Positioning European Spatial Planning

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ABSTRACT The European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) is being described as ‘inter-governmental’. The original initiative was for a Community spatial strategy for the delivery of the Structural Funds. Coming from France, it met with opposition. So it was that the successive six-monthly Presidencies of the EU took turns in managing the process. In truth, however, without Commission support the ESDP would not have come about. Now that the ESDP is on the books, the Commission is claiming a leadership role. Taking a position on this, one needs to view spatial planning against the backdrop of general thinking about European integration. Positions in the literature are often presented as polar opposites, like that of ‘neo-functionalists’ putting faith in integration on the one hand and that of ‘realists’ emphasizing the continuing dominance of nation states on the other hand. However, a growing body of literature is not about these ‘grand theories’, but about the actual workings of European institutions. It takes a middle ground and invokes concepts which planning writers are accustomed to, like networks, discourses and governance. From this literature it appears that mutual learning, a feature also of the ESDP process, is common in European integration. European spatial planning must be seen as part and parcel of an emergent system of European multi-level governance. In it, power is exerted at multiple levels of government. Denying the Community a spatial planning role is not realistic, therefore.

1. Introduction

Having been formulated jointly by EU member states and the European Commission, the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) (CEC, 1999) must count as an achievement. National spatial planning is not universally practised, and where it is, approaches vary. (CEC, 1997) So do attitudes and views as regards European integration. Inevitably, therefore, work on the ESDP has raised a contentious issue, the Community role in spatial planning. In the end, there was an agreement

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... that the ESDP does not provide for any new responsibility at Community level. It will serve as a policy framework for the Member States, their regions and local authorities and the European Commission in their own respective spheres or responsibility. (Excerpt from the final conclusions issued by the German Presidency in CEC, 1999)

The debate that this statement wants to put to rest will be described as the competency issue. The article will show that, in taking a position on this, one needs to explore wider issues of European integration. Planners must take note of these.

Therefore, after a short account of the ESDP process focussing on how the competency issue evolved (for an account of the process as such see Faludi & Waterhout, 2002), the article discusses literature on European integration that casts light on the deeper issues involved. This helps clarifying not only the competency issue, but also the position of spatial planning in the context of European ‘multi-level governance’.

2. The ESDP Process and the Competency Issue

The ESDP process has been marked by a succession of informal ministerial meetings, starting with one called by the French Presidency at Nantes in 1989. The French idea was that of a spatial strategy for the delivery of the Structural Funds allocated, as they were (and still are), on the basis of purely quantitative indicators. After Nantes, a French expert joined DG XVI, and together with a colleague seconded from the Netherlands became responsible for Commission planning initiatives like ‘Europe 2000’ (CEC, 1991) and ‘Europe 2000+’ (CEC, 1994).

The reason why Nantes (as all subsequent events) was not a Council of Ministers is often said to be that there is no Community competency for spatial planning. Now, Council of Ministers meetings are always in Brussels and for a set number of weeks in Luxembourg, so Nantes could never have been the venue of a Council of Ministers meeting. However, Presidencies may host a limited number of Council of Ministers meetings in their home country, but these can take no decisions and are thus called informal.

Surely, therefore, Nantes could have been an informal Council? However, it was just a meeting. The reason was not that there was no spatial planning competency. In fact nobody even went as far as raising the issue. Anyhow, with ministers responsible for regional policy present, the meeting did relate to an area recognized as a Community concern. However, regional policy is the second-largest spender of Community funds. Foreign ministers and ministers of economic affairs and of finance and ultimately the heads of State and government on the European Council take the decisions, and so no Council of Ministers dedicated to regional policy is needed. This, and not because there is no Community competency, was the reason why the meeting had no status whatsoever.

