

NEW ECONOMIES, NEW GEOGRAPHIES. A FRAMEWORK FOR EUROPEAN TERRITORIAL POLICIES

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Abstract

The paper is focused on the evaluation of the Territorial Agenda of the European Union, aimed to support the Lisbon and the Gothenburg strategies, and focuses on the main challenges promoted, such as spatial integration, network policies, historical vocations. These goals must be connected to polycentrism and cohesion, in order to contrast the so-called “blue banana” (or European backbone) and to pursue an active and positive territoriality based on collective action of local actors, and therefore to reach a real European polycentrism.

Keywords: Territorial cohesion, ESDP, Polycentrism, Active territoriality, Networks, Local development, MEGA nodes.

1. Introduction

The history of territorial policies developed and practised in the European Union can be seen as the result of a process of dynamic tension between "competing" centres of power within an institutionally complex framework.

Making a simplification, we can state that the EU decision-making arena appears marked by the presence of two sets of actors, which, even if not always in a unitary form, try to tilt the balance of operational responsibility in the definition of territorial policies in their favour. On the one hand, the European Commission, a technical and executive body formally independent of the member countries, that has not only oriented the conceptual debate on European territory through forward-looking documents and official communications, but also, through the planning of the Structural Funds, has effectively channelled substantial financial flows into the European urban system.

On the other hand, there are the member states, which have full responsibility for territorial planning policies, and have started out in recent years along the difficult road of inter-governmental co-operation through the European Council and the informal councils of the ministers responsible for planning. The instrument through which members strived to create the territorial backdrop and, at the same time, the frame of

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political options is the European Spatial Development Perspective, presented in its final version at Potsdam in May 1999.

More recently, during the Informal Ministerial Meeting on Urban Development and Territorial Cohesion in May 2007, a new instrument of EU territorial policy has been agreed: the Territorial Agenda of the European Union. The Agenda supports the implementation of both the Lisbon and the Gothenburg Strategies through an integrated territorial development approach (see articles 2, 16 and 158 of the Constitutional Treaty) and it is supposed to contribute to economic growth and sustainable development by strengthening territorial cohesion of Europe.

Nevertheless, empirical evidence shows that in many cases these agendas missed their goals. In the context of the European Union, one famous case regards the Lisbon and Gothenburg strategies. In these two agendas, the European Union set all-important action and development plans to tackle some recognised and striking challenges (productivity and stagnation of economic growth in the EU) and contribute to economic growth and sustainable development. In order to accomplish the goals set by the agenda, various policy initiatives were formulated for all EU member states in a medium and long-term perspective. The broader objectives set out by the Lisbon strategy, for instance, are to be attained by 2010. Yet in 2006 the European Parliament as well as the European Commission recognised the need for a re-launch of the Lisbon Strategy as it was essentially failing the goals set in March 2000. Reasons for the failure are not clear. The mild commitment of single national governments probably played a major role as well as the ever-changing external and internal conditions. Nevertheless, a disproportionate formulation of the strategy might also have occurred, as suggested by the recent effort in the policies developed in the European Union toward a strategic development framework based on an integrated territorial approach. The territorial dimension of EU policies has been acknowledged by the Constitutional Treaty, agreed upon - yet still to be ratified - by the Intergovernmental Conference of the EU Member States on 29 October 2004.

2. A view to the past: the "European Spatial Development Perspective" as a guidance document for national planning policies

The European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) was the expression of a long process of inter-governmental co-operation aimed, at least in the original intentions, at establishing a "guide" for integrated strategies of the territory of member states and, at the same time, a means of co-ordination and harmonisation of the options that have a spatial impact, already adopted or to be adopted in the framework of the Union's various sectoral policies (Janin Rivolin, 2004).

The Committee for Spatial Development's decision to produce it was made in the framework of the informal committee of the ministers responsible for territorial planning in the member states, at Liège in November 1993. The first official draft of the document was presented at the informal meeting of the ministers responsible for territorial planning in the member states held in the Dutch town of Noordwijk in June 1997. The definitive version (CSD, 1999) was presented officially at the Potsdam meeting (1999).

All the various versions of the ESDP pivot around three key general principles, set out in Leipzig in 1994: social and economic cohesion, sustainable development, balanced competitiveness for Europe.

