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# Rescaling urban development policy in the EU: the impact of integrated place-based approaches in Cohesion Policy

Carlos Mendez<sup>a</sup> , Arno van der Zwet<sup>b</sup>  and Sylwia Borkowska-Waszak<sup>c</sup>

## ABSTRACT

This article investigates the role of European Union (EU) Cohesion Policy in urban development policy rescaling following the introduction of a strengthened regulatory framework for integrated territorial development in 2014–20. We find variations in the rescaling of sustainable urban development policies in the Netherlands, Poland and Spain shaped by domestic politics, path dependence and institutional capacity. The theoretical implication is that the European Commission's focus on a functional rationale for urban rescaling encounters political, policy and institutional constraints, which raises questions about the EU's capacity to shape rescaling dynamics and the need for more flexible approaches to achieve EU goals.

## KEYWORDS

urban governance; sustainable urban development; Cohesion Policy; rescaling; place-based development

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## INTRODUCTION

The spatial rescaling of policies, politics and polities has become a critical field of academic enquiry in regional and urban studies (Brenner, 2003; Gualini, 2006; Keating, 2013). The European Union's (EU) Single Market programme and Cohesion Policy are credited with contributing to the spatial recalibration of the European polity at all levels and of territorial development policies in particular, either as part of the multilevel governance literature (Hooghe, 1996; Hooghe & Marks, 2003) or new regionalism scholarship and the associated concept of rescaling (Gualini, 2006; Keating, 2013; Stead et al., 2016; Swyngedouw, 2004).

More recently, there is increasing attention to the role of EU Cohesion Policy in the rescaling of subregional spatial policies and developing functional understandings of territory, reflecting shifts in thinking about the rationale of regional policy as part of place-based narratives and instruments in EU Cohesion Policy (Barca, 2009; Barca et al., 2012; Dabrowski, 2014a; Mendez, 2013), a new treaty commitment to territorial cohesion and an emerging

'Urban Agenda for the EU' (European Commission, 2017). However, the impact of EU Cohesion Policy on the rescaling of local and urban policies and governance has received considerably less attention than regional-level dynamics in academic scholarship.

This article assesses the role of EU Cohesion Policy in the rescaling of sustainable urban development (SUD) policies in 2014–20, following the introduction of a strengthened regulatory framework for promoting place-based approaches and territorial cohesion. Drawing on political science and geography literature, the rescaling of urban development policy is conceptualized to comprise territorial, thematic and governance dimensions. In line with constructivist approaches to rescaling, the analytical framework accommodates a range of functional, institutional and political factors in accounting for spatial rescaling dynamics. The empirical analysis employs a comparative case study methodology analysing SUD implementation in the Netherlands, Poland and Spain, drawing on desk research and interviews at national, regional and local levels.


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The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. It begins by setting out the analytical framework. The methodology and case selection rationale are then presented. The empirical analysis of each case study is followed by a cross-case comparison of rescaling outcomes and determinants. Theoretical and policy implications are discussed in the conclusions.

## RESCALING URBAN DEVELOPMENT POLICY IN THE EU: THEORY AND FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSIS

The concept of ‘territorial rescaling’ captures the varied and dynamic nature of changing government and governance structures (Swyngedouw, 2004). It refers to the way in which economic, social and political systems are migrating to new territorial levels above, below, and across the nation-state (Keating, 2013). Political science perspectives on territorial rescaling have tended to focus on the rescaling of the polity (state institutions) or politics (electoral behaviour or interest groups). Our central concern is with the territorial rescaling of policy rather than polity or politics, while recognizing that there are interrelations between all three dimensions. The empirical focus is on urban development policy, a domain that has received significant attention in geographical scholarship on rescaling (notably by Neil Brenner). However, the EU dimension of urban development policy also requires a grounding in the relevant political science and political geography literature on new regionalism and multilevel governance.

Our conceptualization of urban policy rescaling includes territorial, governance and thematic analytical dimensions (Table 1). Informed by models of federalism (Eichenberger & Frey, 1999) and multilevel governance (Hooghe & Marks, 2003), the territorial dimension of the framework distinguishes between an urban policy focus on areas nested within pre-existing governmental jurisdictions, on the one hand, and a territorial scale that does not exist as an administrative structure, such as a functional urban area (FUA) or a neighbourhood with overlapping jurisdictions, on the other. Research shows that targeted urban development interventions addressing a limited number of geographical areas are more likely to gain critical mass and visibility than dispersed models that scatter interventions across the whole country (Barca, 2009; McCann, 2015, p. 105). Accordingly, the level of territorial concentration of interventions provides an additional empirical measure of territorial rescaling.

The thematic scope of rescaling relates to the extent to which policy interventions involve the integration of multiple economic and social policy domains to improve policy efficiency and effectiveness. This requires new practices to provide more holistic and strategic approaches to addressing complex challenges at the local level (McCann, 2003). The key empirical question is to what extent rescaling processes lead to more integrated approaches to urban development policy across themes and funding streams, as opposed to traditional sectoral plans and working methods.

Turning to governance, the main analytical distinction is the extent to which the implementation of urban development instruments through Cohesion Policy involves the use of pre-existing (subsumed) or new (differentiated) administrative bodies, and whether they receive more or less responsibilities, capacity or resources. Research on the recalibration of territorial relations in Cohesion Policy through the partnership principle has found that despite the increased mobilization and participation of regions in the policy process, the central state often remains the dominant ‘gatekeeper’ actor in decision-making (Bache, 1999; Bachtler & McMaster, 2008). The empirical measurement of governance rescaling requires investigating whether hierarchical decision-making processes remain intact, or if minor responsibilities are being rescaled at the margins with existing structures and institutions remaining in place. The extent of governance rescaling may vary across different functional tasks such as the design of territorial strategies, the selection of projects, financial management, monitoring and evaluation – all of which should be factored into a comprehensive conceptualization of governance rescaling.

