The European Spatial Development Perspective and North-west Europe: Application and the Future

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ABSTRACT The European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) is the product of a north-west European planning tradition. This article discusses the role of north-west European concerns, in particular the use of the concept of polycentricity, in the making of the ESDP, and the application of the ESDP in the North-west European Metropolitan Area (NWMA), more in particular in Germany, the UK, The Netherlands and Belgium. The article also explores the future of spatial planning as regards north-west Europe. Much will depend on how Community policy will adapt to the enlargement of the European Union. However, it seems certain that existing member states, in particular those in north-west Europe will see their share in the structural funds evaporate. This may give added significance to INTERREG IIIB respectively to the successor of this Community Initiative. In addition, concepts like territorial cohesion and territorial management may become functional equivalents to that of spatial planning, for which the Community is said to have no competence.

1. Introduction

This article is about (a) the north-west European roots of European spatial planning, (b) the role of north-west European concerns in making the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) and (c) the application of the same ESDP in the North-west European Metropolitan Area (NWMA).

The NWMA as defined under the Community Initiative INTERREG IIIC for transnational planning includes an area that has been the object of a previous study, ‘Prospects for the Development of the Central and Capital Cities and Regions’ (CEC, 1996) done for ‘Europe 2000 +’ (CEC, 1994). What was added were the French regions Basse Normandie, Centre and Bourgogne, the Dutch provinces of Flevoland and Overijssel and the whole of Ireland. In addition, the NWMA comprises the whole of the UK, rather than (as in the previous study) only the south-east.

Seven member states are involved: the Benelux countries, the UK, the Irish Republic, France and Germany. The, according to the ESDP, one and only ‘global economic integration zone’ in Europe, the ‘pentagon’ London-Paris-Milan-Munich-Hamburg, overlaps the NWMA. Three out of the four polynuclear urban regions forming the object of EURBANET,
Figure 1. The four polynuclear urban regions, the NWMA and the ‘pentagon’.

one of the projects in this ‘cooperation area’, the Randstad, RheinRuhr and the Flemish Diamond, are in the ‘pentagon’ (Figure 1).

The next section of this article is about how one defining characteristic of these regions, polycentricity, has been identified in the 1960s. Section 3 is about polycentricity in the ESDP process. Section 4 provides evidence as regards the application of the ESDP including, where applicable, the polycentricity theme, in the NWMA. The conclusions are about the future of the ESDP, in particular in north-west Europe.

2. A Test Bed for European Spatial Planning

Although not always under these names, Randstad, RheinRuhr and the Flemish Diamond have been the object of deliberations by national and regional planners on the Conference of Regions of North-west Europe (CRENWE) set up in 1958. It brought together delegates from the Benelux, northern France, the south-east of England (from the 1970s onwards) and some German Länder. They discussed the prospect of a megalopolis in north-west Europe comparable to the one between Washington and Boston (Gottmann, 1961). It is common knowledge that population density in the Netherlands is high. It is less well known that density in North-Rhine Westphalia and Flanders (where RheinRuhr respectively the Flemish Diamond are located) is even higher. The three regions discussed here are indeed in the most extensive contiguous region of high population density in north-west Europe. This area is being
described as ‘polynucleated’ (Dieleman & Faludi, 1998, pp. 366–370) a term also used in the EURBANET project talking about ‘polynucleated urban regions’. In the ESDP, the term used is ‘polycentricity’. Both terms refer to the absence of a dominant core.

CRENWE also pointed out the high level of industrial activity in north-west Europe. Coal production amounted to 95% and steel production to 75% of that of the European Economic Community of six. Agriculture was diverse and productivity high. The ports handled large volumes of traffic, and there was a dense network of railways, motorways and pipelines. It was claimed that the three urban agglomerations were matches even for London and New York. This was indeed when Hall (1966) included the polynucleated Ruhr Area and the Randstad among his ‘World Cities’.

CRENWE wanted to go beyond analysis. In 1967, Norbert Ley, chief planner of North-Rhine Westphalia, presented a veritable structure sketch of north-west Europe, identifying the area between the Rhine, Meuse and Scheldt as an ‘urban triangle’ with 35 million inhabitants, the largest urban complex on the European continent and one of the largest in the world.

After CRENWE (now disbanded) Benelux entered the scene (De Vries, 2002). In 1986, Benelux produced a Structural Outline, quite likely the first transnational plan ever to receive formal approval by representatives of the governments concerned. The 1990s saw a Second Outline being prepared, but it was soon eclipsed in importance by the ESDP. The ESDP does not specifically address the area under consideration, but north-west European concerns, like polycentricity, were articulated in the process, nevertheless.

