Commentary

Technocratic Planning and Political Strategies: Territorial Policy in the EU

William Outhwaite

Abstract

This commentary examines the EU's halting development of territorial policy, most recently in macro-regional planning, and the responses of member states' local and national governmental elites. Whether populist or not in their overall programmes, these elites have tended to resist EU initiatives in the name of a perceived national interest or to instrumentalise them in order to maximise their domestic political pay-off. These 'sovereignty games' (Adler-Nissen and Gammeltoft-Hansen 2008) have been a constant feature of the European integration process, but transnational territorial initiatives, involving a flexible mix of European and sub-regional bodies as well as national states (both members and non-members of the EU) tend to raise the stakes in these games.

Keywords

Macro-regions, Territorial policy, Sovereignty, Cohesion

This commentary, drawing on more detailed analysis (Outhwaite 2020), examines the European Union's (EU) halting development of territorial policy (broadly conceived to include cohesion policy, cross-border cooperation and transport policy), most recently in macro-regional planning and the responses of member states' political elites. The themes of technocracy and populism which frame this special issue serve as a convenient way of posing the dilemmas which arise. The term 'technocratic' is used descriptively to refer to planning processes which may or may not involve representatives of civil society but are primarily conducted by European and national civil servants in conjunction with expert advisors. The highly contested term 'populism' (see Adam and Tomšič 2019) is also used in a broad sense to refer to a political style found in many systems and parties which might not normally be called populist, for example the British Conservatives or the Austrian ÖVP as distinct from the extreme right FPÖ.

Three current crises (Brexit, the rejection of 'truth' and climate change) have sharpened our awareness of this conflict between technocracy and populism. The Brexit debate was dominated by a wilful rejection of the available evidence and expertise. The Trump presidency was driven by a similar construction of an alternative reality, beginning with the rewriting of the inauguration narrative and the rejection of the evidence of catastrophic climate change and the threat posed by Covid-19. The pandemic abruptly shifted the balance in favour of respect for expertise and a remarkable public acquiescence in restrictions resulting from technocratic policymaking (see Delanty 2021). The tension however remains acute. As Hans Kundnani (2020) recently suggested, 'there is a symbiotic relationship between technocracy and populism', in which a backlash against 'depoliticized forms of decisionmaking' leads to 'the further expansion of technocratic governance as elites seek to insulate decision-making from politicians who are perceived as irresponsible or irrational'. As Kundnani (2020) notes, 'In Europe, there is a particularly acute version of this symbiosis – not least because of the EU, which is perhaps the ultimate experiment in technocratic governance'. Against the background of these controversies, this commentary addresses a topic in an area of European policymaking which might seem less contentious but which for a long time has raised important issues of the relation between levels and structures in European multi-level governance.

In the variable geometry of what has become the EU, the principal tension has always been between Europeanising initiatives and a resistance normally located at the level of the political authorities of the member states (Outhwaite 2021). Where national actors (usually heads of state or government) have supported such initiatives, we tend to look for underlying explanations in terms of perceived national interest, the domestic pay-off of being seen to lead a European programme or commitments entered into more or less inadvertently. 'Brussels' is characteristically blamed for anything unpopular by national politicians who take the credit for anything that looks good. They can however point out that they are mostly elected and that the European Commission is structurally biased in favour of European solutions where national or regional ones might be more appropriate. These 'sovereignty games' (Adler-Nissen and Gammeltoft-Hansen 2008) have been a constant feature of the European integration process, but transnational territorial initiatives, involving a flexible mix of European and sub-regional bodies as well as national states (both members and non-members of the EU) tend to raise the stakes in these games.