The Italians organized a follow-up in 1990 even so, followed by the Dutch in 1991. At that time the Germans started a campaign for European spatial planning to be a joint member state responsibility. Federal spatial planning policy in Germany is also formulated bottom-up. In addition, the Germans (although by no means as the only ones) conceive of spatial planning as the making of statutory plans. Germany thus represents what “The Compendium of EU Planning Systems and Policies” (CEC, 1997a) describes as the ‘comprehensive integrated approach’ to spatial planning, this as against the ‘regional economic approach’ represented by France. Now, it was inconceivable for German planners to grant the European Community powers to make a comprehensive plan. The ‘Guidelines for Regional Policy’ prepared jointly by the Länder ministers and the German federal minister responsible spelled this out:
Endeavours to lay down comprehensive rules and codes for regional policy at the European level must be rejected. Instead, the European regional policy concept (i.e. what came to be known as the ESDP-AF) must support the multifarious forces in the individual nations and regions, promoting and coordinating cooperation between them at the same time. What we need is not a new super-planning concept on a European scale but the flexible further development of the various forms of coordination. (Federal Ministry for Regional Planning, Building and Urban Development, 1993, p. 20)

As soon as the spectre of a European super-planning concept had been invoked, it was clear that a Community competency was out of the question.

In view of this it is understandable that, when the ministers of the member states agreed to form a Committee on Spatial Development (CSD), the chair went to the member state holding the rotating EU Presidency rather than the Commission. The Commission did not like this but acquiesced, although as will transpire this acquiescence was only for the time being.

The turning point as far as the ESDP was concerned came when ministers heeded the call for a joint ESDP. With their 1994 Presidency in mind, the Germans hoped to see the ESDP through. In the end they got no further than getting the so-called Leipzig Principles, called after the venue of the meeting, accepted. Subsequently, a French Presidency introduced so-called scenarios, but national elections stalled the effort. Perceiving the ESDP as a danger to their allocation out of the Structural Funds (of which Spain is the greatest beneficiary) the Spanish Presidency treaded water. The Commissioner for Regional Policy sought to straighten out the competency issue by suggesting that spatial planning in the sense of ensuring ‘spatial coherence’ of interventions was implied in the twin notion in the Treaty of Maastricht of economic and social cohesion. Neither this Commission proposal for clarifying the issue in the treaties nor the German view that an inter-governmental ESDP, once adopted, should become a mandatory framework for Community spatial policies got much of a hearing at the Inter-governmental Conference of 1996/1997 (Selke, 1999). Note, however, that buried in Article 16, the concept of ‘territorial cohesion’ popped up in the Treaty of Amsterdam.

A meeting at Venice took the ESDP out of the doldrums. At Noordwijk in 1997, the Dutch gained approval for a ‘First Official Draft’ (CEC, 1997b) to be followed, under the 1998 UK Presidency, by the (unpublished) ‘First Full Draft’. Completing the work fell to the Germans, and so ministers came to accept the ESDP at Potsdam in 1999. No vote was taken. The German Presidency simply noted that the process had run its course.

Now that the ESDP is on the books, the Commission claims a leadership role. There is a new Committee on the Development and Conversion of the Regions with a sub-committee dealing with matters previously discussed by the CSD, both chaired by the Commission. Also, the Commission now promotes the concept of ‘territorial cohesion’. It is a prominent theme in “Unity, Solidarity, Diversity for Europe, its People and its Territory: Second Report on Economic and Social Cohesion” (CEC, 2001; on its French origins see Faludi & Peyrony, 2001; Faludi & Waterhout, 2002, pp. 163–164).