The explanatory side of the framework recognizes that rescaling dynamics are heterogeneous over time and space and dependent on global, European and domestic factors. The first is a functional imperative in response to globalization. The deterritorialization and reterritorialization of urban areas is a contradictory feature of globalization (Brenner, 1999). These processes took place within the jurisdiction of the nation-state until the early 1970s, but have since been increasingly driven by external and spatially neutral flows transcending existing administrative boundaries and requiring anchoring in urban centres (i.e., glocalization). Rescaling provides a barricade against the centralization tendencies associated with Keynesian welfare state traditions, and a framework for neoliberal economic deregulation of policies to subnational levels (Brenner, 2004; Keating, 2013).

The rescaling of territoriality at the local level is driven by an increased salience in policy of functional territories and systems, while early shifts to decentralized state structures were often based on the manifestation of strong territorial identities (Keating, 2013; Tomaney, 2016). A central proposition of the place-based and rescaling literature is that space matters for development by shaping the endogenous potential of territories and their inhabitants (Barca et al., 2012; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2009). In a globalized world with pervasive transnational migration and trade flows, inequalities are increasingly manifested at a micro level and require local knowledge and responses (De Rynck & McAleavey, 2001; Keating, 2014). The process of globalization is intrinsically premised on economic development, particularly infrastructural development, at the local level (Brenner, 1999).

Second, European integration facilitates rescaling through the EU’s Single Market programme and promotion of regional development policies (Keating, 2013). EU Structural Funds have the potential to drive

**Table 1.** Analytical framework: rescaling urban development policy.

| Dimensions  | Sub-dimensions                 | Level of rescaling |                    |
|-------------|--------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
|             |                                | Low                | High               |
| Territorial | Targeting                      | Dispersed          | Concentrated       |
|             | Jurisdiction                   | Administrative     | Functional         |
| Thematic    | Thematic integration           | Limited            | Extensive          |
|             | Fund integration               | Mono-funded        | Multi-funded       |
| Governance  | Institutional                  | Existing/subsumed  | New/differentiated |
|             | Decision-making by urban areas | Weak               | Strong             |

Source: Authors' elaboration.

territorial rescaling by forging direct links between regional and European institutions, providing resources and capacities for subnational actors to participate in decision-making, and by facilitating networking and learning across cities (Hooghe & Marks, 2003), although the impact on rescaling is contested if not exaggerated (Keating, 2013). The polity-transforming effects of EU Cohesion Policy have been mainly theorized from a multilevel governance perspective highlighting the shared nature of decision-making across levels of government, involving cooperation between public, private and societal actors and the empowerment of actors below and above the nation-state.

Most empirical studies have investigated the national and regional level impacts of the EU. While the enhanced role of local actors in Cohesion Policy is acknowledged (De Rynck & McAleavey, 2001; Marshall, 2005), the impact of EU initiatives on urban policy and governance has been dismissed as limited owing to member state resistance to Commission interference, the small scale of the initiatives (Keating, 2013) and the intergovernmental decision-making framework for EU spatial planning policy which lacks the binding force of EU regulations (Dühr et al., 2007; Faludi, 2014; Mendez, 2013). By contrast, the strengthened regulatory provisions and funding for urban development in Cohesion Policy during 2014–20 provide a more powerful framework in principle for rescaling dynamics and impacts at the urban level (Van der Zwet et al., 2017).

Capacity is another important dimension of rescaling dynamics. On the one hand, the complexity of modern governance and territorial disparities means that the central state no longer has the capacity to be solely responsible for territorial development. National government rely on 'network governance' (Sørensen & Torfing, 2016) to manage policy as policy coordinators while devolving implementation responsibilities to substate authorities. However, substate actors often have limited capacity and resources to take on increased responsibilities (Dabrowski, 2014a, 2014b). Paradoxically, policy complexity leads to rescaling from the central to the local level to elicit the local knowledge and capacity required to navigate this complexity (Barca, 2009), but increased responsibilities and complexity at the local level means that these actors are unable to effectively manage policies, leading to calls for increased capacity and support from higher levels. Supranational institutions such as the OECD and EU can play an important role in supporting capacity-building resources and

activities for economic development intervention and management, particularly in countries with capacity challenges and limited experience (Keating, 2013).

A fourth driver of rescaling is political by focusing on the way in which urban geographies and governance are the objects of sociopolitical contestation (Brenner, 1999, p. 442). While the rescaling literature emphasizes the collaborative and depoliticized nature of new forms of urban development and governance (Swyngedouw, 2010), power and influence among actors is reconfigured around new spaces often involving highly contested political processes (Gualini, 2006; Keating, 2014; Stead et al., 2016). Consensus-building strategies can also be utilized politically to neutralize conflict in SUD policies (Mössner, 2016).

Demands for rescaling at the subregional level often originate from political and social heterogeneity in attitudes and values, which drives variations in voting behaviour across states and regionalist movements (Keating, 2013). Similarly, rescaling dynamics have a political dimension at the local or urban level and functional cooperation and urban development agendas can be influenced by political allegiances, coalitions and conflicts between local authorities, including pork-barrel politics and rent-seeking behaviour (Mössner, 2016). The rescaling of urban policy responsibilities can also be politically expedient by forcing local cooperation in line with wider local devolution agendas (Pugalis & Townsend, 2013).