Populism comes in many varieties, and in a diffuse sense pervades modern post-democracy. Whether or not a party or government is properly called populist, a simplistic 'them and us' approach to EU political issues is a structural feature of most member states. In post-communist member states, there is the further twist of an understandable resentment at the EU's assumption of a 'civilising mission' in the region (for example Follis 2012: 202). The current fetishisation of national sovereignty by anti-European governments and parties is the tip of a much larger iceberg. Largely unrepresented in these conflicts between European planners (who are also nationals of member states) and

national and local political elites are the interests and concerns of local victims of top-down planning (whether European or national). Well-meant programmes may be counter-productive in their local impact. Transregional planning is therefore a good example of the tensions between technocracy and populism in the ongoing European integration process.

Michael Zürn (2018: 90) lists 'technocratic bias' as one of the mechanisms which undermine the legitimacy of global authorities, leading to contestation which may result in institutional adjustment or alternatively in gridlock.[i] However, it is also worth noting that the *antithesis* between technocracy and populism also allows for their *combination* in a 'technocratic populism' which invokes technocratic competence in its critique of established political elites, as for example in the Czech ANO before it came to power (Havlík 2019). There may be a similar fusion in Western Europe in a more long-standing resistance to European-level schemes, stressing local knowledge as well as national sovereignty and custom in opposition to 'ivory-tower' proposals dreamed up in Brussels.

Christopher Bickerton and Carlo Invernizzi Accetti (2017) argue moreover that both populism and technocracy share a hostility to procedural legitimacy and mediation, in the sense of intermediary institutions between state and individual. Both are embodied in party democracy, which is where, they suggest, one should look for the twin pathologies of populism and technocracy. Their argument is framed in relation to the politics of national states, but it may well apply also to the European level. Here, although *party* democracy is much weaker, the main potential obstacles to technocratic initiatives by the Commission are the member states and, to a lesser extent, the regional states in devolved or federal member states, and MEPs and lobbying groups operating as often as not on a national basis.

TERRITORIAL PLANNING

In the early years of the Communities, this was firmly off limits and a national prerogative for the states which engaged in it. Territorial planning (*aménagement du territoire*) is sometimes presented as uniquely French, though it is also practised in the Netherlands and Sweden and was foreshadowed by interwar attempts by the Soviet Union and Italy to mitigate uneven development (in the east and south respectively) and even in Britain, in response to early deindustrialisation. A report produced for the Commission in 1997 by a United Kingdom (UK) group of authors noted the diversity of terminology and practice in this area:

> it should be understood that spatial planning when used in the EU sense does not mean precisely '*aménagement du territoire*', town and country planning, *Raumordnung, ruimtelijke ordening*, or any of a number of other terms used by Member States and regions to describe the particular arrangements for manging spatial development which apply in their territories. … Therefore, the term 'spatial planning' has been adopted by the European Commission. This is a neutral generic term. (European Commission 1997: 23)

In France, the idea of balanced development was continued in the French and later European concept of 'cohesion', which neatly captures the interplay between territorial and socio-economic relations and the implication of forms of solidarity and mutual interdependence in an imagined community. In the EU case, the formal introduction of the concept was foreshadowed from the beginning in the subterranean social policy implications of the Coal and Steel Community and, more substantially, the Common Agricultural Policy for citizens employed in or dependent on those sectors. The French planning tradition can be traced back as far as Louis XIV's minister Colbert. Its predominant emphasis on central control, criticised as Jacobin by regional activists (Pierret

1997) was mitigated in the 1960s with a decentralising emphasis on regional centres (*métropoles d'équilibre*), with the idea of balanced development continued in the SCoT (*Schéma de cohérence territoriale*) of 2000. Territorial power was a focus of Michel Foucault's work, which has inspired a good deal of writing on Europe mainly shaped around Foucault's concept of governmentality (Foucault 1991). Even if his analysis is not always reliable (Elden 2013: 8-9), the basic idea of the link between power and territory, ruling and region, is important. It is most powerfully related to Europe by Jensen and Richardson (2004), who develop a notion of European planning as the pursuit of a 'monotopia' in which Europe is conceived as a whole and all internal obstacles are removed (see also Scott 1998; Richardson 2006). Given the 'four freedoms' (the free movement of goods, capital, services, and people), they focus in particular on the EU's encouragement of transport networks and infrastructure and on transnational or polycentric development plans, especially in border regions. Even with the EU as a framework, there are internal differentiations between the eurozone and the rest; the Schengen area includes non-members and transnational initiatives may also include 'third countries' outside the Union (see Grzymski 2019).

