OUTLOOK ON EUROPE

THE USUAL SUSPECTS: THE ROTTERDAM EU INFORMAL MINISTERIAL MEETING ON TERRITORIAL COHESION

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ABSTRACT
In November 2004 the Dutch Presidency of the EU hosted a successful informal ministerial meeting on territorial cohesion. The paper discusses the concept of territorial cohesion and how it could be invoked, among others in relation to the Lisbon Strategy of turning Europe into the most competitive region of sustainable growth globally. This is put against the backdrop of previous Dutch involvement in the preparation of the European Spatial Development Perspective. The paper documents the preparation of the meeting and reports on the meeting itself and the conclusions of the Dutch Presidency. The meeting has generated commitment on the part of various Member States holding the EU Presidency (some of them with a long-standing involvement in such issues) between how and 2007 to pursue a common political agenda in so doing, these Member States signal their insistence in taking an active part in the preparation of any future EU territorial cohesion policy.

Key words: Territorial cohesion, European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP), polycentric development, European Spatial Planning Observation Network (ESPON), Lisbon Strategy, treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe

On 29 November 2004 the Dutch Presidency of the EU hosted an informal ministerial meeting on territorial cohesion in Rotterdam. Judging by a letter to the Dutch parliament, the Minister of Housing, Spatial Planning and Environment hosting the meeting, Sybilla Dekker, looks back on it with satisfaction. (Dekker 2005) After briefly discussing the as yet untried concept of territorial cohesion, we report on the bumpy road to Rotterdam, the preparation and the results of the meeting and the prospects of EU territorial cohesion policy. Clearly, the meeting has been a step towards more territorially sensitive EU policies.

AN UNIDENTIFIED POLITICAL OBJECTIVE

Territorial cohesion has not yet crystallised as a concept. Although figuring in Article 16 of the Amsterdam Treaty about ‘services of general economic interest’, it is only since the Second Cohesion Report (CEC 2001) that it is drawing attention. Note, however, that it was mainly the European Commission and in particular the then Commissioner Michel Barnier (who had made territorial cohesion his personal interest) rather than the Member States that paid attention. After all, Article 16 with its narrow focus
appeared less significant. In this respect though, the Constitutional Treaty may be the harbinger of radical change. It elevates territorial cohesion to a core area of EU policy on a par with economic and social cohesion. How territorial cohesion got into the Constitutional Treaty is shrouded in mystery and may in fact be due mainly to the personal effort of Commissioner Barnier representing, as he did, the Commission in the Presidium of the Convention on the Future of Europe drafting it. (Norman 2003) The text of the Constitutional Treaty fails to clarify its meaning, opening it up to a wide range of political interpretations. The Dutch Presidency has been aiming at consensus about this.

The Dutch initiative did not come out of the blue nor was it taken in splendid isolation. The background stretches as far back as the late-1980s. Then, a similar initiative was taken, i.e. to – spatially speaking – knock sense into relevant policies of the then European Community. In 1988, prompted by their expert advisers (some of them the same that were involved more than 15 years later, in 2004) the Dutch and French ministers responsible had agreed on a similar meeting under the French Presidency in 1989. This was the beginning of a series of no less than 12 such meetings eventually producing the ESDP, or European Spatial Development Perspective. (CEC 1999; Faludi & Waterhout 2002)

The ESDP is the first EU-wide document on spatial planning. It pays tribute to Europe’s territory diversity. The downside is that an articulated territory – and the linguistic and cultural diversity that goes with it – reduces labour mobility, a crucial factor to the success of Economic and Monetary Union. (Choi et al. 2004, p. 429) This is but one example where territory matters to the success of the European Union (EU). However, while having this differentiated structure, according to the ESDP, the EU territory is highly unbalanced. As against the four global economic integration zones in the US, in Europe there is only one, dubbed ‘pentagon’ (London-Paris-Milan-Munich-Hamburg). This raises concerns about equity and about whether Europe makes full use of its potential. A key policy in the ESDP is thus polycentric development. (Davoudi 2003; Zonneveld et al. 2005) This concept marries visions of Member States from north and south emphasising competitiveness respectively cohesion. (Waterhout 2002) Next to polycentric development the ESDP puts forward two other guidelines: access to infrastructure and knowledge and careful management of natural and cultural heritage. The guidelines should be observed by national officials and in particular by the makers of EU sector policies, the latter having frequently unintended spatial impacts. (Van Ravesteyn and Evers 2004) Although dating from the 1990s, the ESDP continues to be of relevance to territorial cohesion policy. After all, rendering territorial cohesion operational will mean invoking terms similar to those in the ESDP.