Concerns about the technocratic nature of territorial rescaling processes and the trading of political accountability for efficiency are well recognized in the literature on multilevel governance (Peters & Pierre, 2004; Polverari, 2015) and rescaling (Gualini, 2006). Furthermore, the pork-barrel politics and political clientelism surrounding the redistribution of regional and local funding (Dabrowski, 2014a; Perron, 2014) can undermine stakeholder commitment and accountability in rescaling processes. To attenuate this, local rescaling agendas often involve a narrative of bringing development closer to citizens and commitments to citizen participation. Yet the scope of and engagement in these activities is often limited (Quinn, 2013; Van der Zwet et al., 2017).

Path dependency is an important feature of rescaling processes (Brenner, 2003). Urban policy and governance rescaling rarely involves a radical or paradigmatic break from the past but rather tends to involve incremental change (Brenner, 2003). In Cohesion Policy, place-based

policy practices are shaped by previous experiences and traditions of collaboration between different territorial levels and stakeholders (Dabrowski, 2014a, 2014b). There is a long history of EU Cohesion Policy operating in the urban development arena through community-led development (Armstrong et al., 2001; Armstrong & Wells, 2006), often implemented through pre-existing institutions and structures (Marshall, 2005).

## CASE SELECTION AND METHODOLOGY

A comparative case study methodology is adopted to investigate SUD rescaling in three cases: the Netherlands, Poland and Spain. The motivation is to control for structural factors that can impact on Cohesion Policy implementation and territorial approaches: length of EU membership and implementation experience (shorter in Poland than the Netherlands/Spain); experience with integrated urban strategies (higher in the Netherlands/Spain than Poland); level of development and scale of Cohesion funding (high in Poland, medium in Spain, low in the Netherlands); and level of devolution (greater in Spain and Poland). The cases also vary according to scale of SUD funding, number of strategies and implementation mechanisms. Poland's budget (€3.198 billion) is much larger than the budget for the Netherlands (€45 million) and Spain (€1.362 billion) given its lower level of economic development. While the Netherlands allocates a proportionately larger budget to SUD (9%) than Poland (8%) and Spain (6.5%), its allocation per capita is much lower (€2.6) compared with Poland (€84.2) and Spain (€21.7).

The methodology draws on desk-based research of programme documents, territorial strategies, monitoring and evaluation reports and 18 in-depth interviews with key policy stakeholders/experts at national, regional and local levels (see Table A1 in Appendix A in the supplemental data online). The interviews were conducted between August 2016 and February 2017 using a semi-structured questionnaire covering the design, territorial focus, thematic scope and governance of the new urban strategies, implementation lessons and European added value of SUD. Questions on European added value are important methodologically to address the research goals because they enable the probing of interviewees' perceptions of the casual impact of the EU on domestic practices in terms of whether activities supported by EU Cohesion Policy are additional to those already implemented domestically; and the extent to which EU Cohesion Policy acts as an enabler of rescaling processes.

## SUSTAINABLE URBAN DEVELOPMENT IN EU COHESION POLICY

The formalization of territorial cohesion as an EU treaty objective in 2009 and European Commission attempts to enhance the effectiveness and legitimacy of Cohesion Policy provided the impetus for an upgraded focus on integrated approaches to territorial development in the 2013 reform (Mendez, 2013). The Common Provisions

Regulation specified that more attention would be given to the role of cities, functional geographies and subregional areas facing specific geographical or demographic problems and introduced binding provisions for doing so (Regulation 1303/2013). The European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) Regulation 1301/2013 requires at least 5% of funding to be allocated to SUD through a dedicated programme or priority, and introduced an optional integrated territorial investment (ITI) tool to facilitate integration of multiple funds and themes. A condition for funding is the development of an SUD strategy comprising a designated territory, integrated strategy, actions and governance arrangements.

To investigate how the regulatory innovations have been implemented and the implications for urban policy rescaling, we turn to the three cases. For each case, an overview of the domestic policy context is provided followed by a description and assessment of the design of SUD strategies, instruments and implementation experiences in relation to the three dimensions of rescaling.

## THE NETHERLANDS: DELIVERING DOMESTIC URBAN POLICIES AND INTEGRATING EU FUNDING STREAMS

### Policy context

The Netherlands has a longstanding tradition of integrated urban interventions, particularly in terms of addressing urban deprivation (GHK, 2002). The National Large City Programme (*Grotestedenbeleid*) was already seen as 'a beacon of good practice in promoting holistic regeneration' (ECOTEC, 2010, p. 35) that tackles social and economic issues in an integrated manner. Therefore, the added value of the European urban dimension has been questioned (Atkinson & Zimmerman, 2017). In the past, the EU has made a limited financial contribution to urban development through the URBAN Community Initiatives in 1994–99 and 2000–06 and through a global grant in mainstream programmes in 2007–13, but without significantly impacting on the domestic approach to urban regeneration (ECOTEC, 2010).

