

# Quaderni

del Dipartimento di Scienze Politiche  
Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore

ISSN: 2239-7302



**ORBEM PRUDENTER INVESTIGARE ET VERACITER AGNOSCERE**



7

2014

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Anno IV - 7/2014

Registrazione presso il Tribunale di Milano n. 355 del 27.06.2011

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Largo Gemelli 1, 20123 Milano - tel. 02.7234.22.35 - fax 02.80.53.215

e-mail: [editoriale.dsu@educatt.it](mailto:editoriale.dsu@educatt.it) (*produzione*); [librario.dsu@educatt.it](mailto:librario.dsu@educatt.it) (*distribuzione*)

web: [www.educatt.it/libri](http://www.educatt.it/libri)

ISBN: 978-88-6780-162-6

ISSN: 2239-7302

In copertina: MARTIN WALDSEEMÜLLER (1470 ca.-post 1522), *Mappa della terra*, 1507. Edito a Saint-Die, Lorena, attualmente alla Staatsbibliothek di Berlino - © Foto Scala Firenze

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# The challenges for the significance of regions in Europe. Some hints from regional policymaking practices

di MARTINO MAZZOLENI

**Abstract** – *In the last decades the sub-national dimension identified with regions has established itself in government and public policies and entered into collective imagination in Europe. The paper draws on the multi-disciplinary literature focusing on the success of European regions and on the “metamorphosis” of the concept of region in the context of globalisation. In light of recent trends of regional policymaking in Europe, this paper examines how the crisis of the territoriality of politics has affected the significance and role of the regional level of government. Nowadays, the regional space ultimately lies in the articulation and aggregation of interests in the policy process more than in the formal division of competences and in the structure of political authority.*

## Introduction: what are regions about?

Policymaking at the “meso” level of government<sup>1</sup> is an underdeveloped field of research in the social sciences, notably with regard to its implications for the conceptual significance of regions. This paper focuses on the evolution of the political meaning of regions in recent years, and on how regional political actors may interpret their role in today’s globalised social and economic environments. This work is, on one side, a review of the multidisciplinary literature concerning the definition of regions as political actors and, on the other, it stems from researches carried out on policy and strategic planning at the regional level in Europe<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> L.J. Sharpe (ed.), *The Rise of Meso Government in Europe*, London, 1992.

<sup>2</sup> Whose findings have been illustrated in other works: S. Bandera - M. Mazzoleni, *Metodi e strumenti della programmazione. Un confronto tra i documenti di programmazione strategica regionale in Europa*, in A. Bramanti - C. Salone (eds.), *Lo sviluppo territoriale nell’economia della conoscenza: teorie, attori, strategie*, Milano, 2009, pp. 233-52; S. Bandera - M. Mazzoleni, *La programmazione regionale in Europa. Alcune best practice di innovazione*, “IReR Working Paper”, n. 15, Milano, 2010.

Over the last decades, a body of multidisciplinary literature has developed regarding the regional or “intermediate” tier of government, underlining that Europe has witnessed a «proliferation of regional regimes»<sup>3</sup> and «conceptualisations of regional power»<sup>4</sup>. The experiences – and their respective theoretical elaborations – of city-regions, cross-border and Euro-regions, regional industrial districts and clusters, and learning regions, are but a few examples. The regional dimension has gained increasing meaning and relevance in multiple economic, political, and cultural processes in place and, consequently, in the different academic disciplines focusing on them. Hence, the region has fully entered the lexicon and imagery of multiple scientific perspectives. This has occurred in close connection with the profound developments experienced by Europe – and the rest of the world – in the last decades: political integration, globalisation, the growth of financial and economic interdependence, and their impact on the roles and functions of political institutions.

And yet, the definition of regions remains rather vague, notably due to the fact that the term “region” possesses different meanings both in the common language and for the various sciences dealing with it, such as international relations, geography, constitutional law, administrative law, etc. These academic subjects do not agree on one same definition, nor is there a semantic unanimity within them. For example, the region may be understood as an area in which aggregations, cooperation and competition among social and economic interests take place; and yet, with regard to this dimension, there are copious interpretations. While, from the point of view of political processes, one can look at the region as a phenomenon concerning all the three dimensions of political phenomena: polity, politics and policies<sup>5</sup>. Table 1 shows an elementary attempt to frame the various meanings that have been put forward, their foundational features and the scientific approaches that centre on them.

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<sup>3</sup> A. Legendijk, *The Accident of the Region: A Strategic Relational Perspective on the Construction of the Region's Significance*, “Regional Studies”, vol. 41 (2007), n. 9, pp. 1193-208 (1194).