Now, assume that the Commission does embark on spatial planning. Would this lead to planning by a remote Commission? Hardly! Member states are involved in the making and implementation of all EU policies, and there is always a mix of supra-national and inter-governmental elements in this. So the idea that was floating around, so much so that in the Foreword of ‘Europe 2000’ (CEC, 1991) Commissioner Bruce Millan felt obliged to disown it, of a ‘masterplan’ being imposed from Brussels was a chimera. To understand why, it is important to come to grips with various notions of European integration.
3. Notions of European Integration

To position spatial planning against the backdrop of the complex integration literature, as is the intention, may turn out to be a fool’s errand. However, fortunately the book by Neill Nugent (1999) *The Government and Politics of the European Union* can serve as a guide. His last chapters examine conceptual and theoretical perspectives. There he points out that, beyond saying in the ‘Maastricht Treaty’ that it moves towards an ‘ever closer Union’, the EU has so far failed to make clear what it is about. The convention now in session has been arranged to clarify this.

In such debates, traditional notions of statehood pop up. These have been shaped by the historic experience of the formation of nation states. Their characteristics are territoriality, sovereignty, legitimacy and the monopoly of governance. To some extent, the EU does display State-like characteristics, the more so since, with States becoming looser formations, statehood itself is changing (Nugent, 1999, p. 494). Such changes have stimulated writers to announce the death of States, replacing them with ‘... glib notions of a ‘borderless world’, or a ‘space of flows’ ...’ which Anderson (1996, p. 135) dismisses. He rather sees a system of overlapping authority like in the Middle Ages emerging, with a multiplicity of perspectives on territory.

Such discussions often invoke constitutional concepts, in particular these three:

- Sovereignty: the legal capacity to take decisions free from external constraints;
- Inter-governmentalism: nation states cooperating on matters of common interest but without sovereignty being impaired;
- Supra-nationalism: States working together in a manner that restricts their control so much so that they “... may be obliged to do things against their preferences ...” (Nugent, 1999, p. 502).

The notion of sovereignty implies that member states are free to decide, amongst others on the use of land within their territory. However, as the ESDP points out in chapter two on the influence of Community policies on the territory of the EU, Community policies impinge upon spatial development as a matter of course. As the reader knows, in the ESDP process the response to this challenge has been that of voluntary cooperation between member states.

Assume though some form of supra-national or Communautarian spatial planning, how would decisions be taken? Not by Eurocrats but by the member states represented on the Council of Ministers in conjunction with the European Parliament under what is called co-decision making. In the EU, it is always member states that impose controls upon themselves. To appreciate this, a closer look at how the EU operates will be useful.

The European Commission, the European Parliament and the European Court of Justice are supra-national bodies, but the Council of Ministers represents the governments of the member states and is thus an inter-governmental body. In addition, there are also so-called summits deciding on the main lines of policy. Lastly, there are the Inter-governmental Conferences (the last one having been concluded at Nice in December 2000 and the next one scheduled for 2004) where treaty revisions are the object of high-level bargaining between heads of State and government.

The treaties identify common goals and the Council of Ministers decides on measures to achieve them. Even where the treaties enable so-called qualified majority voting, generally considered a step towards supra-nationalism, unanimity is still the preferred mode of decision-making (Cini, 1996). This works in favour of inter-governmentalism. Anyhow, because it is an informal document, around the ESDP, all decisions had to be taken unanimously. There was after all not even a requirement to participate. By walking out, each and every member state could have stalled the proceedings.

Having said all this, it is however worth mentioning that according to Nugent increasing
interdependence and the logic of the EU itself, alongside with the inaction that inter-governmentalism causes, work in favour of supra-nationalism. The supra-national features are, firstly, the right of the Commission to frame the agenda (but always based on the objectives as defined in the treaties). Secondly, with every treaty revision, qualified majority voting is becoming more common and the European Parliament gains in influence, thus strengthening the supra-national element. Lastly, EU law, once adopted, takes precedence over national law. So supra-nationalism is present, but of course not in the ESDP process.

There, the European Commission has been restricted to offering assistance. Having been left out of the process altogether, the major contribution of the European Parliament, seconded by the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions has been to argue for European spatial planning to be formalized, in which case both would have a role to play.