### Territory

In 2014–20, the Netherlands has four regional ERDF programmes (North, West, East and South) and one central European Social Fund (ESF) programme. Integrated place-based SUD strategies are implemented through the West ERDF Operational Programme, also benefitting from national ESF funding. The strategies are delivered through plans in the four largest cities (Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Utrecht – the so-called G4). Each strategy is implemented using the ITI tool and all four cities have developed a plan detailing both the ERDF and ESF objectives linking local strategies with programme priorities. The population covered is around 2.5 million. The strategies target specific neighbourhoods with social challenges or that provide opportunities for job creation and growth, which are identified in pre-existing local strategies. Despite the use of the 'new' ITI tool

the approach is a continuation of that taken in the 2007–13 period.

The focus on the G4 is rooted in domestic governance structures but has not gone unchallenged. Other larger medium-sized cities have questioned the preferential status of G4 and during the programme negotiations, they argued (unsuccessfully) for opening up SUD funding to a wider range of urban centres on the basis that the impact of funding would be greater in medium-sized cities. Feedback from the MA and Commission was limited but did lead to further territorial targeting (specifying neighbourhoods in strategies). The use of ITI and focus on four cities was supported by the Commission.

### Thematic integration

The SUD budget of €70.5 million (ERDF €45.5, ESF €25 million) is relatively small, reflecting a limited total Cohesion Policy allocation. The average ESI funding per strategy is €17.6 million, with budgets ranging from €25.1 to €8.1 million.

The type of projects that cities can invest in is restricted to eight investment priorities within four thematic objectives (TOs), TO1, TO4, TO6 and TO9 (see Table A1 in Appendix A in the supplemental data online for further details). All plans identify employment and labour mobility as a TO. The Amsterdam plan is the most integrated and includes priorities from four TOs, whereas The Hague only includes priorities from two TOs. According to interviewees, a key element of the European added value of the ITI tool is that it allows for the integration of ESF and ERDF funding.

### Governance

The city of Rotterdam is the managing authority (MA) for the West programme, in which The G4 have traditionally managed parts of the programme. The national Ministry of Economic Affairs has an overarching coordinating function. The ESF is centrally led programme by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment MA. The G4 cities were designated as eligible areas for SUD and have longstanding urban development strategies. While the targeted areas do not represent a pre-existing territorial focus in domestic policy, in practice these are the main areas where domestic policy efforts are concentrated.

The G4 have enjoyed intermediate body (IB) status since 1994 and have extensive responsibilities for the management, implementation, monitoring and control of part of subprogrammes. The subprogrammes comprise a regional programme for which the MA is responsible, and a city programme (the ITI strategy) for which the intermediate (managing) body in the urban authority is responsible. A formal covenant sets out the IB responsibilities in terms of project animation, financial management and monitoring, which are all largely delegated responsibilities. These were not new responsibilities for the urban authorities and they have sufficient technical and administrative capacity to manage and implement the ITI strategy. To facilitate a common approach and alignment to the programme, a standardized template was used

and there was extensive informal dialogue between the cities to share best practice. Interview evidence suggests that this approach is by and large a continuation of previous programme periods and is embedded in a domestic framework of well-developed horizontal and vertical relations.

Each city has an independent urban advisory group (UAG) consisting of representatives from a broad range of socioeconomic and public stakeholders which is responsible for the implementation of the strategy and project selection. The assessment of the UAG is also formally presented to the mayor and municipal executive for approval and also formally approved by the MA. Interviews identified the inclusive nature of the UAG (no more than 50% of the membership can be made up of public officials). In general, the selection process is highly technical and avoids politicization of project funding decisions.

## SPAIN: TOWARDS A MORE STRATEGIC AND NATIONWIDE URBAN AGENDA

### Policy context

In Spain, EU Cohesion Policy has played a key role in promoting an integrated approach to SUD. The domestic approach has traditionally been sectoral, focused on housing and with weak coordination at national level (INFYDE, 2014). At the regional level, only two regions out of 17 Spanish regions (the Basque Country and Catalonia) had domestic policy instruments promoting integrated urban strategies in the 2000s. The EU-funded Urban Pilot Projects and the URBAN Community Initiative were important tools for developing urban policy targeting disadvantaged neighbourhoods between 1990 and 2006 across all regions. Drawing on these experiences, SUD was mainstreamed within Cohesion programmes in 2007–13 (URBANA scheme) for municipalities with a population of over 50,000 inhabitants and provincial capitals.

### Territory

In 2014–20, SUD is implemented through a multiregional programme for sustainable growth managed at national level. Three calls between 2016 and 2017 supported 173 SUD strategies with a budget of €1.34 billion. This represents a four-fold increase in the budget and number of participating cities compared with 2007–13.

The eligible urban areas are defined as functional areas with a minimum population of 20,000 inhabitants in territories with sufficient administrative capacity to comply with EU requirements. Four types of urban area are eligible: a municipality with a population above 20,000; groups of municipalities with a population in each exceeding 20,000; a municipality of more than 20,000 inhabitants combined with peripheral municipalities of less than 20,000 inhabitants; and groups of municipalities with less than 20,000 inhabitants forming an urban area with more than 20,000 inhabitants.

In practice, 402 municipalities (out of 8125 in total) are eligible, implying a broad and flexible approach to

territorial targeting. This differs significantly from the Commission's proposal to focus on a few large cities with a population over 100,000, and to use the ITI mechanism. Both proposals were rejected by Spain, highlighting the limited influence of the Commission. Only four of the SUD strategies involved collaboration between municipalities, which were embedded in existing rather than new cooperation structures (MAP, 2018). SUD has therefore had no impact in encouraging collaboration between municipalities across functional areas.

In addition, several regions lobbied the Commission to encourage the national government to fund an urban development initiative for regions witnessing high levels of depopulation. Despite Commission support, the proposal was resisted by the central government.

