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# Positioning regional planning across Europe

Lukas Smas<sup>a</sup>  and Peter Schmitt<sup>b</sup> 

## ABSTRACT

Many scholars argue that regional planning has lost its political significance and practical relevance in recent years. Based on a comparative analysis of formal regional planning in eight European countries, this study questions and nuances this view. It is concluded that the institutional conditions for regional planning are still extensive and have been adapted to changing contexts since the year 2000, but along different pathways across the analysed countries. The investigation highlights that multiple forms of planning regions have been incorporated in the planning systems through multipurpose planning instruments that have further added to the existing dynamic and diversified regional planning landscape across Europe.

## KEYWORDS

regional planning; comparative research; planning systems; planning instrument; regions; Europe

JEL R5, R50, R52, R58

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## INTRODUCTION


Regional Planning has come of age. In country after country, it has become part of the established machinery of government. (Friedmann & Weaver, 1979, p. 1)


In recent years, much research in the field of regional planning has focused on issues related to strategic planning (e.g., Albrechts et al., 2003; Boddy & Hickman, 2013; Healey, 2007; Vallée, 2012), soft spaces and soft (regional) planning (e.g., Allmendinger et al., 2015; Olesen, 2012) and aspects of governance, devolution and rescaling (e.g., Li & Wu, 2012; Roodbol-Mekkes & van den Brink, 2015; Tait & Hansen, 2013; Zimmermann, 2017). Less attention has been paid to the more formal apparatus and arenas of regional planning, which have a long history, as the above quotation by Friedmann and Weaver alludes to (see also Alden, 2006; Hall & Tewdwr-Jones, 2019; Wannop, 1995). In this paper, we complement this research by investigating how regional planning is institutionalized with regard to its formal organization and its available statutory planning instruments, and examine the shifts that have occurred in recent years. Thus, we focus on how governments in various European countries have formally equipped regional planning in order to guide and coordinate issues of spatial development and/or land-use planning at the sub-national level.

Recently, it has been claimed that regional planning as such is defunct (Harrison et al., 2020), since its formal status has been taken away and/or its practical relevance has withered due to obsolescent approaches and limited flexibility to address contemporary and future place-based challenges. However, our empirical analysis shows that although this might be the case in a few countries, the formal regional planning landscape across Europe is still intact rather than dead. Furthermore, in a number of countries, formal regional planning spaces and formal organizational structures have been adapted to changing contexts, and new multipurpose planning instruments have been introduced since 2000. These recent adjustments indicate that regional planning still is and can be perceived as important and relevant in the diverse multilevel spatial planning systems across Europe.

Overall, it has been argued that regions, or more specifically city-regions, form an appropriate scale for addressing many of the current challenges related to sustainable development (Ahrend & Schumann, 2014; Rodríguez-Pose, 2008; Soja, 2015). Regional planning can be understood as a sub-national mode of horizontal and vertical coordination to integrate various issue- or sectoral-based interests (cf. Haughton & Counsell, 2004; Wannop, 1995). As such it might be well situated to deal with rather comprehensive governance challenges, due to its position in relation to other policy levels upwards and downwards, as well as the

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aspired integration of different actors, agendas and strategies (Alden, 2006; Tewdwr-Jones et al., 2010). This form of regional planning has to be carefully distinguished from cross-border or supra-national 'regional' approaches of spatial planning and development that have been facilitated by various EU policy programmes in the last two decades or so. Examples are the emergence of macro-regions (Metzger & Schmitt, 2012; Sielker & Rauhut, 2018) and other forms of non-standard regional spaces as termed and illustrated by Deas and Lord (2006).

Across Europe (but self-evidently even beyond), the sub-national (city-) regional level is difficult to capture analytically due to the prevailing differences in institutional settings, extent of political autonomy and geographic scope. Formal regional planning is not an exception as it is institutionalized differently across Europe and its role and assertiveness vary concerning mediating different interests in the use of land, coordinating aspirations for (economic) spatial development, safeguarding environmental quality and the provision of services of general interest, to name just a few of its associated tasks. The fact that the institutional context of regional planning has changed in recent years further contributes to these differences, as will be discussed below. In a few cases, this has resulted in weakening its political significance and its practical relevance (Galland, 2012; Morphet & Pemberton, 2013). In addition, in research and practice, interest in 'formal' regional planning seems to have faded in conjunction with the emergence of more informal and strategic approaches that follow a rather flexible network-based governance logic (ARL – Academy for Spatial Research and Planning, 2011; Foster, 2010; van Straalen & Witte, 2018).

In the remaining part of the paper we provide methodological information about the data being used for analysis. After that we elaborate on the important conceptual aspects and the development of regional planning in Europe during the last two decades. Focusing on eight exemplary countries, we then empirically analyse shifts in the distribution of spatial planning competencies and changes concerning formal regional planning spaces and statutory regional planning instruments. Finally, based on our comparative investigations we position the current state of regional planning across Europe and develop some further thoughts and conclusions for future research and practice.