The lack of a formal EU role notwithstanding, what Nugent (1999, p. 505) says about integration generally, i.e. that “... working together results in the EU states becoming ever more intermeshed ...” also applies to the ESDP. This intermeshing, he says, is not so much a cause of a decline in national power but a response to it. The rationale of the EU “... lies in the attempt ... on the part of member states to increase their control of ... a rapidly changing world” (Nugent, 1999, pp. 505-506). This is evidently true for the ESDP process where member states have been trying to come to terms, for instance with the competitive position of the EU as a whole in relation to the US. The foremost policy option in the ESDP of promoting global economic integration zones outside the one existing within the ‘pentagon’ London-Paris-Milan-Munich-Hamburg addresses this issue.

How can this process of member state perspectives coalescing be explained? On this there are two ‘grand theories’. Both draw on what is called ‘interdependency theory’ arguing that globalization makes for different parts of the world coming more and more into contact with each other, thus weakening the dominance of States. Historically, a theory explaining the rise of supra-nationalism called ‘functionalism’ has come first. It sees integration as an autonomous process driven by functional necessity. As against this, ‘neo-functionalism’ recognizes the role of governments in the process (Anderson, 1996, p. 136).

Thus, neo-functionalism views integration as a seminal process proceeding from modest beginnings of coordinating the production of coal and steel (the European Coal and Steel Community or ECSC) to embrace one area of policy after another. The engine behind this is called ‘spill-over’: supra-national powers in one area requiring such powers in others. For instance, it is argued that European Monetary Union will inevitably lead to political union. Being a response to amongst others the cross-impacts of various Community policies, the quest for European spatial planning is an example of spill-over at work. The argument, put in the ESDP, is that cross-impacts become manifest in the territories of the member states and their regions. This is said to make for a need for an integrated approach focussing on territories at various scales and on the overall effects of EU-policies on them.

The alternative to neo-functionalism is a theory described as ‘inter-governmentalism’, but note that here the term refers to an explanatory theory and not to the characteristics of certain institutions. Inter-governmentalism claims that European integration is in the best interest of and dominated by national governments. Inter-governmentalists draw inspiration from international relations theory, in particular its realist tradition. Realism centres on nation states as the key actors in international affairs.

Authors in this vein argue that the EU is an inter-governmental organization in which government representatives cooperate on a voluntary basis. There are many such organizations, for instance the United Nations. However, Nugent points out that in the EU meetings of government representatives are more frequent and regular than in other inter-governmental organizations. Thus, during the preparation of the ESDP, the Committee on Spatial
Development met on average four times a year, with \textit{ad hoc} working parties meeting even more frequently. This has generated a dynamics that is not to be underestimated, taking the ESDP process beyond what would be usual for an inter-governmental organization. This is true for European integration generally, where contacts are sustained over long periods of time, with learning taking place, a point to which we return later.

Add to this that no other inter-governmental organization has anything like the same range of responsibilities.

So is the EU perhaps an emergent federation? Federal ideas “… have always been at the very heart of the debate about the future of West European political integration” (Burgess, 1993, p. 4). However, there is confusion about the meaning of federalism (Ross, 1995, p. 176). British Euro sceptics identify federation with a European super-state. Germans see it as a safeguard against precisely such a State emerging.

What, then, is a federation? According to King a sovereign state with (a) a preponderantly territorial representation; (b) that representation being secured on at least two sub-national levels; (c) the regional unit being incorporated into national decision-making; (d) incorporation only being altered by extraordinary constitutional measures, what King calls ‘legislative entrenchment’ (King, 1993, p. 94).

Nugent points out that power is indeed shared between member states and the EU. However, he says the EU falls short of the federal model because national governments, rather than a supra-national body, are in control. After all, they have a veto power against decisions to which they are fundamentally opposed. Also, EU institutions have no independent powers of enforcement. The EU is not a sovereign state either, this being one of the conditions identified by King for speaking about a federation. Thus, the EU has no way of giving itself competencies. It is the member states that, by means of treaties concluded between them, define the objectives. Member states are thus the masters of European integration.