### Thematic integration

The average funding per SUD strategy is ERDF €8.2 million, with budgets ranging from €2.6 to €15 million and addressing four themes (MAP, 2018). The strategies should be coordinated with the ESF, but are exclusively funded by the ERDF. The thematic coverage of SUD is flexible. At least two TOs must be covered in the urban strategies (from TO2, TO4, TO6 and TO9) with TO4 and TO9 being obligatory. As a result, all strategies allocated funding to the four objectives, with one also covering an additional objective (TO8 in Santander). Evaluation evidence shows that SUD has encouraged a more integrated approach as many local authorities had to redesign their pre-existing sectoral plans to comply with the integration criteria included in the project calls (MAP, 2018).

### Governance

The national MA for the ERDF (DG for EU Funds) is also responsible for managing SUD. Other departments for Territorial Cooperation and Urban Development and for Local Cooperation are national implementing bodies with operational responsibility for the scheme in terms of launching calls, selecting strategies, monitoring and financial management. Strategies were selected through a competitive procedure by an evaluation committee composed of national and regional government representatives and experts.

Local authorities have IB status and are responsible for submitting SUD strategies and, if successful, project selection based on criteria defined in coordination with the MA and monitoring committee. Financial management and monitoring of projects are undertaken by local authorities, which are responsible to the national MA and IBs. The MA is also responsible for evaluating all SUDs through a mid-term and ex-post evaluation.

Interviews with policymakers and evaluation evidence highlight three main areas of EU added value. First, the competitive element has encouraged strategic planning and the development of better strategies than would have been the case if geographical areas had been pre-selected without a call. By contrast, citizen/interest group mobilization and participation was weak (MAP, 2018). Second, as noted, many local authorities had to rethink

their pre-existing sectoral plans to pursue a more integrated approach. Indeed, many of the unsuccessful proposals were rejected because of a lack of strategic coherence or attempts to 'camouflage' sectoral projects as integrated projects (Navarro, 2017).

A third area of added value is strengthened informal governance. A pre-existing Urban Initiatives Network was considerably strengthened in 2014–20 to promote informal networking among urban authorities more proactively. Working groups set up in 2016 brought together all the cities with approved urban strategies to review experiences providing a forum for debate and exchange of good practices and to feed into formal decision-making in the SUD Monitoring Committee. Further, city representation in the monitoring committee was increased. Lastly, peer review workshops have made a significant contribution to shared learning and networking among cities (Barreiro, 2017).

## POLAND: A RESCALED POLICY FOR SUSTAINABLE URBAN DEVELOPMENT

### Policy context

Historically, integrated urban development in Poland has been weak. Before 2014–20, the only EU funds dedicated directly to Polish cities were URBAN (2004–06), URBACT (2007–onwards) and JESSICA (Kaczmarek & Kociuba, 2017). These instruments did not stimulate integrated approaches or intermunicipal cooperation, resulting in fragmentation of EU investments.

### Territory

For 2014–20, the Polish government opted to implement SUD requirement through the ITI model. The 16 regional programmes include 24 ITI strategies targeting functional urban areas (FUAs). Most FUAs (17) are located around regional capitals, but some are polycentric. Six FUAs consist of metropolitan areas with over 1 million inhabitants. A further seven subregionally important FUAs (200,000–650,000 inhabitants) were included after intensive lobbying effort by local authorities. The total population covered by the 24 ITI strategies is around 18 million, nearly 50% of the Polish population.

Polish ITI strategies are characterized by their focus on FUAs, which requires cooperation between the core cities and their surrounding hinterland (Kozak, 2016). The delimitation of the boundaries was highly controversial. Initially, an expert analysis was carried out to determine municipalities' functional linkages with major cities (Śleszyński, 2013). However, municipalities were added or excluded after a political negotiations between local, regional and national authorities (Kaczmarek & Kociuba, 2017; Krukowska & Lackowska, 2017). Consequently, there is a major diversity in the number of included municipalities in the ITI strategies (from five to 81).

### Thematic integration

The TOs of the strategies are diverse, addressing 10 out of 11 available objectives. Most strategies cover five to six

TOs, while a few include nine to 10 of them. All strategies include TO4 and most include TO9 (85%) and TO6 (80%) (see Table A1 in Appendix A in the supplemental data online for further details). Strikingly, no strategies address capacity-building (TO11) and only 15% address research and development (R&D) and innovation (TO1).

ITI strategies in Poland have a budget of €6 billion (including €3.1 billion ERDF and €0.57 billion ESF). The ERDF component is more than double the 5% EU requirement (11%). The average ESI funding per strategy is €123 million with budgets ranging from €40 to €739 million. Several interviewees highlighted complementarity and synergy effects between soft and hard investments.

### Governance

The implementation of SUD through ITIs represent a step change in partnership working in Poland, creating new intermunicipal collaboration structures and empowering pre-existing collaborative initiatives (Krukowska & Lackowska, 2017). ITI strategies are implemented through regional programmes managed by regional authorities (marshal offices). Pre-existing or new intermunicipal associations or an agreed lead municipality were designated IBs for all SUD ITI strategies. Most FUA cooperate in the looser agreement (14 out of 24), while 10 implement ITI strategies through intermunicipal associations which can be considered more advanced.

