



Delft University of Technology

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Faludi, Andreas

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# A HISTORICAL INSTITUTIONALIST ACCOUNT OF EUROPEAN SPATIAL PLANNING

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**Andreas Faludi**

TU Delft

Sorensen invokes historical institutionalism as a theoretical framework. This paper does so revisiting the making of the European Spatial Development Perspective of 1990s vintage and the subsequent Territorial Agenda of the European Union. The context is EU Cohesion policy. First the paper presents the theoretical framework. Then it explains why European spatial planning has been a limited success by identifying fault lines in the institutional architecture of European integration generally: whether integration merely means states relinquishing specific powers, called competences in EU jargon, or whether the EU transcends states and state institutions and whether representatives of state governments with their political and electoral concerns or the European Commission with its detached expertise should take the lead. There is also the fault line between planning and the spending department, or sectors. The view that the EU has no business in planning because planning is a state power has prevailed. To its chagrin, the Commission has also been side-lined by national planners. To overcome this problem, the European Union was to be given a competence, if not for spatial planning, then for territorial cohesion. To mark their joint position on the matter in relation to evolving EU policy, member states adopted the Territorial Agenda of the European Union. Neither their initiative nor the pursuit of territorial cohesion by the EU as such went far. Estimating that member states would not accept whatever it might propose in the matter, the Commission never took, as it could have done under there relevant rules the initiative. With its cross-border, transnational and interregional strands, 'European territorial cooperation' serves as a substitute for EU territorial cohesion policy proper. The paper explains the course of events over the more than twenty-five years covered by these developments by reference to the institutional architecture of the EU. The primacy which that architecture gives to member states means that state institutions and their politics prevail over expertise, including that of planners. It also implies European space being conceptualised as a seamless cover of sovereign jurisdiction. The story of European spatial planning casts a critical light on the EU institutional architecture being challenged by a fluid, dynamic spatial reality.

## Keywords

historical institutionalism, European spatial planning, territorial cohesion, EU Cohesion policy

## How to Cite

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*We should not assume that a democratic Europe would merely be a replication on the continental level of institutional patterns that are characteristic of nation states.<sup>1</sup>*

## INTRODUCTION

A Dutch national planning director of the early-1990s thought it unthinkable for 'Brussels', shorthand for the European Union (EU) to have a say in the expansion of the Port of Rotterdam. Never mind that its expansion might affect developments in other parts of Europe. EU initiatives, also and in particular as regards spatial planning evoke such assertions of national sovereignty, particularly at borders where the nation state as an institution manifests itself. Borders '...express sovereignty as a power to attach populations to territories..., to "administrate" the territory through the control of population, and, conversely, to govern the population through the division and the survey of the territory.'<sup>2</sup> The reason is that a nation is an '...ideal community ... whose durability rests on the State's ability to demarcate ... its physical and symbolic boundaries.'<sup>3</sup> European planning is suspect for challenging such core beliefs about nation and state as institutions. If the EU were a federation, sovereign in its own right, objections might be mooted, but it is not.

Does federation and its alternative, an intergovernmental construct, exhaust the institutional options? Scholars invoke the notion of the EU as 'sui generis' and former European Commission President Jacques Delors that of it as an 'unknown political object'.<sup>4</sup> But unfamiliar institutional alternatives may simply evoke reassertions of the role of the state, also and in particular where it comes to spatial planning standing for the methods used by the public sector to influence the distribution of people and activities in spaces of various scales.<sup>5</sup> National spatial planning more in particular is about influencing the distribution of people and activities within the national space.<sup>6</sup> European spatial planning would then be about the distribution of people and activities in the European space, but in an EU operating along intergovernmental lines this would be possible only if member states were to entrust the EU with the task. Only then the European Commission could take relevant initiatives, always subject to member state approval. If the EU were a federation proper, there would be a prima facie case. The practicality and desirability of planning at that scale would remain to be proven, but that would be all. What spatial planning would mean if the EU were Delors' unknown political object remains an open question. Such is the importance of institutional constructs.