Since the EU displays federal features but is not a federation, a powerful argument is that it represents a new phenomenon. This relates to the ‘new governance’ literature inspired by investigations of the actual workings of institutions. This literature is less State-centrist in that it emphasizes the roles of actors beyond the State. It argues that the EU “… is transforming politics and government at the European and national level into a system of multi-level, non-hierarchical, deliberative and apolitical governance, via a complex web of public/private networks and quasi-autonomous executive agencies …” (Hix, 1998, p. 54, quoted by Nugent, 1999, p. 500).

As Nugent says, in the EU decision-making is indeed shared between national governments and institutions and actors at other levels. “Multi-level governance thus conceives of the EU as a polity … in which power and influence are exercised at multiple levels of government. National state executives are seen as extremely important … but the almost semi-monopolistic position that is ascribed to them by many state-centrists is firmly rejected” (Nugent, 1999, p. 501).

Multi-level governance as a concept has been formulated in the context of analysing regional policy (Hooghe, 1996). With European spatial planning having emerged in the same context, it should be particularly relevant for interpreting it and in particular the Interreg IIC, now Interreg IIB Community Initiatives set up in the wake of the ESDP. With this we enter the discussion of middle-range theories of integration.

4. Middle-range Theories

European integration has attracted the attention of a wide range of scholars, many of them examining EU politics rather than the system. Amongst the middle-range theories Nugent distinguishes the ‘new institutionalism’ and the policy-network approach. The former “… has
at its core the assertion that institutions matter in determining decisional outcomes” (Nugent, 1999, p. 516). However, as against traditional institutionalism, the ‘new institutionalism’ defines institutions broadly, including informal procedures and practices leading to policies and policy areas taking shape before being formalized. This is why it holds appeal to researchers analysing integration on the shop floor level. In the vein of new institutionalists, the ESDP process, which is of course informal, can indeed be seen as involving the institutionalizing of evolving practices until, by being used repeatedly, they shape the thoughts and actions of the actors involved. For instance, at a CSD meeting at Corfu, procedures were agreed for how to submit proposals to ministerial meetings (Faludi & Waterhout, 2002, pp. 71–72). These have shaped the proceedings ever since, so much so that, with a side glance at the acquis communautaire, the body of EU legislation that all member states, old and new, have to adhere to, Bastrup-Birk and Doucet (1997, p. 311) talk about an acquis of a commonly accepted working method. This is an example of institutionalization taking place outside the realm of formal competencies.

The other so-called policy-network approach can be thought of as an application of new institutionalism to describe and analyse policy processes and outcomes. Thus, “… policy networks are arenas in which decision-makers and interests come together” (Nugent, 1999, p. 517) Networks can be arranged on a continuum. At one end are the integrated policy communities in well-established areas of EU policy (like agriculture) and at the other loosely integrated issue networks in areas where the debate is still fluid. The EU knows many networks because of the informal nature of much of its policy-making, the many interests involved and the technical nature of its policies giving bureaucrats the edge, and also because the Commission deliberately employs networking as a strategy (Nugent, 1999, p. 518).

Theorizing the ESDP, some authors have invoked middle-range theories such as these. Thus, Faludi et al. (2000) have sought to interpret the CSD as forming a network. Faludi (1997) has pointed out the emergence of an ‘epistemic community’ around the ESDP (see also Faludi, 2000), and Hajer (2000), Richardson and Jensen (2000) and Jensen (2002) identify various, sometimes implicit, sometimes competing discourses in European spatial planning. So for conceptualizing European spatial planning, the middle-range theories seem particularly promising.

There are examples in fields other than planning. One discussed by Heritier et al. (1996) is environmental policy and the ‘regulative competition’ in this field. The authors analyse institutional structures and informal interactions, exchange and negotiating strategies and problem-solving cultures. The process brings about changes in the structures and strategies of all participants, which, as the collection of papers in Faludi (2001) shows, is something that could be said about the ESDP as much as about environmental policy.