The transfer of a territorial planning approach from a national to a European scale is one dimension of EC/EU policy (Atkinson and Zimmermann 2018).[ii] The other is a more diffuse and bottom-up process of the formation of links between border regions such as the EUREGIOs, one of which developed into what came to be known as the Atlantic Arc of western maritime states (Wise 2016). The focus of this commentary is on the macro dimension, but initiatives at this level can draw on experiences on a smaller scale. Following on earlier initiatives such as the European Spatial Development Perspective (see Europa 1999), the *White Paper on European Governance* (2001) addressed the theme of multi-level governance and a 'scoping' document of 2005, updated in 2011, *Territorial State and Perspectives of the European Union*, linked a territorial approach to a macro-regional focus:

> common regional features in European macro-regions – such as the Northern, the Central, the Eastern, the Alpine, the Mediterranean one – as well as in micro-regions – such as numerous cross-border ones – influence the territorial capital of a region. (European Commission 2011: 5)

In 2007 the *Territorial Agenda of the European Union* stressed cohesion (European Commission 2007: 9), and it was followed in 2008 by a *Green Paper on territorial cohesion.* This discussed the example of the Baltic Sea Region which remains much the most impressive of the EU's macro-regional initiatives (see Figure 1). Finally, the Commission's discussion paper *Macro-regional strategies in the European Union* (2009) marked the consecration of the term, while qualifying this approach with what it called 'Three No's': no new funds, legislation or institutions.

Macroregional planning in an explicit form has emerged, then, from the EU's earlier focus on subnational regions. As Sebastian Büttner (2012) has brilliantly demonstrated, the EU has developed a developmental programme shaped by global convergence on 'instrumental activism' and 'social mobilization' (Büttner 2012: 5) at the level of subnational regions (see also Piattoni 2016; European Commission 2020). As Büttner notes, however, the EU's achievements in this area have been modest, and a question must be raised about the transferability of this model, with the 'activism' which it imputes to regions and on which in part it relies, to macro-regional entities which will tend to be less integrated and self-aware.