Fulfilling a long-standing ambition.<sup>7</sup> Dutch spatial planners in cahoots with French colleagues took initiatives to bring planning to the then European Community. This was in the late-1980s. This paper revisits their campaign resulting, if nothing else, in much mutual learning.<sup>8</sup> In time, there might be a revival but for now prospects are poor. Be that as it may, to make planners savvier about institutional matters, this paper revisits previous works on European spatial planning.<sup>9</sup> It looks at the making of a European Spatial Development Perspective, henceforth ESDP. Then comes a discussion of the Territorial Agenda of the European Union. The context is the flagship Cohesion policy of the EU. First the paper presents the theoretical framework.

## HISTORICAL INSTITUTIONALISM

Sorensen<sup>10</sup> invokes historical institutionalism to address the lack of theory-driven history. Institutions are sets of regularised practices with a rule-like quality structuring the behaviour of political and economic actors.<sup>11</sup> Their maintenance, and challenging them even more so requires the application of power. Historical institutionalism elucidates how institutions shape long-term political, economic, and social behaviour, thus generating self-reinforcing dynamics.

Sorensen wants to find out why some institutions are successful and others not. 'Critical junctures' are when institutions change, but there is also slow, ongoing incremental change. Applying this to urban planning, Sorensen focuses on (a) urban land parcels with the property on them; (b) relevant public and private infrastructure; (c) governance systems. In European planning, for land parcels read (a) the territories of member state with their endowments; (b) embedded as they are in transnational infrastructure in a wide sense of the word; (c) the EU system of governance.

Focusing on the dynamics of planning and development, Sorensen recalls Mahoney and Thelen<sup>12</sup> saying that, where it can be observed, continuity comes from the ongoing mobilisation of, and by, those benefiting from the status quo. For instance, in European spatial planning member states maintain, as the Dutch planning director quoted above suggested, control over their national territories. Such is the institutional architecture of the EU with its three fault lines, the first and arguably deepest one being between the member states and the EU itself. The second is between national and European Commission experts. The third fault line running through governments much as the Commission and its services is that between planning and the spending departments, or sectors single-mindedly pursuing their policies. The discussion starts with explaining the cleavage between states as institutions and the EU.

States have territory, people, and a government<sup>13</sup>. Shaw<sup>14</sup> notes likewise that they have a permanent population living in a defined territory with a government enjoying a monopoly on managing international relations. Without controlling their territory, states are not sovereign. This is why the suggestion that the EU might engage in spatial planning prompts them to defend their territoriality, the latter a general term in human geography<sup>15</sup>. It stands precisely for the exercise of control over resources and people by controlling area.<sup>16</sup> State boundaries in particular '...indicate territorial control and, hence, power over prescribed space'.<sup>17</sup> The ideal being a homogenous territory and people, the French Republic proceeded to replacing historic provinces with départements of more or less equal size<sup>18</sup> and considered the people as equal<sup>19</sup>. With compulsory education stamping out local patois<sup>20</sup>, the Third Republic homogenised the people further. Travelogues like *Le tour de la France par deux enfants* (Two Children's Tour of France)<sup>21</sup> encouraging readers to take virtual possession of their territory were enforced national identity. Europe bears the marks of efforts to impose national languages and construct narratives of nationhood and territory.

It was only logical for states to map their territories and compile demographic and other statistics, ensuring what Michael Foucault describes as governability<sup>22</sup>. This led to 'methodological territorialism'<sup>23</sup> erecting barriers in the way of transnational and European research and planning. Compiling European data bases, the European Spatial Planning Observation Network, better known by its acronym ESPON, makes an effort to overcome methodological territorialism.

With states being all-important, European space comes to be seen as the quilt of national territories as which it is often represented. But Balibar has been shown to question the reliance on states. Badie<sup>24</sup> has already talked about 'La fin des territoires' (The End of Territories) due to globalisation, the end of the Cold War and the crisis of the welfare state. But in France even more so than elsewhere, services delivered equitably throughout the territory have become part of national identity<sup>25</sup>. At the same time, as with communes of which Estèbe<sup>26</sup> says that they can no longer govern themselves as rural communities once could, so with states: there is a mismatch between their citizens, residents and other stakeholders. The calling of the EU being to create a Europe makes this more evident, but there would be a mismatch even without the EU. Nonetheless, states claim control over their territories. Caught in what Agnew<sup>27</sup> has famously called the territorial trap, member states therefore keep the EU therefore at bay.