The ESDP, in addition to gathering the results of the work produced in the framework of experiences such as Europa 2000 and Europa 2000+, co-ordinated directly by the Commission, summarises in explicit terms a political viewpoint, the expression of the fifteen member countries, from the perspective of reaching an integrated strategy for the development of the territory of the EU. At the same time, in observance of the principle of subsidiarity, it specifies that the territorial policies defined by the ESDP are not imperative but represent only guidelines, and that the document does not have the purpose of developing a new framework of action for community policies, but only the improvement of the implementation of existing community policies and increasing their effectiveness and relevance by better integrating the territorial dimension in their area.

The main spheres of activity of European territorial policies address three priority objectives:

- a balanced and multi-centred urban system and new forms of city-countryside relations
- equal accessibility to infrastructures and knowledge
- careful management and development of the natural and cultural heritage.

The rationale of the ESDP is also founded explicitly on the need to take into account, through strongly institutionalised and inevitably "comprehensive" forms of co-ordination, three fundamental types of interdependence: the interdependence of territories (with strategies of transnational territorial integration), interdependence between the various community sector policies with an impact on territorial organisation (horizontal co-ordination), and interdependence between the various levels of governance with territorial management powers (vertical co-ordination) (Salone, 2005).

Geo-politics of the ESDP: a difficult compromise between different "visions"

It is however necessary to highlight the co-existence of diverging forces in the formation of the agenda of European territorial policies and, as a consequence, their compromising and negotiated nature. Striving to orient our analyses according to the cultural perspectives that differentiate the national traditions in territorial planning and regional policies, we can identify, with a certain degree of precision, at least four competing European "visions" (Janin Rivolin and Faludi, 2005), the expression of special cultural features, but also of precise geo-political connotations.

This entails a first vision, seen from the north-west, made up of France, Germany, the Netherlands and countries with related cultures in Belgium and Luxembourg; a second one specific to a country traditionally "tepid" towards European unification, the United Kingdom; a third vision, typical of the Scandinavian countries, Denmark, Sweden and Finland; and a fourth view, the expression of a Mediterranean perspective on European territorial policy, found in the Iberian countries, Italy and Greece. Here we will limit ourselves to discussing the first one, that turned out to be decisive.

A look at the fundamental stages in the process of drafting and approving the ESDP, and at the places where those decisions were taken, enables us to clarify these aspects better than a series of analyses of a political nature:

- 1) although many stimuli should be placed even further back in time, the bases of the construction of the document were laid in 1989 under the French presidency;
- 2) the document's first official presentation was instead at Noordwijk, in the Netherlands, under the Dutch presidency;
- 3) the document's definitive version was officially approved in the capital of the German Land of Brandenburg, Potsdam, in 1999.

It was thus Germany that closed the circle, a country in a certain way symbolic of the new Europe that emerged from the Cold War and the division of the continent in blocs following World War Two.

As can be observed, all the key places of the process of drafting the ESDP are located in countries in north-west Europe: this observation, far from being just a touch of colour, underlines instead the effective central and leadership role of these areas in the process of construction of a European territorial policy. These elements of cultural, technical and political leadership can easily be seen by analysing the cultural perspectives that characterise the three main countries in the north-west axis.

1) The French perspective: the approach followed right from the start of the process of defining the structure of the ESDP seems strongly influenced by the French concept of *aménagement du territoire*, seen as a field of action of territorial political of an indicative and not prescriptive nature. The approach concerns in particular regional economic planning and has been adopted as a working model for the ESDP. Particularly important is the role played by France in the introduction of the theme of polycentrism among the central issues of the ESDP, as a key for interpreting and implementing "territorial cohesion" (even if, or perhaps precisely for this reason, France is one of Europe' least multi-centred countries);

2) The German perspective: this is dominated by the federal concept, which is the basis of the formal constitution of the contemporary German state. This concept is extended to relations between member states as the fundamental ingredient of that inter-governmental co-operation that was to "produce" the ESDP;

3) The Dutch perspective: it was under the Dutch presidency at the 1991 conference in The Hague that the Committee for Spatial Development was established for the technical management of the process of drawing up the ESDP; the traditional negotiating skills of the Dutch were to turn out fundamental for mediation between the two differing concepts outlined above.