<sup>4</sup> C. Carter - R. Pasquier, *Introduction. Studying Regions as “Spaces for Politics”: Re-thinking Territory and Strategic Action*, “Regional and Federal Studies”, vol. 20 (2010), n. 3, pp. 281-94 (284).

<sup>5</sup> For an introduction to these dimensions, see M. Cotta - D. Della Porta - L. Morlino, *Fondamenti di Scienza Politica*, Bologna, 2004, pp. 30-37.

Table 1 – The ontologies of the region

Meaning	Key elements	Main scientific domain
Territory	Physical space	Geography
Social environment	Human relations, attitudes, behaviours	Sociology
Economic system	Economic actors, fluxes, interactions	Economics
Government and public administration	Institutions, legal systems, bureaucracies	Law, public management studies
Political space	Politics and policy: partisan and interest mobilization, citizens' participation, authoritative decision-making	Political science
Community	Polity: language, culture, identity, borders	History, anthropology

In short, the meaning of “region” is far from being fixed. A comprehensive definition does not appear to exist nor, incidentally, does there seem to be an urgent need for it. The debate on the “regional realm” has yet to be closed and the region appears, now more than in the past, to be a multi-dimensional phenomenon.

With regard to scientific knowledge, it is possible to assert that, nowadays, «we know a great deal about the division of competences, intergovernmental relations, and the role of regions in the European Union, and quite a bit about regional party systems and competition.»<sup>6</sup>. Regional economic systems as well have been deeply investigated. Moreover, over the years a literature on regional policies has developed, which has already produced empirical analyses and theoretical reflections, albeit with diverging conclusions, with notable attention drawn to the experimentation and diffusion of public policies among sub-national tiers of government<sup>7</sup>. Nevertheless, «with the

<sup>6</sup> M. Keating - N. McEwen, *Introduction: Devolution and Public Policy in Comparative Perspective*, “Regional and Federal Studies”, vol. 15 (2005), n. 4, pp. 413-21 (413). Such themes have been the focus of attention of several works, notably centring on the electoral fortunes and strategic adaptation of ethno-regionalist parties; the impact of decentralization on party organization; changes in electoral arenas; party attitudes on decentralization. For instance, see D. Hough - C. Jeffery (eds.), *Devolution and Electoral Politics*, Manchester, 2006; W. Swenden - B. Maddens (eds.), *Territorial Party Politics in Western Europe*, Basingstoke, 2009; E. Hepburn (ed.), *New Challenges for Stateless Nationalist and Regionalist Parties*, London, 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Among those having approached regional governance from different disciplinary perspectives, many have repeatedly stressed on the concepts of policy experimentation and innovation, that are more likely to happen the more numerous the policymaking arenas are, as well as on policy learning and diffusion of good practices. See, for example, S. Rose-Ackerman, *Risk Taking and Reelection: Does Federalism Promote Innovation?*, “Journal of Legal Studies”, vol. 9 (1980), n. 3, pp. 593-616; D. Dolowitz - D. Marsh, *Who Learns from Whom: A Review of the Policy Transfer Literature*, “Political Studies”, vol. 44 (1996), n. 2, pp. 343-57; K.S. Strumpf, *Does*



exception of regional economic development (which remains a rather specialized field), there is a surprising lack of work on the effects of devolution to regions and nations on the policy process, policy substance and policy outcomes; there is little comparative work on the performance of regional governments»<sup>8</sup> as well as on the practices and rules of regional policy formulation and, in general, policymaking<sup>9</sup>. And yet, in the opinion of Hooghe et al.<sup>10</sup>, in order to understand regionalization «we need not only better theory, but better information about the structure of government from the local and regional levels to the nation, international, and global».

To this purpose, in order to offer our contribution, the next section of the paper introduces the motivations – concerning both the polity and politics dimensions as well as policymaking – for the success of the regional layer of government in Europe in the last decades. Then follows the illustration of recent theoretical reflections centering on the changing meaning of the region in the context of globalisation, with respect to which some considerations for the scientific debate will be finally offered, drawing from research undertaken on several regional-level governments. The region in Europe appears to keep its own identity, even though this has been subject to a process of redefinition.

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*Government Decentralization Increase Policy Innovation?*, “Journal of Public Economic Theory”, vol. 4 (2002), n. 2, pp. 207-41; C. Kotsogiannis - R. Schwager, *On the Incentives to Experiment in Federations*, “Journal of Urban Economics”, vol. 60 (2006), n. 3, pp. 484-97; H. Cai - D. Treisman, *Political Decentralization and Policy Experimentation*, “Quarterly Journal of Political Science”, vol. 4 (2009), n. 1, pp. 35-58; B. Galle - J. Leahy, *Laboratories of Democracy? Policy Innovation in Decentralized Governments*, “Emory Law Journal”, vol. 58 (2009), n. 6, pp. 1333-400; and the special issue *Policy Making, Learning and Devolution* of “Regional and Federal Studies”, n. 3/2012.