## NOTES ON DATA COLLECTION

In this paper we investigate these seemingly different theoretical and practical views on the position of regional planning through a comparative analysis of the diverse and dynamic landscape of formal regional planning across Europe. Our analysis is based on findings from an applied research study commissioned by the ESPON 2020 Cooperation Programme, which aims to promote and foster a territorial dimension in European development and cooperation by providing evidence, knowledge transfer and policy learning to public authorities and other policy actors at all levels. This study is entitled Comparative Analysis of Territorial Governance and Spatial Planning

Systems in Europe (COMPASS) and provided 'an authoritative comparative report on changes in territorial governance and spatial planning systems in Europe from 2000 to 2016' (Nadin et al., 2018a, p. vii). As such, the study provides up-to-date knowledge and an extensive overview of spatial planning systems and territorial governance across Europe with a more attuned conceptualization of spatial planning 'that goes beyond the regulation of land use and urban form to the coordination of the territorial impacts of sector policies, as has been advocated since the 1990s' (p. vii).<sup>1</sup>

By means of two extensive questionnaires, information about spatial planning systems and territorial governance in 32 European countries was collected (cf. Nadin et al., 2018b). National experts, in most cases academic scholars who either originated from or conducted research in the country under consideration, responded to the questionnaires. Besides assessing the available national literature and collecting national-based information on various aspects of the national spatial planning system concerned, the experts consulted other experts in the country of their responsibility, that is, academic scholars and planning professionals, in order to gather additional information and discuss (their) preliminary assessments through interviews and/or focus group meetings (Nadin et al., 2018b). The first questionnaire was oriented towards the formal structure of the institutions for territorial governance and spatial planning, while the second focused on how territorial governance and spatial planning operates in practice by putting an emphasis on the relationships among strategy, policy, decisions, outputs and outcomes (cf. Nadin et al., 2018b). It should also be noted that roughly one-third of the questions in both questionnaires were focused on European territorial governance and the influence of EU policies on domestic planning systems.

For this paper, we investigate how formal regional planning is positioned across Europe, specifically focusing on the spatial planning systems of France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Norway, Poland and Sweden as explanatory examples. This carefully selected sample is a result of a number of strategic considerations. First, it represents various ideal types of spatial planning traditions (Commission of the European Communities, 1997), different legal and administrative families (Newman & Thornley, 1996), as well as diverse models of welfare systems (Nadin & Stead, 2008). Second, this selection is promising due to its illustrative capacity rather than the inherent territorial specificities that these countries may show, which means that the chosen countries provide both commonalities and particularities from which an image of contemporary European formal regional planning approaches and recent dynamics is derived. Finally, in our empirical analysis we deliberately excluded countries that are well represented in the international literature, such as the UK, Denmark and the Netherlands. Since we aim to contribute and nuance the debate on the current position of regional planning across Europe, we revisit and include these countries in our conclusion as well as in our conceptual review of the development of regional planning.

In the COMPASS study, a spatial planning system is broadly defined as ‘the ensemble of institutions that are used to mediate competition over the use of land and property, to allocate rights of development, to regulate change and to promote preferred spatial and urban form’ (Nadin et al., 2018a, p. viii). This rather narrow working definition made it possible to differentiate formal regional planning from closely related policy fields, such as environmental, regional or cohesion policies. It also helped us to focus on the formal aspects of regional planning and thus those planning instruments that are produced under the law, despite the fact that formal and informal arrangements coexist and are often blended in practice (cf. Mäntysalo & Bäcklund, 2018; van Straalen & Witte, 2018). A specific focus has been to acknowledge the different characteristics of these instruments.

## DEVELOPMENT AND CONCEPTUALIZATION OF REGIONAL PLANNING

At the beginning of the 1960s, an era when regional planning was institutionalized in many European countries, Friedmann (1963) discussed its substantial tasks, which appear to be relevant even today, such as coordinating economic development and guiding the spatial organization of centres and other places for activities such as work, leisure, residence and different forms of land use. These tasks of regional planning are cross-boundary issues, and as such cause inevitable tensions with the prevailing systems of governance and government. In addition, Friedmann also emphasized early on that:

[t]he historic city is turning obsolete ... it has burst its container. ... The new city may be identified as a density configuration that is measured by the flows of integration within a given ‘matrix’. This matrix, however, has no firm boundaries but represents a continuum of densities of interaction. ... The metropolitan region is the new, etherealized city.  
(p. 172)

Hence, one key issue of regional planning is the question of how regions are constructed and to what extent the boundaries of the region at hand coincide with the intended objectives and ordering of activities or interventions under consideration. The ideal spatial unit for regional planning and development, in particular due to the increasing complexity of city–hinterland relations and the emergence of more polycentric patterns, has been extensively discussed in various countries and expert communities, such as within the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the ESPON Cooperation Programme. These discussions often implicate relational and dynamic perspectives on regions that do not necessarily conform to the existing political jurisdictions and the territorial logics of the related layers of government (Jones & Paasi, 2013). This is, of course, of central concern for territorial politics in general and has been largely discussed in regional studies, political

geography and related subjects. A central question here is how network-based and functional relations can be captured by the prevailing territorial mosaic of politico-administrative institutions and their fixed boundaries or by other governance arrangements to avoid institutional voids (Neuman, 2007; Neuman & Zonneveld, 2018; Varró & Lagedijk, 2013). Within planning studies, this evolving loss of territorial synchrony has stimulated debate in recent years around soft and hard spaces and about the extent to which practices in spatial (or regional) planning are able to navigate between those governmental institutions that are supposed to guarantee democratic legitimacy and accountability and those that allow for more flexible approaches in order to bind together territories, multiple actors and different levels of spatial governance, (cf. Allmendinger et al., 2015; Faludi, 2016; Purkarthofer, 2018; Zimmerbauer & Paasi, 2019). However, in this paper, we focus mainly on the hard spaces of regional planning, since the instrumental and formal apparatus and arenas within state-run public planning are at the centre of our analysis here, and have been given little attention in recent years. However, hard spaces are not set in stone; they also shift and are adapted, as will be discussed further below.