Figure 1: EU Macro-regions (European Commission 2017a)
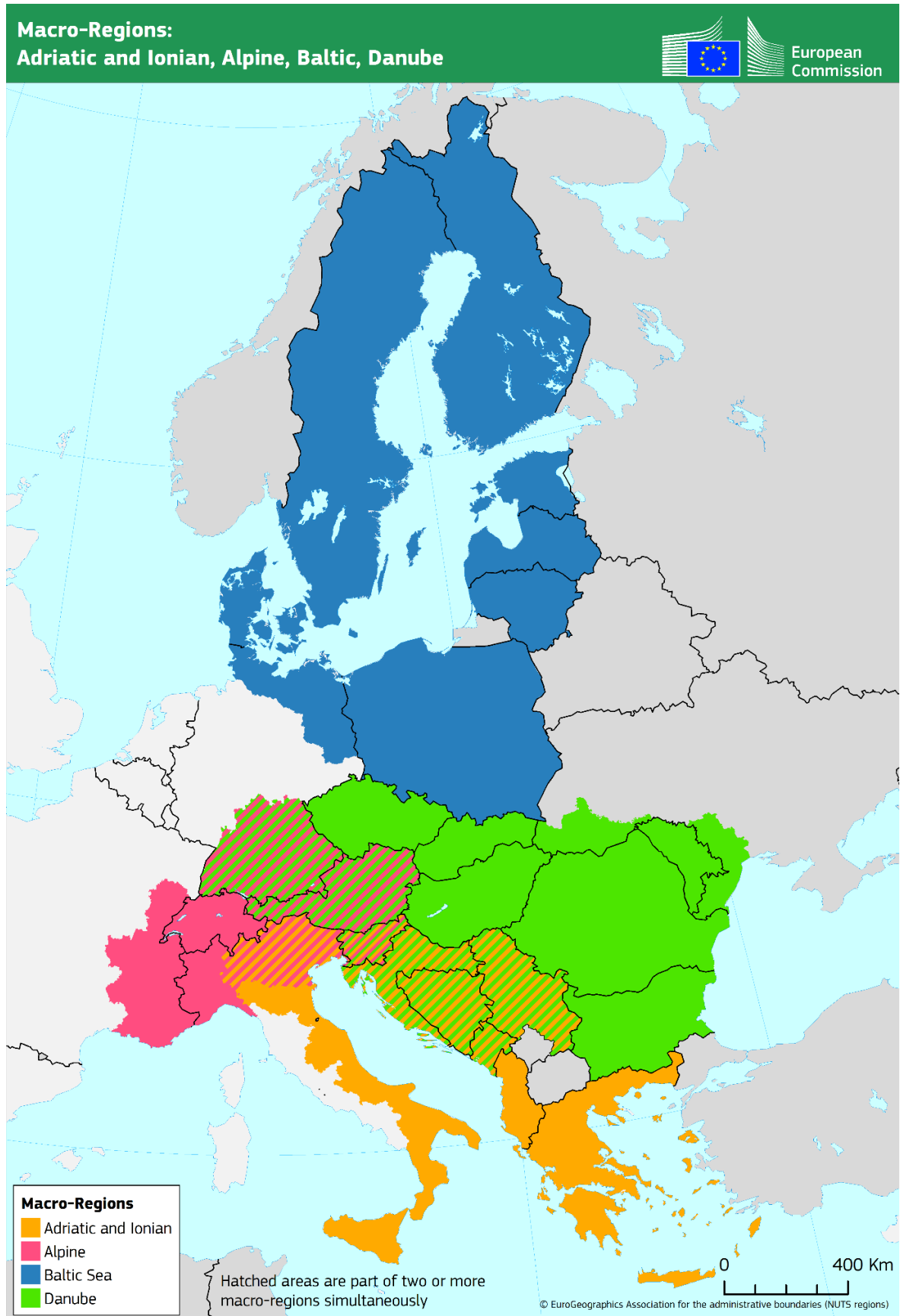
COHESION

In 1986 the EU had already taken up the concept of cohesion (important because it came with a threefold increase in structural funding to nearly a third of the EU budget) in a way which combined the equalisation of conditions across the EU with the looser idea of its cohesiveness as a territorial space. This was furthered by the removal of borders and improvements in transport. The Single European Act included a commitment to 'reducing disparities between the various regions and the backwardness of the less favoured regions'. From an EU point of view, with its cohesion agenda, there is no difference in principle between a subnational region and a transnational macro-region, though the coordination of policy may be expected to be more problematic in the latter case, and not just for reasons of size. The EU deliberately runs together the subnational and transnational dimension, as in the Single European Act of 1986 and a 2008 Commission document (cited in Büttner 2012: 92) which referred both to 'large areas such as the Baltic Sea region and improving conditions along the Eastern external border … [as well as to] … promoting globally competitive and sustainable cities' and the problems of 'remote regions'. The cohesion narrative was later given a neoliberal twist by the Lisbon Treaty of 2009 in its stress on competitiveness. It can be argued that what Kristan Olesen (2014) calls the 'neoliberalisation of strategic spatial planning' has exacerbated the long-standing tension between the competitiveness and cohesion dimensions of EU policies (Rumford 2000).

