The Future of the ESDP in the Framework of Territorial Cohesion

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The message of this contribution is that now that the EU territorial cohesion policy has been formally recognized in the European Constitutional Treaty, the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) should evolve towards a discussion of common principles of EU territorial governance. The spatial vision that the ESDP represents appears to be no longer sufficient for European Community members to get a handle on the territorial cohesion policy. Indeed, the Community Strategic Guidelines on Cohesion (CSGC) proposed in the new Structural Funds regulations might incorporate such a task in future. Moreover, the experiences of European spatial planning, summed up here in four main regional perspectives, show that some common principles of EU territorial governance would be rather in the interest of not only Community institutions, but of all public authorities in Europe, who, whether they appreciate it or not, already participate in territorial cohesion policy and are progressively transformed by it.

1 Introduction

The European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) is the intergovernmental document on territorial policy which the then 15 EU member states’ representatives agreed upon at Potsdam, Germany, in 1999 (CEC 1999; Faludi and Waterhout 2002). Since the European Community had no formal competence in territorial policies at that time, the European Commission simply played a proactive role (absolving itself of the overall financial burden, too) in the ESDP development process. For the same reason, the Commission ended its support as soon as the member states became engaged in the application of the ESDP Action Programme (Faludi [ed.] 2003).

Since the early 2000’s, money has been put into territorial cohesion, which is now recognized as one of the Union’s objectives as stated in Art. 1-3 of the new treaty establishing a constitution for Europe (European Council 2004). However, territorial cohesion and the ESDP are not opposing concepts at all. Rather, born in the cradle of “social and economic cohesion,” a fundamental Community principle since the 1986 Single Europe Act, the ESDP has actually paved the way for an institutional recognition of the territorial dimension of cohesion. Now opinions are converging on the point of whether or not the ESDP should be renewed or at least updated, if only because of the enlargement of the EU to 25 members as of 1 May 2004.

The recent Third Commission’s Report on Economic and Social Cohesion (CEC 2004[a]) also refers to territorial cohesion. Furthermore, it proposed an improved delivery system for establishing Community cohesion policy, which was then adopted in the draft of the Structural and Cohesion Funds Regulations for the programming period 2007–2013 (CEC 2004[b]). Does this imply that the ESDP has arrived at its terminus as an intergovernmental perspective on spatial development?

The present contribution tries to resolve this emerging dilemma: Does territorial cohesion encourage or block a possible “next ESDP”? To do this, this article refers to the “regional perspectives on European spatial planning,” which emerged from the practical experiences incurred in different planning contexts in Europe. In brief, the article suggests that a common discussion on planning issues is still necessary, since the implementation of territorial cohesion policy is primarily a matter of good EU territorial governance. Indeed, whether and how territorial cohesion policy should interact with national planning systems remains an unresolved problem of Community legislation, as well as of current debate on European spatial planning (Janin Rivolin 2005).

This article takes the discussion of the future of the ESDP as a starting point. Then, it refers to the recognition of territorial cohesion in the European Constitutional Treaty and presents the Commission’s proposals for cohesion policy in the forthcoming programming period. After exposing the uncertain status of the ESDP as a consequence of these activities, it recalls the lessons of regional perspectives on European spatial planning and proposes terms for a possible evolution of an intergovernmental discussion on planning in Europe.
2 Should the ESDP have a future?

The ESDP has been said to be “the proudest achievement so far of European spatial planning.” (Faludi 2001: 245). Since its approval in 1999, at the end of a development process that started in 1989 with the first meeting of the EU ministers responsible for planning (Faludi and Waterhout 2002) all member states and the European Commission have been engaged in an action program concerning application of the ESDP (Faludi [ed.] 2003). Though formally non-binding, this program concerns many aspects of EU territorial governance, from Structural Funds implementation to Interreg Co-operation Programs, and the relationships with national planning, urban policy, etc. (Tab. 1).