When considering shifts and changes of regional planning across Europe after 2000, it is important to recall the 1990s and early 2000s as the heyday of regionalism. The question is whether the appreciation of regions within regional studies and other sub-disciplines from different ontological and epistemological angles (Agnew, 2013; Paasi & Metzger, 2017), as well as normatively by specific policy communities (e.g., European Committee of the Regions), have had any implications for the practice of regional planning. One argument that has been echoed within academic and policy circles alike, and which is often used to explain the re-emerging interest in regionalism, is the pursuit of regional competitiveness and economic prosperity (Jones & Paasi, 2013). This has been discursively underpinned by numerous policy reports (cf. Ahrend & Schumann, 2014) and regional indicators and rankings (Annoni & Dijkstra, 2013). In addition, the stabilization, and even expansion, of EU Cohesion Policy should be recognized, specifically after the EU enlargements in 2004 and 2007, since it has implied a further institutionalization, or even establishment, of regions within the multilevel governance architecture of the EU (Dąbrowski, 2014). In sum, these and other arguments are used, to echo Paasi and Metzger (2017), to highlight the region as a social construct for policy-making and delivery.

But to what extent do these debates have implications for the role and position of formal regional planning? Or, to put it differently, does formal regional planning have a life of its own, since it is in a robust and mature state across Europe, or is regional planning ‘dead or just coping’ as Galand (2012) suggests, when discussing recent developments in Denmark. Without doubt, there are indications that in a number of countries the significance of formal regional planning has declined in recent years at the expense of other forms of (strategic) regional planning and spatial

policy formats (cf. Nadin et al., 2018a). A generic line of argument is that neoliberal spatial policy schemes (e.g., Tasan-Kok & Baeten, 2012) and the encompassing post-political conditions (e.g., Metzger et al., 2015) have increasingly questioned the usefulness, efficiency and, thus, the need for formal regional planning. Prime empirical examples of this decline of formal regional planning are the UK and Denmark, which may be seen as outliers of (neoliberal) devolution processes (e.g., McGuinness & Mawson, 2017; Olesen, 2014; Roodbol-Mekkes & van den Brink, 2015; Waterhout et al., 2013).

For instance, in England, as McGuinness and Mawson (2017) note, the so-called Localism Act 2011 was used for re- and down-scaling strategic regional and land-use planning with the argumentative frame of localizing responsibility where communities were affected. This form of localism induced what Cowie et al. (2016a) call 'hyper-local planning' at the neighbourhood scale, orchestrated through locally self-organized neighbourhood forums below the municipal level. At the same time, the regional tier of planning was removed by abolishing regional assemblies and the regional spatial strategies, which the assemblies were responsible for preparing. These strategies were introduced in 2004 in a statutory instrument seeking coordination and compliance of local development policies between neighbouring authorities. At the same time, under the devolution agenda, neighbouring authorities are tasked to come up with governance solutions by themselves. In practice they do this by using existing institutional frameworks through combined authorities (e.g., in Greater Manchester) or by forming so-called local enterprise partnerships (LEPs) (Cowie et al., 2016b; McGuinness & Mawson, 2017). However, LEPs are characterized as soft spaces that lack democratic legitimacy and clarity about their roles in the planning system, and due to their non-mandatory character they create institutional voids and fragmentation in the coverage of sub-national planning (McGuinness & Mawson, 2017; Morphet & Pemberton, 2013).

In Denmark, the formal spatial planning system was radically changed by a structural and territorial reform in 2007, when the number of municipalities was reduced from 271 to 98 and the former counties were replaced by five new administrative regions. This reform has had significant implications for regional planning, since it has been gradually abolished with the effect that, currently, land-use planning is only carried out at the national and local levels. Through a number of revisions of the Planning Act in 2007, 2014 and 2017, the regional land-use planning instruments and regulatory guidelines were transferred, in a modified form, to the new and larger municipalities, which has given them more autonomy to plan and guide their future development. However, the shifts have led not only to a downscaling of formal competencies but also to an upscaling as the abolition of the Greater Copenhagen Authority exemplifies. The statutory and regulatory regional plan for the capital area, the famous so-called 'Finger plan', is now executed by the national Minister of Industry, Business and Financial Affairs (Galland, 2012).

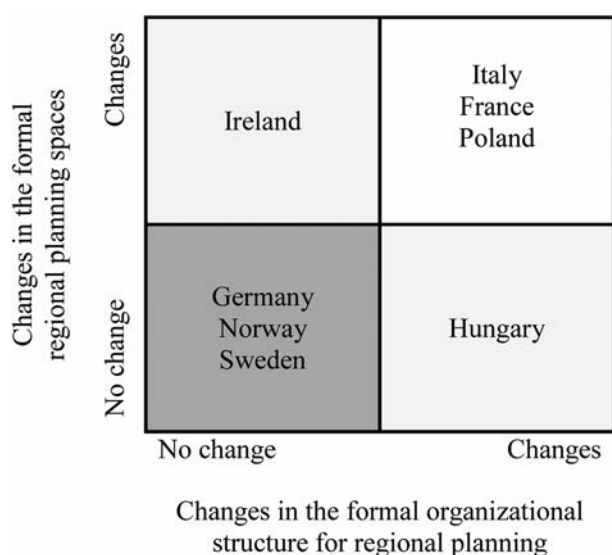
To summarize, in England and Denmark (and also to some extent in the Netherlands; Roodbol-Mekkes & van den Brink, 2015; van Straalen & Witte, 2018), regional planning has been dismantled. It seems that these well-studied examples have become common knowledge, but they are not necessarily representative across Europe, as Waterhout et al. (2013) indicate when exploring developments in the Netherlands, France and Germany. Schmitt and Smas (2019) argue in a similar vein when comparing the shifts in the Danish planning system with those adjustments that have been undertaken in Finland, Norway and Sweden in recent years. In order to further substantiate this observation, we now provide a more nuanced view on the shifts and current state of formal regional planning in eight other European countries as additional explanatory and illustrative examples.

