

# CONTRASTING PRACTICES OF TERRITORIAL COHESION

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## *1. Introduction*

This research is about the use of ideas and models of intervention in policy responses to uneven territorial development. In Central and Eastern Europe, policies that aim to address this are usually centred on the regional level, and are attuned to principles stated in the European Union's Cohesion Policy. The overall approach of this policy is centred on arguments for strengthened competitiveness, while generally sidelining redistributive interventions to punctual, reactionary, life support-type of measures (Avdikos and Chardas, 2015: 10). The results of this research aim to provide a better understanding of local-regional development responses to persisting territorial development disparities.

The Cohesion Policy covers a breadth of policy domains, affording a range of instruments for furthering development in the member states. I have therefore limited my scope to engaging with ideas that are explicitly focused on territorial cohesion. At the European level, this brings forth an ambivalence between supporting processes of economic polarisation in large cities, while stating an imperative for redistributive measures aimed at stimulating development in places where markets cannot be sustained. These two dualistic logics are on the one hand internalised in the planning systems and governmental arrangements that are specific to national policy contexts. On the other hand, they are further shaped by political traditions, being attached to various attitudes towards development present within national, regional, or local communities.

The notion of territorial cohesion has hereby become a nodal point for growth-oriented neoliberal and social discourses, resulting in a balanced competitiveness imperative, one that ought to lead towards a harmonised European space (Tewdwr-Jones, 2011; Muller, 2013). Present-day regional policies are tasked, amongst others, with sustaining growth-inducing processes of

polarisation and agglomeration, while also being prompted to intervene by correcting the spatial externalities that markets produce. Striking this balance is not a straightforward deal, given the hefty political nature of the task. Moreover, planning systems across the European Union are grounded in differing values, and attitudes, hence shaping a diversity of mindsets, and routines (Früst, 2009: 26). This heterogeneity is a hallmark to the extent that the European Union has yet to be granted any supranational competencies in territorial planning, and has so far relied on a set of open methods of coordination to negotiate the remit and organisation of its Cohesion Policy in the member states.

Against this background, the central question for this research is: *How do normative ideas of territorial cohesion shape regional development policy responses for urban areas outside spatial agglomerations?*

## 2. Research perspectives

I formulate an understanding of uneven development that draws on the concept of peripheralisation. This understanding is focused on the dynamics which lead to the making and re-making of peripheries in relation to processes of polarisation. As far as policy making is concerned, peripheralisation is seen as a conceptual tool that can advance understandings of the powerlessness of peripheral actors to act (Kühn 2014, 10) – powerlessness that is, so far, understood to stem from “a loss of capacities of actors and institutions to act” (Beetz et al 2008, 305), resulting in exclusions from decision-making centres and networks (Herrschel 2011: 98). I use this dimension to construct an argument that grasps uneven development as the lack of support for the socio-spatial needs of certain actors and subjects in core policy outcomes.

To investigate my question I draw on framing analysis as a principal conceptual tool for understanding the emergence of policy responses through the circulation, mix, and use of ideas. Across European countries, urban and regional development planning policies have been gradually shifted away from imperatives of instrumental reason and centralised control. In so doing, policy articulations have become increasingly reliant on interactivity, reinterpretation, and flexible bottom-up constructs (Healey, 2012: 229). At its essence then, framing research is

about the interactive, intersubjective processes of constructing guiding metaphors of how the world works. Such an analysis seeks to capture the process through which policy problems are defined, categories are created, and stories are told (van Hulst and Yanow, 2014).

### *3. Methodology & Methods*

The methodological design of this research is informed by principles of grounded theory – a set of “systemic inductive guidelines for collecting and analysing data to build middle-ground theoretical frameworks that explain the collected data” (Charmaz, 2000: 509). Far from being a treaty on theory, data, and generalisability, at its very core, grounded theory offers principles that guide researchers’ dialogue with the phenomena under study, so that conceptual categories reflect the data, rather than a-priori theories (Glaser and Strauss, 1967: 3). Doing interpretive policy analysis in the philosophical hermeneutical tradition relies profoundly on inductive means of discovery. Following an interpretive line of thought, the key building block of a methodology is the particular treatment of meaning, and the interpretive theory that underpins it (Wagenaar, 2011: 9).