<sup>8</sup> Keating - McEwen, *op. cit.*, p. 413.

<sup>9</sup> A. Bruzzo, *La programmazione regionale in Italia: ricostruzione storica e questioni aperte*, Testo presentato alla XXX Conferenza Italiana di Scienze Regionali, Florence, 2009.

<sup>10</sup> L. Hooghe - G. Marks - A. Schakel, *The Rise of Regional Authority: A Comparative Study of 42 Democracies*, London, 2010, p. 68.

### **The regions in Europe: Origins and motivations of a success**

The emergence of the intermediate layer of government has been a trend shared by many European states in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. In the last decades, countries such as Italy, Spain, Belgium, France, and the UK, thanks to a series of regionalist (and, in some cases, properly federalist) reforms have abandoned the centralism which had characterised the model of the unitary modern state. As Hooghe et al. highlight: «not every country has become regionalized, but where we see reform over time, it is in the direction of greater, not less, regional authority»<sup>11</sup>. For the reasons that will be outlined in the next section, by now, few countries do not have a sub-national tier of government or administration, even those once considered as the archetype of the centralized unitary model, such as Britain and France, as well as countries of recent accession to the European Union. The regional reforms indeed «have been one of the most important innovations of the last decades. The regionalisation as the criterion of interest organization and political wills on a territorial basis has been asserting itself in Europe: today it is the rule, not the exception». Within this general trend, however, «different historical vicissitudes and a deeper or more superficial intensity of experiences of territorial autonomy have formed, on the European continent, distinct models of organization and functioning of the levels of power»<sup>12</sup>.

The regional phenomenon has both deep historical roots and more recent motivations. Several arguments have been put forward in the literature of various academic disciplines. They are not mutually exclusive but can, rather, be combined.

The first one, which can be referred to the dimension of polity, is the centre/periphery cleavage developed by Rokkan<sup>13</sup>. Its persistence could explain the various pressures that originate, in a bottom-up fashion, from national minorities aiming to obtain the devolution of political power from the centre. «Demands on the part of regional communities for more self-rule have strengthened» in past decades<sup>14</sup>. Actually, from 1950 to 2006, «the number of ethno-regionalist parties

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibi*, p. 52.

<sup>12</sup> M. Caciagli, *Regioni d'Europa. Devoluzioni, regionalismi, integrazione europea*, Bologna, 2003, p. 9.

<sup>13</sup> See S. Rokkan - D. Urwin, *Economy, Territory, Identity. Politics of West European Peripheries*, London, 1983.

<sup>14</sup> Hooghe et al., *op. cit.*, p. 55.

contesting national elections increased from nine (in six countries) ... to 20 (in nine countries)» and their share of votes has more than tripled in the same period<sup>15</sup>. Experiences such as devolution in Britain in the 1990s can clearly be explained in the light of this factor.

Further accounts are concerned with politics. According to one interpretation, the creation of regional-level political institutions can be explained by the efforts aimed at democratising political systems in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but also the willingness to increase popular participation to the government, which has also been pursued in countries where the regional level has been introduced more recently, such as Italy (1970s) and France (1980s). A different account refers to the interest towards decentralization shown by some political actors, individual politicians and sectors of the national bureaucracies, particularly linked to personal career opportunities (office-seeking strategy) and the possibilities of extending and increasing the control over policymaking.

There are, moreover, explanations specifically linked to policies and policymaking. First of all, one policy-related reason for the creation of regional authorities in Europe may be found in the establishment of the universalistic welfare state after World War II and in its exponential growth, particularly with regard to its expenditure. In time, this has forced political authorities to set limits for welfare services and to control its costs, and national governments have had to face an overload of social demands without being able to provide adequate outputs<sup>16</sup>. Hence, regions have become privileged spaces with new forms of policy efficacy. In short, according to Hooghe et al.<sup>17</sup>, «as the policy portfolio has expanded, so have the competencies of regional governments», provided with responsibilities over social and physical infrastructure notably – for example, in sectors such as health, vocational training, economic development, and spatial planning – since «the public goods for which governments are now responsible are more efficiently provided with the help of an intermediate level of government». In other terms, functional imperatives for public policies have been relevant drivers for regionalization throughout the Old Continent.

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibi*, p. 58.