The reason is that even clear-sighted elected officials are hamstrung by their accountability to their voters, said Monnet<sup>28</sup>. EU members are by definition democracies where the ‘...absolutization and sacralization of borders is perhaps even greater ... precisely because [democracy –AF] expresses the fact that the state is ideally the people’s property... [But –AF] the constitutive relationship between territory, population and sovereignty is no longer taken for granted...’<sup>29</sup>. Indeed, an ‘...architectural vision of a territory conceived of as a total body, always pursuing harmony, coherence and equilibrium ceased to inspire all those who, as analysts (penseurs) or practitioners, wish to control, organise, remodel this territory.’<sup>30</sup>

The second fault line in the EU institutional architecture is between national planners and the detached expertise of the European Commission and its services. Commissioners themselves are considered to be experts. Their names being put forward by member state governments, they now come from the ranks of national politicians. Still, at hearings before the European Parliament they are grilled about their expertise. And, as far as the Commission services modelled on the French higher civil service are concerned, expertise is what counts.

The Commission being considered an expert body comes from the Schuman Declaration of 9 May 1950, regarded as the foundational moment of the EU. At that time, Schuman announced the French initiative to bring coal and steel production in Western Europe under joint control. Cohen<sup>31</sup> points out that in so doing he was been guided by Jean Monnet in charge of French planification involving, as it did, experts and stakeholders in managing industry. The High Authority of the European Coal and Steel Community, predecessor of the European Commission, was thus also thought of as an expert body, but the governments of the prospective members, France, Germany, Italy and the Benelux countries insisted on a Council of Ministers ratifying its proposals. This second fault line in the EU institutional architecture between expertise and political representation persists. So in planning, national planners are constrained to represent national positions while Commission experts may articulate independent points of view.

As an aside, Monnet’s ideas smack of course of technocracy. But remember that the Fourth Republic was at the mercy of political parties squabbling. Worse still, the divisive parliamentary politics of the Third Republic was held responsible for the defeat at the hands of the Germans. Enjoying impeccable democratic credentials, Rosanvallon<sup>32</sup> points out that, where political decision makers need to worry about elections, expert authorities can safeguard what he calls ‘generality’. Faludi<sup>33</sup> holds that this includes, not only long term, but also broad spatial concerns that may transcend administrative boundaries. This can bring planners at loggerheads with democratic representatives constrained to do the bidding of territorial constituencies. This may justify independent expertise being brought to bear, also in European planning. Bringing expertise to bear has been the inspiration of Jean Monnet, being described by Duchêne<sup>34</sup> as the ‘statesman of interdependence’.

The third fault line is not unique to the EU. As large bureaucracies, government institutions, too, suffer from what is called a silo mentality. It is the planners’ calling to break through this, making sure that spatial development takes account of the impact of the actions of spending departments on other existing and future activities in space and to pursues synergies between them. At times, French *aménagement du territoire* has been in a position to do so, but planners are generally in a weak position to do so.

So far for thee fault lines in the institutional architecture of European integration between states seeking to maintain their integrity as institutions and the EU looking after common concerns; between government planners or Commission experts taking the lead; and between planners and spending departments. It is with this in mind that the paper looks at the history of European spatial planning.

## THE MAKING OF THE ESDP

In this drawn-out process, the three fault lines are only too evident. The occasion for starting deliberations was the 1987 Single European Act, the first major overhaul of the foundational Treaty of Rome of 1956. It foresaw the completion of the Single Market and in a much enhanced European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). National planners from France and the Netherlands eyed the renewed dynamism of European integration, not only for opportunities and threats to their countries but also for bringing their expertise to bear –at the Commission services had no comparable expertise available– in formulating overall strategy. Thus there was the prospect of a critical juncture in the development of European planning which some of the planning elite had been looking for since the end of World War II being reached.