3. Polycentricity in the ESDP Process

In the ESDP process, polycentricity was a ‘bridging concept’ (Waterhout, 2002). It fulfilled this role precisely because of what the academic literature (Kräutke, 2001; Copus, 2001) criticizes it for: its ambiguity, allowing for multiple interpretations. In the ESDP emphasis is on the polycentric urban system of the European Union (EU) as a whole. The backdrop is formed by the well-known conceptualization of Europe, in a study done for the French agency DATAR by Brunet (1989), in terms of a European dorsale, later dubbed ‘Blue Banana’. It gained Notoriety because of the one-dimensional view that it seemed to suggest, paying regard only to population density and economic performance. (In fact, Brunet had a purpose, to warn of the danger the marginalization of Paris, and even more so of the French Atlantic seaboard.) In a study for the European Commission, Kunzmann and Wegener (1991; see also Kunzmann, 1998) present the ‘European Bunch of Grapes’ as based on a more subtle, more diversified, indeed more polycentric view. Like with the Banana, the purpose is manifest: to warn of a mono-centric development in Europe.

In the ESDP process, polycentricity became a popular concept. (For the story of the ESDP see Faludi & Zonneveld, 1997; Faludi et al., 2000; Faludi & Waterhout, 2002.) The process started with an informal meeting of ministers at Nantes in 1989 and culminating, after several drafts had passed muster, in the ESDP being adopted at Potsdam in 1999 (CEC, 1999a). During its initial phases, initiatives by France (Faludi & Peyrony, 2001), the Netherlands (Martin, 2001) and Germany (Faludi, 2001a) were crucial. This process was inter-governmental, but with strong Commission involvement. Thus, consensus was a precondition of success. So forging a link between the interests of north-west Europe, from where the impetus came, and the rest became essential, and this is the role that polycentricity fulfilled.

At Nantes, polycentricity was not an issue. At the second meeting at Turin (1990), the Italians identified the area within a 500-kilometre radius around Luxembourg as the European core. The Dutch (for similar German views see Krautzberger & Selke, 1996) disliked what they saw as an over-emphasis on redistribution. At the third meeting at The Hague
they put the competitiveness of Europe and agglomeration diseconomies in its core on the agenda. These were said not only to endanger competitiveness but also the quality of life. The document they put on the table of the assembled ministers referred to a Europe-wide urban network (Figure 2). This conjures up the idea of polycentricity at the scale of the EU.

At a milestone meeting, one of the three 'spatial development guidelines' in the ESDP became 'balanced polycentric development'. The text of the document, called after the venue of the meeting the Leipzig Principles, specified this to mean "... a polycentric urban system, as balanced as possible, discouraging excessive concentration around some large centres and the marginalization of peripheral areas." Agglomeration diseconomies in the core were however linked to developments in the periphery: "Maximising inward investment in peripheral regions may also provide significant benefits to those central regions presently suffering from congestion, a deteriorating environment and demographic pressure due to their over-development" (Bundesministerium für Raumordnung, Bauwesen und Städtebau, 1995, p. 57). Thus, competitiveness of Europe as an issue receded into the background.

When in 1997 it was once again the turn of the Dutch to take the driving seat, they put it back on the agenda. Emphasizing competitiveness could lead to claims for European funds stimulating developments in the core of Europe. Southern Europeans held out for the periphery receiving assistance for catching up, thereby creating a better balance between core and periphery. The compromise was to formulate a new goal, 'balanced competitiveness', another term that, because of its very ambiguity, forms a good basis for compromises. 'Balanced competitiveness' has a polycentric ring about it, reminding one of the 'Bunch of Grapes'.
The final version of the ESDP altogether eschews visualizing the intended spatial structure of Europe. It merely identifies the "... one outstanding larger geographical zone of global economic integration: the core area of the EU, the pentagon defined by the metropolises of London, Paris, Milan, Munich and Hamburg" (CEC, 1999a, p. 20). One of the chief policy options is to promote several other zones to achieve a "polycentric and more balanced system of metropolitan regions".

To achieve a greater balance in the urban system, the ESDP proposes to strengthen cooperation "... to enable city networks at regional level to complement each other and co-operate. (...) As well as city networks at regional level, the need for complementing co-operation also applies to city networks at interregional, transnational or even European level" (CEC, 1999a, p. 21). This suggests nested urban networks and multifarious patterns of cooperation just as befits the contemporary metaphor of a 'network society' (Castells, 1996). It suggests a policy going beyond merely doling out support. Rather, initiatives from below are to be encouraged.