Interpretive work steers clear from claims towards objectivity, grounding this reasoning in two broad perspectives. First, the role of the researchers’ participation in the process of producing the research is emphasised. This means that interpretations are guided by researchers’ own thinking, their values, and their conceptual and theoretical repertoire. Second, interpretive thinking stresses the point that the object of research cannot be taken out of context. This means that the research produced is not intended to be generalisable, as predictive theories cannot be inherently found in the study of human affairs (Flyvbjerg, 2006: 224).

I use case study regions to situate policy responses. Cases in this research are defined as being the regional policy decision making networks. Decisions-making is approached in a broad sense, not being restricted only to formal policy design, but also including decisions made in the context of utilising the regional policy.

The two countries chosen for the study contrast strongly from each other, offering an adequate setting of understand policy responses to issues of uneven

spatial development based on similar hegemonic principles in different legislative and socio-economic contexts. As a whole, Germany is one of the strongest economies in Europe, with a strong principle of federalisation at its core, parts of which have been uploaded into European policy thinking. On the other hand, Romania has been a member of the EU for just over a decade, and in spite of efforts to give relevance to sub-national entities in making development decisions, remains a strongly centralised state, with stark contrasts within the country itself.

In spite of the national differences between the two countries, when selecting case study regions, I sought to select regions that are relatively similarly positioned within their context, and which, when put face to face, feature similar processes. It is relevant to mention that given Germany's federal principle of organisation, the nation state in this country is the Bundesland, rather than Germany as a whole. The reason for this is that in the case of development policies, federal states have most control over their shape, goals, etc. The EU also concludes partnership agreements with each Bundesland.

The selection of the was purposive, following a set of tangible criteria and indicators that depict certain realities within the regions. As a first step, case selection in Germany was restricted to the Eastern part – i.e. the former German Democratic Republic, in order to place the German case in a similar socio-economic past, and overall market transition trajectory with that of Romania's. Second, the capital cities (Berlin and Bucuresti), together with their surrounding NUTS2 regions (Brandenburg, respectively Sud-Muntenia) were excluded from the selection. The reason for doing this links to the stark differences between the administrative settings of two cities, which make them unfeasible to serve as case studies in the comparison conducted here. Third, a number of statistical indicators were used to determine processes of peripheralisation in East Germany and Romania: population change in total, and in localities over 20,000 inhabitants; age structure change, unemployment change, workers without qualification change, change in contribution to national/Bundesland GDP. Further, the structure of the regions in question was taken into account – size and number of big cities, types of urban/intermediary/rural. Fourth, the potential to access relevant respondents was taken into account. The selection process yielded the West region in Romania and Chemnitz region in Germany as feasible case study regions.

## *Methods*

An interpretivist methodology built on principles of grounded theory typically relies on interviews as the main source of analytical content. Hereby, interviewing takes place primarily because we would like to get an insider's perspective of a field of practice. An insider here is a person with expert knowledge on a field, or someone who is engaged in, or has witnessed an event. Knowledge in our case would be gained primarily by inquiring about the mechanics of micro-interactions within policy communities. This typically unfolds as a storytelling of a sequence of events, from which a causal story can be extracted in the analysis. A particular setting of qualitative interviewing is that of expert interviewing. According to Meuser and Nagel (1991), experts are the people responsible for the development, implementation or control of solutions/strategies/policies, or people who have privileged access to information about groups of people or decision making processes (p. 443).

The main pool for selecting respondents is given by the practitioners and professionals involved in shaping and using ideas of regional development. In choosing interview partners, I follow the logic of capacities. On the one hand, I looked for respondents that have had the ability shape or observe processes of decision making regarding regional development. On the other hand, I sampled respondents who, given the nature of their position, are involved in processes of identifying and engaging development potentials in a given regional territory.

The first stage of data collection in Romania was carried out in early 2016, and involved informal discussions at the regional level. The information was useful in setting the focus for subsequent stages. The second round of interviews was carried in February 2017, and involved policy experts at a regional and county level. The sequence of interviews was regional to local, primarily with the scope of bringing forth actors from within the region that engage with the regional policy. The interviews were focused on the topic of economic development and territorial cohesion. The structure of the interviews was designed to touch on four broad issues: past experiences of economic development, forward-thinking and strategy building, processes of horizontal and vertical collaboration. As far as possible, I sought to steer the discussion away from stale objective claims towards personal opinions on the matter.

#### *4. Interim outcomes – Romania*

In this section I will outline two practices driven by normative ideals derived from implementing the Cohesion Policy – that of intra-regional partnerships, and the competitive-driven nature of interventions.

