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# Europe should cherish its major urban nodes

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## Abstract

By choosing the spatial concept of ‘polycentricity’ the European Territorial Agenda (TA) has opted for an outdated one. An alternative approach would have been to place emphasis on the major European urban nodes that function within worldwide networks and to leave the planning of the urban regions entirely up to the member states of the European Union (EU).

## Keywords

Polycentricity, Territorial Agenda, European Union

## 1. Introduction: European thinking about urban patterns

The TA, first drawn up by the member states in 2007 and renewed in 2011, is the most recent EU document to embrace quasi-spatial policy. It is still a member state product but it addresses itself also to the Commission. It was inspired in part by the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP), that dates from as long ago as 1999.

I want to focus here on the unsatisfactory way in which European urban patterns up to now have been incorporated in the TA. After many years of research, and of development of conceptual ideas by the planning profession, it is very disappointing that the “raw” policy concept polycentricity still is used. In this way also opportunities are missed to catch on with other policy fields, e.g. European transport policy.

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## 2. Polycentricity and the conflict of interest with free movement of entrepreneurs and people

In the TA polycentricity is prominent, namely as the fundamental policy principle. According to the ESDP, that can be regarded as the originator of the concept:

‘The concept of polycentric development has to be pursued, to ensure regionally balanced development, because the EU is becoming fully integrated in the global economy. Pursuit of this concept will help to avoid further excessive economic and demographic concentration in the core area of the EU.’<sup>2</sup>

In addition the ESDP states: ‘The creation and enlargement of several dynamic global economy integration zones provides an important instrument for accelerating economic growth and job creation in the EU, particularly also in the regions currently regarded as structurally weak’.<sup>3</sup>

The TA of 2011 wants to “promote polycentric and balanced territorial development”, thinks that it is “important to avoid polarization between capitals, metropolitan areas and medium sized towns on the national scale”, and remarks that “the challenge of the core-periphery division is still present, even on the national scale”.<sup>4</sup>

Achieving spatial balance, and - expressed in another way - reducing the disparities between centre and periphery in Europe, are recurring themes in the ongoing debate about Europe’s territorial development. That is not so strange because cohesion policy, under which territorial discourses often fall, is based on the premise of the need to reduce social and economic disparities. Those disparities are, however, accentuated by the effects of economic policies developed with the wider European market in mind. These latter policies have an effect on territorial European policy so one can imagine that there is indeed a conflict of interest between territorial policy and economic policy that forms the heart of the European project.

This is an important point. In Europe the free movement of capital and labour is sacrosanct. The consequence of the free movement of capital is that firms look for the most favourable locations. That has resulted in the past – and probably will in the future – in a preference for concentration in accessible, major urban regions that offer considerable agglomeration advantages. The consequence of the freedom of movement of capital is that people search for locations where the standard of education is high and also where chances of employment are greatest. That is in the general interest of the European

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<sup>2</sup> CEC, Commission of the European Communities (1999) European Spatial Development Perspective: Towards Balanced and Sustainable Development of the Territory of the EU, Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, Luxembourg, p. 20.

<sup>3</sup> See previous note.

<sup>4</sup> Territorial Agenda of the European Union: Towards a More Competitive and Sustainable Europe of Diverse Regions - Agreed at the occasion of the Informal Ministerial Meeting on Urban Development and Territorial Cohesion on 24/25 May 2007, passim (<http://www.bmvbs.de/territorial-agenda>; Last access 3 August 2011).

citizens themselves. This does not sit comfortably with the territorial orientation of member states.<sup>5</sup>

A consequence of these types of spontaneous movements is that some regions become stronger and some weaker, and that here and there depopulation takes place. This in turn has the effect that governments are inclined to introduce measures to counteract or compensate for these developments. In the European context Cohesion Policy fulfils this role. We are talking here about compensating both historical deficiencies – for example the Eastern Europe states – and the reduction of differences in general. Many member states had or still have similar objectives. In this context ‘territorial cohesion’, the new cohesion kid on the block, has been introduced to mitigate the differences arising from the spontaneous movement of entrepreneurs and people. The question is whether this is a rational or sensible policy.

In many countries the welfare state – certainly in the countries in the Rhine river basin (Germany and the Netherlands) and the Scandinavian countries – has ensured that the geographical contrasts in living standards and circumstances within national boundaries remain relatively small. Geographically based policy to compensate for disadvantages is not very effective compared to welfare state arrangements<sup>6</sup>.

In other words: the welfare state has proved to be an adequate formula for considerably reducing the geographical differences in living standards and circumstances; reducing disparities in prosperity between regions within countries does not in the first place require territorial policy. There could be other reasons for wanting to mitigate the rapid depopulation of certain regions, for instance the desire to preserve certain valuable natural or cultural-historical landscapes, or retain potential for tourism, or to guarantee food production. But that requires specific policies tailored to the regions themselves, not general objectives to reduce disparities or counteract population decline.