Yet these equilibria (or disequilibria) were probably good for the new Europe that emerged from the Cold War and the division of the continent in blocs following World War Two, but need to be investigated with greater attention respect to the enlarged one as demonstrated by the process of formation of the new Territorial Agenda of the European Union.

Territorial Agenda of the European Union

When it was presented in its preliminary version (under the German presidency, in summer 2007), the Territorial Agenda of the European Union was significantly characterised by the subtitle "Towards a More Competitive Europe of Diverse Regions". The starting point of the Agenda was in fact the acknowledgment that some most important territorial trends and driving forces expected to rapidly turn into striking challenges would influence diverse European cities and regions differently. The Agenda constitutes a strategic and action-oriented framework for the territorial development of Europe. It supports the implementation of both the Lisbon and the Gothenburg Strategies through an integrated territorial development policy. More precisely, the Agenda aims at contributing to economic growth and sustainable development by strengthening the territorial cohesion of Europe.

After becoming a politically accepted objective of the EU in 2004, territorial cohesion has formally been addressed in several EU documents (among the others: in the Third Cohesion Report of 2005 and the Community Strategic Guidelines on Cohesion adopted in 2006), and it was added as a third dimension, along with economic and social cohesion, as an objective of the EU policy agenda.

As described in the Community Strategic Guidelines, the concept of territorial cohesion is associated with the capacity of cohesion policy to adapt to the particular needs and characteristics of specific geographical challenges and opportunities. Under cohesion policy, geography matters. This means that a different meaning should be given to territorial cohesion, linked to each Member State's history, culture or institutional framework. Adopting explicitly a strategy aimed at promoting the "territorial diversity" among European regions, the Agenda stresses the importance of territorial cohesion, in terms of:

- focusing territorial development policies towards an efficient exploitation of regional potential and "territorial capital";
- implementing strategies for strengthening regions and cooperation in order to achieve better interconnection and territorial integration;
- promoting synergies among European policies which support sustainable development at both the national and regional scale.

While focusing on the sustainable economic growth of Europe, the Territorial Agenda of the EU builds upon the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) agreed by the Ministers in 1999 as a result of cooperation by EU Member States on spatial development, and goes beyond it at least from three different points of view:

- in the assessment of the background framework, the Agenda takes advantage of some important scoping documents such as the latest spatial research outcomes of the European Spatial Planning Observation Network (ESPON) Programme, the different spatial visions and strategic aims of Transnational Cooperation Areas, which have been supported in the framework of the EU Community Initiative INTERREG III B, and the report *The Territorial State and Perspectives of the European Union*. Thus we can say that the Agenda is no longer the result of a single geopolitical vision overwhelming the other ones, but the result of a work of synthesis of different representations that have stratified over time;
- the Agenda is developed in an open process with stakeholders. The ambitions of the Territorial Agenda are to be achieved through informal structures of cooperation.

It also contains a programme of joint activities, on which the Ministers have agreed to take an active role during the period 2007-2010. In particular the Ministers see for themselves a role in raising awareness and stimulating debate on the most important territorial challenges for Europe. This means that there is no longer either the juxtaposition of few competing visions nor the absolute predominance of one of them as in the case of the ESDP;

- it is characterised by the shift from a spatial to a territorial perspective. The Agenda provides a strategic framework with priorities for territorial development of Europe and it recommends a number of key actions aimed at creating a more coherent approach to territorial development within EU and national policies as well as opportunities for better using the territorial diversity and potentials of Europe.

The Territorial Agenda of the EU addresses some important challenges that are recognised as having diverse impacts on territories:

- geographical concentration of activities supported by market forces and general evolution of society;
- accelerating integration of the EU in the global economic competition;
- growing interdependency between the EU territory and neighbouring countries as well as the other parts of the world;
- effects of ageing and migration on labour markets and social sustainability;
- impacts of climate change e.g. on occurrence and type of hazards;
- rising energy prices and uneven territorial opportunities for a new energy paradigm;
- impacts of the enlargement on the economic, social and territorial cohesion of the EU;
- aspects of unsustainable development leading to the overexploitation of the ecological capacity of the regions.