At the outset, there are a couple of note-worthy points to bring forth on the context in which notions of territorial cohesion are practiced in Romania. First, regionalism is not a way of thinking, and certainly not a policy delivery approach that is engrained in the country's own political and territorial development system. In spite of an ascent of 'regional' policy nexuses, planning processes, discourses, and expertise, this scale and approach to policy making is not the main driving force for regional development per se. Rather, regional development tends to be a discursive construct that territorially grounds certain central Government's policies and interventions (not all of them being regionally targeted). Interventions pursued at sub-regional scales (local, supra-local, and county forms of organisation) have stated regional implications, although only one policy programme is explicitly regionally targeted – the Regional Operational Programme that draws on European Structural Investment Funds. However, this is an incentivised form of policy delivery, and overwhelmingly leads to an individualised manner of implementation to the organisations that draw on such funding.

Second, the planning system, while enabling development, is not designed to cope with the spatial consequences posed by surges in economic activity. Statutory planning very seldom assumes the role of either managing and controlling, or predicting and providing, working on a reactionary mode of responding to unravelling issues. The practice of carrying out interventions through exemption from legally binding development plans is a major factor that inhibits the coordination of development. All in all, redistribution in the case of economic development is very weak.

The first of the practices I touch upon – regional partnerships emerges as part of the statutory development planning process (Regional Development Act 2004, art. 9, sect. a), and are conducted between elected representatives and regionally-relevant actors – i.e. representatives of public and private organisation (see Minister of Regional Development and Tourism Order #1087, 2012). At their very least, partnerships aim to provide the grounds for learning about future funding

conditions, while ideally fostering interactions between administrative counties, localities, and various social, environmental, or economic organisations within the regions. Yet oftentimes, discussions in such forums focus on questioning the relevance of such processes, or end up in debates about responsibilities for certain interventions, and lack of action or initiative.

In spite of this, the overall expectation is that the engagement of a wide pool of actors in articulating development needs, and formulating responses has the potential to mobilise intervention capacities, leading to a prospective increase of spillovers benefits of emerging projects. Nonetheless, formulating a strategic sequence of interlinked projects cannot be realistically sustained through this approach. For the 2014-2020 financial programming period, consultations for regional plans took place alongside Governmental negotiations with the Commission for the forthcoming programming period. Therefore, the final contents of the Partnership Agreement, the structure of the Management Authorities, and the distribution of funds between Operational Programmes had not yet been decided at the time when regional plans were being formulated. In planning for the current period, there were strong signals that the Ministry of Regional Development and Public Administration would seek to devolve the Management Authorities for the Regional Operational Programme to the regions, meaning that Regional Development Plans would have functioned as distinct Operational Programmes in their own right. In the end, not only was this not the case, but to the contrary, the extent to which this plan can be implemented continued to rely on decisions taken by the Government. This setting maintained a well established degree of frustration in the case of regionally-relevant actions:

“regional objectives that don’t match the central agenda have very slim chances for financing. They may be very well written in the plan, but they will stay on paper if they are not part of the objectives that the government wrote in their Operational Programme. There’s talk about bottom-up approaches, and subsidiarity, but the Government itself practices it only as a purely bureaucratic exercise”.

(RDP 1, 2017).

Content-wise, regional plans hold an analysis of the region's socio-spatial structure, accompanied by a list of objectives and subsequent lists of priority projects that are justified in the thematic objectives set by the European Commission. However, funds are evenly distributed between regions, inhibiting tailored priorities. This leaves regional actors two possible courses of actions: they either focus on lobbying for their objectives to become national, or they aim to sustain a voluntary context for collaboration in which a broad set of regionally relevant projects can be matured, and selectively be put up for financing, when this becomes available. The use of regional plans is peculiarly weakened by the legislation itself, which does not provide formal instruments for intervention, although Regional Development Agencies are required to "ensure the realisation of regional development programmes" (Regional Development Act 2004, art. 9, sect. a). The best regional authorities can do then is to create the setting for discussions at the planning stage, which may or may not lead to concrete actions. Regional partnerships are not explicitly oriented towards formulating a sequence of interventions, but are rather aimed at identifying local projects that could gain financing. The task of following up hence primarily falls on the eligible beneficiaries for each measure, as indicated in the Regional Operational Programme – these can be various territorial or sectorial public authorities, businesses, NGOs, etc.