The ESDP addresses other concerns as well, including quality-of-life issues particularly relevant to north-west Europe. Polycentric development forms the bridging concept that all member states, those from the periphery and those from the, largely north-west European core could agree upon. The article now turns to the application of the ESDP.

4. The Application of the ESDP

The ESDP talks about its application rather than its implementation. The research has sought to establish whether the ESDP has indeed been applied, with an emphasis on the four countries in which the polynucleated urban regions covered by EURBANET are located. This has been done through a series of interviews in 1999/2000 with respondents involved in the preparation of the ESDP and/or the Community Initiative for the NWMA. The interviews aimed at identifying ESDP messages and their addressees, alongside arrangements for various follow-ups. Where possible, concrete examples of the application of the ESDP were also elicited. Finally, the interviews discussed the future. The impression was positive. The ESDP intended to shape the minds of those involved in spatial development. This has been achieved.

Although questions concerning polycentricity were included, the interviews allowed respondents to range over whatever issues they thought important. So, as might be expected, the coverage of polycentricity was uneven, reflecting the different attitudes held in the four countries covered. Issues besides polycentricity came to the fore, including attitudes towards the ESDP process as such.

Later, the results (see also Waterhout & Faludi, 2001; Faludi, 2001b) are discussed in the light of a review of the relevant literature, augmented by research in the archives of national planning agencies done as part of a wider research programme concerning the ESDP and its application (Faludi & Waterhout, 2002). In the case of Germany, this has been further amplified by observations by the author as a member of various advisory bodies. Before discussing the results, a brief look at the follow-up of the ESDP after Potsdam will be useful.

4.1 The Makers of the ESDP Taking it Further

At Tampere in Finland, the makers of the ESDP agreed on an action programme for its application. Meanwhile, there has already been progress on some of them. For instance, the object of one of the actions, the European Spatial Observation Network (ESPON), is now a fact (Bengs, 2002). The intended Pan-European framework forming the object of another action is also on the books (European Conference of Ministers responsible for Regional Planning, 2000). The UK is lead partner on exploring ‘Territorial Impact Assessment’ (TIA).
First results have been presented at the last meeting of ministers responsible for spatial planning (the first one since Tampere in 1999) at Namur on 13–14 July 2001, and the work is due to be completed in 2002. The Belgian Presidency has taken it upon itself to survey ESDP orientations in national spatial planning (Maréchal & De Boe, 2001; Van der Lecq, 2001a) with results also due in 2002. The ‘Geography manual for secondary schools’, a French action, is already available (Bailly & Fremont, 2000). The Commission is lead partner on two actions, including one on the spatial impacts of Community policies, which is in hand, and on enlargement.

The ESDP also plays a role in mainstream Community policies. Thus, the ‘Guidelines for Programmes in the Period 2000–2006’ for the structural funds stipulate that the development strategy of each region must take account of the ESDP (CEC, 1999b, p. 39). There is another programme under Article 10 of the ERDF Regulation, called TERRA, assessing the relevance of the policy options in the ESDP as a “… means to demonstrating the importance of a multi-sectoral and integrated approach to spatial planning” (CEC, 2000b, p. 7). Likewise, although predating the final ESDP, the ‘Urban Communications’ (CEC, 1997b, 1998) recognize its importance (Atkinson, 2001, p. 390).

A Communication on Integrated Coastal Zone Management (ICZM) says in so many words that the Commission “… will work with the Member States to support the application of the ESDP, including integrated spatial planning and management across administrative, natural and socio-economic units” (CEC, 2000a, p. 12, emphases in the original). Coastal zone management is based on eight fundamental components of good governance. (On the mention of the ESDP in the White Paper on Governance see later.) This is part of a strategy of applying the ‘Integrated Territorial Management approach’ in future across the EU. Thus, the Commission is formulating a spatial planning agenda of its own. The work programme for the year 2000 of Directorate-General Regio, the Directorate-General responsible for regional policy and centrally concerned with the ESDP, divines that the time for an inter-governmental approach has passed (Gatawis, 2000, p. 71).

Another Communication (CEC, 2000c) on ‘Services of General Interest in Europe’ also mentions the ESDP. Under Article 16 of the Treaty of Amsterdam such services are said to have a place among the shared values of the Union. Article 16 refers to the French concept of ‘territorial cohesion’. This concept gets a prominent place also in the ‘Second Report on Economic and Social Cohesion’ (CEC, 2001a). Like the ESDP, and although it defines the European core somewhat differently, it portrays the spatial structure of Europe as unbalanced, with an urbanized north-west European core and large socio-economic differences between regions. It then invokes the ESDP mantra of polycentric development to achieve a better balance, in terms of competition and complementarity, between the core of Europe and its other regions.