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF THE EUROPEAN SPACE

The EU's territorial conceptions conflicted with a trend in human geography away from objectivist conceptions of 'Euclidean' or Newtonian space towards a stress on what Benno Werlen (2005) calls an 'action-centred' rather than 'space-centred' approach and a 'shift of focus … from regional analysis to … the analysis of everyday regionalizations' (see also Faludi 2018; Debarbieux 2018). In the case of the EU and its diverse agencies, the very idea of transnational planning confronted the entrenched suspicions of member states, often focussed on cartography (see Foster 2015). Even without baleful gaze of the UK, the broader issue remains. The conception of macro-regional planning inevitably clashes with the national priorities of member states, especially where border areas include substantial national minorities, as is often the case in central and eastern Europe (where it has bedevilled the Danube project).

Since 2010, despite doubts from regional geographers and others (see Bialasiewicz, Giaccaria, Jones and Minca 2013), the EU has engaged in what was described as a 'macro-regional fever' (Dühr 2011: 3; Dühr 2018; Dühr, Colomb and Nadin 2010). The Baltic initiative (2009) was followed by the Danube (2011), with the Adriatic-Ionian (2014) Alpine (2015) and the others gradually developing. The North Sea programme, now linking Denmark, Norway, western Sweden, northwest Germany and parts of Flanders and the Netherlands, located in an area destabilised by Brexit, is to remain as merely an INTERREG programme in 2021-8 (Danson 2017a; 2017b). The rather random nature of its 'contact points' indicates its marginal status: a Flemish enterprise agency, the Hamburg Senate, the Netherlands Enterprise Agency, the Western Norway regional government, the Western Gothland region and (until the departure of the UK) its Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. Whereas Norway is well integrated into this and other programmes, a post-Brexit UK can only be expected to withdraw into isolation and decline. The Atlantic Arc mentioned earlier is also blighted by Brexit (though Wales and Cornwall remain members), leaving something of a vacuum on the Western flank of the Union. The Black Sea has a Cross-Border Cooperation programme which seems unlikely to go much further in the foreseeable future, though several of the participating states are also in the Danube programme, and the Eastern and (to a lesser extent) Western Mediterranean also confront familiar problems (Laruffa 2019).

A 2017 DG REGIO document noted that although the EU's macro-regional strategies have so far been mostly on its eastern borders, and 'from a "soft security" perspective and pre-accession support perspective, this is where they will likely bring the greatest added value … There are also large shared ecosystems in other parts of Europe … e.g. the Rhine corridor' (European Commission 2017b: 156). These various initiatives have been described ambitiously, as they were in a European Commission (2013: 5) report, as 'regional building blocks for EU-wide policy, marshalling national approaches into more coherent EU-level implementation'.

Environmental issues such as pollution and river management have formed a major focus of many of these emergent programmes. There is also however an idea in the background that geographical proximity or common challenges will necessarily form a basis for intensified political cooperation. It is this element of geographical determinism which inspires doubts. Being on opposite sides of a river or a maritime fishing ground may encourage cooperation, or it may be a focus of competition and opposition as in the Danube dam projects. The EU's contribution to the development of rail links across Europe has been substantial, with €30 billion allocated to rail in central and eastern Europe in the 2014-20 funding period and 2021 announced as the European Year of Rail in the context of the European Green Deal. This was an obvious area for European-level intervention, with incompatible infrastructure and trains impeding interstate travel (Badenoch and Fickers 2010). For equally obvious reasons, plans were conceived in macro-regional terms: TEN-T 'corridors' linking major cities across the subcontinent (see Figure 2).

In the related area of tourism, however, progress has been slower than one might have hoped. The Council of Europe's (2017) trans-European cultural travel routes programme 'Routes4U', based on the EU's four macro-regional areas and to which the EU has also contributed, is an impressive small-scale initiative. It could however have been expected that an activity contributing much more to Europe in value terms than agriculture would have received more attention, for example representation by a Commissioner.