<sup>16</sup> R. Rose, *Risorse dei governi e sovraccarico di domande*, «Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica», vol. 5 (1975), n. 2.

<sup>17</sup> Hooghe et al., *op. cit.*, pp. 55-56.

Secondly, in the last thirty years many scholars have either partially or entirely linked the creation of regional governments to the political and financial opportunities offered by the EU cohesion policy. «European integration has reduced the costs of regionalization and has catalysed reform»<sup>18</sup>. In particular, in countries such as Ireland, Greece, and Hungary, for example, sub-national authorities were introduced in the Eighties and Nineties, mainly in order to create the necessary requirements to obtain the structural funds. Nevertheless, among those who interpret regionalization in such reductive terms, basically looking at regions as «objects of EU politics, rather than subjects of its daily government»<sup>19</sup>, there are authors who acknowledge that, even in recently created regions, the political, administrative, and economic actors have eventually come to identify with the regional dimension of policymaking, to demand a larger involvement in regional decision-making processes and to stimulate regional governments to manage local policies more effectively. «Stronger devolution has, in general, provided institutional incentives for groups to regionalize» and «the region has emerged as a new arena for mediating relations between capital and labour» since the economic actors of a territory share the goal of enhancing infrastructure and human capital as well as attracting investment in the same territory<sup>20</sup>. In other terms, also (some of) the purely “administrative” regions, lacking a consolidated tradition of political autonomy and identity, have progressively developed a policymaking capacity and taken up the nature or real spaces for political mobilization, representation, and interest mediation. According to Graziano<sup>21</sup>, «EU cohesion policy has reinforced the “politicisation of the regional territory” and further legitimised the regions as political arenas due to the development and support of

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibi*, p. 55.

<sup>19</sup> C. Carter - R. Pasquier, *The Europeanization of Regions as “Spaces for Politics”: A Research Agenda*, “Regional and Federal Studies”, vol. 20 (2010), n. 3, pp. 295-314 (295).

<sup>20</sup> M. Keating, *Rescaling the European State. The Making of Territory and the Rise of the Meso*, Oxford, 2013, pp. 129-130. The sharing of goals among policy actors and the «territorial element in the definition and articulation of group interests», however, appears to be stronger where the identity of the groups (business, labour or third sector) are territorially oriented (*Ibid.*).

<sup>21</sup> P. Graziano, *From Local Partnerships to Regional Spaces for Politics? Europeanization and EU Cohesion Policy in Southern Italy*, “Regional and Federal Studies”, vol. 20 (2010), n. 3, pp. 315-33 (330).

regional interests in connection with the availability of EU resources for development».

Finally, a further policy-related category of explanations for the regional political dimension originates from the economic sciences and, notably, the study of post-industrial economic policies. The production model based on large, vertically integrated factories has largely shrunk; this has brought about a wide mobilisation of economic and political actors usually on a regional scale, aimed at revisiting existing macro-economic and industrial policies. Since the Eighties, with the transition to a post-Fordist economy, the core of economic regulation has shifted from wage policies to competitive dynamics among territories, from Keynesian interventionism to policies for innovation and human capital, as well as to new forms of financial relations<sup>22</sup>. The regional dimension has appeared to some observers as an essential junction between local dynamics (production, consumption, human capital training) and global dynamics (financial, commercial, information fluxes). Scientific and political awareness has spread, according to which «the enduring competitive advantages in a global economy lie increasingly in local things – knowledge, relationships, motivation – that distant rivals cannot match»<sup>23</sup>. New practices of regulation and clustering have developed mainly in spaces of a limited dimension, as compared to the national scale, and have generated new forms of regional governance. In this context, various actors have indeed stressed that the devolution of political power could make it possible for regional institutions to design *ad hoc* policies to develop the competitive advantages of their own territories. Nowadays, it is argued, regional governance should build and support specific territorial assets, which are vital for the creation of an innovative potential and for improving the productivity of economic actors<sup>24</sup>.

To recap, in the last forty years regionalisation has spread and accentuated in Europe thanks to the combination of all these dynamics, highlighted – as we have seen – by different academic approaches and yet not mutually exclusive, indeed rather complementary. The increasing relevance of the regional dimension may be considered as the logical result of general trends and pervasive phenomena such as

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<sup>22</sup> Lagendijk, *op. cit.*, p. 1200.

<sup>23</sup> M. Porter, *Clusters and the New Economics of Competition*, “Harvard Business Review”, vol. 76 (1998), pp. 77-90 (78).