Not the least indicator of the Commission taking the ESDP on board is to be found in the White Paper on European Governance. There, the ESDP is placed at the core of efforts to achieve more coherence, being one of the ‘principles of good governance’. One can read this to mean the need for, amongst others, a form of spatial planning so as to improve European governance:

The territorial impact of EU policies in areas such as transport, energy or environment should be addressed. These policies should form part of a coherent whole as stated in the EU’s second cohesion report; there is a need to avoid a logic which is too sector-specific. In the same way, decisions taken at regional and local levels should be coherent with a broader set of principles that would underpin more sustainable and balanced territorial development within the Union.
The Commission intends to use the enhanced dialogue with member states and their regions and cities to develop indicators to identify where coherence is needed. It will build upon existing works, such as the European Spatial Development Perspective .... (CEC, 2001b, p. 13)

The makers of the ESDP could not have wished for more. Note, however, that the Commission anticipates being in the driving seat. This has been the sticking point between it and the member states throughout the ESDP process. Amongst others to win their support, in 1996 the Commission introduced a new Community Initiative IIC supporting transnational planning, under which this research on the NWMA has been conducted. The article turns to the NWMA.

4.2 Application in the NWMA

In the NWMA, no less than 45 projects took place, involving 369 partners with a total expenditure of 59.5 million Euro, 28.1 million of which came from Brussels (NWMA Secretariat, no date). Going by the example of one of the 45 projects, EURBANET, which involved five partners and about a dozen people, it would seem that hundreds of experts were involved, and many more in the whole of Europe. In due course, Zetter (2002) expects this group to become a lobby for transnational planning.

Three of the four ‘measures’ in the Operational Programme (urban and regional systems, infrastructure and communication networks and natural resources and cultural heritage) related to the ‘spheres of activity’ as identified in the ESDP. (The fourth related to the secretariat.) The majority of partners were representatives of local and in particular regional authorities, the balance being made up of national authorities, universities (like in EURBANET) and non-profit organizations and private consultants. The programme was designed to stimulate European spatial planning based on the conviction that the ESDP “… will be an ongoing process, not a rigid ‘master plan’”. A mid-term evaluation found that the partners encountered a steep learning curve.

A project within NWMA deserving a special mention is the ‘Spatial Vision for North-west Europe’ (NWMA Spatial Vision Group, 2000). It elaborated upon and refined ESDP themes and presented building blocks for an eventual update. It was thus an important arena for the application of the ESDP, in particular of themes relating to polycentricity. The intention was to set an agenda for balanced and sustainable development in north-west Europe to be achieved through transnational cooperation. The Spatial Vision applied the polycentric philosophy, advocating more dispersed economic development building on various polynucleated networks existing in the NWMA. More in particular, the Vision divided NWMA into a ‘Central Zone’, an ‘Island Zone’, an ‘Inland Zone’ and an ‘Open Zone’. The Randstad, RheinRuhr and the Flemish Diamond are in the Central Zone and Central Scotland (the fourth polynucleated urban region covered by EURBANET) in the Island Zone. The Randstad, alongside with London, Paris and Frankfurt, was defined as a ‘global city and gateway’. RheinRuhr and Flemish Diamond are both ‘strategic polycentric areas’. In combination with Lille, the Flemish Diamond figured as a ‘counterweight global gateway and economic centre’, thus bearing evidence of the intention behind the polycentric development ideology of providing alternatives to further concentration in the most highly developed core areas. Central Scotland, with Glasgow and Edinburgh, was designated a ‘strategic centre’ with a key role in attracting inward investment. A ‘Spatial Vision Diagram’ does what the ESDP has avoided doing: visualizing policy (Figure 3). The jury is still out (Doucet, 2002; Nadin, 2002) but this must count as the most deliberate attempt to pursue ESDP themes, thereby giving expression to the idea of polycentricity as regards north-west Europe.
4.3 Application in Member States

This section reports on the application of the ESDP in Germany, the UK, The Netherlands and Belgium. Applying it, member states are free to interpret its guidelines as they wish. It is obvious that, in so doing, they take account of their own planning system, its strengths and weaknesses. So the research, including supplementary reading of the relevant literature shows the application of the ESDP taking a different course in each country, depending on the specific context and the relevant issues.
Germany. German federal planners have a statutory task representing German planning in the European arena. Indeed, they have been ESDP protagonists, but at the same time the most outspoken exponents of the view of European spatial planning being an inter-governmental rather than a Community responsibility.