Macro-regional planning, as we saw earlier, is perhaps the most explicit challenge to member states' conceptions of their sovereignty, since it lumps them together with other states under European leadership and also often valorises the status of subnational regional bodies and others. In the Baltic region, for example, tourism is coordinated not by a national member state but by the state government of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern. This combination of national, subnational and supranational institutions creates patterns of regular interaction in multi-level governance which amount to quasi-institutions, despite the official requirement that macro-regions should not involve new institutions and their associated costs (Gänzle 2017: 411). The 'three no's' were one expression of this anxiety. The Baltic region states were relatively cooperative, but the more authoritarian and nationalistic regimes in the Danube area have been less willing to compromise, and this has been a major contributor to the sluggish progress of the region. Hungary, in particular, was very supportive of the Danube Strategy in its early stages when it held the EU presidency in 2011, but has since withdrawn its support under Orbán's increasingly ultra-conservative and authoritarian regime. Attila Ágh (2016), who conducted a four-year project on the EUSDR, is particularly pessimistic about what had been achieved. Franziska Sielker (2017) is less negative, while also stressing the need for support from stakeholders. In the Mediterranean there seems little prospect of macro-regional initiatives, always somewhat unrealistic (Bialasiewicz, Giaccaria, Jones and Minca 2013) being extended.

Figure 2: Trans-European Transport Network TEN-T network (European Commission n.d.)
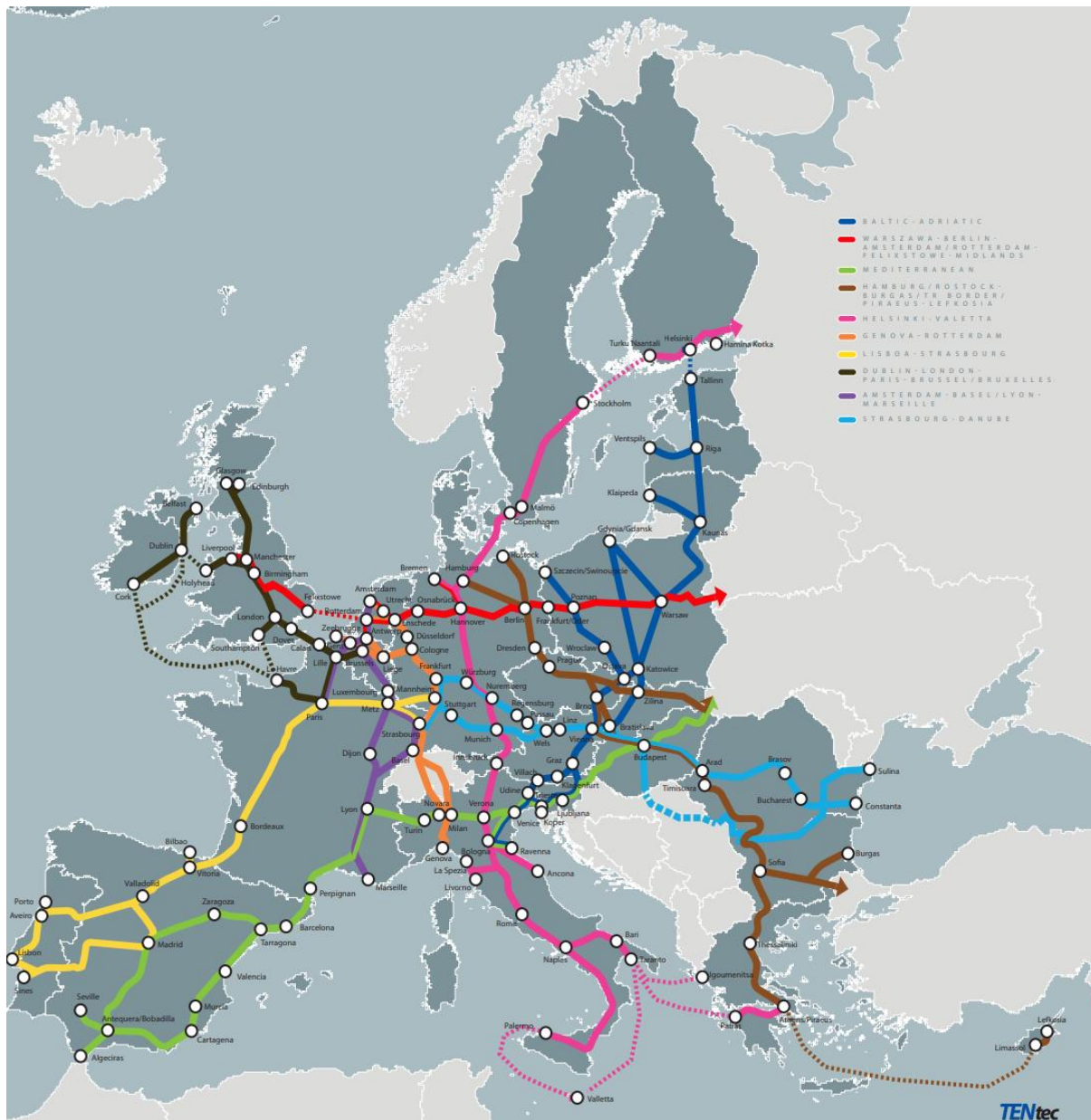
Finally, it is worth considering some of the downsides of European-level initiatives. In a critique of the Carpathian Euroregion on the Polish-Ukrainian border, for example, Chris Hann (1998) argued that it had increased antagonism towards the population on the Ukrainian side and that the existing informal bazaar was a much more effective link: 'All the Euroregion has really done is supply a further opportunity for the nationalists to whip up anti-Ukrainian sentiment, and to combine this with the ever-present powerful resentment felt towards a superfluous bureaucracy' (Hann 1998: 254-5). More than twenty years on, his critique still has some relevance to current initiatives. Karolina Follis, working in the same area from 2003, provides a somewhat more optimistic view of the interplay of externally imposed policies and local initiatives, while also arguing that 'The technocratic rebordering of the EU exists alongside the material and mental residues of old systems of rule and social organization, starkly visible in the discourse and practice of Polish-Ukrainian partnership' (Follis 2012: 173).