<sup>24</sup> Lagendijk, *op. cit.*, p. 1200.

the revival of local identities, globalisation, the flexibility in industrial production, urban expansion, European integration, and the restructuring of the nation-state. The region «turned out to be at the right place and time»<sup>25</sup> in offering a suitable dimension for the emergence of these trends<sup>26</sup>.

Such a combination lies indeed at the basis of the widely-known multi-dimensional definition of “new regionalism” by Keating<sup>27</sup>, which involves:

- As for the polity dimension: the reassertion of historic identities, even those apparently forgotten in the course of time, with an ensuing political mobilization in the name either of nationalism (notably for stateless nations) or of regional autonomy.
- Concerning politics: an institutional restructuring with the decentralization of political authority in the name of modernization as a response to bottom-up pressures or as a means to strengthen the political system, responding to the demands of local stakeholders for greater political participation and larger responsibilities.
- With regard to policymaking, a functional restructuring: in the context of economic globalisation in which nation-states are less and less capable of managing their own economies through

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibi*, p. 1205.

<sup>26</sup> Geographers and regional economists have also studied how and why these developments have privileged the regional dimension. Two are the most popular perspectives. Structuralist scholars support “scalar selectivity”, considering that certain levels take priority over other levels, due to «the power which organizations at certain spatial scales are able to exercise over organizations at other, higher or lower scales» [C. Collinge, *Self-organisation of Society by Scale: A Spatial Reworking of Regulation Theory*, “Environment and Planning D - Society and Space”, vol. 17 (1999), n. 5, pp. 557-74 (568)]. «Yet these other levels may acquire important subsidiary roles, such as regions in global production networks, or the international level in the pursuit of nationally oriented interests» (Lagendijk, *op. cit.*, p. 1199). In this view, there are «dominant» and «nodal» (subsidiary) scales, the regions belonging to the latter category (Collinge, *Self-organisation of Society by Scale*, cit.). A second perspective is based on spatial selectivity, i.e. «the prioritisation of certain places in a wider territory», such as a region within a state. This occurs «through both material and discursive practices» and can either be intentional – as a choice of ruling elites – or unintentional, «since most political decisions and policy outcomes are spatially biased, advantaging some areas while disadvantaging others» (Cfr. Lagendijk, *op. cit.*, p. 1199).

<sup>27</sup> M. Keating, *The New Regionalism in Western Europe. Territorial Restructuring and Political Change*, Cheltenham, 1998.

redistributive policies and public investment, the region is evermore considered as an adequate political level for the making of economic and industrial policies. The “new” regions, therefore, should also be seen as a response to globalisation.

Globalisation which, in turn, has nourished in the last decades the revival of academic debates centering on the very notion of region. These are the focus of the following section, which outlines the consequences of globalisation for the regions themselves, as well as the multiple challenges that regional institutions and political actors experience nowadays.

### **The regions of the 21<sup>st</sup> century: from the government of the territory to the governance of networks and functions**

In the literature, within the contention among the various conceptualisations of the region, the functional thesis has had some success in recent decades. According to it, functional social and economic systems have started to transcend territorial boundaries. In fact, in a context where economic, social, and cultural relations transcend territorial limits and the traditional differentiation between the “inside” and “outside” of borders have become blurred, the nation-states have experienced a phenomenon that now seems to be affecting sub-national authorities as well: politics and, in some ways, policies too have started to separate from the territory. Following the progressive internationalisation and de-territorialisation of any subject – be it of either national or regional competence – it has indeed become more and more problematic to delimit a policy competence to a given territory.

Several years ago, with the strengthening of supranational integration in Europe and globalisation, but also the proliferation of independent authorities and agencies, political scientists – and other academics – put forward the thesis of the «retreat of the state»<sup>28</sup>, some even raising a question regarding the end of the sovereign nation-state<sup>29</sup>. A state that now seems «too small to deal with capitalism as a global

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<sup>28</sup> See W. Müller - V. Wright (eds.), *The State in Western Europe. Retreat or Redefinition?*, London, 1994, and S. Strange, *The Retreat of the State. The Diffusion of Power in the World Economy*, Cambridge, 1996.

<sup>29</sup> K. Ohmae, *The End of the Nation State. The Rise of Regional Economies*, New York, 1995.

system and too large to respond effectively to the rapid changes taking place at the local level»<sup>30</sup>. Some authors, «in the light of recent transformations brought about by global economic and political influences», utterly claim that the «territorial integrity of regions» as well is over<sup>31</sup>. In particular, according to the constructivist perspective, an economic context in which the production processes, economic relations, and knowledge networks are no longer limited in a defined space has brought about the emergence of a “relational” character of the regions, that can now be defined as «a series of open, discontinuous spaces constituted by the social relationships which stretch across them in a variety of ways»<sup>32</sup>. In Allen’s and Cochrane’s words<sup>33</sup>:

at the current political moment regions are being remade in ways that directly undermine the idea of a region as a meaningful territorial entity ... the governance of regions, and its spatiality, now works through a looser, more negotiable, set of political arrangements that take their shape from the networks of relations that stretch across and beyond given regional boundaries.