Germans need not be told about polycentricity. They conceive of their urban system as polycentric and wish to keep it that way. On this basis, together with the Dutch they have been instrumental in putting the ‘polycentric system of cities in Europe’ on the ESDP agenda. However, in the light of active German participation in its preparation, the German reception of the ESDP seems low-key. Not that Germans soft-pedal on polycentricity. However, the competency issue continues to weigh on them. They are particularly weary of current Commission thinking as described earlier.

Be that as it may, in 2000, the Planning Advisory Council of the German Minister of Transport, Building and Housing (now responsible for spatial planning) gave its opinion on the ESDP. As in 1997, when commenting on the first official draft, it supported the ESDP. As then, the Council suggested updating the ‘Guidelines for Regional Policy’ (Federal Ministry for Regional Planning, Building and Urban Development, 1993) adopted jointly by the federal government and the Länder to more closely reflect ESDP principles. Note however that there are others in Germany who point out that the ESDP is more detailed than the ‘Guidelines’ so that, rather than the ‘Guidelines’ being adapted to the ESDP, the latter can double up for the former.

Another German forum is the standing conference of the federal and the Länder’ ministers responsible for planning, the one that has adopted the ‘Guidelines’. It is also known by its German acronym as the MKRO. The Länder on it are concerned about further ‘competence creep’ (the Commission assuming new powers and new responsibilities allegedly implied in existing treaty provisions). As a condition for their acceptance (required under the German Constitution) of the Treaty of Nice, they have put a clearer demarcation of responsibilities on the agenda of the next Inter-governmental Conference in 2004. Their position is reflected in attitudes towards the ESDP. It is positive as regards the ‘Future regions of Europe’ award and cooperation with accession states, both part of the Tampere Action Programme. And, of course, the MKRO, like pretty much everybody else, is supportive of INTERREG under which Brussels co-finances transnational work. For the rest, the MKRO keeps its distance.

The ‘Spatial Planning Report 2000’ (for an English summary see Federal Office for Building and Regional Planning, 2001) published by the Federal Office for Building and Regional Planning provides another vehicle for discussing the ESDP. It reviews spatial development in the Federal Republic, underlining once more that its polycentric urban system is an asset. Also, it emphasizes a central ESDP message, the importance of what it calls ‘integrative thinking, knowledge and action’ and the need for more attention to the integration of European and national components in spatial development.

The last issue of 2000 of a German-language journal published by the same Federal Office for Building and Regional Planning Development, Informationen zur Raumentwicklung, is devoted to the ESDP. In it Krätke (2000; for an English version see Krätke, 2001) gives a critical review of the idea of polycentricity. Ahlke (2000) writes about INTERREG IIC in Germany, saying that with the lively participation of cities and regions, one of the ESDP’s objectives is already being achieved. Germany has a share in no less than six out of the seven cooperation areas, NWMA amongst them. However, with the German focus on enlargement, the NWMA receives relatively little attention. Only three out of the 45 NWMA projects have a German lead partner. Rather, the Baltic Sea Region and CADSES, shorthand for Central European, Adriatic, Danubian and South-East European Space (both of which coincidentally comprise of 45 projects, like the NWMA), receive most of the funding.
Altogether, INTERREG IIC can be considered a success. Half of the 342 projects have a German partner. For more than a quarter, the lead partner is German. Of NWMA projects though, and although Germans participate in close to half of them, only three have a German lead partner and the German share amounts to no more than 3% of the funding. For other programme areas, the German share is higher (Research News, 1/2000, p. 8). Priorities will not be much different under INTERREG IIIB. For German planners involved in European matters, north-west Europe is not the main playing field.

The UK. It hardly bears emphasis that under the Conservatives the UK took a back seat in the ESDP process (Zetter, 2001, p. 286). Planning was restricted to what the EU Compendium of Planning Systems and Policies describes as the ‘land use management’ tradition “...where planning is more closely associated with the narrower task of controlling the change of use of land at the strategic and local level” (CEC, 1997a, p. 37). Planning was not about social and economic policies, and the impact of Community policies on planning was considered negligible (Tewdwr-Jones et al., 2000, p. 658). However, where they could, local authorities were exploiting opportunities for European partnerships (Eser & Konstadakopulos, 2000, p. 794), so much so that central government was “… falling behind local government’s enhanced links with European regions in relation to transnational planning” (Tewdwr-Jones & Williams, 2001, p. 76).