Moreover, in the light of the Lisbon and Gothenburg Strategies, the Agenda recognises that the diverse territorial potentials for sustainable economic growth and job creation in Europe must be identified and mobilised and the constraints removed or mitigated. In addition the obstructive effects of borders on the optimal utilization of territorial potentials must be overcome by more intensive cross-border and trans-national cooperation.

3. The values in play: territoriality, cohesion and polycentrism

The territorial dimension of development and competitiveness

It is no chance that the success stories that have marked local/regional development in Europe in recent years underline a number of key lessons:

- these successful systems have not pursued improbable new vocations, but that have enhanced and given new life to historically rooted technologies and savoir faire, both at the business level, on which to enhance core competencies, and at the territorial level, on which to enhance regional core competencies;

- they have pursued integration (clustering) of the production systems, i.e. based on relatively stable organisational bonds. Co-location has turned out to be a decisive component of competitive advantage (in that it is the basis of collective learning);
- applied network policies of technological, management and financial assistance, in addition to dialogue between the actors (envisaging the maximum collaboration and interaction at the local level);
- in the light of a shared political agenda and the presence of strongly interventionist institutions, i.e. capable of stimulating the formation of interest groups that share a common regulatory framework.

This underlies the unanimous recognition of the local territory – and its material and relational connotations – in addition to rigorous criticism of traditional territorial (and above all institutional) frames of reference, as well as the related regulatory instruments. Territoriality is, in fact, based essentially on factors of relations and processes as well as material conditions. In particular:

- it expresses a system of relations that a community has both with a (local) environment and with other actors;
- it is a place of action, characterised by changes and processes that continually organise and reorganise a territory), as the material expression of a project, of intentions and power relations on which planning itself is based;
- it is a social construction, stemming from the mobilisation of local groups, interests and institutions in a process that assumes various forms: discussion, co-operation and conflict. Its construction thus depends on the actors' collective action.

It follows that development and other economic processes can no longer be interpreted as a consequence of the behavioural dynamics of a limited number of privileged actors (large companies, for example), but instead as the expression of networks of relations that connect the co-located actors (small and large companies, trade unions and workers, trade associations, universities and public and private research centres, public authorities, financial institutions, schools and training centres). A substantial part of these relations is not of an economic or commercial nature but rather more socio-cultural and institutional: in other words, non mercantile relations.

In effect, with the decline of Fordism and the emergence of a new international division of labour, a surplus value rose made up of the local environment, society and knowledge – the external territorial economies. Apart from the most visible and mature processes (such as the explosion of information, the concentration of growth, the consequent social polarisation and the cutting of traditional bonds of solidarity), a new political demand (in a framework of decreasing resources), with the consequent modification of the forms of management of public problems and modes of governance: in general, the major public institutions are not able in themselves to adapt and respond to the complexity and multiplication of demand, above all due to the complicated operating processes that have been stratified over time.

In particular, economic policies and territorial planning have seen a growing process of overlapping between their fields of application, to the point of converging in the most mature experiences in the concept of territorial policies, underlining an inseparable set of objectives, actions and instruments that go beyond the limits of

standard planning to assume the role of a real local development strategy. In other words, the subject of territorial policies is not only the management of the physical territory – from the planning of infrastructures to housing and business units – but also, and above all, that of the intangible territory, meaning by this term the relational and institutional dimensions on which competitive and innovative processes are based today. This opens the examination of two fundamental concepts introduced above, those of cohesion and polycentrism.

Territorial cohesion as a strategic objective

The European Union reached the expression "territorial cohesion" through the definition of the more general concept of "economic and social cohesion", already contained in the European Single Act of 1986. In the Amsterdam Treaty of 1997 the expression "social and territorial cohesion" appears (Article 16) as a criterion for regulating the possible conflict between the state and the market in the management of services of general interest that play a role as territorial public assets. Finally, "territorial cohesion" was taken up again and re-interpreted by the Third Report on Economic and Social Cohesion (2004). Here, territorial cohesion policy is defined in positive terms as "a dynamic policy that strives to create resources by targeting factors of economic and employment competitiveness, especially where the unused potential is higher", in that "growth and cohesion offer mutual support" (p. xxii).