These relations often «form ‘regional’ spatial assemblages that are not exclusively regional, but bring together elements of central, regional and local institutions». All this calls «into question the usefulness of continuing to represent regions politically as territorially fixed in any essential sense»<sup>34</sup>.

In other terms, regions should be regarded as formed by a net of relations and connections, many of which take form elsewhere,

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<sup>30</sup> D. Webb - C. Collis, *Regional Development Agencies and the “New Regionalism” in England*, “Regional Studies”, vol. 34 (2000), n. 9, pp. 857-64 (858).

<sup>31</sup> Carter - Pasquier, *Introduction*, cit., p. 282.

<sup>32</sup> J. Allen - D. Massey - A. Cochrane, *Rethinking the Region*, London, 1998, p. 5.

<sup>33</sup> J. Allen - A. Cochrane, *Beyond the Territorial Fix: Regional Assemblages, Politics and Power*, “Regional Studies”, vol. 41 (2007), n. 9, pp. 1161-75 (1163).

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* Incidentally, in the latest years, also because of the need to rationalize the framework of territorial government, in order to reduce public expenditure many political and technical proposals have been put forward throughout Europe on the reshuffling of regional authorities’ borders and competences. For instance, “macro-regions” have surfaced in Italy in the least twenty years and have recently been given relevance in the party platforms of the regionalist Lega Nord movement. In January 2014, France’s President Hollande called for new and clearer administrative competences for regional councils as well as for the merger of several existing regions, announcing an *ad hoc* parliamentary bill. A similar proposal was already included in a 2009 report commissioned by President Sarkozy, which had no outcomes though. In England, regional assemblies were utterly abolished by 2010.



outside their own territories and, therefore, ought to be understood as «spaces for action»<sup>35</sup> and «social constructions» realised through the nurturing of a collective identity<sup>36</sup> more than the expression of a given territory, forever fixed. Today more than ever, indeed, regional political institutions define themselves in relation to other regions, both in the competition for public funds and in the search for an identity on the basis of which they can mobilize resources and actors. Therefore, they are constantly open to the reinvention of themselves as spatial entities with ever changing political meanings<sup>37</sup>.

Many observers notably point out that the role of sub-national authorities may vary according to different policy fields<sup>38</sup> while, even within the same countries, not all regions possess the same capacity to compete for the allocation of resources. In other words, the actual leeway available to regions may not be defined in a univocal manner, but rather should be constantly redefined for each single policy area and within each national context. This is especially due to the existence of trans-border fluxes that nowadays are no longer only economic (of goods, services, and workforce) but also concern the users of welfare services (most notably health and education).

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<sup>35</sup> P. Schmitt-Egner, *The Concept of "Region": Theoretical and Methodological Notes on its Reconstruction*, "Journal of European Integration", vol. 24 (2002), n. 3, pp. 179-200.

<sup>36</sup> According to the reflective approach, regions are political, institutional, and discursive constructs whose development is structurally conditioned and enabled, but not fully determined, by external conditions. Cfr. J. Agnew, *Regions on the Mind Does Not Equal Regions of the Mind*, "Progress in Human Geography", vol. 23 (1999), pp. 91-96. In this perspective, «regions only exist in relation to particular criteria. They are not "out there" waiting to be discovered; they are our (and others') constructions» (Allen - Massey - Cochrane, *op. cit.*, p. 2). In other terms, the region – as well as the state – should not be seen as a self-standing entity, but rather as a social product. According to Paasi, regions are indeed «both products and constituents of social action», sustained by four basic processes, namely territorial, institutional and symbolic shaping, and internal and external recognition [A. Paasi, *Europe as Social Process and Discourse: Considerations of Place, Boundaries and Identity*, "European Urban and Regional Studies", vol. 8 (2001), n. 1, pp. 7-28 (13)]. In conclusion, regions, according to some scholars, are «imagined communities» the same way as are European nation-states developed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (M. Keating - J. Loughlin - K. Deshouwer, *Culture, Institutions and Economic Development: A Study of Eight European Regions*, Cheltenham, 2003).

<sup>37</sup> Allen - Cochrane, *op. cit.*, p. 1163.

<sup>38</sup> Keating offers a synthetic review of the metamorphoses of the regions' policy domains in: *Rescaling the European State*, cit., chapter 3.