The scope of delegation implementation responsibilities to the urban level varies between IBs but in general, responsibilities are quite limited (with one exception of the Walbrzych FUA (Lower Silesia), where the IB has been afforded a full responsibility), and the MA continues to be the leading actor. Interview evidence suggests that the lack of delegation is mainly due to the lack of experience in managing EU funds at the urban level. However, interviewees also note that overtime there have been clear administrative capacity-building effects at the urban level, and IBs play an important role in animation, project coordination and maintaining intermunicipal collaboration.

All IBs were fully responsible for strategy design, including joint diagnosis of FUA's territory and population, formulating key needs, challenges and objectives, and organizing consultations. All strategies were officially approved by the MA and domestic authorities. The IBs have a varying degree of responsibility for project selection, with a greater formal role in competitive than non-competitive funds allocation procedures. All IBs animate project generation, and a majority can preselect strategic projects. Interview evidence suggests that this often involves political bargaining among local authorities, moderated by the IB and monitored by the MA. The MA's role in the process is to ensure that the projects were in line with EU and national guidelines.

In most FUAs project assessment is dominated by the MAs. They perform the initial formal assessment. If a project passes the necessary criteria, the IBs assess compliance with ITI strategies. The IB's influence on the selected projects is formally limited, but in practice is more extensive as

they can informally influence the projects preselected in a non-competitive procedure. Moreover, although rarely used, FUAs with competitive selection mode or those that have full IB status have more extensive responsibilities.

By creating intermunicipal institutions and delegating responsibilities to IBs, local mayors were empowered as key decision-makers for SUD implementation. The decentralization of responsibilities concerning EU fund redistribution has to an extent avoided pork-barrel politics at the national and regional level. However, at the same time it has increased politicization at the local level.

### COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Comparative analysis of the three cases demonstrates significant variations in the three rescaling dimensions (Table 2). Beginning with the territorial dimension, the Netherlands and Poland adopted territorially concentrated models focusing on a limited number of cities in line with EU objectives, albeit for different reasons. The Netherlands focused efforts in the four largest cities, partly because of funding limitations but also legacy issues. In Poland, there is a focus on major urban areas and their functional territory with significant territorial rescaling through intermunicipal cooperation and urban capacity-building. By contrast and against Commission's preferences, Spain applied a dispersed model open to all medium-sized urban centres and focused on neighbourhoods within individual jurisdictions rather than functional areas transcending administrative boundaries.

Thematic rescaling also varied in terms of policy and funding integration. In the Netherlands, the ITI approach is perceived by stakeholders to add value by offering technical capacity to integrate ESF and ERDF funding streams that have previously operated independently. However, the relatively low level of funding and limited number of objectives involved implies a limited impact in integrating multiple sectors. In Spain, the potential for integration of socially oriented policies is limited as no ESF funding is available for SUD strategies, reflecting a silo mentality across ERDF and ESF managing authorities as well as concerns about administrative complexity.

Irrespective of the lack of integration across EU funds, many local authorities have still had to develop more integrated strategies (than in pre-existing plans) in order to apply for funding. In Poland, strategies generally included a high number of TOs, offering greater opportunities for thematic integration. All Polish strategies included ESF and ERDF funds. In several FUAs, the integration of investments was ensured by establishing formal project partnerships between municipalities planning investments in the same thematic area. This was encouraged by establishing project integration among municipalities as a project evaluation criterion. Turning to governance rescaling, the Polish case again represents the most significant change through the promotion of intermunicipal cooperation across FUAs including the establishment of new institutions and significant urban capacity-building.



**Table 2.** Rescaling dimensions Poland, Spain and the Netherlands.

| Category           |                      | Territorial rescaling                                      |   |   |
|--------------------|----------------------|--|---|---|
|                    |                      | Poland   | Spain   | Netherlands   |
| Rescaling outcomes |                      | High   | Moderate  | Moderate/low  |
| Territorial focus  | Targeting            | Concentrated. Functional urban areas (>150,000 population) | Dispersed. Urban areas (>20,000 population), mainly neighbourhood focus | Concentrated. Districts/neighbourhoods in metropolitan cities |
|                    | Jurisdiction         | Transcending existing local government jurisdictions       | Nested within existing local government jurisdictions                   | Nested within existing local government jurisdictions         |
| Thematic scope     | Fund integration     | ERDF (85%), ESF (15%)                                      | None, only ERDF   | ERDF and ESF  |
|                    | Thematic integration | Diverse TOs, 4–10, average of six                          | At least two TOs (TO2, TO4, TO6, TO9)                                   | At least two TOs (TO1, TO4, TO8, TO9)                         |
| Governance         | Institutional reform | Major. New intermunicipal organizations                    | No significant institutional reform                                     | No significant institutional reform                           |
|                    | Design               | Led by urban IB, approved by MA and national government    | Led by urban IB, approved by national MA committee (competitive call)   | Led by urban IB (preselected territories)                     |
|                    | Project selection    | Shared among MA and urban IB                               | Urban IB  | Urban IB. Reporting to MA                                     |
|                    | Financial management | Led by MA, urban IB's informal influence                   | Urban IB with national IB/MA oversight                                  | Urban IB with MA oversight                                    |
|                    | Monitoring           | Urban IB, reporting to MA                                  | Urban IB. Reporting to national IB/MA                                   | Urban IB  |
|                    | Evaluation           | MA led   | MA led at the national level  | MA led with inputs from urban IB                              |
|                    | Networking           | Shared among MA and urban IB                               | Informal interaction through reinforced urban network                   | Informal interaction through existing networks                |

Note: ERDF, European Regional Development Fund; ESF, European Social Fund; IB, intermediate body with delegated management responsibilities for parts of programmes and/or specific instruments; MA, managing authority with overall responsibility for management of programme; TOs, thematic objectives.