The approach taken by these authors, policy network analysis, rests on a view, like in the ‘governance’ literature, of the State as having to rely on voluntary cooperation of actors pursuing divergent but interdependent interests. Over and above this, European networks have specific characteristics, amongst others their high policy segmentation, with the Commission the only one to identify itself wholly with Europe, something that becomes evident from talking with Commission officials concerned with spatial planning.

The authors then discuss the ‘strategy of the first move’ used by member states to gain a lead. One is reminded of France taking the initiative in the ESDP process. This strategy requires the support of the Commission as the gatekeeper. The Commission is often characterized as a ‘political entrepreneur’ (Kohler-Koch, 1999, p. 18). Atkinson (2001, p. 397) makes the same point concerning urban policy. If the Commission takes up a proposal, this arouses fears of ‘unilateral adjustment’ among other member states, which is of course what has happened with Germany opposing Commission planning initiatives.
In all this, the Commission is also a process manager. The high-regulation countries are like innovative policy entrepreneurs. If a proposal gains approval, the first mover is at an advantage. “The strong interest in the policy proposal generally goes hand in hand with a high degree of national expertise ...” (Héritier et al., 1996, p. 13). For low-regulation countries, sitting on the fence is a more attractive proposition (Héritier et al., 1996, p. 15). In the ESDP process, southern Europeans have indeed sat on the fence, so much so that, with the exception of Spanish opposition to the ESDP and Italian insistence on more emphasis on cultural heritage, there is not much to report about them.

In the drafting phase of a policy, another pattern manifests itself, mutual learning, like in the ESDP process. “Especially when committees are longer lived, common learning processes are set in motion that lead to cognitive rapprochement among national experts and to the development of ‘epistemic communities’ ...” (Héritier et al., 1996, p. 16).

Discussing ‘network governance’, another author, Kohler-Koch (1999) comes to similar conclusions. Network governance rests on self-interested actors learning to perceive their common interests. Readiness to participate in problem-solving depends on the ‘match’ of systems, which may once again explain why southern Europe has been reluctant to go along with north-west European spatial planning ideas. Be that as it may, policies become effective not by imposition (which in the EU only happens with regulatory policies) but by means of negotiations, in the European context considered most effective in bringing about change. Another way is that of ‘attraction’, by disseminating best practices. In such ways, the “... formulation of European policies enmeshes national and Community actors in a complex discursive process. It incorporates a shared understanding of the basic rationale of the aims and purpose of European political regulation” (Kohler-Koch, 1999, p. 29).

The conclusions of the editors of the volume with Kohler-Koch’s paper in it reiterate the importance of shared concepts. The European institutional set-up differs from that of member states in that supra-national policy actors are largely restricted to agenda-setting and policy formulation. Also, the Commission depends on external expertise (Eising & Kohler-Koch, 1999, p. 270). The contingent of ‘European planners’ at the Commission numbers less than a handful, making this glaringly obvious. There is a need for guiding principles capable of papering over the cracks between the various views prevailing. “Precisely because of its heterogeneous composition and complex institutional set-up, regimes around which actors (sic) expectations can converge are needed: the European Community puts a premium on the ability to provide convincing policy concepts and their interpretation” (Eising & Kohler-Koch, 1999, p. 275).

Eising and Kohler-Koch refer to belief systems revolving around broad orientations towards solidarity and reciprocity and the search for consensus. They distinguish what they call ‘substantial concepts’ relating to the content of a policy, the goals to be attained and the instruments to be employed and procedural and distributive principles pertaining to the whole European Community system, like subsidiarity and cohesion. Of necessity, such concepts are vague, and so “... their normative relevance as well as their prescriptive elements are often disputed and subject to divergent interpretations ...” (Eising & Kohler-Koch, 1999, p. 277).