## POSITIONING ORGANIZATIONAL AND SPATIAL SHIFTS

A main conclusion from the ESPON COMPASS study is that the regional level or, to be more precise, the sub-national levels, have been subject to the most significant changes in spatial planning systems across Europe since 2000 compared with national and local levels (Nadin et al., 2018a). Alongside a general trend towards decentralization across Europe through, for example, the creation of new regional governance arrangements (e.g., France, Italy and Sweden) or reorganizations of administrative systems (e.g., Poland and Hungary in the 2000s and (Eastern) Germany in the 1990s) (Buček & Ryder, 2015), we can also discern reforms and rescaling of spatial planning competencies at the regional level in various directions. To that end, our analysis here has focused on whether and how the spatial form and organizational structure of regional planning changed between 2000 and 2016.

In Figure 1, the eight countries are positioned in relation to changes of the formal regional planning spaces and changes in the formal organizational structure for regional planning. In Ireland, changes in the spatial form, that is, a reduction of planning regions, occurred without major changes in the formal organizational structure of regional planning. In Hungary, the opposite development can be identified, that is, the formal role of regional planning in terms of land-use development diminished (similar to Denmark and England as discussed above). In Poland, France and Italy, both the spatial and organizational forms of regional planning changed, whereas in Germany, Norway and Sweden, no significant formal changes were undertaken concerning the position of regional planning within the statutory planning systems. In the following, we further discuss and nuance these four general tendencies by providing an overview of the main events and types of changes.

Both Hungary's and Poland's planning system have changed significantly since their accession to the EU in 2004, but in different ways regarding regional planning and along dissimilar trajectories. In Hungary, spatial planning has become more oriented towards regional



**Figure 1.** Changes and constancy in formal regional planning spaces and formal organizational structures.

development, and the sub-national level has been subject to the redistribution of spatial planning competencies within the regional tier of government, namely between regions and counties. Between 1996 and 2011, regional development councils and regional development agencies were responsible for the preparation and implementation of regional plans (concepts and development strategies) (Table 1). Since 2012, these organizations have only acted through *Regional Consultation Forums for Spatial Development* and do not have a formal role in land-use regulation anymore. Instead, spatial development has become a competence of the county governments (and Budapest City Council), which prepare and adopt spatial development concepts, spatial development programmes and land-use plans (Table 1). Formal regional planning competencies in Hungary have thus shifted *within* the regional tier of government from so-called regions to counties.

Following the major administrative reforms of decentralization and administrative restructuring in Poland

**Table 1.** Main statutory regional planning instruments in eight European countries in 2016.

Regional planning instrument		Characteristics of instruments			
	Original language [English translation]	Regulatory	Visionary	Strategic	Framework
France	<i>Schéma régional d'aménagement, de développement durable et d'égalité des territoires</i> [Regional Scheme for Spatial Planning, Sustainable Development and Equality of Territories]	Yes		×	×
	<i>Schéma directeur de la région d'Ile-de-France</i> [Ile-de-France Region's Master Plan]	Yes		×	
Germany	<i>Landesentwicklungsplan</i> [State Development Plan]	Yes		×	×
	<i>Regional Plan</i> [Regional Development Plan]	Yes			×
Hungary	<i>Megyei területrendezési terv</i> [County Land-Use Plan]	Yes			
	<i>Megyei területfejlesztési koncepció</i> [County Development Concept]		×	×	×
Ireland	Regional Planning Guidelines		×	×	×
Italy	<i>Piano Territoriale Regionale</i> [Regional Spatial Plan]	Yes		×	×
	<i>Piano Territoriale di Coordinamento Provinciale</i> [Provincial Territorial Coordination Plan]	Yes			×
	<i>Piano Territoriale Generale Metropolitano</i> [General Territorial Metropolitan Plan]	Yes			×
	<i>Piano Strategico Metropolitano</i> [Strategic Metropolitan Plan]		×	×	×
Norway	<i>Regional planstrategi</i> [Regional Planning Strategy]			×	×
	<i>Regional plan med retningslinjer</i> [Regional Master Plan with Guidelines]	Yes			×
Poland	<i>Strategia rozwoju województwa</i> [Regional (Voivodeship) Development Strategy]			×	
	<i>Plan zagospodarowania przestrzennego województwa</i> [Spatial Management Plan (Voivodeship)]	Yes	×		
	<i>Strategia rozwoju związku metropolitalnego</i> [Metropolitan Association Development Strategy]		×		
Sweden	<i>Regional plan</i> [Region Plan]			×	×

Source: Authors' own compilation based on data acquired within the Comparative Analysis of Territorial Governance and Spatial Planning Systems in Europe (COMPASS) study through the assessments of national experts.

during the 1990s, Poland has four administrative levels at which spatial planning is exercised, with two sub-national levels: *voivodeship* and *pivots* (Kaczmarek, 2016). Since these reforms have been in place there generally no changes in the distribution of competencies concerning spatial planning between 2000 and 2016. One exception and controversial issue is the possibility to establish metropolitan associations for city-regions and to merge sub-regional entities (*pivots*) (Kaczmarek, 2016). Since 2003, there have been national efforts in Poland to create metropolitan units to tackle urbanization processes through a law on land-use planning in metropolitan regions (Kaczmarek & Ryder, 2015). Establishing a metropolitan association is not compulsory; nevertheless, such associations are supposed to perform public tasks to foster spatial order in their areas.

In addition to tensions and rescaling within the regional tier of government, the Polish example also highlights how city-regions and metropolitan areas are prioritized by giving them special additional planning competencies and instruments, as will be discussed below. The increased emphasis on city-regions and metropolitan areas in both policy and research (cf. Ahrend & Schumann, 2014; Rodríguez-Pose, 2008; Soja, 2015) has been translated into changes in the formal spatial planning systems, not only in Poland but also in Italy. In 2001, a constitutional reform in Italy modified the competencies between the national state and the regions regarding spatial planning (cf. Vinci, 2019). Amongst other things, the reform introduced the principle of subsidiarity into the spatial planning system and added metropolitan areas as specific planning regions. Italy has two sub-national levels relevant for regional planning: regions and provinces. While the regions have maintained their competencies, the provinces were, in 2015, transformed into secondary level entities, that is, indirectly elected with reduced power; however, spatial planning remained amongst the provinces' competencies (further reforms to abolish the provinces have been unsuccessful). The new metropolitan cities will substitute for their provinces by assuming the same territories, boundaries and competencies. The metropolitan authorities thus cover the same territories as the previous provinces; therefore, they have not been realigned to functional urban areas. Similarly, they still have more or less the same competencies as the provinces, but are expected to play a more strategic role (Fedeli, 2017).