The other side of many of the infrastructural projects is the environmental damage caused by the continuing and expanding use of private cars, most still powered by petrol or diesel, and that caused by high-speed rail projects which largely benefit urban centres rather than the communities through which they pass. The EU, though more willing to listen to citizen initiatives and NGOs than most member state governments (at least those outside the Nordic region), has not been particularly receptive to local interests fearing the impact of large transport or dam projects.

The impact of EU accession and EU-inspired regional policy on peripheral regions has also been critically examined in a number of studies. Fischer-Tahir and Neumann (2013) and Loewen (2018) put the situation in central and eastern Europe in a broader context of the differential effects of regionalisation on inequalities in developed and less developed states and regions. What has been called the "regional innovation paradox", (Oughton, Landabaso and Morgan 2002) suggests that the least well endowed and organised regions are also least effective at accessing EU resources. More broadly, Amanda Machin (2019: 209) has pointed to what she calls 'double depoliticisation' in the EU's discourse and practice of 'ecological modernisation' or 'sustainable development':

> political dissent is smoothed over by economic rationality; market competition and innovation replaces political regulation. Further, the discourse itself is reified as the only feasible strategy, a matter of "common sense" and therefore one that is "outside" or "beyond" politics. Not only is politics taken out of the discourse, but the discourse is taken out of politics. (Machin 2019: 209)

Her analysis has clearly a much wider application across the whole spread of macro-regional planning (in which of course ecological issues play a large part). Follis (2012: 195) argues similarly that what James Ferguson (1990) called the 'anti-politics machine' of 'development' could also be said of 'rebordering'. Machin (2019: 227) concludes:

> Might it be possible to open up policy-making to a more "agonistic" contestation between alternative and conflicting discourses and strategies? Any real shift to sustainability surely must be a result of political decisions that do not, and cannot, satisfy everyone and everything; stricter and more explicit regulation and a brake on capitalist expansion may well be both ultimately requisite and hotly contested.