So-called bridging concepts are needed. “Even within the European Commission or individual member state governments, actors are in need of bridging concepts. Being responsible for different tasks within the administration, they identify with exclusive policy philosophies. Environmental policy is a good example of how a common denominator had to be found to break a deadlock. ‘Sustainability’ was the formula used by environmentalists within the Commission in order to present their strategies in a way which was also acceptable to their colleagues from other DGs ...” (Eising & Kohler-Koch, 1999, pp. 278–279).

This is what the makers of the ESDP have attempted to do: by supplying persuasive concepts to gain the ear of policy-makers. At the same time, in order to gain acceptance, they
had to invoke flexible and even amorphous concepts like that of a polycentric system of cities in Europe (Waterhout, 2002).

5. Factoring in the Competency Issue

An author coming from the integration literature and applying himself to the ESDP is Benz (2001, 2002). He belongs to a German school around the political scientist Scharpf applying game theory to European integration. As against other middle-range theorists discussed, Benz factors in the competency issue.

In analogy to the well-known prisoner’s dilemma, game theory shows that, by putting their interests first, participants can block the proceedings. To overcome this, what is called the ‘negotiator’s dilemma’, actors have to adopt cooperative strategies.

In European multi-level governance, linguistic and cultural differences and in particular the number of actors and issues increase transaction costs and the likelihood of conflict. On the positive side, as other authors have also been shown to be saying, the existence of policy communities improves the chances of coordination. However, Benz points out the danger of technocratic dominance, a well-worn issue in European integration evoking demands for more democratic control. Now, when subjected to outside control, negotiators go into a bargaining mode, thus increasing the chances of stalemate.

An aggravating circumstance in European spatial planning is that plans represent costly investments, a fact that militates against flexibility. Also, the presence of entrenched vertical sector networks makes coordination difficult. As indicated, there are differences also between member states, and the areas of EU policy that spatial planning seeks to coordinate are differently constituted, too. So the claim of European spatial planning of achieving overall coordination is implausible. Although it has a clear mandate to coordinate other areas of EU policy, environmental policy finds this difficult, too (Bomberg, 1998, p. 179). Rather, coordination must focus on what is necessary and feasible, which is what the principle of subsidiarity suggests anyhow. Thus, planning at the EU level should address genuine transnational concerns. However, to keep planning levels apart is difficult. So Benz looks for ways of further reducing the problem of coordination.

On the basis of research into European regional policy (Benz, 2000; see also Benz & Eberlein, 1999), he suggests a loose coupling of arenas so that decisions in one do not unduly constrain decisions in others. The aim is to maintain as much autonomy of national and regional authorities and of sector administrations as possible, but at the same time to ensure that they take the goals of the ESDP into account.

Two modes of coordination between them meet this requirement. The first is coordination by discourses and ideas. Benz quotes literature emphasizing the importance of discourses, including works by authors discussed earlier. They explain the objects of a policy, put forward relevant policy concepts and codify experiences as regards the effectiveness of policy instruments.

Discourses are not enough, though. There must also be incentives. Providing grants to certain regions, EU regional policy offers an example of how to do this without imposing stringent conditions leading to de facto centralization. Overall goals and rules are defined by European institutions, but detailed coordination is left to bilateral negotiation between the Commission and sub-national levels of governments.

Applying this to the ESDP, and this is where he gives a novel solution to the competency issue, Benz suggests that it could be turned into a binding framework for member states and their regions, as well as for the allocation of grants under the Structural Funds. However, those affected should be given the right to call for time out. If so, then this would lead to fresh negotiations focusing on concrete issues and limited to the actors immediately
concerned. Hence a veto, rather than merely obstructing the proceedings, would generate new information and induce the actors to better define their mutual positions.

This is how, according to Benz, European spatial planning can meet the challenges posed by its sheer complexity. He thus points the way for the ESDP to evolve into a new form of intelligent multi-level governance that integrates European, national and regional policies in an overall learning system.