Tensions and shifts of competencies within the regional level and increased focus on metropolitan areas are also evident in France. Since 2000, France has seen a devolution and reorganization of its government's structure, which has also significantly changed the spatial planning system (Demazière, 2018). The regions have been designated as the leading sub-national level in spatial planning, and should coordinate other lower planning levels, in particular the counties. They have, alongside municipalities, become the core actors in spatial planning and have gained formal planning competencies. In 2016, the regions were enlarged as their numbers dropped from 22 to 13, and, at the same time, they gained competencies for doing regulatory

regional planning. The reforms in France also encouraged metropolitan planning across the country through new 'municipal groupings', which have emerged as important actors at the local inter-municipal level. The introduction of the 'quasi subnational governments' of municipal groupings has created tensions in the French planning system due to 'overlapping competencies and competing policies' across levels (Geppert, 2017, p. 227). These types of, and possibilities for, inter-municipal-led regional planning initiatives also exist, for example, in Germany, Italy, Norway and Sweden, although they are practiced only to a rather modest degree (Nadin et al., 2018a). However, in this paper, we focus solely on regional planning conducted by sub-national level authorities.

In countries with multiple sub-national levels relevant for spatial planning, we can observe tensions between them, in particular between different planning regions and regional planning authorities. In terms of changes in the formal organizational structure we can identify not only rescaling downwards towards lower regional levels (Hungary) or an expansion of planning regions (France), but also a formally articulated shift towards metropolitan areas (Italy and Poland) (Figure 1). The latter in particular causes asymmetries in the spatial planning systems, in which larger urban regions have different competencies compared with other regions. In Italy, there is an emphasis on larger city-regions, and in France reforms have created larger regional territorial entities, which means that an increased focus on regional planning in metropolitan areas and city-regions does not necessarily imply decentralization or redistribution of planning capacities. Apparently, the question of how regions are constructed and to what extent their boundaries coincide with the intended objectives and the ordering of activities or interventions under consideration, which Friedman highlighted in the 1960s, is still a major concern. The examples of France, Poland and Italy, and to some extent even Ireland (see below), show clear evidence of the transforming of functional regions, specifically in metropolitan areas, into more formal planning regions within the statutory spatial planning systems. Relating formal regional planning institutions to metropolitan areas has also been a specific concern in Germany (Zimmermann, 2017) as well as in Sweden and Norway (Schmitt & Smas, 2019), but has not resulted in any major formal changes of the statutory planning systems.

Although we can discern repeated instances of structural reforms and significant changes in the spatial planning systems across Europe, we can also identify examples where formal regional planning competencies have not shifted and changed considerably (Figure 1). There have been no formal changes in the distribution of competencies between the state and the regional planning authorities in Germany since 2000, but there has been a tendency to streamline the 'states' development plans' at the federal states level by decentralizing topics to the regional plans and to regional planning authorities (Blotevogel et al., 2014). Due to the fact that formal regional planning is under the aegis of the federal states (*Länder*),

which differ a lot in terms of their size and territorial context, it is not surprising that the spectrum of planning regions and regional planning formats varies significantly across the 16 federal states. Sub-national planning is practiced not only at the federal level and in administrative regions, but also at the local level in districts and municipalities (local levels). In some cases, regional planning in Germany is under the responsibility of municipal planning associations, and in other cases, administrative regional planning authorities bear the responsibility for drawing up the regional plans. In total, more than a hundred regional plans exist, which cover the entire country (Priebes, 2018).

In both Sweden and Norway, regional reforms have been debated for years, but in the period from 2000 to 2016 there was no major formal redistribution of spatial planning competencies. Norway has a three-level government structure where all regions (counties) have planning competencies and several planning instruments at their disposal. In contrast, in Sweden only the capital region has been obliged to produce a statutory regional plan until recently. The Region Skåne, in the very south of Sweden, has worked informally for more than 10 years to link its regional development strategy with land-use planning in the region's 33 municipalities. This work has led to change in the national legislation because, since 2019, Region Skåne has gained regional planning competence and is obliged, similar to Stockholm, to develop a regional plan in accordance with the Planning and Building Act, which is supposed to be adopted in 2022.

In Sweden in general, there has been a shift towards strengthening the policy-making competencies at the regional level (e.g., with regard to regional development policy), which was part of a regional reform process that initially aimed at strengthening the regional level and establishing larger territorial units but ended in minor readjustments and harmonization of responsibilities for the regional development policy (Smas & Lidmo, 2019). But in terms of formal regional planning, the system has been rather stable, except for the example of Skåne, and planning as such is more or less the exclusive responsibility of municipalities. The Swedish and Irish spatial planning systems are, in this respect, similar even if those countries' legal systems are completely different.

The Irish spatial planning system is discretionary and similar to that of the UK system (but different in terms of appeal procedures), and, thus, unlike other legal systems in Europe (Lennon & Waldron, 2019). The government's arrangements in Ireland with regard to formal regional planning changed with the establishment of larger planning regions in 2015. Generally, different planning authorities have expanded into more policy fields than they traditionally were engaged with, taking on more responsibilities. In 2015, the now existing three regional assemblies replaced the former eight regional authorities and two regional assemblies. They are expected to ensure consistency between the national and the local level through developing regional planning guidelines (Table 1). However, these regional planning guidelines have recently

been replaced by regional spatial and economic strategies, which are supposed to be more strategic and economically oriented. Ireland is thus another illustrative example of the continuously changing dynamic landscape of regional planning across Europe. Furthermore, the movement towards more strategic spatial planning instruments is a widespread tendency across Europe, which will be discussed further in the next section.