Liaising with the Commission services, the small group concerned engineered an informal meeting of planning ministers of the, at that time twelve members of the European Community. It was the origin of the ESDP. Looking at its history one has to bear in mind, not just what states in general are; one has to look also at the specific institutional position of planning in the member states concerned. Dutch and French planning are miles apart, but what the initiators from these countries of Nantes not only knew and appreciated each other, they had reasons each to watch the effects of European integration on their country: Dutch planners looked at the effects of the Single Market on the spatial position of the Netherlands as a trading nation; French planners were apprehensive about the fall of the Iron Curtain shifting the centre of gravity to the east. It was no accident that the French chose Nantes as the venue for a meeting of ministers in 1989. Fearing that the west of France with Nantes being marginalised, they wanted to draw attention to the ‘Atlantic Arc’<sup>35</sup>. In terms of regional-economic strength not particularly, as EU jargon would have it, ‘defavourised’, the west of France it should thus receive assistance. The French also perceived a threat from the polycentric urban network running north-south along the Rhine Axis and barely straddling their eastern border outperforming their territory centring as it did on Paris<sup>36</sup>. With the Netherlands firmly within this purported core of Europe, the Dutch did not share this concern.

Pursuing his ‘European model of society’<sup>37</sup> implying spatially balanced development<sup>38</sup>, Delors attended Nantes. His officials present included the French former deputy director of his cabinet. He had been responsible for formulating Delors’ new regional policy and would shape it until after the ESDP was completed ten years hence. He embodied the idea of a rightful place for the Commission as the initiator of policy, an attitude which put him frequently at loggerheads with national planners whose brief was to pursue the interests of member states.

The fault line became immediately evident at Nantes when Delors complained in an impromptu speech that the Council of Ministers –not the same ministers as the planning ministers assembled at Nantes– had unilaterally set the parameters in Cohesion policy. Now, the meeting at Nantes in 1989 had no direct bearing on Community decision making. In fact, it did not even exist in the cosmos of EU institutions. Rather, the ERDF was dealt with by the General Affairs Council of foreign ministers and/or the summit meetings, now the European Councils of Heads of States and Governments. Neither was specifically concerned with regional issues let alone spatial planning. The concern was a ‘fair return’ for member states from the EU budget fed by their own contributions, what Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher would once bring to the point by saying: I want my money back. So ministers had insisted on national shares of the ERDF to be negotiated by them, with no planning input whatsoever.

Had the ministers at Nantes had some clout with their governments, they could have convinced their colleagues on the Council of the merits of a joint spatial vision, but here the third fault between planning and spending departments becomes relevant. With no Council formation to argue its case, planning at the EU is non-existent. Its position in member state governments varies. Other than their French colleagues who were involved, Dutch planners were not dealing with ERDF allocations, but at least national spatial planning was serious business<sup>39</sup>. This as against Germany where the federal level was constrained to setting a broad planning framework,

with the Länder, each with its own planning law and institutions being responsible for planning. To prevent Brussels from interfering with this setup, Germans argued, and continue to argue, that member states and not the Commission should be responsible for any common spatial perspective. Soon other member states, including the Netherlands were swayed to the German position. Spatial development, as it was beginning to be called, should be the joint concern of member states and not of the Commission.

How spatial planning became spatial development is interesting in itself for illustrating how, in an intergovernmental and thus consensual setting, individual member states can shape common policy. Identified by Commission officials as the common denominator of terms used in the various Community languages, spatial planning was an unexceptional term to German and Dutch ears. But to the UK Conservative government planning smacked of socialism. On its insistence spatial development became the term used.

The further process of making the intergovernmental ESDP was punctuated by informal ministerial meetings prepared by an equally informal Committee on Spatial Development, both chaired by the country holding the rotating Presidency of the Council of Ministers. Procedures were agreed at a meeting at Corfu, hence 'Corfu Method'. Institutionalisation does not always come under the law.

