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The first steps towards regional policy

and the origins of a European model of territorial cohesion

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Abstract

This paper focuses on how the slow but steady development of the EU regional policy was shaped by the gradual emergence of a territorial perspective in its strategic design. In particular, it examines the origins of regional policy, shedding light on its first stage of formulation, from the Treaty of Paris to the adoption of the European Regional Development Fund (1951-1975). Notably it analyses some underlying factors influencing its elaboration: the idea and vision of transnational spatial planning promoted by the Council of Europe, the exchange of ideas within the European Commission expert groups on town and country planning and the territorial studies relating to the first EEC enlargement. This cultural milieu contributed to a common outlook on the equilibrium of the European regions, thus planting a seed that would ripen into the “territorial cohesion” model recently included in the Lisbon Treaty.

Keywords: EEC/EU Cohesion Policy; Regional Disparities; ERDF; Territorial Cohesion; Territory

Introduction

Cohesion policy is at present one of the most important activities of the European Union (EU), commanding more than a third of its budget. EU Structural Funds aim to reduce economic and social disparities between European regions in order to achieve the objective of territorial cohesion as set out in the Lisbon Treaty. This policy, which originally occupied only a marginal place in the Treaties of Rome, has changed substantially over time due to the deepening of the
European integration process, the impact of EEC/EU enlargements, and the inclusion of a territorial perspective in its regulatory design\(^1\).

In the founding treaties signed in the Fifties, there were no special chapters dealing with regional policy at European level. EEC regional policy as such was shaped step by step between the Sixties and the beginning of Seventies.

In fact, despite the absence of a specific competence, regional policy was not entirely absent from the European legal setting and the founding treaties included several implicit and explicit references to regional problems. This was a starting point for the adoption of the first instruments of regional rebalancing. Moreover, since the Sixties a set of concomitant factors boosted the EEC’s motivation to deal with territorial issues and with town and country planning at supranational level: a) the awareness of territorial issues evinced by many officers of the European Commission and by many experts convened by the Commission to study the impact of new EEC policies; b) the meetings on town and country planning organized within the Council of Europe since the late Sixties; c) the relevance of new EEC policies (environmental, regional, social and industrial policies) launched after the Paris Summit of 1972 from the perspective of both territorial cohesion and the wellbeing of the population; d) last but not least, the pressures of the first EEC enlargement (together with Italy, both Ireland and the United Kingdom – in their capacity of applicant countries were firmly committed to the creation of the European regional development fund).

With reference to the policy initiation stage, this paper takes a step back in time to examine the origins of regional policy – the herald of actual cohesion policy – and to shed light on its core dynamics\(^2\). In particular, we will focus on the motivations of the European Commission, the relative influence of the experts groups and the pressures of enlargement negotiations. In so doing, the main objective of this paper is not to solve the dispute between the prevalence of supranational approach and the conditioning of the intergovernmental bargain in shaping the formation of EC regional policy\(^3\), but to identify the broader cultural conditioning and the larger political influence prompting regional policy adoption.


\(^3\) BACHTLER, John; MENDEZ, Carlos; WISHLADE, Fiona – EU Cohesion Policy and European Integration. The