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

The scope of IB tasks expanded, and intermunicipal cooperation initiatives extended to domestic policy. In Spain and the Netherlands, significant responsibilities are devolved to urban authorities under SUD, but this does not involve a change to pre-existing domestic and EU-related initiatives for urban development or establish new institutions.

There has been no significant rescaling of final decision-making authority for approving ISUD strategies, financial management, monitoring and evaluation in any of the cases. This is because EU rules require the programme MA to be formally accountable to the EU for these functions, albeit drawing on inputs from the urban IBs. Governance rescaling in the form of transnational city networking at the EU level was actively encouraged by the Commission through a new Urban Development Network and Urban Innovative Actions. Additionally, domestic city networks were established in Poland and strengthened in Spain, to play a more proactive role in urban policy.

What explains these patterns in territorial rescaling dynamics and outcomes? The findings from the case studies show that redistributive politics and contestation, path dependence, and institutional capacities were critical factors that mediate the impact of EU SUD initiatives on spatial rescaling dynamics and outcomes.

First, *redistributive politics and urban policy politicization* was evident in all three cases. The availability of a ring-fenced EU budget for subregional territories mobilized local actors and led to extensive debates about which cities should be eligible for funding. In the Netherlands, the G4 cities were eligible but other urban centres questioned whether a wider group of cities should be eligible. In Poland, the restriction to regional capitals was successfully challenged through lobbying by other FUAs leading to the inclusion of additional urban areas.

Political contestation over financial redistribution in the context of austerity contributed to the dispersed model adopted in Spain. In opposition to Commission preferences, EU funding was provided to over 170 municipalities (essentially all municipalities above 20,000

inhabitants), partly as a compensation mechanism following fiscal consolidation of local authority budgets, but also as a means to develop a more fully fledged urban policy agenda coordinated at national level.

The role of the Commission was important in the pursuit of a uniform approach with minimum standards but it was not always consistent or successful. A key Commission objective was to promote the use of territorial instruments through the ITI mechanism. Poland adopted the ITI tool with enthusiasm, leading to significant innovation, whereas in the Netherlands it has largely involved the continuation of existing practices. Spain resisted Commission pressure to adopt the ITI model because of concerns about administrative burden and complexity. The Commission also aimed to achieve territorial concentration of funds to achieve critical mass and avoid dispersing funds across a large number of cities. In the Netherlands and Poland there is a significant level of concentration although this was in line with domestic priorities. As noted, Spain opposed the Commission pressure to limit the number of eligible urban authorities and lowered the recommended population threshold to increase coverage.

Redistributive politics was fuelled by local interests and divergences in the expectations of urban authorities with those of national or EU actors. There was significant lobbying activity by local actors in all cases, often motivated by rent-seeking goals to secure ring-fenced funding for existing policies. Competing interests and expectations at multiple levels underpinned the SUD policy processes and outcomes, despite the veil of a technocratic and depoliticized EU logic of consensual decision-making. In line with the 'gatekeeper thesis' (Bache, 1999), the Spanish case clearly shows that there are limits to the ability of the European Commission to impose its preferences against the will of member states, while in the Polish and Dutch cases domestic interests were largely aligned with those of the Commission.

Second, *path dependence* played a critical role in rescaling outcomes (Brenner, 2003). Existing practices from the EU-funded URBAN scheme in Spain strongly informed the adopted policy framework, whereas in the Netherlands domestic (non-EU funded) approaches underpinned the new approach within Cohesion Policy. By contrast, in Poland, URBAN programmes have operated on the margins and had not yet led to well-established policy practices. In this blank slate environment, EU pressures combined with domestic support for promoting place-based approaches led to significant rescaling in urban development approaches in Cohesion Policy with spillover effects on domestic policies.

In the Netherlands, the four major cities already had an autonomous position in the 2007–13 programme. Whilst an ITI was adopted, the basic framework continued in 2014–20. Similarly, in Spain, the new framework mirrored a scheme used in 2007–13, but significantly increased the financial scale and number of participating local authorities, and helped to institutionalize a nationwide urban agenda for the first time with increased representation of local actors in national Cohesion Policy committee

structures. For Poland, the ITI model provided a strategic opportunity to fill an institutional gap by offering a template to pursue a more functional approach to urban economic development.

Finally, *institutional capacity* was an important factor. As noted by other scholars, local actors often lack capacity to engage in multilevel EU policy frameworks (Dabrowski, 2014a, 2014b; Keating, 2013). Translating the local knowledge at the heart of the place-based logic (Barca, 2009) into national and European policy objectives in a meaningful way requires resources, especially as these activities often lie outside the agenda of urban authorities' daily activities.

The Dutch experience did not involve any significant institutional rescaling in terms of increased decision-making responsibility for urban authorities, largely because there was pre-existing technical and administrative capacity to manage and implement the ITI strategy. In Spain, the eligible urban areas were required to be of a sufficient size with administrative capacity to comply with EU requirements. Despite the option to develop new intermunicipal and functional strategies, pre-existing urban development plans and structures were used, limiting the need or potential for institutional change and capacity-building. Furthermore, the preference for limited integration of multiple EU funds in Spain was motivated by local capacity concerns particularly because of the bureaucratic complexity of administering EU funding. Nevertheless, the SUD experience did involve the development of capacity for designing and implementing integrated strategies linked to EU objectives and funding across a much larger number of cities in Spain than previously.