## POSITIONING AND UNPACKING THE REGIONAL PLANNING TOOLBOX

Almost all of the 32 countries under study in the COMPASS study have some form of statutory (i.e., produced under the law) regional planning instrument (Nadin et al., 2018a). New regional planning instruments have been introduced or have been significantly revised across Europe since 2000 (e.g., France, Hungary, Italy, Ireland, Poland and Norway); in many cases these instruments particularly focus on metropolitan areas (e.g., Poland and Italy). Germany and Sweden are the only countries of the eight under consideration here that did not introduce any new formal statutory regional planning instrument between 2000 and 2016, although many regions in these countries experimented with various non-statutory regional plans and regional development programmes.

In the COMPASS study, we defined planning instruments as plans and/or tools used to mediate and regulate spatial development. To explain the form and content of planning instruments, the following non-exclusionary characteristics of each planning instrument were considered: (1) *visionary*: setting out a normative agenda of principles or goals for a desirable future; (2) *strategic*: providing an evidence-based integrated and long-term frame of reference for coordinated action and decision-making across jurisdictions and sectors; and (3) *framework*: establishing policies, proposals and other criteria for a territory that provide a non-binding reference for other plans and decision-making. In addition, the statutory planning instrument under consideration was analysed to determine whether it was regulative or not, that is, to see if it made binding commitments or decisions concerning land-use change and spatial development (Table 1).

Given the diverse spatial planning types and traditions, it is not surprising that regional planning instruments vary across Europe. Despite the institutional and organizational differences across Europe concerning formal regional planning, we can identify repeated instances and commonalities regarding regional planning instruments across the eight different countries. For instance, each country has at least one statutory regional planning instrument that is 'regulatory' (except for Sweden). All countries also have statutory 'strategic' and 'framework-oriented' regional planning instruments. However, fewer regional planning instruments are 'visionary' (Table 1).

More importantly our analysis shows that many of these statutory regional planning instruments have multiple functions and characteristics, that is, they are visionary, strategic and/or framework oriented. Furthermore, in



many countries several planning instruments at the regional level exist that often complement each other in character (Table 1). Also, the OECD (2017) has recently reviewed the spatial and land-use planning systems of its member states and concludes that there are numerous planning instruments at the sub-national level; most of them have the character of being policy guiding or strategic, but many of them also have a binding character, of which several have ample room for exemptions (OECD, 2017). However, according to our questionnaires within the COMPASS study, regulatory regional planning instruments are also (still) evident across Europe, meaning that the instruments are binding for at least lower level instruments and authorities. At the same time, many regulatory instruments also have other characteristics, such as providing a non-binding framework or have a strategic character according to our definition.

Due to their multiple functions, these statutory regional planning instruments are expected to coordinate different policy areas, and thus operate as a link between local and national levels of the government. Furthermore, not all of these identified planning instruments are 'plans' in a traditional sense; rather, they are programmatic policy documents. One example is the Regional Schemes for Spatial Planning, Sustainable Development and Equality of Territories (SRADDET) in France, which were introduced in 2015 to coordinate actions and decision-making across jurisdictions and sectors. The schemes, which are to be adopted by the regional councils, include many different policy documents, and thus are not just a single traditional land-use plan. Furthermore, these new schemes are regulative, whereas the former were not. In addition, a special regional master plan exists for the metropolitan region of Paris (Île-de-France). However, this plan should not be interpreted as a simple devolution of planning competencies since it is produced in collaboration with the regional prefect and the regional council. It is adopted at the national level and is binding for lower planning levels, and, as such, can be compared with the Copenhagen Finger plan (Elinbaum & Galland, 2016).

Similarly, in Germany, the state development plans are supposed to coordinate spatially relevant sectoral planning on the level of the federal states, on the one hand, and are supposed to specify guidelines for spatial development for the lower sub-national level, on the other (Blotevogel et al., 2014). Thus, regional development plans incorporate the mutual feedback principle, which characterizes the multilevel German planning system, since they are supposed to substantiate the specifications of the state development plans as well as to provide a framework for the spatial development of the municipalities. As such, regional planning below the federal states' level is supposed to take on an intermediary role between governmental spatial planning, municipal urban land-use planning and sectoral planning.