In particular, the European Spatial Planning Observation Network (ESPON) was supposed to complete an update of the ESDP, especially considering the expansion of the EU to 25 members (ESPON 2002). Nevertheless, the future of the ESDP appears to be anything but certain at the moment. Since all along the development process member states insisted that it should be “intergovernmental” rather than EU driven, upon completion of the document, the Commission ceased supporting the process. This was not due to a sudden loss of interest, nor to be rude to the member states. Rather, the Commission (in particular, its Directorate General for Regional Policies under Commissioner Michel Barnier) intended to capitalize on the results obtained for the institutional recognition of territorial cohesion as the third necessary dimension of the fundamental Community principle of “social and economic cohesion” (CEC 2001; Husson 2002). This intention proved to be successful.

The Committee on Spatial Development (CSD), a joint technical structure established by the EU Ministers in 1991 to write the ESDP (Faludi 1997; Faludi et al. 2000), was abolished in 2001. Since then, new platforms of cooperation have taken over the role of elaborating, almost on a voluntary basis, the territorial dimension of EU policies. In addition to the ESPON Monitoring Committee, this is particularly the case of the Sub委员会 of Spatial and Urban Development (SUD) of the Committee for the Development and Conversion of the Regions (CDCR), which is the management committee for EU regional policy. In their Expert Paper on “Managing the territorial dimension of EU

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Tab. 1: The ESDP Action Programme.
policies after enlargement,” the members of the SUD wanted a “... follow up of the ESDP process: seeking political commitment during 2003/2004, particularly including accession countries, and updating and firming up the ESDP objectives and policy options on the basis of the current analyses of the European territorial structure in the light of enlargement.” (SUD 2003: 30)

Apparently worried about clarity, the European Council of Town Planners (ECTP) held a conference in London on 24 October 2003, entitled “What does Europe want from the next ESDP?” One of the participants was Peter Melbye, the person responsible for the ESPON Coordination Unit. One general conclusion of the debate was that “if it is to happen, there needs to be much greater consensus on what form, shape and purpose ESDP 2 would have, which means addressing political issues” (ECTP 2003: 14). The discussion was followed up at the international conference entitled “Present and Future of the European Spatial Development Perspective,” organized by the Italian Ministry of Infrastructures and Transportation at Turin on 5 March 2004 (MIT, Politecnico di Torino 2005).

In the wake of these and other debates occurring elsewhere in Europe, the Netherlands Institute for Spatial Research (Ruimtelijk Plannbureau RPB) dedicated a special issue of its periodical Ruimte in debat (Debating Space) to the topic “Towards a New European Spatial Development Perspective?” The answer of the RPB researchers to such a question is clear enough: “The need for an ESDP is as urgent now as it was in 1999, perhaps even more so given the institutional changes currently facing the EU. It is also evident that the current ESDP will no longer suffice and that an update which incorporates new ESPON data, input from the new member states and uses the “territorial” terminology is needed. If not, Europe will continue to conduct its spatial policy clandestine through the sectors.” (Ravesteyn and Evers 2004: 10)

In fact, in spite of the lack of high-level political support, the ESDP did demonstrate the need for an EU spatial development policy. Moreover, in the light of the recent recognition of territorial cohesion in the European Constitution, expert planners are almost unanimously convinced that the “next ESDP” should serve to pursue this objective in the interests of the European Community.

3 Territorial cohesion

The treaty establishing a constitution for Europe, now up for ratification (European Council 2004), states in the first lines that the Union “shall promote economic, social and territorial cohesion, and solidarity among member states” (Art. 1-5). Economic, social and territorial cohesion figures then in Art. 1-14 about competencies shared between the Union and the member states, alongside the internal market, social policy, agriculture, environment, transport, energy, security and justice, etc. “Economic, social and territorial cohesion” is also the title in Part III of the constitution, which regards a section concerning: “The policies and functioning of the Union”. This section (Arts. III-220 to III-224) will substitute the Title XVII (Economic and social cohesion, Arts. 158 to 162) of the existing treaty establishing the European Community (EC Treaty), which has formed the basis for European regional policy since the 1986 Single Europe Act (Husson 2002).

Most importantly, Art. III-220 says: “In order to promote its overall harmonious development, the Union shall develop and pursue its activities leading to the strengthening of its economic, social and territorial cohesion. In particular, the Union shall aim at reducing disparities between the levels of development of the various regions and the backwardness of the least favoured regions.”