Following the planning period, partnerships are maintained through interactions between regional agencies' staff and a handful of interested individuals working within local authorities. Pushing for the realisation of regional objectives is hereby more a matter of inter-personal communication, rather than a formal institutional flow. Regional development agencies attain a certain degree of relevance as a source of expertise during the implementation of the Regional Operational Programme. Yet again, given the lack of formal intervention channels, regional experts can at most advocate for rational-strategic courses of action:

"We do try to keep in touch with all our urban localities. When it comes to small towns, we first encourage them to write a local strategy, so that we all have an inventory of their needs. Most of the times, these needs are rightly identified, but it's true that some propositions are unrealistic [...] and often



times, in our view, not prioritised correctly. We try to point out things like this, even though that might sometimes upset them”.

(RDP 2, 2017)

Within this context, competitiveness emerges as a major cross-cutting approach that guides the conduct of development practices that local authorities engage in. As a way of acting, it transcends the logic of economic competitiveness goals that are pursued through formal policy and official document statements. Competitiveness is rather inscribed in the practices that guide access to public resources (i.e. ESI funds) which are intended to support the fulfilment of development needs. A key enabling element for competitive practices is an approach to decision making built upon a rough consensus model – a type of agreement that is tacitly accepted out of expediency, as a best way to get about under a set of particular circumstances (see Sørensen and Torfing 2014, 122).

Situational consensus appears to be a de-facto approach to regional issues in Romania, being the outcome of a project-, rather than strategy-driven nature of development planning practices. Given the multitude of long-overdue immediate, palpable, problems, mayors and publics alike have become accustomed to expecting immediate noticeable interventions. It's hard to sell a strategy, but much more easy to put forth a flagship, typically infrastructure-centred project - a bridge, a business park, a new road, or a sewage system. In most cases, these are real needs that are lacking, and rightly justify interventions. Yet such interventions appear to ground the perceiving of development in material rather than processual terms. This state of affairs that is mirrored in the design of the Regional Operational Programme, as the 'soft' interventions that ought to complement physical investment are spread across other programmes. Given this, local authorities gear their efforts towards making their localities attractive places to live, work, and visit in relation to others. In following through courses of action, local elected officials are infamous for their reluctance to support initiatives that spread beyond their own turf, as this is oftentimes conflated with a loss of local autonomy:

“We suggested a business park [for an area], an idea that was met with enthusiasm [by local representatives]. But when we got to doing it, the

‘fighting’ began: each local authority wants it on their own turf, because they’d be able to charge taxes, and so on. They are however all aware that the whole area would benefit from such infrastructure, but don’t seem to notice that endless bickering wastes time that could be spent on thinking how to best integrate it in their existing context”.

(RDP 2, 2017)

The kern of the issue here appears to lie in the principle of local autonomy. This is driven by the subsidiarity principle – that decisions should be taken closest to the citizens, which in territorial terms points to the local level. Put in a context of fierce competition for resources, this has the potential to backfire into an intractable debate. This points to a rather intricate aspect of development politics, one that is a major contributing factor to a ‘bottom-up’ type of peripheralisation, or in opposite cases, to an accentuation of issues caused by agglomeration. I am referring here to the sheer amount of time required for development-relevant actors to settle on, and follow through an agreed course of action. The rough consensus reached in non-binding local, but particularly supra-local agreements allows for sufficient room to subvert decisions as, or after they are reached. Such subversions may very well work within the framing of a response by deploying alternative storylines sustained by a credible set of different facts (e.g. why a location may be more suitable, or why different priorities are needed).

An equally essential central point here links to the purpose of strategic planning which follows a mechanistic, rather than a consensus reaching design logic. In essence, we are talking about a process that engages the capacities of a community to formulate and prioritise responses for programmes that are however designed elsewhere. The realm of development politics, while actively at work through bureaucratic conformity and political bargaining, is typically veiled by privatised expertise. Nonetheless, a pragmatic moulding of objectives to available funding opportunities is not uncommon, although a rational approach is usually advocated (eg. SWOT analyses-based responses). Pragmatic as it is, the downside of such an approach is the lack of support and of broad cooperative action of policy subjects, a cornerstone for realising a strategy. On the other hand, the vast array of requirements for project submission paves the way for the use of informal

channels to bring a project to a halt. Complex bureaucratic requirements become such arenas. It is in such cases, that uneven development is driven by stagnation.

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