Workshop 2.3.
European spatial planning and territorial cooperation in times of economic crisis

Workshop convenors: Dr. Stefanie Dühr, Radboud University Nijmegen and Dr. Magdalena Belof, Wroclaw University of Technology

This workshop was organised by Dr. Stefanie Dühr (Radboud University Nijmegen) and Dr. Magdalena Belof (Wroclaw University of Technology). Within the context of the EU proposals for the future of territorial cooperation in the 2014-2020 programming period, the workshop discussed questions in relation to the role and objectives of strategic spatial planning in and for Europe. In the current economic situation, the value of integrated spatial development perspectives is increasingly questioned in many EU countries. National and regional spatial planning is being reformed or even abolished, as in England, as a consequence of changes to sub-national government structures. Also at EU and transnational levels, the enthusiasm of the 1990s to prepare integrated spatial visions seems to have waned, or is presented under different labels. After all, the question of coordinating actors and spatially-relevant policies continues to be high on EU agendas, as the recent examples of macro-regional strategies for the Baltic Sea Region and the Danube corridor demonstrate. Also within member states, e.g. at city-region level and at cross-border level the need to address functional relationships across political and administrative borders remains an important issue.

Four invited speakers addressed questions of whether there (still) is a role for strategic spatial planning at EU and transnational levels in the currently changing context. The invited experts were: Dr. Kai Böhme (Spatial Foresight GmbH, Luxembourg), Prof. Dr. Andreas Faludi (Professor of Spatial Policy Systems in Europe, Delft University of Technology, The Netherlands), Prof. Vincent Nadin (Professor of Spatial Planning and Strategy, Department of Urbanism, Faculty of Architecture, Delft University of Technology, The Netherlands) and Mr. Géza Salamin (Head of Department, Ministry for National Economy, State Secretariat of Planning Co-ordination, Department for Territorial Development Planning, Budapest, Hungary).

Géza Salamin explained that strategic spatial planning in Hungary is pursued with considerable enthusiasm at national and transnational levels, albeit with different levels of political commitment and with varying results in terms of the application of the strategies. He gave an overview of numerous strategic spatial planning initiatives to illustrate the potentials and challenges of such instruments in, and with the involvement of, Hungary. What seems to matter, especially in transnational activities, is a common understanding of what spatial planning seeks to achieve at this level of scale, and the commitment of political actors to ensure that the strategies are used in decision-making and action programmes. At the same time, such spatial visions needs to be ‘grounded’ and territory-specific to ensure their relevance for other spatial planning processes and implementation. Especially at European level, there is a danger for the discourse on spatial or territorial development to become too abstract to be able to engage actors from different levels and sectors. While EU funding is important to address functional issues at the transnational or cross-border scale, Salamin argued...
that INTERREG and ESPON initiatives would benefit from a strong underlying spatial strategy to support a better prioritisation of actions at the transboundary scale and ensure that outputs of EU-funded projects are used more widely.

Vincent Nadin argued that the current dominant attitudes in many European governments are to question the role of spatial planning. Although there are still examples of countries that pursue an integrated spatial planning approach, as the example of Hungary shows, Nadin pointed out that in many countries at the moment “planning is not very popular”. He also agreed that political support is crucial for spatial strategies, and especially to overcome the considerable gap between vision and implementation. The need for spatial coordination remains important for the European Union, but according to Nadin is hindered by a number key factors, including: (1) a jargony language and a mystification of the subject (‘territorial cohesion’ instead of ‘spatial planning’); (2) the question over an EU competence for spatial planning which has been decided in favour of the member states (resulting in weak capacity for spatial planning at EU level and varying political support given to spatial planning in the member states); (3) a continuing lack of understanding of the differences of approaches to spatial planning in the EU member states, which EU programmes such as ESPON have not helped to clarify; and (4) shifting arguments over the role and purpose of spatial planning for the EU and from an EU perspective, which has not succeeded in building on earlier achievements such as the ‘European Spatial Development Perspective’. Nadin concluded by pointing out that spatial visions and strategies are given considerable attention as an instrument for policy coordination in other parts of the world, such as China, and warned that Europe has lost its status as a model for such initiatives.

Kai Böhme highlighted the need for planners to reconcile spatial planning, economics and politics in order to ensure that spatial planning aims can be achieved. In EU policy in particular, the spatial dimension needs to be made explicit and the costs of non-coordination of spatially-relevant sector policies should be discussed openly. In order to ensure that strategic spatial planning plays a more prominent role, vision and leadership are important, clearer goals need to be expressed for European spatial development, a longer-term perspective needs to be provided and a more radical approach be considered than is currently the case in spatial planning where “visions” are merely “fuzzy consensus documents” of the EU member states. Böhme argued that in European spatial planning debates, we seem to be focused on detail and have lost of the bigger picture. We, as planners, find ourselves in a “complexity trap”, trying to understand everything which keeps us from formulating clear policy objectives and deliver convincing actions and instead prompts us to demand ever more and detailed studies and “evidence”.

Andreas Faludi argued that the role of spatial planning is the integration of spatially-relevant policies, and that territorial cohesion is not the fuzzy policy goal as which it is often criticised but rather consists of four clearly identifiable storylines (a “balanced”, “competitive”, “sustainable” and “coherent” Europe). The key question is how these storylines of the territorial cohesion objective can and will be achieved in the European Union. Faludi argued that we need to think “big” when we talk about policy integration and that planners continue to be held back by traditional ideas of planning for local communities. Instead of our continued focus on bounded territories, planners need to consider (and plan for) functional spaces, such as macro-regions and cross-border spaces.
In the discussion following the panel presentation, questions of whether a new definition of, and approach to, spatial planning in Europe may be needed and how stronger political commitment for such spatial visions could be achieved. Given the importance attached to achieving policy integration as a key role for spatial planning, the question was raised whose role it is to achieve such integration, and whether planning is powerful enough to take on this role. Calls for a stronger injection of the spatial dimension in EU territorial policy were made in order to overcome the sectoral approach and compartmentalisation of public policy.