It is clear that territorial cohesion builds upon the notion of economic and social cohesion in the existing EC Treaty, in particular, the aim of contributing to the harmonious and balanced development of the Union as a whole, an aim that the ESDP also embraces.

Art. III-231 confirms the obligation of the Commission to publish regular cohesion reports, and that these “shall, if necessary, be accompanied by appropriate proposals.” The Third Cohesion Report, published in March 2004 (CEC 2004a), tried to cast light on the added value of the territorial dimension of cohesion: “The concept of territorial cohesion extends beyond the notion of economic and social cohesion by both adding to this and reinforcing it. In policy terms, the objective is to help achieve a more balanced development by reducing existing disparities, preventing territorial imbalances and by making both sectoral policies, which have a more coherent spatial impact and regional policy. The concern is also to improve territorial integration and encourage cooperation between regions.” (ibid.: 27)
The report, also proposes an improved delivery system for cohesion policy:

"The Commission proposes that an overall strategic document for cohesion policy should be adopted by the Council, with an opinion of the Parliament, in advance of the new programming period and on the basis of a Commission proposal, defining clear priorities for member states and regions.

The strategic approach would be to guide the policy in its implementation and make it more politically accountable." (ibid.: xxxv)

Consequently,

"on the basis of the strategic document adopted by the Council, each member state would prepare a policy document on its development strategy, which would be negotiated with the Commission and constitute the framework for preparing the thematic and regional programmes, but not having the role – as does the existing Community Support Framework – of a management instrument." (ibid.)

Finally,

"on the basis of the policy document, the Commission would adopt national and regional programmes for each member state. The programmes would be defined at an aggregate or high priority level only, highlighting the most important measures." (ibid.)

The draft of the Structural and Cohesion Funds Regulations for the programming period 2007–2013, published on 14 July 2004, is based on the proposed delivery system, respectively renaming the above-mentioned types of documents: “Community Strategic Guidelines on Cohesion” (CSGC); “National Strategic Reference Frameworks” (NSRFs) and “Operational Programmes” (CEC 2004b). In particular, the adoption of the CSGC would be established, at the latest, three months after the forthcoming adoption of the Regulations, which means before December 2006.

4 The ESDP at a crossroads

Now, what about the ESDP? How would it be able to contribute to the shaping of Community territorial cohesion policy?

On the one hand, one has to admit that the Potsdam document is now practically useless, if only because it does not represent the perspective of all 25 current EU member states. It is perhaps not by accident that it is never mentioned in the new Funds Regulations (it is in the one in force). Curiously enough, though built on considerable ESPON data and information (the ESPON program takes account of 29 existing and potential EU member states), even the Third Cohesion Report only refers once to the ESDP, and the ESDP is the very reason that the ESPON is at work. And it does mention it superficially, incorrectly attributing the document to “the European Council in Potsdam in 1999” (CEC 2004a: 28), rather than the informal Council of EU Ministers for Spatial Planning.

On the other hand, it seems difficult to envisage that the programming process established for a cohesion policy put forth by the CSGC/NSRFs, could lead to a rewriting or even a simple update of the existing ESDP. Andreas Faludi has convincingly argued that an effective European territorial cohesion strategy should be polycentric and, consequently, might imply a revamped, more structured and accountable ESDP development process (Faludi 2005). The point is, however, how this idea could fit in practice into a delivery system that seems to lead elsewhere and is up to now very strict in its rules, schedules and procedures. So, if it is true that the ESDP and a European cohesion policy are pursuing the same objective, the risk is that the CSGC and NSRFs package will take the place of the ESDP in future, rather than contributing to its possible process of renewal.

This must not necessarily be a tragedy, but it is worth asking whether it is appropriate, primarily at Community level, for 25 distinct NSRFs to represent the member states’ perspective on cohesion and, therefore, on European spatial development and planning and territorial cohesion. It is true that the CSGC guidelines for the NSRFs will be adopted by the European Council (new regulations are quite clear on this point) but, at the end of the day, this also means that any council of EU ministers responsible for planning will lose its significance.