The symbolic character of much EU planning has long been noted. As James Wesley Scott (2002b: 140; see also Scott 2002a) wrote:

> Spatial planning and regional development concepts that have emerged since 1990 from EU agencies as well as ministries of member states emphasize spatial metaphors such as networks, regions, nodes, links, gateways etc., that create a sense of strategically interlinking communities. Since 1990, European spatial policies have also been conspicuously cartographic in nature. Evocative maps of co-operative regions such as the Atlantic Arc and Alpine, Danubian, and Baltic areas, and transportation networks linking the continent have emerged as central elements in the definition of an integrating European economic and political space … Together with more global paradigms of environmental sustainability and economic competitiveness, visionary maps and metaphors attempt to make the European integration and enlargement process more intelligible to citizens and local communities.

Despite this, there remains a dissociation between what Vivien Schmidt (2008: 303) has called 'coordinative discourse among policy actors' and 'communicative discourse between political actors and the public'. Another important dimension of this is the emergence in

post-communist countries of what Kovách and Kučerova (2006) aptly termed a 'project class' of well-educated young semi-professionals equipped to apply for and manage externally funded projects. *Transnational* projects, one may assume, are particularly dependent on people with linguistic and other skills.

CONCLUSION

The tension between technocratic planning and both democratic and post- or anti-democratic politics persists. The remedy is to be found in more democracy. Democratic participation has the potential both to curb the excesses of planners (Clifford and Tewdwr-Jones 2013) and to outflank nativist populism, as the 'sardines' movement did in Italy in 2019-20. Another promising development is the growing appeal of deliberative democracy and citizens' assemblies in many European countries, regions and cities, as well as at the EU level. The theme of communication suggests a further reflection, paralleling the analysis by Bickerton and Accetti. Recent research in science and technology studies on interdisciplinary collaboration has stressed its affectual dimensions, for example in controversies over meetings between participants in drug studies and researchers (Hillersdal, Jespersen, Oxlund and Bruun 2020: 76-77) as well as among the researchers themselves; a concept of 'interdisciplinary expertise' involves these dimensions as well as others. In a transnational context of policymaking, the difficulties of interdisciplinary communication will tend to be compounded by differences between national research traditions, especially when experts are also representing their respective member states or regions. Andrew Barry (2012: 329-330) addressed this issue in terms of the concept of the 'political situation' as a complement to the concept in science and technology studies of the 'knowledge controversy':

> A controversy that is ostensibly about the environmental impact of the construction of a dam might well be taken by some participants in the controversy to be just one episode in the history of continuing conflict between the state and minority populations in the region. In turn, and conversely, a political situation – such as the conflict between an ethnic or religious minority and the state – is likely to contain multiple knowledge controversies.

Politics, then, is inescapably present in the policymaking arena even if it is occluded in the public presentation of policies.

The development of what could be called transnational expertise has been well studied by Keith Middlemas (1995), Didier Georgakakis (2012) and others, and the interplay between science and technology studies and transnational expertise may together usefully inform work on policy contexts such as the transregional example briefly discussed here. On the issue of legitimation which is one of the frames of this special issue, I suggest, in conclusion, that while projects of the kind I have discussed are an important potential source of support for the EU, in that they demonstrate the added value of a European approach, as well as delivering visible benefits in infrastructure and other areas, they also raise unresolved tensions over the legitimacy of European-level initiatives.

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ENDNOTES

[i] There is of course a genuine problem with the relation between expertise and democracy, see Turner (2003: 15).

[ii] On the concept of scale, see Moore (2008) and, in relation to macro-regional planning, see Piattoni (2016).

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