In an attempt to generate good will, the Commission services played along, supporting the Committee on Spatial Development as if it were on Commission business. In the end they were disenchanted by the persistent denial of their due role as initiators of Community policy. All support was ended, causing a hiatus of several years in the work. In terms of Sorensen's critical junctures, the first in the path of truly European planning had evaporated. Invoking legalistic arguments, those advantaged by the current position, planners from member states who could have been inconvenienced by a European policy led by the Commission had prevailed. The Commission services concerned got support neither from member states nor from the higher echelons of the Commission for their ambition to take a leading role. Given political will, the lack of a mention of spatial planning in the treaties could have been overcome, as the lack of an explicit mention in the treaty had when environmental and regional policy were introduced in the 1970s. But priorities were different, and the Director-general for regional policy spoke of those advocating truly European planning as the 'dreamers' of his service.

The ESDP<sup>40</sup> which the member states negotiated over many years has its merits. At the same time, and whilst drawing inspiration from its propagating polycentric development<sup>41</sup>, once completed member states, even those who had been closely involved, paid little attention to the document as such. For a while, Commission documents and regulations did refer to the ESDP, but its real achievement is having initiated support for transnational cooperation under the INTERREG programme, including the setting up of ESPON, the latter the most enduring institutional provision for attending to spatial or territorial matters.

No real decision points having been reached, and none appearing on the horizon, all this may still be to good effect in the long run. If so, this would be an example of incremental institutional change. But at the time the territoriality of member states –their control over their territory– was unassailable. It was narrowly interpreted in terms of what in EU jargon is called a competence to regulate land use and development. This had never in fact been what Commission experts steamed in French *aménagement du territoire* had –but not the Germans– had in mind. *Aménagement* is not about land use. It coordinates state investments. The case for coordinating them seems unexceptional, but if at all, member states wanted to do this themselves.

Not all member states did, at least not as regards space and the spatial impacts of investments. Where they did not, their failure to do so was due, once again, to their institutional setups. More powerful ministries than planning were more concerned with funding issues and with the conditions attached<sup>42</sup>. In principle, state authorities should of course take careful looks at their territories, and do so in their wider European and global context. But, to repeat, administrations suffer from silo mentality. Where they are concerned about, or stand

to benefit from Community policies, ministries, the likes of agriculture, industry and transport and also those responsible for regional policy prefer planners not to be looking over their shoulders. The same silo mentality creating the third, all-pervasive institutional fault line as identified prevents the Commission itself from formulating its own spatial strategy. Member states would not savour this for giving the Commission an edge over them, but they could hardly object, but to repeat, the Commission, too, suffers from silo mentality<sup>43</sup>.

Germany made a foray in the opposite direction. It proposed that its brainchild, the intergovernmental ESDP, being a mandatory guideline for Community policies. In the German institutional setup it is common for ideas and practices of the Länder to filter up to the federal level. Germans call this the Gegenstromprinzip, or counter-current principle. But the Commission cherishes its right of initiative. Allowing itself to be guided by, as was the Germans proposal, a strategy formulated by a Council working group representing member states would take away this privilege enshrined in Europe's institutional setup. So another critical juncture which could have been reached during negotiations in the mid-1990s leading to the Treaty of Amsterdam, which was when the Germans made this proposal never came even close.

## TERRITORIAL AGENDA PROCESS

During the ESDP process planners from the member states applied an institutional logic under which integration is based on specific competences of the EU. Since there was no such competence, they did the ESDP themselves. But as soon as the ESDP was literally speaking on the books, published as it had been in 1999 by the Commission in all Community languages, applying the same logic, the Commission withdrew its operational support. Since then the mantra of the Commission services is the same as that of the member states: The EU has no competence for spatial planning. In lieu, when the opportunity presented itself, the Commission proposed a competence for 'territorial cohesion'.