To recap, «the disappearance of borders, the Europeanisation of regional policies, and the realization of big infrastructures», let alone the evermore trans-national market of welfare services, «highlight the emergence of ‘post-national’ territorialities», that can also be seen in the activism of some regions in the context of global competition on economic as well as cultural and political exchanges<sup>39</sup>. Therefore, according to this view, the role and action of regional governments are progressively addressing functional networks which cross territorial borders and that can no longer be governed through policies operating exclusively within administrative borders. This change has been interpreted as a real “metamorphosis” of regional (as well as local) authorities in Europe.

Obviously, the elimination of the territorial dimension from political phenomena has been the target of critiques moved by scholars arguing that the nation-state «does not actually seem near to be over». Rather, the state «appears to have changed physiognomy and shown the resilience it needs to adapt to top-down and bottom-up pressures»<sup>40</sup>. Similarly, the end of the territorial character of regions has been contested as well, notably because political representation and decision-making processes are still rooted in territories<sup>41</sup>. European peoples and cultural, professional, and economic elites do not necessarily identify with regions as areas of relations rather than regions in their territorial sense. Nor does this mean that the historic and political peculiarities of any regional area are absorbed and dissolved by the fluxes of interactions that occur across territorial borders. There is a persisting opinion according to which territory «continues to matter» for regions<sup>42</sup> and that the region still has a symbolic potential, albeit differentiated throughout Europe. «Successive predictions of the end of territory have been confounded, as space is continually rediscovered and shapes economic, social, and political systems»<sup>43</sup>, at the sub-national level too.

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<sup>39</sup> S. Conti - C. Salone, *Le tessere del mosaico*, in S. Conti - C. Salone (eds.), *Il Nord, i Nord. Geopolitica della questione settentrionale. Rapporto Annuale 2010*, Società Geografica Italiana Onlus, Roma, 2010, pp. 18-19.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibi*, p. 17.

<sup>41</sup> Carter - Pasquier, *Introduction*, cit., pp. 283-89.

<sup>42</sup> C. Carter - R. Pasquier, *Conclusions*, “Regional and Federal Studies”, vol. 20 (2010), n. 3, pp. 425-30 (427).

<sup>43</sup> Keating, *Rescaling the European State*, cit., p. 191.

In other words, the territorial element has not (yet?) been fully replaced by the relational one<sup>44</sup>; the latter has only come abreast the former, that has kept vitality, at least for the polity and politics dimensions, but also – it appears – for (some) policies: as it is known, economic competitiveness policies – for instance – do emphasize the need to invest on the production of local collective goods able to enhance the endogenous assets of territories and local economic systems<sup>45</sup>.

### **Contemporary trends in regional policymaking**

To summarize, the European region still survives under the meanings of a symbolic space and a territory where politics organizes and policymaking takes place, although all these significations have been re-defined. In particular, Europe's regional political actors have had to adapt their own policymaking to the challenges outlined above by adopting some diffuse strategies. They seem to support the view of regions that are attempting to reinvent their own role to fit to the changing environment.

First of all, as concerns the medium-term agenda-setting and policy formulation, there is the growing trend amongst European regions – albeit with varying objectives and practical instruments – to create venues for the discussion on policy priorities of regional governance, such as “strategic committees” or “advisory boards” which have been introduced to advise regional executives. Moreover, following the pattern of EU cohesion policy planning, today many regional governments publish, alongside legislature programmes and specific strategies in policy areas, multi-sectoral long-term scenarios on the which to base dialogue and share priorities with regional stakeholders.

These are non-binding instruments that help the government, on one side, to fix some priorities and guidelines that overcome the time limit of their mandate and, on the other, to representatives of the regional community – that are involved in different ways and with varying intensity amongst regions – to offer to the government their

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<sup>44</sup> In Keating's words: «function and territory have always been twin components of social, economic, and political order, with the nation-state as just one effort to bring them into alignment». Keating, *Rescaling the European State*, cit., pp. ix-x.

<sup>45</sup> C. Crouch - P. Le Galès - C. Trigilia - H. Voelzkow, *Changing Governance of Local Economies: Responses of European Local Production Systems*, Oxford, 2004.

points of view on the future of the region. In other terms, these are instruments aiming to set some common strategic goals ... and may hence contribute to reduce informative and political uncertainty by assessing the resources, competences, and knowledge existing throughout the territory, and which the government by itself no longer masters, as well as by connecting of the action of different actors who somehow contribute to define the future of a region<sup>46</sup>.