### **3. The pentagon: a worrying pattern on the map**

A particular worry in the European context is the visible concentration of population and economic activity over a large area of Europe than can be delimited by the cities of Hamburg, London, Paris, Munich and Milan (sometimes referred to as the pentagon). Within the individual countries this pattern of concentration on small areas is repeated, with extreme cases of concentration in and around the capital cities of France and Hungary and more dispersed patterns in the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany. In the ESDP and behind the concept of polycentricity - with the recognition of the economic value of the strong urban regions in the pentagon - lies the reasoning that a high concentration of population and economic activity in a small area in general is not a good thing; there are agglomeration disadvantages, there is a threat to the rural areas, and the large concentration in central Europe stands in the way of the development opportunities of the more peripheral regions.

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<sup>5</sup> The work of Saskia Sassen, 2006, *Territory, authority, rights; from Medieval to Global Assemblages*, Princeton: Princeton U.P., deals extensively with this theme.

<sup>6</sup> There are indications that the welfare state may have negative effects on some regions because they can create transfer dependency: large numbers of households living of welfare payments, and local economies mainly based on government jobs and investments (lecture by dr. Andrés Rodríguez-Pose, London School of Economics, at EU Seminar, Ostróda, Poland, July 19 2011).

It is not a valid argument that the pressure exerted by the large agglomerations in this large pentagon on their surroundings is so great that action at a European scale is required. The Netherlands for instance cannot really be regarded as a country with an intensive land use (two thirds of the area is agricultural land and the total nature area is growing), and even with regard to the Randstad the viewpoint can be defended that it contains a number of low pressure areas. Furthermore the so-called Eurodelta of the Rhine, Meuse and Scheldt rivers provides in practice plenty of space for nature development, recreation, water storage, viniculture and animal husbandry, in close proximity to the development of the large urban concentrations of the Randstad, the Flemish triangle and the Rhine-Ruhr conurbation. If we look a little bit further, then Northern France and Wallonia can be regarded as being more empty than full. To my mind this inaccurate analysis is the consequence of a morphological judgment made at much too high a spatial scale<sup>7</sup>

*Morphological view not useful at all spatial scales*

The morphological policy view of spatial pressure at the scale of the cities and urban regions makes sense but at a higher scale this is no longer tenable. The conflict between land uses is far less prevalent and less frequent and the coherence of housing, employment and transport markets underpinning the development of the urban regions is much less.

Over the last twenty years the realization has dawned in the planning discipline – partly influenced by the rediscovery of spatial economics - that with the end of strict central government control over housing and economic activity, and with the European liberalisation of the internal market and the globalisation of other markets, shaping urban regions according to a pre-determined model can only be effective in a limited number of cases. At the lowest scale of urban neighbourhoods and districts the public authorities can still determine fairly precisely how and what should be built but the higher the scale the more important other forces become. There is now an awareness that the spatial development of urban areas – just as in agricultural areas – is determined principally by the people themselves (demography, migration, prosperity) and by entrepreneurs.

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<sup>7</sup> There are more objections to the concept of polycentricity. An important one is that polycentricity as a descriptive concept is often confused with polycentricity as a policy concept. Within the broad brush idea of polycentricity is the vision that not only the urban regions must be strengthened all over Europe but also that the rural areas remain liveable down to the smallest settlements. Collaboration between the larger and smaller nuclei should have a favourable effect, but this is doubtful. There are also other problems. Others have pointed these out: that ecological, social and economic advantages attributed to polycentric development (also at the urban regional scale) cannot be proven or could even be untrue. See for instance Vandermotten et al 'European Planning and the Polycentric Consensus: Wishful Thinking?' in *Regional Studies* and Evert Meijers and Kirster Sandberg, 2008, "Reducing regional disparities by means of polycentric development: panacea or placebo?" in *Scienze Regionali* vol. 7, no. 2, p. 71-96.

### *Morphological view versus functional view*

In research<sup>8</sup> - partly subsidized by the EU as in the case of ESPON - it is clearly apparent that polycentricity must be defined in both morphological and functional terms and that these are not at all the same thing.

The functional world provides better insights than the morphological into what the drivers are for spatial development<sup>9</sup>. Multinational enterprises are the biggest drivers in the world economy<sup>10</sup> and must therefore be cherished. They represent a high earning capacity and support the other parts of the national economies.

The multinationals are concentrated mainly in the large urban agglomerations. The significance of 'first cities' (see note 6, Polynet) is great and they should be perceived more as having a competitive advantage than a disadvantage. Large urban regions are for the most part more productive than smaller ones, simply because they can offer more agglomeration advantages.<sup>11</sup> That the spatial developments they stimulate can be a cause of concern – agglomeration disadvantages such as for example criss-cross car traffic, noise pollution, high house prices etc. - is recognized and must be countered by spatial, environmental and transport policies at the local, regional and national levels, but that does not mean that the agglomeration advantages should be ignored.