Availing themselves of the centralized UK system, the Conservatives introduced ‘national planning policy guidance’, first in Scotland and later in England and Wales, to ensure more consistency among local authorities in meeting national objectives for planning. The Conservatives were against devolution and decentralization that would have given their opponents in Labour strongholds more say. However, since the very beginning of European Community membership, the UK had been a recipient of structural funds and as such obliged to set up some form of regional organization, which in England it did by forming Government Regional Offices (for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, national offices already existed). For each of the English regions, a regional planning guidance (RPG) was published (Tewdwr-Jones et al., 2000, pp. 656–657; see also Twedwr-Jones & Williams, 2001, pp. 61–65).

With the coming into power of Labour in 1997, the situation changed drastically. (Tewdwr-Jones & Williams, 2001, pp. 56–57; Cullingworth & Nadin, 2002, pp. 30–31). It is this new situation that this inquiry relates to.

In the UK it is not so much the concept of polycentricity that draws attention. Thinking in terms of polycentricity does not come naturally to the UK, where London is dominant, indeed a world city, but there is willingness to test the concept (Zetter, 2001, p. 288). What does find favour with UK planners is the concept of spatial planning as being broader than just the management of land-use (Cullingworth & Nadin, 2002, p. 81). Spatial planning is thus a battle cry for all those wanting to liberate planning from the shackles of statutory land use management into which the Conservatives had put it.

The Labour Government also put devolution and strengthening relations with Europe on the agenda and published ‘Modernising Planning’ (DETR, 1998). The Minister responsible, Richard Caburn, felt that the European context had largely been missing. Since then, under Planning Policy Guidance Note 11 (DETR, 2000), before issuing an RPG, the Secretary of State must be satisfied that it has sufficient regard to European considerations specified in the Guidance Note, including the main themes of the ESDP. In the absence of a national spatial development perspective, now identified by the Royal Town Planning Institute as problematic (Wong et al., 2000; see also Tewdwr-Jones & Williams, 2001, p. 163), does the ESDP thus
The reader will remember that some Germans argue that it could do so for Germany!

The UK is not a front runner as far as NWMA projects are concerned. Although there are many UK partners, only nine out of the NWMA projects have a UK lead partner. In this respect it is important to note that the UK also participates in the North Sea and in the Atlantic Area programmes. In fact, all British regions with the exception of the south-east are covered by at least two, and the Highlands and Islands have even managed to be in all three (Zetter, 2001, p. 288). So, as with Germany, NWMA does not have undivided attention. Anyhow, the most important impact of the ESDP seems to be at the conceptual level where it comes to broadening the scope of planning.

The Netherlands. Dutch planners had been co-conspirators in bringing the ESDP about. However, towards the end, sector departments curtailed their freedom of action (Waterhout & Zonneveld, 2000a, 2000b). For a while it even seemed as if the ‘Fifth Policy Document on Spatial Planning 2000/2020’ (for an English summary see Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and Environmental, 2001) prepared as always in a complex pattern of interaction with the same sector departments would ignore the ESDP. A discussion document, “Planning the Netherlands: Strategic Principles for a New Spatial Planning Policy” (Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment, 1999) altogether failed to give it a mention. Meanwhile, the inter-departmental situation has improved and the Fifth Policy Document on Spatial Planning does refer to the ESDP. In a grand gesture, borders have been left off maps portraying the country as “that part of Europe called the Netherlands” (Martin, 2001, p. 266).

More in particular, the Fifth Policy Document describes the Netherlands as being situated in the economic core of Europe at the crossroads of ‘Euro-corridors’. It discusses its position in what it calls the north-west European ‘urban delta’ containing intensely urbanized areas. Against this backdrop, the Randstad is being re-positioned as the ‘Deltametropolis’.

The introduction of the ‘Delta Metropolis’ concept is an expression of the ambitions for the Randstad conurbation as an international urban network. The presence of water (delta) as well as its large city features (metropolis) give the area as a whole a unique profile in Europe (Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment, 2001, p. 25; see also Lambregts & Zonneveld, in this issue).

Three themes echoing the ESDP are discussed: urban and rural areas, the trans-European networks and water and nature areas. “On the one hand, policy focuses on important Dutch values of international significance such as the Wadden Sea. On the other hand, policy focuses on presenting a profile of Dutch qualities in Europe in order to strengthen the Netherlands’ competitive position, e.g. relating to the port of Rotterdam and Amsterdam Schiphol Airport. Both approaches are in line with the objective to provide input and assistance towards creating an optimal spatial structure for Europe and actively helping shape European policy that affects the spatial planning of the Netherlands.” The text adds that the “... European Spatial Planning (sic!) Perspective (ESDP) drafted in May 1999 by the European ministers of spatial planning is a frame of reference for this. The possibility of collaboration under the European initiative INTERREG III are also being capitalized upon” (op. cit.).

