although its political decision-making body includes Austria's highest political representatives, the managing office – which carries out all tasks at the administrative level – consists only of a handful of employees. More important, however, is the fact that the Conference is an informal organisation that can only give recommendations and coordinate but has no power to draw up legally binding plans. With Austria's accession to the EU, the Conference significantly gained importance but its legal status was never seriously debated (among other things due to the general unwillingness of the federated states to hand over responsibilities to the national level).

However, although the formal planning responsibility remained with the federated states, for the first time the nine *Länder* were forced to cooperate and coordinate their actions in order to ensure their interests at the national and European level. Based on this example, Faludi (1998) deduced that “informal arrangements can work, some would even say better than formal ones” (p. 497), especially in situations characterised by fragmentation, such as European spatial planning. In the case of Austria, co-operative planning substitutes formal powers, a model that Faludi (at that time) regarded as potentially successful for European planning as a whole.

These two examples alone, though only touching upon how the European Union affects national planning systems in two countries, without providing a bigger picture, illustrate how the same challenge – in this case the incompatibility of the domestic system with the institutional architecture of the European Union – can lead to either soft or hard arrangements. The emergence of soft and hard planning at the European Union level and within the member states, and the encounter of these different types of planning, therefore bears a lot of potential for further research. Studies on governance have already touched the “‘goodness of fit’ argument, that is, the degree of fit between the national and the EU level” (Giannakourou 2012, pp.119–120). However, the reality seems to be more complex, depending not only on the statutory institutional framework, but just as much on the soft solutions that are found to interrelate European and national planning.

...and comparison on an abstract level

To clarify the proposed conceptual framework it might be helpful to leave concrete examples aside for a moment and instead focus on a gen-

eralised, abstract presentation of the problem. Currently, the European Union's influence on planning in the member states is frequently understood as presented earlier in this article (Figure 1), dividing EU activities relevant for planning into three categories. Although this framework is accurate, it needs to be developed further in order to depict the encounter of European and national planning. In fact, one central claim of this article is that it is not sufficient to observe what happens *between* the European Union and its member states but rather how European input is dealt with *within* a country^{III}. Figure 3 aims to illustrate in an abstract manner how EU activities with relevance for planning are linked to complex networks of actors and instruments within the member states. Although all member states possess the same links to the European level, the networks these links encounter within a country might differ considerably. It can thus be assumed that the influence of the EU in a certain country is directly dependent on the integration of policies into these networks, the degree of formalisation of the actors involved as well as the relationships between them. This way of thinking can contribute to overcome the prevalent perception that hard, legally binding policies automatically have greater impact than soft, not legally binding ones. Instead, it appears to be crucial which key actors and institutions deal with EU policies and how they contribute to the policy transfer within a country through connections to other formal and informal planning actors.

Not referring to any particular member states, an example might clarify this line of argumentation: The European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) is a legally non-binding document, agreed upon by the European ministers responsible for spatial development. Within a country, the ESDP can either be stalled at ministerial or national level, figuratively turning into a dead end in our framework, or be passed on to other scales and institutions. This transmission can take different forms, such as referencing to the ESDP in other documents directly or indirectly (e.g. through the use of its objectives and rhetoric), or internalising the ideas and contents of the ESDP and acknowledging them when making plans and policies. This way, the impact of the ESDP can go far beyond its entry point to the domestic system. Additionally, and this is particularly interesting in the context of soft and hard planning, the ESDP's influence is not bound to remain informal despite its status as a non-statutory document, since domestic actors have the opportunity to embed its ideas into formal as well as informal policies.

This example illustrates the importance of understanding the relationship between hard and soft planning in different countries in order to better grasp the role of the European Union. It can be assumed that countries differ in their 'hardness', i.e. their fixation on formal legislation, their ability to accept soft planning approaches and integrate them into the planning system, and their perception of soft planning as a temporary solution in need of formalisation. This hardness may be a determining factor when investigating how well different countries accord with European spatial planning and to which extent the EU has found its way into and exerts influence on national planning systems. It can

also be an essential characteristic to take into account when rethinking traditional classifications of planning systems (Newman & Thornley 1996; CEC 1997), a process that has been given some thought recently (see e.g. Nadin & Stead 2012).

Moreover, a better understanding of different actors involved in the planning process can shed light on the power relations inherent to planning. The integration of EU policies can serve as an example to highlight that the widespread perception of planning systems as linear, hierarchical, top-down systems omits multi-dimensional and multi-scalar connections between different planning actors. Mapping these connections also makes apparent whether soft planning is used strategically to bypass formal restrictions and procedural requirements associated with statutory planning. This in turn raises further questions regarding the legitimacy of soft planning and of the actors practicing it. Are they governmental actors who stretch their authority to new planning scales – and if so, is this legitimate – or does soft planning bring new actors into the planning process?