This was in the early-2000s when the, ultimately ill-fated Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe was considered. In France and maybe also in circles of the Community services the notion of territorial cohesion had been floating around for some time. One of its French promoters, the President of the Limousin Region, Robert Savy, had persuaded a lobby group, the Assembly of European Regions, to embrace it. The story, and that of the role of French Commissioner for regional policy, Michel Barnier, has been told before<sup>44</sup>. Briefly, a perceived threat from EU liberalisation policies for state service provisions had been of concern to French regions. Territorial cohesion popped up for the first time in the Treaty of Amsterdam where it dealt with so-called services of general economic interest<sup>45</sup>. Making it part of the rationale of Cohesion policy had also been discussed when Barnier had still been French state secretary for European Affairs. As Commissioner, he allowed himself to be advised in this sense by DATAR, and DATAR by Savy. An adviser of Savy had published a long report on the matter<sup>46</sup>. Representing the Commission on the Presidency of the Convention on the Future of Europe proposing the Constitution, Barnier's presence there might have helped. Anyhow, there is no suggestion of territorial cohesion having been a controversial issue.<sup>47</sup> Anyhow, French and Dutch referenda derailed the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe and, for reasons having nothing to do with planning, yet another critical juncture in the history of European spatial planning, albeit this time under the territorial cohesion flag, did not materialise. In 2009 territorial cohesion would finally be on the books. By that time though, attention had shifted to other matters.

Before mid-2005 when there was still a prospect of territorial cohesion becoming an EU competence, on Dutch initiative the practice of informal meetings was resumed. The format –the Corfu Method previously institutionalised, albeit informally– was readily available and the key countries involved in the ESDP process wished to see their role in EU territorial cohesion policy once it would come about clarified. The planners were not all alarmed by the prospect. Evidence expected from ESPON research should allow them to demonstrate that policies like agriculture, environment, transport and also mainstream regional development policy had real,



and sometimes detrimental spatial or territorial –terminology began to shift– impacts . Using this evidence, with territorial cohesion being in the treaty, they might bridge the third fault and see to it that spending departments would coordinate their investments. Had the Constitutional Treaty come into operation as expected, in 2006, a critical juncture might have been reached, leading to constructive cooperation with the Commission.

Emulating new terminology, the meetings were restyled as meetings, this time without Commission support, of ministers responsible for territorial cohesion. Liaising with the French, the Dutch, old hands as they were in such matters, called the first one in late-2004. Under the Corfu Method, directors-general of the member states resumed their practice also of deciding beforehand on what to put before their ministers, and there were ad-hoc working groups. Hall<sup>48</sup> has been quoted saying that, in the absence of legal obligations, practices with a rule-like quality can structure behaviour, so this is what happened. In May 2005, days before the French and the Dutch referenda would sink the prospects of territorial cohesion becoming an EU competence any time soon, a ministerial meeting at Luxembourg formally agreed to work on the ‘Territorial Agenda of the European Union’.

Two years later, whilst subsequent negotiations seeking to rescue key elements of the Constitutional Treaty approached their conclusion, ministers adopted the Territorial Agenda<sup>49</sup> and also the Leipzig Declaration on Sustainable Urban Development, the latter not to be discussed here. The Commissioner responsible –the Commission continued to follow the proceedings– announced the coming of what would become the Green Paper on Territorial Cohesion.

The Green Paper<sup>50</sup> came out before the Lisbon Treaty replacing the Constitution was ratified. A green paper is a discussion document which can lead to legislative proposals. Maybe it did not want to rock the boat before the Lisbon Treaty was home and dry, but at least some of the close to 400 reactions asked the Commission to do precisely this: make legislative proposals. However, invoking the subsidiarity principle, the UK and Germany in particular objected, and the Commission abstained from making a move.

The Treaty of Lisbon, operational since late-2009, duly identifies territorial cohesion as an objective of the Union and a competence shared between it and the member states. In the early-2000s, this would have meant a critical juncture in the development of European spatial planning, albeit under the territorial cohesion flag. By the end of the decade, neither the French Commissioner nor the French key Commission expert lastly occupying the position of Deputy Director General were still in office. But in view of territorial cohesion in the EU treaty, is it possible for it not to become serious business? Two points concerning the formal institutional structure of the EU are relevant here: What a shared competence means in general and what EU territorial cohesion policy would mean in terms of the sovereignty and the territoriality of member states more in particular. Recall that sovereignty and territoriality are key concerns for any state.

A shared competence means that, if it so chooses, the Commission may make legislative proposals, but it will always consider likely reactions from the Council of Ministers which must ratify them. Reactions to the Green Paper from key member states made it plain that this would be difficult. The Commission chose not to spend political capital on the matter.