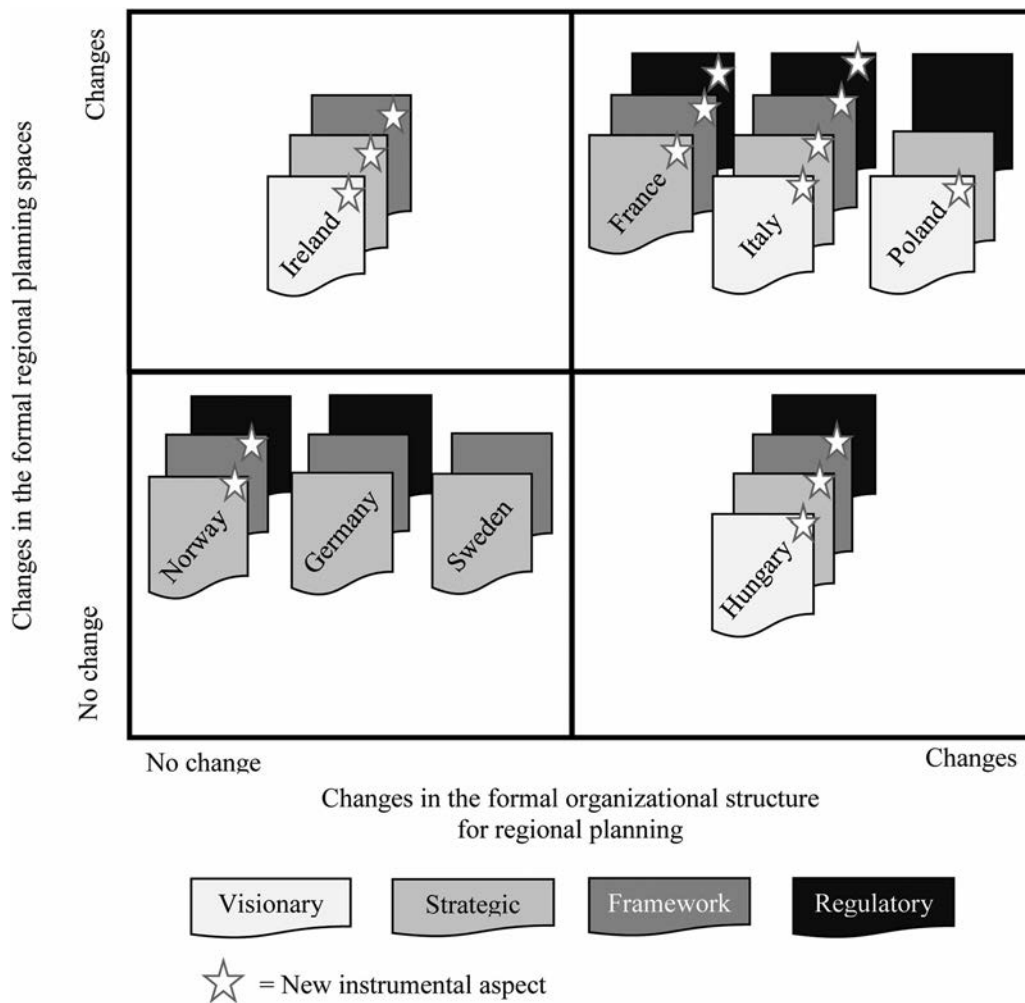
For metropolitan areas in Italy and Poland, new statutory strategic regional planning instruments have been introduced. In Italy, the general territorial metropolitan plans were introduced in 2014 for the 10 metropolitan cities; outside these areas the provincial coordination spatial

plan is still in place. Both the provincial and metropolitan plans need to be in accordance with the regional plan and are binding for local plans. In addition, strategic metropolitan plans were also introduced in 2014, but no metropolitan city has yet adopted such a plan. In Poland, the new Metropolitan Association Development Strategy (Table 1) is expected to have a rather strong influence on spatial development especially concerning transport, suburbanization and environmental issues. But since it is a new instrument (which is also connected to a framework study of conditions and directions of spatial management for metropolitan associations), it is difficult to assess its impact on spatial planning and territorial governance.

The introduction of new regional planning instruments, the institutionalization of existing soft non-statutory strategies and policies, and/or the removal of regional planning instruments can have significant effects on the production and consequently the implementation and power of planning. On the other hand, even lesser changes within regional planning, which do not require reformation or reorganization of the spatial planning system (cf. Figure 1), can have significant effects on the production and contemporaneity of regional planning instruments, and in the end on the extent to which regional planning influences spatial development. For example, in Germany, the production of state and regional development plans has been dragging on in recent years due to new legal requirements, including environmental impact assessments and obligatory citizen participation (since 2004) as well as new societal requirements (increasing the number of stakeholders and higher demands in the weighing up of interests). Consequently, the spectrum of issues that regional planning in Germany used to deal with has been reduced and this has weakened the formerly comprehensive perspective (Blotevogel et al., 2014). These factors have apparently contributed to the observation that the political significance of regional planning has weakened in recent years (ARL, 2011). In Hungary, the formal role of planning at the sub-national level has diminished too. However, the regional development concepts have generally had a strong influence on the distribution of spatial development, and practices have improved since 2005 through the linking of the regional development concepts to EU Cohesion Policy. Before that, regional plans were mostly ineffectual and rarely a good guide to spatial development, as reported by Hungarian national experts.

## POSITIONING REGIONAL PLANNING

Our analysis shows that regional planning is firmly institutionalized in most of the spatial planning systems that we have analysed, not least through various regional planning instruments available for governmental authorities at sub-national policy levels. Alongside an increased interest regarding more strategic, informal and soft approaches to spatial planning at the regional level, formal regional planning was modernized and partly even strengthened through different reforms between 2000 and 2016, though in different directions (Figure 2). Another trend that becomes



**Figure 2.** Characteristics of different spatial planning instruments available to regional planning in relation to changes and consistency in formal regional planning spaces and formal organizational structures.

visible is that although devolution and decentralization processes across Europe are evident, regions are also expanding in scale and scope, and have gained some planning competencies in a number of countries (Ireland, France, Italy and Poland).

We can discern significant changes in the spatial planning systems and redistribution of planning competencies in relation to regional planning across Europe since 2000. At the same time, as there are repeated instances of no or only minor changes with regard to the formal spatial planning competencies as such, we can observe a number of readjustments at the sub-national level. In connection to their accession to the EU in the 2000s, many spatial planning systems in the so-called new member states were reformed (Nadin et al., 2018a), for example, in Poland and Hungary, but more recently there have also been significant changes in relation to the organization of formal regional planning in Italy, France and Ireland. In other countries such as Germany, Norway and Sweden, the formal regional planning competencies have not been significantly redistributed or changed apart from a few adjustments and modifications within the spatial planning systems in general.