The document announces the intention to strengthen the spatial dimension of European regional policy. In combination with the Community Initiatives URBAN and INTERREG, this should lead to a European strategy for spatial investments. In a passage not included in the English summary it states:

As far as the Netherlands are concerned, investments made under the structural funds will not be targeted solely at the internal economic development of regions with a development lag. Rather, investments in and outside these regions must be
based on a spatial vision of the territory of the Union as a whole and be made in
such a way that policy decisions are based on cross-border and transnational spatial
relations … The ESDP has already put such a change of policy into motion.
(VROM, 2001, p. 262, own translation)

The Fifth Policy Document embraces polycentric development, identifying six national urban
networks as “… highly urbanized zones that take the form of a network of larger and smaller
compact cities, each with its own character and profile within that network” (Ministry of
Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment, 2001, p. 31). The most prominent one is the
‘Deltametropolis’. The government undertakes to improve the main infrastructure connec-
tions between it and the Flemish cities and German Ruhr area (op. cit., p. 50).

Three urban networks straddle the Dutch borders. Formulating cross-border spatial policy
for these is primarily a task for the provinces and municipalities, but the national government
will provide support. In addition, the document identifies regional networks. However, it
would be wrong to say that this emphasis on polycentricity is the result of the ESDP being
applied. As will be remembered, the Dutch together with the Germans have been instrumen-
tal in introducing polycentricity into the ESDP discourse in the first instance.

Martin (2001) identifies three traditions as being germane to the positive European role of
the Netherlands: the acceptance of planning, the Dutch multi-level planning system that the
ESDP merely extends with another layer, and the ‘neutral’ position of planning. Accordingly,
planning is the coordination of spending departments, invoking a holistic view of the territory.
Besides, with the Fifth Policy Document giving planning its own budget line, spatial planning
is no longer restrictive, but development-orientated. Martin claims that this “… fits in far
better with European policies, where the emphasis lies traditionally more on the level of
financial support than on policy substance. The characteristics of planning policy implemen-
tation within the Netherlands and at the European level are, as it were, converging” (Martin,
2001).²

Add to this the enthusiasm, as elsewhere, for INTERREG. No less than 16 out of the 45
NWMA projects (including EURBANET) have a Dutch lead partner, including in particular
the ‘Spatial Vision’ project discussed earlier. This is more than any other member state. (Note
that the Netherlands also participates in the North Sea programme.) And there is much more
INTERREG money to be had, so in the Netherlands as elsewhere this Community Initiative
will be stealing the limelight.

Belgium. At Nantes in 1989, Belgium was not represented. It was in the process of being
‘federalized’. Spatial planning became the responsibility of the regions, and there were no
arrangements for representing a joint Belgian position.

Meanwhile, in areas with devolved powers, regions take turns in representing Belgium in
EU business. Prior to meetings, they coordinate their positions, with the foreign ministry in
the chair. Since planning is not a Community competency, these arrangements do not apply,
and so in coordinating their actions, the experts concerned are left to their own devices (Van
der Lecq, 2001b).

Beyond this, each region goes its own way, adopting planning legislation and making
strategic plans. This is why there can be no question of either the ESDP as such or the
polycentricity theme being applied on the level of Belgium as a whole. Rather, the focus must
be on the regions.

Given its size and make-up, the Brussels Capital Region is the odd one out. It has been
the first to make a comprehensive plan, long before the ESDP became available, but this plan
is inward looking (De Vries, 2002). Even in the Benelux context, Brussels has difficulties
holding its own. It does participate in six INTERREG IIC project, but not as lead partner.
Flanders has adopted a well-publicized Spatial Structure Plan and a binding Action Programme (Albrechts, 1999, 2001a, 2001b; see also Albrechts & Lievois, in this issue). A central concept in it is that of the Flemish core area forming the ‘Flemish Diamond’. This, however, predates the ESDP and, with the exception of incidental attempts to get the Flemish Diamond on the ESDP agenda, there are no direct links with the ESDP process. The Flemish Administration finds it difficult to make personnel available for international work. This seems also why the Flemish Region as such does not figure amongst the lead partners of INTERREG projects. The Province of West Flanders does though, and Flemish partners participate in a further five projects. However, generally, the situation is inauspicious for the application of the ESDP.