There is more than expedience involved. EU discourse has shifted. Convergence through investments, often in infrastructure in least developed regions in Central and Eastern and also Southern Europe, has made room for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth as an objective. So the new master strategy Europe 2020<sup>51</sup> makes only oblique references to territory. An update to the Territorial Agenda, the Territorial Agenda 2020<sup>52</sup> making the case for more importance attached to territorial cohesion had no effect on this state of play. Apart from continuing to pursue European Territorial Cooperation as an objective, Cohesion policy 2014-2020 merely makes Integrated Territorial Investments, Community-Led Local Development and Sustainable Urban Development available as new instruments. Spending at least 5% of funding on the latter is mandatory, but the others are facultative.

Not all member states avail themselves of these instruments. Being able to integrate EU funding does not always weigh up against the hassle of having to negotiate integrated packages.

Meanwhile, under the guise of National Territorial Cohesion Contact Points and a new Urban Development Group, intergovernmental cooperation practices established when preparing the ESDP have become routine, and the Commission has had a permanent Territorial Cohesion and Urban Matters working group for quite some time. Financed and administered jointly, ESPON is also a going concern. If only no longer under the flag of spatial planning, it keeps on churning out relevant European-wide research. Albeit irregularly, informal ministerial meetings continue, always depending on the interest taken by the rotating Presidency of the Council of Ministers. The last has been in Luxembourg in December 2015. If the intention expressed there to revise the Territorial Agenda in time for influencing the Financial Framework 2021-2027 comes to fruition, more meetings will follow. And there is the intellectual capital built up through international contacts. European Territorial Cooperation has involved tens of thousands of experts: the Europeanisation rather than the EUROpeanisation of planning<sup>53</sup>. National and international contact points service, and give direction to these activities.

## CONCLUSION

European spatial planning never reaching critical junctures teaches us, firstly, that institutions do matter. Secondly it shows historical institutionalism helping to understand why. Thirdly, it underscores the need for those involved to understand what relevant institutions are like and what the perspectives of and the power constellations between main actors are, including what shared competences in the EU treaties really mean.

One can also learn that not all is doom and gloom, neither in European spatial planning nor in European integration generally. There is, albeit low-level informal, ongoing institutionalisation. If only state authorities saw European planning, rather than being about fixing on one desirable future to be written into the law, being about creating spatial visions exploring alternative futures, they might not feel compelled not object to this at EU level.

But this evokes the more general issue of how to view the EU as an institution. Here the uncertainty invoked at the beginning remains: Is it something like a federation with a mandate to deal with common issues, or a collection of states whose sovereignty remains supreme, terms in which the euro-crisis and the refugee crisis, too, are being discussed? To illustrate, there is talk of strengthening bank supervision, the oversight of budgetary policies, the control of external borders and the like, but also about reducing EU powers and maybe rescind the common currency.

Maybe the EU as an institution has to be fundamentally reconsidered, but not quite in the way of those wishing to return to national rule. The introduction has hinted the alternative notions of what the EU is, or might be. It transcends the talk exclusively in terms of sovereignty. There has not yet been much discussion of what this would mean for European spatial planning, but maybe reality gives some hints. In fact much planning overlaps sovereign realms, leading to a jumble of informal understandings, agreements and also visions. The resulting complexity and uncertainty are in the nature of 'post-modern' statehood which some say the EU is heading for. But adequate conceptualisations of its institutional shape are still lacking, this being also true for planning.

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## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

Andreas Faludi (1940, Budapest) is Professor Emeritus for Spatial Planning Systems in Europe at Delft University of Technology. Previous appointments have been at Radboud University Nijmegen (1999-2004), the University of Amsterdam (1978-1998), Delft University of Technology (1974-1977) and the Oxford College of Technology, now Oxford Brookes University (1968-1973). He has written extensively on planning theory, Dutch and European spatial planning.

## Endnotes

- 1 Wheale, "Government by committee: Three principles of evaluation", 164
- 2 Balibar, "Europe as borderland", 192.
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