My conclusion is that the functional approach can alter our viewpoint, to start with at the European level. Relations of firms and their choice of locations are the first aspect we have to study in the context of spatial policy. Then we have to look at the planning of the urban regions, and in this respect the morphological approach is relevant. The question is what are consequences of this change of approach for spatial planning, in particular in the European context?

## **4. Looking for nodes**

In the functional approach we must study functional relationships. What these relationships exactly represent and where the emphasis must be applied in spatial terms has certainly not yet been scientifically fully worked out. It can, however, be safely assumed that functional relationships also have a physical side that is expressed in flows of goods, information and people and their respective infrastructures. Castells referred to 'space of flows' and 'space of places' and translated the physical aspect of the meeting of spaces and flows as 'nodes'. That brings us to the tried and trusted fields of spatial planning and transport.

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<sup>8</sup> Such as ESPON 111, 2005, *Potentials for polycentric development in Europe*, Stockholm: Nordregio; P. Hall and K. Pain, *Polynet*, 2006; W. Knapp and P. Schmitt, Discourse on 'metropolitan driving forces' and 'uneven development': Germany and the Rhine Ruhr Conurbation in *Regional Studies* 2008.

<sup>9</sup> Eloquently propagated as basis for modern planning by prof. Luuk Boelens, 2005, *Fluviology, a new approach of spatial planning*, inaugural lecture, Utrecht University.

<sup>10</sup> For example Philip McCann, Zoltan J. Acs, 2011, 'Globalization: Countries, Cities and Multinationals', in *Regional Studies*, 45: no. 1 p. 17-32 and A. Thierstein and S. Luthi, 'Rhein+Ruhr – Der polyzentrische Metropolraum im internationalen Standortwettbewerb' in *Vorbereitender Bericht Jahrestagung Deutsche Akademie für Städtebau und Landesplanung*, 2010.

<sup>11</sup> E.g. Enrique Garcilazo and Joaquim Oliviera Martins, 2011, Key findings and policy implications in the *OECD regional Outlook 2011*.

For a European perspective on spatial development we must first study the nodes in networks that have relevance at the European and world scales.<sup>12</sup> The nodes acquire their significance from world trade and the locational behaviour of multinational enterprises. In Europe there are large urban agglomerations with a multiple global function, such as London and Paris.<sup>13</sup> In addition there are urban regions with a specialist focus on part of the world economy; one can think in this context of a certain type of technology (e.g. Helsinki) or logistics (e.g. Rotterdam).

In the globalizing economy markets are ever-growing. Under the influence of EU policies also the markets close to home, that is to say in Europe, are also growing. But the European economy itself is growing only slowly and its relative strength in the world is in fact diminishing. That means that eventually the opportunities for finding high quality employment and earning high salaries in Europe could also be reduced. We will have to focus on a wider world than the traditional hinterland of the United Kingdom, Germany, Belgium and France. It is not without justification that Dutch horticulture has a global outlook and that the Amsterdam Schiphol airport is active in New York as an enterprise.

We are not talking here only about increasing flows of goods. On the contrary in the future more and more revenue will be earned from the organization of flows of information (and possibly of tourists). For this reason in Europe nodes with a powerful position in various types of international and worldwide networks will be more and more important. In the future design of the Transeuropean Networks international nodal points will be of paramount importance, in the first place London and Paris. Additional new nodes are necessary, certainly in the larger new member states such as Poland.

#### *Nodes as urban places*

Then we must look with a morphological slant at the spatial planning of the nodes themselves, namely as large urban regions. It is important that these regions in international terms are strongly connected to not only one economic or social field but to several. In that way they acquire an integrated and diversified economic base with a wide range of services (such as advanced producer services and amenities for the population in the fields of culture and health services). A certain degree of increase in scale is in this respect an advantage, for instance to a minimum of three million inhabitants. The Dutch urban regions are small and it makes sense, therefore, that the Amsterdam metropolitan conurbation is allowed every opportunity to grow extensively. The regions must provide a good working and living environment and therefore be well planned spatially. And here we arrive at the scale of the daily urban system.

Is the design and planning of the daily urban system a European issue or should we leave that to the member states? I would say the latter because integrated (spatial) planning is only possible at smaller scales, and also as a result of the desire for subsidiarity. In European sectoral policy systematic account must, however, be taken of the growth

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<sup>12</sup> Zachary P. Neal, 2010, 'From central places to network bases: A transition in the U.S. urban hierarchy, 1900-2000' in *City & Community*, vol 1, p. 1-27.

<sup>13</sup> See for instance Peter J. Taylor and Ben Derudder, 2004, 'Porous Europe: European cities in global urban arenas', in *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie*, vol. 95, no. 5, p. 527-538.

potential and the agglomeration advantages and disadvantages of the European world cities. Policy development should start from these. That is more fruitful than devoting equal attention to all kinds of smaller and larger nuclei.

Europe should cherish its major urban nodes