If, as is well known, territorial cohesion "translates in a territorial sense the goals of sustainable and balanced development explicitly assigned by the Union in the treaties", the concept is still characterised by conceptual and political ambiguities, due above all to the use that community documents make of this concept in various situations. The concept therefore swings between a sense of territorial cohesion as a value in itself and a purely instrumental conception to increase economic competitiveness or to repair the damage deriving from its excesses. In any case, it is a fact that, as the territorial dimension of sustainability (alongside the technological, diplomatic and behavioural/organisational dimensions), territorial cohesion is a framework of reference with direct implications for territorial policy, in its three essential components (Camagni, 2004):

- territorial quality: this puts into play the characteristics of the living and work environment, collective prosperity, the availability of community services and the equality of access to knowledge; it underlines the role of territorial policies in producing and maintaining collective assets (infrastructures, amenities and intangible values such as social capital)
- territorial efficiency: this case covers the forms of use of natural, landscape and energy resources, but also the capacity to attract capital, people and competitiveness for their own territories
- territorial identity: the presence of social capital, the safeguard of the specific local features and industrial traditions, and the strengthening of the competitive advantage of each local area). Here we find the identity incorporated in the local culture, in competencies, social capital and the landscape, which represent for this reason the ultimate bonding element of local communities, the basis of collective learning and dynamic strengthening of the local production fabric (i.e. territorial cohesion).

The territorial dimension thus "contains" three co-evolutionary sub-systems: economic, social and environmental/landscape. This therefore implies an integrated approach to territorial cohesion policies which, in turn, postulates forms of horizontal and vertical co-operation between the various institutional levels and between the different departments of the same administrations – the only ones capable of providing complex and multi-dimensional responses and actions.

Territorial efficiency, quality and identity represent in themselves objectives and values for any advanced society and are the basis of collective well-being, as well as pre-conditions for the competitiveness of local territories. However, whilst the first two objectives – efficiency and quality – are known and shared, the inclusion of the third goal, that of territorial identity, may appear surprising in this context. Nonetheless, territorial identity in particular will play a growing role in European strategies and policies. To understand this better, it is worth shifting attention to a second term that is decisive for our purposes, that of polycentrism.

Polycentrism

Polycentrism is a particular type of spatial structure based on networking relationships, which can exhibit a hierarchical or equipotential pattern. It is at the same time a structural concept, concerning a spatial pattern that has grown "spontaneously" over time, and a functional one, constructed by spatial policies at various scales (Nordregio, 2003). The latter aspect may be induced and stimulated through the stronger or weaker planning effort of supra-local authorities (European Union, and to some extent states and regions) or through local co-operation among municipal authorities. Cohesion and territorial development policies stated by the official documents of the EU, and particularly by the ESDP, might be interpreted as the attempts to recompose, at the European level, the territorial fragmentation of the individual national territories, by boosting voluntary forms of transnational co-operation and by referring to the principle of subsidiarity at sub-national level.

The concept refers, in an intuitive way, to the presence of multiple development nodes on the territory, and in this sense it can be considered to be in opposition to the traditional polarization theories that characterize post-war regional science. The concept of polycentrism is ideally the evolution of decentralized concentration, traditionally tied to Dutch spatial planning and referring to policies aimed at the spread of economic activities from major congested areas in order to reconcentrate them in the main poles of the less developed regions. Obviously the aim does not simply consist in the reorganization of a fixed amount of economic activities in a sort of zero-sum game, but to encourage development processes and cities characterized by economic stagnation, industrial decline, or depopulation (Mazza, 2015).

As a geographical concept, polycentrism can be considered from three different perspectives: as a spontaneous phenomenon, as a theoretical model, and as a political objective. From the first point of view, the current popularity of polycentrism among scholars reflects a general trend of the urban phenomenon: several monocentric and polarized structures, i.e. characterized by one big dominant centre, tend to reorganize

themselves in networks and polycentric structures: this is, for example, the case of many Italian urban areas.

The topic therefore overlaps with polycentrism as a theoretical concept, almost in opposition to the traditional idea of urban hierarchy in terms of dimensions and “rank” of the urban functions (for example, in terms of population in the famous Zip’s rank-size model). From this perspective, the recent debate on the polycentric urban region does not only concentrate on the different endowments of functions of the territorial system, but on the variety and diversity of these functions, their distribution between the centres, and the consequent relations of integration and interdependence.