The Walloon ‘Schéma de développement de l’espace régional’ was adopted concurrently with the ESDP, in May 1999. As its name suggests, it is more about regional economic development than about land use, addressing problems of old industrial regions and conceptualizes the spatial position of the Walloon Region in the relatively undeveloped heart of the otherwise highly dynamic north-west European urban core (Granville & Maréchal, 2000). In contrast to the other Belgian regions, the plan does relate to the ESDP, but the main interest is in ‘Eurocorridors’, in particular the one from Brussels across Walloon territory to Luxembourg. Furthermore, the plan refers to the cross-Channel Euregion of which the Belgian regions are part, and in particular to an INTERREG project called SPACE (Spatial Planning and Cities in the Euroregion) for which the Walloon administration is the lead partner. Being lead partner on a further three projects, the region is very active. Maybe this is due to the fact that as a recipient of structural funds it is familiar with things European. It seems no accident either that, when in the second semester of 2001 Belgium assumed the EU Presidency, it was once again the Walloon Region that hosted the informal council of ministers responsible for regional policy and spatial planning.

With the exception of Walloon enthusiasm, as far as applying the ESDP in Belgium is concerned, INTERREG is however the only show in town. No fewer than eight lead partners out of the 45 come from Belgium, only one less than from the UK. One of the EURBANET partners comes from the University of Leuven.

5. Conclusions: The Future of Spatial Planning as Regards North-west Europe

The Directorate-General Regio responsible for the Commission input into the ESDP process has always been of the opinion that formulating a spatial strategy is implied in existing Community competencies. This was the position of, for instance, Commissioner Wulf-Mathies in 1995 (Faludi & Waterhout, 2002, pp. 82–84). Member states did not buy this. The Commission went along with preparing the ESDP as an inter-governmental document. However, now that it is on the books, the Commission, whilst embracing the substantive policies in the ESDP, charts its own course, independently from the member states.

An example is the Second Report on Economic and Social Cohesion (CEC, 2001a). It conveys a clear message: enlargement will have profound impact on spatial development. Applying the current cut-off point of 75% of average EU gross domestic product (GDP) would mean that virtually all structural funds would go to the new member states (Figure 4) (see also Drevet, 2000, 2002). This will, of course, be the object of heated discussions with unpredictable outcomes. However, it seems certain that existing member states in north-west Europe will see their share in the structural funds evaporate. Zetter (2002) surmises that even so, far from giving up on spatial planning, existing member states would see it as giving them “… a higher degree of control over how ‘their’ money was being spent.” In addition, by way of compensation, INTERREG is sure to continue, probably with enhanced finances. Maybe INTERREG would even be ‘mainstreamed’, meaning that it would be financed from the
main budget. Be that as it may, with its reliance on decentralized initiatives, INTERREG could provide a vehicle for further articulating specific north-west European concerns.

This would give added significance to the ‘Spatial Vision for North-west Europe’. Such visions were intended to go where the ESDP process did not get, conceptualizing the spatial organization of Europe, not only in verbal, but also in diagrammatic form. Together with the Baltic Sea programme, the NWMA has been most successful in so doing. The ‘Spatial Vision’ is a pointer to a future in which traditional north-west European concerns for applying spatial planning at transnational level would be met.

The ESDP process as such may have run its course. It would take Herculean efforts to resuscitate it. Member states would have to grovel before the Commission, imploring it to resume its support and promising that they would never again raise an eyebrow over its role. This is unlikely, and so the leopard is changing its spots. At Community level spatial planning may reappear as territorial cohesion policy and/or territorial management.
This is not to say that the ESDP has been a failure. This article has shown that, in albeit diffuse ways, those concerned take it seriously. Of course, the ESDP discourse in no way dominates the scene. This would be too much to expect. Rather, the very fact that the process keeps ticking over (as indicated, mostly under INTERREG) and that those involved each in his or her own way invoke the ESDP, is sufficient for coming to a positive conclusion.

Anyhow, the ESDP discourse changing is all in the game. Application is not a linear process. One should not expect ESDP policies to be taken on board lock, stock and barrel. This is not how strategic planning works. Rather, concepts drawn from the ESDP are incorporated in various policies or otherwise play a role in planning discourses through a process of diffusion. It also shapes research agendas, both directly, i.e. through ESPON, and indirectly, i.e. by raising academic interest in the substance and the process of European spatial planning. Propositions are modified to suit different contexts and different sets of goals. Still, by virtue of the discourse continuing, the ESDP may be considered a success.

Note

1. Based on research done jointly with Drs B. Waterhout of the University of Nijmegen in the context of EURBANET, a project in the framework of the Community Initiative INTERREG IIC for the NWMA. The lead partner was the research institute OTB from Delft University of Technology.

2. The Fifth Report has never been formally approved and is in the process of being absorbed into a new-style policy document, due to be released in 2004.

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