In general, different trajectories and tensions can be identified within the sub-national policy level. Changes

in the spatial planning systems across Europe have caused tensions between different sub-national levels with regard to the appropriate scale of regional planning, and discrepancies between the political governmental systems and the administrative spatial planning system (e.g., in Hungary, Poland, France and Italy). The structure of the national governmental system is of course important when considering formal regional planning competencies, and there are fundamental differences between federal states and unitary states in terms of law-making competencies in the regional tier of the government.

Within the subdivisions of the government, it is noteworthy to distinguish between countries with one sub-national tier of government and countries with two sub-national tiers of government. But these tiers of the government do not always correspond to the various sub-national levels of regional planning. On the contrary, we can observe discrepancies between the governmental system and the planning system, especially when spatial planning systems across Europe at the sub-national level are adapted to urbanization processes, functional planning regions (i.e., metropolitan areas) and economic-political policy shifts (often in neoliberal directions), such as in France, Italy and Poland.

We also conclude that the institutional and instrumental conditions for regional planning across Europe are extensive and, to some extent, have been renewed and adapted to changing contexts in recent years (Figure 2). In addition, one should note that in Germany (but also in other countries such as Switzerland) formal regional planning is established since the 1960s, with only a few adjustments since then; thus it seems to be in a rather stable state of maturity. Overall, we can observe that in principle, regional planning seems to be (still) well positioned to regulate land-use change and to promote preferred urban form and spatial development. However, the role of regional planning is differently anchored in each country and in the way statutory instruments are produced and applied. The analysis of statutory regional planning instruments shows not only wide variations but also a number of commonalities. Due to the recent changes, regional planning instruments are often multipurpose tools that are expected to be regulative, visionary and strategic and/or to provide a framework for other plans and issues to assist with decision-making, all at the same time. However, whether one or more formal instruments for regional planning are available is of minor importance; more noteworthy is which instrumental aspects they cover in total in the one or other country (Figure 2).

Obviously, there are political and procedural difficulties in practising regional planning and producing regional planning instruments. It is widely known that installing legal frameworks for producing specific (regional) planning instruments is indeed important, but the question remains whether these instruments are produced and updated or not. However, overall it should be noted that according to the COMPASS study, 'most statutory spatial planning instruments have been either produced or revised during the period between 2000 and 2016' (Nadin et al., 2018a, p. 30).

Rather unsurprisingly, our findings indicate distinct variations in how regional planning is organized, which is in accordance with differences on how regions are institutionalized and politicized across Europe. More noteworthy are the tensions between different sub-national levels concerning the appropriate scale of regional planning, and between the political governmental systems and the administrative spatial planning systems. Illustrative examples in this respect are France, Hungary and Poland. Furthermore, we observe that metropolitan areas are provided with additional formal planning instruments and competencies in for example France, Italy and Poland. This has created asymmetrical relations within their national spatial planning systems, since it implies that regions within each country have different competencies and spatial planning instruments at their disposal.

## CONCLUSIONS

With this paper we want to direct the focus of academic analysis of regional planning back to the more formal apparatus in which regional planning is embedded. In doing so, we can conclude that regional planning is still a

fundamental element in many European planning systems. However, we concur with van Straalen and Witte (2018) that both formal and informal arrangements, specifically at the regional scale or even those that transcend the regional from above or below, are critical for our understanding and for the practice of (strategic) regional planning. Sometimes, they coexist in isolation, which may imply frictions and contestations (Zimmermann, 2017), but there are also examples in which they complement each other (Smas & Lidmo, 2019) by forming hybrid forms of governance (Mäntyselä & Bäcklund, 2018).

At the same time, this coexistence of formal and informal arrangements often implies the concurrency of different geographies, namely hard and soft spaces (Zimmerbauer & Paasi, 2019). We do acknowledge that the latter have formed not only a strong narrative in purely academic debates, but also in communities of practice and applied research as the debate on functional regions demonstrates (e.g., within ESPON). Soft spaces also offer opportunities to capture the different geographies of diverse actors and interests, and, as such, eventually open up avenues for a more integrative approach and cross-sectoral integration to cope with complex challenges that pop up at the extra-local, inter-municipal scale (Purkharthofer, 2018). On the other hand, we agree with Allmendinger et al. (2015, p. 11) that at the end of the day:

planners responsible for making the statutory system work must always 'close down' such 'external' considerations into a plan or decision on land use rights. ... Lines on maps matter when it comes to establishing legal rights that are sufficiently robust to stand up in courts of law. Relationality in planning has its place, but so too does territoriality.

Hence, we argue that being knowledgeable about and acknowledging formal regional planning is still essential and can be easily overlooked when scholars in regional and planning studies (and planning practitioners) give more attention to the (neoliberalized) informal formats of regional planning, which are characterized mainly by soft spaces and network governance arrangements. At the same time there is a tendency to disregard that in a number of European countries advanced and mature apparatuses of formal regional planning still exist that have been modernized if not even expanded recently and, as such, offer planning professionals a number of instruments and powerful arguments to retain the role and regain the significance of regional planning. In other words, we argue that the radical changes that have been observed in England and Denmark illustrate the extreme rather than the norm of regional planning and we do not necessarily see any evidence that we will see a substantial withering away of formal regional planning across Europe in the near future.

Regional planning is not dead or irrelevant; rather, in the last two decades, it has been further advanced and adapted to changing contexts along multiple different trajectories across Europe. Regional planners and researchers alike need to acknowledge this and further investigate the existing dynamic and diversified regional planning

landscapes. A key research and policy question to investigate further in the future is *how regional planning is (and ought to be) practiced* under these new institutional and ongoing shifting political conditions in several European countries.

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## NOTE

1. As researchers involved in the COMPASS study, we have full access to all questionnaires and responses, which have been dealt with as raw data and thus have not been published. However, for the full report, with annexes, including methodological considerations, in-depth case studies and comparative tables, see <https://www.espon.eu/planning-systems/>.

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