6. Conclusions

Nugent thinks that no single body of theory can capture all aspects of integration. In particular, the assumption of a semi-autonomous movement towards integration as invoked by functionalists has been proven wrong. In spatial planning, too, the move, logical though it may have seemed, towards underpinning regional policy with a spatial perspective has been stalled. Generally, Nugent (1999, pp. 522–523) says that in areas involving heavy government expenditure, the national level is still important, but in the case of spatial planning, the reason has been that spatial planning is seen as relating to control over territory, one of the privileges associated with sovereignty.

Nugent continues by saying that there has certainly also been pressure in the direction of more integration, with Eurocrats the driving force, a point that finds broad support in the literature. In the ESDP process, too, Commission officials (some of them national experts seconded to Brussels) have been important. Generally, according to Nugent, responses to challenges will depend on perceptions, support and opposition and leadership. Prospects of integration are enhanced when all member states perceive initiatives as desirable. “Very frequently, there is no such common perception, especially when new types of development are envisaged and/or initiatives have sovereignty or clear distributional implications” (Nugent, 1999, p. 523).

Indeed, the initial lack of a common perception of what spatial planning stands for has slowed down the ESDP process, but with the document now on the books, this should be less of a factor. The Commission in particular is making profuse use of principles that, by virtue of coming out of the ESDP, can be considered as representing the consensus amongst member states.

What is clear beyond this is that the ‘middle-range theories’ of European integration offer good opportunities for appreciating the nature of European spatial planning. They also cast light on the competency issue. It has been seen in black-and-white terms for too long. Maybe it is time for an intelligent solution, like the one advocated by Benz, thus allowing the process to continue. Without such a solution, the ESDP process might be sidelined.

Referring to enlargement, Nugent ends on an upbeat note. The EU has a role to play in the reshaping of Europe. “It is approaching this task in a proactive manner, but it will need to be extremely careful ... Most importantly, perhaps, the EU will need to strike a sensitive and appropriate balance between its own needs and ... those of prospective member states ...” (Nugent, 1999, p. 528). Having already formed the subject of one short chapter in the ESDP itself, enlargement is a theme of continuing concern in European planning circles (CEC, 2000, p. 2001). Indeed, as Husson (2000) argues, the pursuit of ‘territorial cohesion’ must be central to the success of enlargement. In the Second Cohesion Report invoking this concept, the Commission seeking to set the agenda for the next programming period of the Structural Funds starting in 2007, after the expected date of enlargement, does the same. More definite proposals are not expected before the Third Cohesion Report, due in 2005. Anyhow, with a view to enlargement there is renewed emphasis on “… a more strategic and targeted approach within the approved SF programmes …”. In this context, incorporating the
ESDP in EU regional policy might “… imposing a policy framework and conditions on the new entrants from Eastern Europe” (Shutt et al., 2002, p. 128; see also Zetter, 2002).

Spatial planning could thus move to centre stage. However, even if the Commission were to be prominently involved, planning would never take the form of preparing a European masterplan. Nobody wants one, and so the idea, alongside with that of distant Eurocrats prescribing the content of national, regional and/or local planning should be put to rest. Hopefully, this article has helped to clarify this. If it wants to be at all relevant, then European spatial planning should be about strategy, about new discourses concerning European space. And, taking ‘multi-level governance’ and perhaps even Anderson’s ‘new mediavalism’ to heart, there should be multiple discourses, including, of course, one taking a Community perspective.

So, to tell the truth, couched in black-and-white terms, the competency issue has been a diversion. To the extent that Brussels interferes with land use, and the occasions are many, it does so under specific Community policies agreed by the Council of Ministers representing member states. European spatial planning has never been meant to add to these powers. All that its proponents want is to knock sense into existing policies by fitting them into some overall Community strategy. This is something planners should applaud.

References