The case is different only if one believes that an institutional definition of European spatial planning is necessary for EU territorial governance, which is of course the context for the implementation of territorial cohesion. Only twelve years ago, when the EU Ministers responsible for planning decided that the ESDP had to be written, such a problem would have made little sense, or indeed no sense at all. Simply put, European spatial planning did not exist. One may recognize that, after just a decade, things stand quite differently: Confronting such a problem now makes a lot of sense, not only because European spatial planning has become something tangible (Williams 1996; Faludi [ed.] 2002; Janin Rivolin 2004), but especially because, this tangibility notwithstanding, the EU
still does not have an institutional definition of the term.

Defining European spatial planning and, in this light, sharing some of the principles of EU territorial governance, is a task that only the Council of EU Ministers responsible for planning, although still informal, could pursue with some expectation of institutional effectiveness. If this became the aim of the next ESDP (or whatever such a document might be named), not only would an intergovernmental discussion on spatial planning be justified, despite the new operational framework of territorial cohesion policy; it would also contribute to making territorial cohesion a truly accountable and effective policy.

5 Four regional perspectives on European spatial planning

Of course, the existence in Europe of different planning traditions is one main reason for the difficulties encountered by European planners and policymakers in defining European spatial planning. In the middle of the 1990's, the Commission Compendium of EU Planning Systems and Policies was a first effort to bring this variety back to just a few models: the regional-economic approach of the French matrix, the comprehensive-integrated approach of the German matrix, the British land use management approach and the Mediterranean urbanist tradition (CEC 1997: 36–37). However, the past decade may have changed some things in European countries and in the light of the EU expansion such an exercise would also deal with at least ten more national planning systems.

Be that as it may, the attempt to deepen the discourse on EU territorial governance has led to at least four distinct perspectives on European spatial planning (Janin Rivolin and Faludi 2005), namely: North-Western, British, Nordic and Mediterranean.

These are outlined here in the belief that some relations, although nonlinear, do occur between what has been experienced in the field of EU territorial governance and the existing national planning traditions. Thus, such perspectives characterize different macroregions of Europe and contribute in their overall framework to the definition of the specifics of EU territorial governance as an informal institution working outside and alongside the established national planning channels (Fig. 1).

5.1 North-Western perspective

First and foremost, the North-Western perspective has dominated the ESDP development process, consequently informing the document model (Faludi and Waterhout 2002).

This perspective on European spatial planning corresponds in some ways to a combination of the distinctive French, German and Dutch planning approaches. Indeed, French aménagement du territoire, a nonstatutory approach rooted in intervention by the central state in territorial development, has been the main inspiration for the planning model embraced by the ESDP. Inspired by their federal constitution and regulatory planning system, the Germans succeeded in imposing an intergovernmental rather than a Community method on the whole ESDP process. Interested as they were mainly in the development of a European dimension of planning, the Dutch (having a planning system comparable to the German one) acted mainly as pro-active mediators between the two bigger member states’ intentions.

Thanks to this perspective, we learned that European spatial planning may have an institutional future, based on the progressive cooperation among the EU member states and between them and the European Commission.

5.2 British perspective

Great Britain represents an exception among northwestern European countries. This is probably due to the different impact of EU territorial governance on the successful UK town and country planning tradition. However, a planning transformation became visible as soon as the incoming New Labour government in 1997 changed the country’s attitudes to the EU and to European spatial planning (Tewdwr-Jones and Williams 2001).

In the British perspective, more than in any other, the crucial link between spatial planning and land use regulation has emerged. Indeed, within the framework of EU territorial governance, “[t]he importance of the national level of planning policy-making is fundamental to the trajectory of the whole planning process, even if planning in the UK is a predominantly local activity.” (Tewdwr-Jones, Bishop and Wilkinson 2000: 653). Thus, while Wales and Scotland have developed their own planning framework and the government has prepared one for Northern Ireland, the Royal Town Planning Institute has advanced a proposal for a UK spatial planning framework (RTPI 2000). As the missing inter-
mediate actor in such evolutionary processes, the regions appeared on the scene and immediately became the most interesting level of ESDP application (Shaw and Sykes 2003).

In brief, the evolution of the British perspective in particular has paved the way for a concept of European spatial planning embedded in a multi-level governance system that could reach from the supranational to the local level (Fig. 3).