The proposed framework is, however, still in its infancy and will need to undergo further adjustment in the course of its application, responding particularly to the following concerns: Understanding a country's planning system in its entirety is a long-term process that requires comprehensive knowledge about the administrative structures as well as the history and culture of a country. Obtaining this knowledge is particularly difficult when it comes to informal planning approaches, as they are usually not as well-documented and well-researched as the formal planning system. Another challenge lies in mapping accurately the involved actors, institutions and instruments, since the complex networks guiding planning are constantly evolving and changing over time.

Though a comprehensive view is highly relevant to understand how the EU affects spatial planning, its complexity is overwhelming. It might thus be feasible to set out from scrutinising single strands, 'following' certain EU policies as they make their way into the political and administrative system of a country. Research on a single (type of) policy has the potential to reach the depth necessary to truly understand the cultural particularities of a domestic planning system and to pay attention to connections that go beyond traditional planning instruments. Bringing together these different strands in one framework, such as the one pictured above, can then be a step towards creating a complete picture of the European Union's influences on spatial planning in its member states. Above all, this framework is therefore a request (or rather, an invitation) to consider the dimension of soft and hard planning when investigating the relation between European, national and sub-national planning, in order to ensure future comparability of studies.

6. Conclusion

Despite the fact that the EU can be seen as a central catalyst for spatial planning in and for Europe (Luukkonen 2015), we are still in the dark when it comes to understanding how European input translates into planning activities within the EU member states. This article studies European spatial planning in the light of soft spaces and soft planning, revealing that the EU plays a crucial role in creating new spatial entities and promoting informal approaches to planning. At the same time, the EU continues to affect spatial planning and spatial development through legally-binding documents and allocation of funds, e.g. to support regional development.

This article suggests that instead of merely focusing on the different channels of influences between the EU and its member states, research should pay increased attention to the encounter of European and domestic planning within the member states. Only through a deeper understanding of the networks of planning scales, actors and instruments through which EU inputs are integrated within a country, their role for spatial planning can be depicted accurately. The effects of EU initiatives and documents might thus differ significantly, depending on whether they are stalled quickly within a national planning system or reach a plurality of planning actors and scales. The distinction between hard and soft is crucial in this research framework, as informal actors and instruments can play an essential role in the integration of European spatial planning into national contexts.

Investigating soft and hard planning through the introduced framework is not only a helpful approach to grasp the complex connections between the EU and its member states but it can also contribute to a broader debate on the relation between formal and informal planning. In order to avoid tensions and parallelism, planning practice and research are concerned with finding ways how to interrelate rigid, legalistic planning regulation with emerging non-binding, flexible elements. Soft spaces, soft planning and strategic spatial planning have evolved into integral components of the planning universe but remain under-researched in many regards. The European Union with its wide range of actions, initiatives and policies and its (currently) 28 member states provides an ideal testbed to explore the encounter of soft and hard planning in a comparative and context-related manner.

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Endnotes

- ⁱ It has to be emphasised, however, that the ESDP and the Territorial Agenda, unlike other EU documents, are not adopted by the European Commission, Parliament and Council but by the member states' ministers responsible for spatial planning. The EU nevertheless plays a crucial role concerning agenda setting and creation of a framework for these meetings and processes (see e.g. Faludi & Waterhout, 2002).
- ⁱⁱ A clear connection can also be drawn between the EU and the neoliberal turn that is ascribed to strategic spatial planning. Economic growth and competitiveness have

been established as depoliticised common-sense policy objectives within neoliberal agendas (Olesen 2014). This has clearly influences EU policies, first and foremost regional policy: Linking itself to the Europe 2020 strategy, it currently transforms from a driver of convergence to a common investment tool (CEC 2014), creating a conflict between growth-orientation and cohesion, the underlying rationale of regional policy at a European level. Political tensions within the EU, caused by a worsening economic climate and the declining willingness of wealthier member states to make net contributions to the EU budget (Baun & Marek 2014), thus found their way into discussions on spatial planning and regional development, lowering the goal of cohesion on the European agenda.

- ⁱⁱⁱ Correspondingly, European input does not just appear but is created within the network of European institutions and in collaboration with national actors. However, in this article the processes within the EU, as well as the direction of member states influencing EU policy-making, are deliberately omitted in order to reduce the framework's complexity.

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