From a political point of view, finally, the objective of polycentrism is to promote a fair and balanced spatial development and, for this reason, it has been included in the policy aims identified by the European Commission. The polycentric strategy can be read on different geographical scales: in a wider European perspective, it refers to the development of new development axes in the peripheral regions outside the European core (CRPM, 2002), while on the regional scale the aim is to contrast the formation of monocentric urban systems in which most of the functions are concentrated in one narrow area, in order to promote equipotential networks of competitive centres sharing different functions. At the centre of this second perspective lies the idea that polycentrism may represent a tool for enhancing regional competitiveness. This is an aspect of the debate that presents a certain ambiguity: arguments in favour of polycentrism, in fact, apparently contrast with the literature referring to the advantages of the major cities in terms of increasing returns to scale. In reality, the theoretical body is not strictly in contrast with the idea of polycentric development in terms of “decentralized concentration”. Polycentrism, in fact, never denies the benefits of spatial concentration, but underlines the necessity to promote networks and different development paths in those situations where an excessive geographical concentration (at different scales) leads to social and territorial imbalances, as in the case of the European core, or in that of some regions characterized by a critical centre-periphery model.

Nevertheless, the literature concerning polycentrism calls attention to some specific ways to enhance the competitive advantage of urban systems. First, cities can enjoy particular external economies deriving from sharing a common labour market, infrastructures like airports and freeways, or highly specialized services like universities. Second, cities can take advantage of their different complementary elements and specializations: basically, referring to the traditional economic theories, every city can specialize in economic sectors in which they enjoy specific comparative advantages. Third, it is reasonable to suppose that frequent interaction between the nodes of a polycentric structure, together with the sharing of problems, solutions and perspectives, will promote governance synergies, while the sharing of resources and programmes allows the financing of bigger projects.

The antinomy between hierarchy and polycentrism has really been one of the most discussed themes during the debate on the construction of the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) and the Study Programme in European Spatial Planning (SPESP), as well as at the present, when the work of the European Spatial Planning Observation Network (ESPON) 2006 is under way. The antinomy is

particularly relevant if one pays attention to the possible danger of concentration of functional and economic strength in the core of the European Union, the so-called “pentagon”.

On the other hand, one cannot ignore that some hierarchical elements may not only be inescapable, but also desirable in order to exploit critical mass effects and to give rise to diffusion processes in regions where the spatial system is weak and dominated by one or few urban centres. Indeed, as the study of the Council of Peripheral and Maritime Regions highlights (CRPM, 2002), European space is now characterized by a twofold phenomenon of spatial diversity at different scales:

- at the European level, the divergence between the central part of the continent and its peripheries;
- at the national level, in most countries the divergence between the most competitive conurbations and the rest of the territory.

The notion of balanced territorial competitiveness and economic and social cohesion mirror some of the crucial challenges facing the EU today. Reinforcing polycentrism may be a strategic answer to the currently unbalanced structure of European space.

According to Simin Davoudi (2003), “one of the most central yet least clear concepts in the ESDP is the concept of polycentricity”. The relevance of the concept depends on its coherence with the political options for the development of European space and on its capacity to face the three main objectives of the ESDP: economic and social cohesion; conservation of natural resources and cultural heritage (sustainable development); more balanced competitiveness of the European territory.

Actually, in the ESDP and in other European official documents which draw inspiration from it, the concept of polycentrism was not used to explain an existing or developing phenomenon, but as a normative agenda for achieving two political goals which are often conflicting: social and territorial cohesion on the one hand; economic competitiveness on the other. The ESPD promotes polycentrism at the European level in order to ensure a more regionally balanced development across the EU and to enhance the Community’s economic competitiveness in the world market (balanced competitiveness).

Nevertheless, the concept of polycentrism is and remains problematic for a lot of reasons. First, from an analytical point of view, despite its widespread usage and its long history, the precise meaning of polycentrism has remained elusive: it “means different things to different people” and also “different things when applied at different spatial scales” (Davoudi, 2003). Second, from a political point of view, it testifies an “idealistic approach” to spatial planning highlighting a theoretical and practical gap. In other words, it is not clear what kind of policies have to be implemented to reach it and, in more general terms, whether polycentrism really is a panacea for the European spatial, economical and social structure.