**THE BUMPY ROAD TO ROTTERDAM**

The ESDP-process saw Member States cooperating voluntarily rather than the Commission taking the initiative under the so-called ‘community method’. The reason was that spatial planning did not fall under the European treaties. This is known as the competence issue, the upshot being that the recommendations of the ESDP are to be pursued by member states and the Commission on a voluntary basis and without prejudice to their respective competences.

The ESDP has been modestly successful. Remarkably, the Commission is among the keenest to invoke its principles, but it has no appetite for continuing in a role of supernumerary, merely helping with arranging the meetings of the Committee on Spatial Development and paying the bills. No sooner the ink had dried on the ESDP, the Commission announced that it would discontinue its support, quoting the lack of a Community competence as a reason.

Since then the ESDP process has been in the doldrums. However, strand B of the Interreg III Community Initiative intended to render ESDP principles more concrete continues, and so does the work of ESPON (European Spatial Planning Observations Network; see <www.espon.lu>) set up to prepare the ground for a revision of the ESDP. Meanwhile, experts involved in the ESDP process continue to meet in Brussels on a subcommittee of the Committee on the Development and Convergence of Regions, called Spatial and Urban Development (SUD), the difference being that (as against the Committee
on Spatial Development) the Commission co-chairs these meetings and sets the agenda.

However, since it was ambivalent about the whole process, the Commission put SUD on the back burner. Old hands of the ESDP process formed the ‘Mermaid Group’ (after the first venue where they met in 2002 under the Danish Presidency) and explored options for continuing their work under the circumstances of the early 2000s. The result was a so-called expert document, which, in keeping with the new official line, was discussed in 2003 by the subcommittee (SUD 2003) and formed the basis for the discussion document of the Dutch Presidency (2004a).

This was a turning point, breathing life into a new-style ESDP process. The Dutch started to feel confident about organising an informal ministerial meeting under their forthcoming Presidency and began to once again invest in the process.

PREPARATION

Ministerial meetings require careful preparation, and not only because of the sheer organisational effort and expenses involved. More importantly, in calling them, political capital is being spent. Close co-operation with other like-minded member states, in particular those who come before and after to hold the Presidency, is essential. Obviously, for all this effort to be undertaken, a member state needs to feel strongly about the issues concerned. More specifically, the experts must have the ear of their minister, and the minister must have sufficient political clout to be able to put the meeting on the crowded agenda of an EU Presidency.

The Dutch do feel strongly about the matters raised in Rotterdam. The Directorate-General for Spatial Policy, more precisely its International Spatial Policy Unit, is the key stakeholder. Its strategy was to relate spatial planning more to the mainstream structural funds. (Martin 2000) This coincided with French thinking. Co-operation with the French planning agency Datar (Délegation à l’aménagement du territoire et à l’action régionale) is indeed longstanding. No sooner enlargement had taken effect, Datar was helping the Dutch by organising a meeting of directors-general of planning from the Member States in May 2004. The same directors-general met again in early Octo-

ber at Haarlem. The Dutch also hosted an ‘ESPON seminar’. Most importantly, the Dutch minister (or her representatives) went on a tour des capitais, visiting all EU capitals and the Commission. This has generated much goodwill for the Dutch and their strategy.

So there was no shortage of preparation. Needless to say, the discussions in Rotterdam were thus well rehearsed. To ensure that Rotterdam would see ministers agreeing, the draft Conclusions of the Presidency (2004b) and the preliminary discussion document (Dutch Presidency 2004a) were already being circulated at the Haarlem meeting – a common practice with meetings like this.

THE PRESIDENCY CONCLUSIONS

The meeting itself welcomed no fewer than 171 representatives, among whom 20 held ministerial status. They represented 30 countries including Bulgaria, Norway, Romania, Switzerland and Turkey and six European institutions such as the European Parliament and the Committee of the Regions. The new Commissioner Danita Hübner headed a Commission team. Participants have reported the atmosphere to have been positive and even enthusiastic. In light of the opposing views in the past of Member States from north and south, the fact that there was agreement on the principles to guide the future development of Europe’s territory is remarkable.

The official record of such meetings is to be found in Presidency Conclusions. (Dutch Presidency 2004b) Accordingly, the meeting took note of demographic, economic, social and environmental problems, including the effects of climate change, global competitiveness and high energy prices. Ministers stressed territorial cohesion as strengthening competitiveness and reducing disparities. They observed that the diverse potentials of EU regions have been insufficiently taken into account in the Lisbon Strategy. Integrated spatial development approaches, enabling regions to exploit their endogenous potentials, can improve on its delivery. Ministers highlighted the increasing territorial impact of EU policies on member states and their regions. Inconsistencies between them reduce their effectiveness, though. In an effort to neutralise the so-called competence issue, Ministers added that existing
European instruments and procedures offered opportunities to develop such an approach on the basis of the concept of territorial cohesion.