5.3 Nordic perspective

All Nordic countries have planning systems rooted at the municipal level and generally lack, with the exception of Denmark, any comprehensive national planning. So they have encountered European spatial planning with a certain degree of difficulty. Moreover, a common and proud feeling of “eccentricity” in relation to the core of the EU is also evident in a home-made form of transnational cooperation launched, parallel to the ESDP process, through the VA-SAB (Vision and Strategies Around the Baltic Sea) initiative (Böhme 2002).

Between them, these aspects seem to have contributed to shaping a specific Nordic perspective on European spatial planning in which mutual learning and exchange play a prominent role. According to this perspective, European spatial planning presents itself as an enlightening “example of European integration by net-
working and policy discourses”; with the warning that “discursive European integration can be successful when there are strong policy communities active at European and national levels and direct links between them.” (Böhme 2002: III).

In other words, the Nordic perspective shows that the performing capacities of European spatial planning depend in a critical manner on the quality of the interactions established between decision-makers and territorial policies operating at Community and national levels (Fig. 4).

5.4 Mediterranean perspective

Lastly, a Mediterranean perspective has emerged only recently, since its specificity deals with innovations in local planning practices. Indeed, this has been said to represent “the hidden face of European spatial planning.” (Janin Rivolin and Faludi 2005: 195).

The relevance of the innovations in local planning practices means that urban regeneration and local development actions have got full right to take place in the European spatial planning domain (Fig. 5). It also means that innovation capacities do not end in the local outcomes of change, but extend and multiply themselves through the propagation effects of cooperation and networking. Indeed, by participating in the different initiatives of EU territorial governance (from the Integrated Mediterranean Programs of the mid-1980s, to the Structural Funds mainstream, to Interreg, Leader and Urban Community initiatives) all south European countries are developing innovations in planning which seem not to have a precedent in their urbanist tradition. This affects not only the local level of planning as the most directly concerned, but also the regional and national institutions, albeit in different forms (Janin Rivolin and Faludi [eds.] 2005; see also: Janin Rivolin [ed.] 2002 and 2003).

In brief, the Mediterranean perspective on European spatial planning especially shows that in order to achieve actual transformations, EU territorial governance does pass through and, meanwhile, modify the complex prism of institutionalized planning. Even if Community-led, this is an eminently local and diversified process and therefore less visible at the continental level.

6 Beyond the ESDP: need for EU territorial governance principles

One conclusion of the above excursus through the existing perspectives on European spatial planning is that both the expected and unexpected effects of EU territorial governance should be considered. They not only affect Community institutions, but also all public authorities which, whether they appreciate it or not, are already participating in territorial cohesion policy and are being progressively transformed by it.

If this is true, then getting a handle on the effects of territorial cohesion policy is in the interests of all the planning authorities in Europe which, of course, are the institutions exerting statutory powers according to the respective national planning systems and guidance plans for local transformations. In other words, looking at the elementary premise that any territorial policy is implemented through local actions, one should consider that the constitutional recognition of territorial cohesion policy poses an institutional question of interaction between the process of EU territorial governance and the functioning of European national planning systems.

In particular, the present author has argued elsewhere that this institutional question concerns at least three dimensions of EU territorial governance (Janin Rivolin 2005) (Fig. 6):

• Vertical relations of territorial governance, meaning not only the problem of coordination between the various administrative levels of planning, from EU to local, but especially the quality of connections to be established between spatial and land use planning.

• Horizontal relations of territorial governance, referring not only to problems of coordination between different sectors of intervention, but particularly the relationship between overall strategies and individual projects in spatial transformation.
• Coordination between cohesion and subsidiarity in territorial governance which resumes, in conceptual and practical terms, the crucial node of an effective territorial cohesion policy in the interests of all European Community members.

In conclusion, the message conveyed by the above considerations is that current worries about the future of the ESDP are justified, only if a possible evolution of the ESDP is simply addressed to represent, as was necessary ten years ago, a perspective of European spatial development. Nowadays, as the territorial cohesion policy recognized in the European Constitution, this task is designated to be covered by the cohesion strategy outlined throughout established Community delivery channels. Therefore, the time is ripe for opening intergovernmental discussion on a possible definition of the shared principles of EU territorial governance, capable of linking the Community cohesion strategy with the functioning of national planning systems.

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