4. Territorial cohesion, polycentrism and active territoriality: the keys to local development

Talking about the theoretical and empirical foundations of such a concept as polycentrism is an arduous task for a review paper. To discuss these problems, one could refer to the ESDP process to understand how and why polycentrism becomes a main goal for the spatial planning at the EU level.

If we look more closely, on the European scale the goal is to promote the formation of a transnational network of "dynamic areas integrated with the global economy" outside the Pentagon, each focused on an existing metropolis or on a group of geographically close medium-sized and small cities that network with each other.

An idea of this kind had already been proposed by Kunzmann and Wegener (1991) when they contrasted the image of a bunch of grapes to the famous French Datar group's "blue banana" (or European backbone). A study published in 2002 by the Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions (CRPM) in collaboration with government offices of the United Kingdom, Sweden, Portugal, Spain, France and Italy, attempted to verify how many large "grapes" Kunzmann's bunch could have outside the Pentagon – or, to use the language of the CRPM, how many Metropolitan European Growth Areas (MEGAs) there could be.

This study demonstrates that the idea of European cohesion based on polycentrism is founded on certain current facts and trends. More in general, it helps us to understand that the possible MEGA nodes ("the areas integrated into the global economy" of the ESDP) are in turn intra-regional networks made up of a number of local urban systems, i.e. of smaller cities with their surrounding areas. Two indications stem from this. The first, apparently obvious but often forgotten, is that each of these is in reality a network. This means that the polycentric European system and its governance should be seen as a network of networks. The other, on which it is worth pausing, is that the nodes of the networks of the lowest hierarchical level are local territorial systems. It is therefore at this level that we find the foundations of the entire construction of European polycentrism: an effective activation of local systems and their diverse specific features are a basic condition for territorial cohesion and the development of Europe.

This was implicitly acknowledged in the ESPD, starting from its initial declaration (par. 1.1.1): "the territory of the EU is characterised by cultural diversity [...], one of the most significant factors of development". As is well known, this variety is local and regional as much as national. In effect, the ESPD includes in the three factors that influence long-term European territorial development trends "the growing role of regional and local authorities and their function with respect to territorial development" (par. 1.1.6). It follows that the Community also needs "cities and regions" and only "in this way will put into practice the principle of subsidiarity sanctioned by the Treaty that established the EU" (par. 1.1.8).

The "bricks" with which the EU builds as a territorially cohesive construction are therefore the local systems, that can become the nodes of regional networks (MEGAs), which in turn can be the nodes of the great polycentric European network. But what are these local networks? Are they existing intermediate entities already functioning as territorial actors or are they collective players that need to be constructed? And in what sense are they "territorial"?

Starting from this last question, it should be remembered that, simplifying considerably, there are two different ways of considering the "local" and territoriality,

i.e. the relations of these actors with the local area. We can distinguish between (Dematteis and Janin Rivolin, 2004):

- a passive and negative territoriality, which with control strategies and the associated regulatory system aims to regulate the access to the resources of an area and to exclude the use of the territory for other actors,
- and an active and positive territoriality, which stems instead from the territorialised and collective action of local actors which, thanks to their knowledge and ability to plan ahead, are the key players in innovation and development.

Active territoriality is what makes it possible to give an operational definition of the local system, as the conceptual model whose purpose is to analyse and describe the socio-territorial reality and potential already existing or to be constructed and, starting from these, of systems that are both social and territorial, destined to become actors of a local framework of the multi-level (regional, national and European) policies and governance. In real terms, there is nothing new here, as many European policies (for example the Urban and Leader projects) are already based on the activation of local systems. What is needed is just the better definition of these policies so as to make them more effective and enable their extension in terms of polycentric development. The networking of these territories, interacting with local actors, is therefore the starting point for the construction of European polycentrism as the chief instrument of spatial development proposed by the ESDP. Translated into the above-mentioned conceptual and operational terms, it could in our opinion improve the current national and regional policies from a perspective of European territorial cohesion. In particular, the attention for forms of active territoriality and their local, regional and national diversification should contribute to greater sophistication of community policies and multi-level governance.

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