Ministers identified this as both a multi-sectoral and a multi-level concept. They recognised the need for regions and Member States to identify their unique development potential – what is increasingly being discussed as ‘territorial capital’ (Zonneveld & Waterhout 2005) – and their position in the European territory, and to place spatial development strategies in a transnational and European context.

Clearly, Ministers wished for territorial cohesion to move to the centre of EU discourse, dominated as it is by the Lisbon Strategy of Europe ‘becoming the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world’ by 2010. (Quoted in CEC 2004a, p. 36) Also, ministers lent support to European Territorial Co-operation as the designated successor to Community Initiative Interreg. (CEC 2004b) They advocated focusing on trans-European structuring elements for the EU territory (the main spatial structure, being a Dutch idea – Zonneveld 2005; Zonneveld & Waterhout 2005), on the development and application of innovative and integrated spatial development approaches, and the exchange and dissemination of best practices.

Ministers also fixed the political agenda until 2007 for focusing on territorial cohesion in relation to the Lisbon Strategy, expected progress on the EU Constitution and the Third Cohesion Report. As part of this, they agreed on the need for a short ‘evidence-based synthesis document’, drawing on the results of ESPON and other research. This should offer the EU institutions, member states, regions and other stakeholders insights into the ‘territorial state of the Union’. The next informal ministerial meeting, scheduled for 20 and 21 May, 2005 (at the time of uniting), under the Luxembourg EU Presidency would examine the first draft of this document. This is seen only as the start, and ministers asked the Commission and the European Parliament to facilitate this process.

PROSPECTS

For the Commission, territorial cohesion – rather than spatial development – has become the name of the game. This explains, first, why (other than with all earlier meetings) Rotterdam was about territorial cohesion – as indicated, not the clearest of concepts, but one (like polycentrism) with considerable appeal. Second, it becomes clear why after years of silence Member States are trying to regain the initiative: to stop the Commission from getting into the driving seat – which it would be entitled to do, once the Constitutional Treaty defining territorial cohesion as a shared competence and thus an area in which the Community method applies comes into effect.

So Rotterdam was a signal that Member States, and in particular the ‘usual suspects’ involved in drawing up the agenda, are willing to, indeed insist on, being part of territorial cohesion policy. What is new is their willingness to put their money where their mouths are and to spend their resources – rather than Community funds – on pursuing their strategy.

The ‘political commitment’ of the prospective Presidencies to pursue this agenda is unmistakable. Will they succeed? Much depends on the evolving context, above all the ratification of the European Constitution. This is such a grand issue that it would obviously be idle to speculate on the outcome within the confines of this short paper, but the potential impact of failure to ratify it is enormous. However, let it be noted that (other than the apparent Commission strategy) the pursuit of the Rotterdam agenda is not strictly dependent on the Constitutional Treaty coming into force.

Much depends also on the position of the new Member States and on the direction into which the Polish Commissioner, Danita Hübner, takes regional policy. Territorial cohesion is not her brainchild, nor have the new Member States been involved in formulating the concept. Will they regard it as a distraction from what presumably matters most to them, the funds which they can look forward to under EU regional policy? In this respect though, the attitudes as shown by the new Member States at Rotterdam augur well for the future.

Needless to say, the ‘old’ Member States, and in particular the net contributors (i.e. their ministers of finance) are another factor to consider. Net contributors want to introduce a ceiling close to the current budget, which would obviously reduce the funds available. There are also proposals to radically simplify regional
policy by giving the funds to Member States rather than the existing ‘multi-level governance’ arrangement. If so, then this would pull the rug from under the feet of the Commission’s strategy for territorial cohesion policy.

Another source of uncertainty is that within the Commission, other directorates-general and Commissioners may be sceptical. Territorial cohesion is part of a ‘soft’ discourse of keeping the European model of society as much as possible intact. The competitor is the free-market discourse coming down on the side of promoting competitiveness by opening as many areas as possible up for competition. With the Barroso Commission’s stated intention to focus on growth and jobs (CEC 2005), the outcome of the contest is up in the air.

So, even after the ratification of the Constitution, a proactive EU territorial cohesion policy will not be a forgone conclusion. However, the Rotterdam agenda is surely a good step in this direction, which is why Rotterdam has been a remarkable occasion.

Notes

2. On the role of Barnier in his former capacity as French Minister of European Affairs in bringing Article 16 about see Husson (2002).
3. Note that this number includes some delegates attending the related meeting on urban policy held the following day, November 30, under the auspices of the Ministry of Home Affairs.

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