In Poland, the focus on new urban and functional geographies involved significant institutional rescaling through intermunicipal cooperation combined with urban capacity-building by installing dedicated ITI administrative teams at the FUA level and local networking activities in FUAs to address local capacity deficits. In other words, administrative capacity should be treated as a dynamic and evolving concept (see also Bachtler et al., 2014). While administrative capacity weaknesses can hamper EU-driven rescaling dynamics, EU funding also provides a strategic opportunity for administrative capacity development and learning which can facilitate the rescaling of urban development policies.

## CONCLUSIONS

This article developed a novel conceptualization of the rescaling of place-based policy approaches for SUD – emphasizing territorial, thematic and governance dimensions – to investigate the rescaling of urban development policy practices in EU Cohesion Policy 2014–20. The comparative analysis of Dutch, Polish and Spanish experiences provides several theoretical and policy implications.

The central finding is that EU regulatory innovations in 2013 have strengthened the place-based approach to urban development in Cohesion Policy by ring-fencing additional funding for urban strategies, establishing

implementation templates, requiring delegation of responsibilities to urban actors, and facilitating urban networking across the EU. However, despite the reinforced regulatory framework and Commission efforts to promote a uniform approach, we found significant variations in territorial, thematic and governance rescaling, and in the impact on domestic practices.

The most substantial impact was in Poland where SUD requirements have facilitated cooperation of local actors across functional boundaries for the first time, the building of capacity at the urban level, and the development of new institutions and responsibilities, which have radically transformed overall governance relations. Furthermore, the approach has allowed for increased thematic and fund integration and opportunities for networking among urban actors. By contrast, in Spain and the Netherlands the impact on territorial, thematic and governance rescaling has been much less significant, although more integrated and strategic approaches to urban development were developed. Another governance innovation in Spain and Poland is stronger networked governance through the integration of cities into domestic and European networks and in formal decision-making structures.

Overall, the 2013 reform demonstrates the variable impact of EU Cohesion Policy on spatial rescaling. The reforms do not represent a paradigm shift in the development of a fully fledged urban dimension with the potential to drive convergence in urban rescaling dynamics and outcomes across the EU. The use of urban development instruments has expanded significantly, but the voluntary and discretionary nature of the regulatory framework allowed approaches to be tailored to local practices and interests and lacked strong incentives for transformational rescaling, especially in more developed countries. Contrasting with technocratic and depoliticized conceptualizations of urban policy development, the analysis showed that domestic politics and contestation as well as historical path dependencies and institutional capacities mediate the impact of the EU on spatial rescaling dynamics and outcomes.

Looking to the future, the reform of Cohesion Policy for 2021–27 provides both opportunities and threats to SUD policy and rescaling dynamics. The main legislative changes are (Council of the EU, 2021; European Commission, 2018): the integration of SUD in a dedicated and more visible Policy Objective 5 – A Europe Closer to Citizens, with an increase in the earmarked funding to a minimum of 8% of total funding (from 5%); more governance flexibility by making the delegation of responsibilities to urban authorities voluntary and providing scope for member states to propose their own ITI models to the Commission; and strengthened networking and capacity-building initiatives at EU level. In its subsequent position papers on future priorities, the Commission has clarified that it does not envisage funding for SUD in five countries (Denmark, Finland, Ireland, Luxembourg and Sweden) because of the limited EU resources allocated to these countries and requirements to concentrate funding on other EU objectives

for a ‘smarter’ and ‘greener’ Europe (Bachtler et al., 2019).

The changes in SUD financial prioritization across member states and increased governance flexibility implies that EU-driven rescaling of urban policy is likely to be more differentiated territorially in the future. However, the findings from our case studies highlighted that a uniform approach is illusory and that top-down prescription would be met with institutional resistance unless it is aligned with domestic priorities, legacies and local capacities. In this sense, the increased emphasis on flexible governance models, networking and capacity-building may provide a more promising approach to promote SUD by encouraging locally tailored solutions with less administrative burden and more reflexive learning across the EU, in line with the tenets of ‘experimentalist governance’ (Mendez, 2011; Morgan, 2018). Indeed, the case study research showed that the establishment and consolidation of city networks and project partnerships in Poland and Spain contributed to stronger networked governance and learning among SUD actors, and that capacity should be understood as a dynamic and reflexive concept that can be developed in response to EU initiatives (Bachtler et al., 2014). The necessity to make the EU urban dimension flexible to facilitate coherence between EU urban objectives and domestic priorities means that a paradigmatic change – involving a fundamental rescaling of urban policies and governance across the EU – will remain unlikely.

More recently, the coronavirus crisis has led the Commission to propose further reforms to Cohesion Policy under the Recovery Plan for Europe with potential consequences for SUD. First, a new Recovery Assistance for Cohesion and the Territories of Europe (REACT-EU) instrument of €55 billion within Cohesion Policy aims to facilitate liquidity and investment in the current and future programmes. However, there is no earmarking of funding for SUD territorial instruments, nor is there a clear obligation to involve urban actors in programming. Second, changes to the Fund regulations for 2021–27 envisage a new ‘emergency mechanism’ to respond to future crises by extending the scope of eligible support and suspending earmarking obligations including the minimum allocation to SUD. While the role of localized territorial instruments for SUD does not feature strongly in the EU’s response to tackling the effects of the health and economic crisis on territorial disparities, future research should investigate the use of EU funding by urban authorities to respond in practice.

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