It is possible to mention, as examples, *Rhône-Alpes 21*, the Wales Spatial Plan, *Zukunft Bayern 2020*, or the new generation of *Programmi di Sviluppo Regionale* adopted in some Italian regions. In broader terms, in many regional strategic and policy planning practices there appears to be a growing interest on partnerships with stakeholders. As seen, in the context of global competition, regional authorities ought to mobilize on more levels and in multiple arenas in order to obtain those resources and tools that they frequently cannot reach in their own national context. It has often been underlined how, in a Europe in which regions contend market quotas, resources and investments, only those capable of strategic leadership succeed: the critical feature, therefore, is the capability of building networks in their own territory, aggregating and connecting assets, steering energies and expectations of actors, even modifying partners and stakeholders according to the varying issues at stake.

This dimension of public policies – partnership – can be detected in most regional contexts<sup>47</sup>, articulated in various manners, and is also prescribed by strict budgets and the complex environments in which regional authorities operate, so that the establishment of partnerships seems to be a forced choice rather than a free one. There are regions, such as French ones, in which partnerships appear to be limited to the formulation of the legislature programme; in this case, partnership takes the form of consultation, through auditions and meetings that allow relevant non-governmental actors to make suggestions. Other experiences involve private and public partners in the policy

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<sup>46</sup>Bandera - Mazzoleni, *La programmazione regionale in Europa*, cit., p. 24.

<sup>47</sup>This finding is confirmed by Keating: «Almost all regional governments have sought to incorporate groups into the policy process. One motive is the need for information about conditions and policy options, given their limited reach and policymaking capacity. They also need group compliance, especially in development, where resources are controlled by the private sector» (Keating, *Rescaling the European State*, cit., p. 141).

implementation phase as well; this is a wider declination of partnership and may be seen notably in the British context.

Secondly, with regard to regional policy outputs, the competitiveness of regional economic systems, notably articulated in the strengthening of human capital, the internationalisation of the regional economy, innovation and infrastructures, seems to be a strategic priority for the policy process of many regions, together with environmental sustainability<sup>48</sup>. This emphasis clearly seems an attempt to respond to the extremely fluid context which has been described above. Regional authorities endeavour to convert their territories into smart and innovative spaces able to attract investments and fluxes, given that these are no longer under exclusive state and public control.

Thirdly, as for the implementation of regional policies, since the ability to elaborate and carry out effective policies is challenged daily by the social and economic environment, Europe's regional governments feel the need to improve their organizational coherence, notably in the current period of generalised scarcity of public resources. Thus, in many European contexts a critical feature of regional governance is the relationship between political institutions and the plethora of quasi-governmental bodies (agencies, authorities, public companies etc.) which are primary actors of regional policies themselves. All the regions have faced or are now facing the challenge of coordinating these bodies in order to strengthen the integration of their activities and, thus, improve the efficacy of public action in their territories<sup>49</sup>. In line with the paradigms developed by the New Public Management and joined-up government, the organizational capacity of performing policy functions has been at the centre of considerable investments by many regional authorities in the last years; these have concerned information systems, managerial capacities, vertical and horizontal coordination among government structures, and political control over the policy process and its outputs<sup>50</sup>.

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<sup>48</sup> Bandera - Mazzoleni, *Metodi e strumenti della programmazione*, cit.

<sup>49</sup> Bandera - Mazzoleni, *La programmazione regionale in Europa*, cit.

<sup>50</sup> In previous works, some examples have been illustrated, namely: the thorough reviews of regional policy planning undertaken in recent years in Wales and Lombardy; the evaluation system of management performance in Lombardy; the policy monitoring and evaluation systems introduced in Rhône-Alpes and Catalonia. See Bandera - Mazzoleni, *La programmazione regionale in Europa*, cit.

To summarize, the new objective of Europe's regional governments is no longer – or not only – to administer a territory but, on one side, to buttress the policy capacity of their own public administration and, on the other, to engage in mutual learning processes in order to impress a direction to the fluxes and dynamics that shatter them, by notably involving stakeholders in their policymaking. This does not necessarily mean to re-propose ancient neo-corporatist models. Yet for regional authorities, to cling to the traditional view of a government, limited to a bounded physical space, entails being doomed to be marginalized from dominant economic and political dynamics and from relevant fluxes of values and resources.

These trends well correspond to the thesis according to which the decline – or, in the eyes of some scholars, the end – of the territorial nature of politics has paved the way for the assertion of governance, with its two main meanings. On one side, governance expresses the idea according to which the role of political institutions and public powers no longer suffices for guaranteeing adequate and effective policies. For this, it appears necessary to mobilize different actors and to look for synergies, not only through normative regulations, but with the construction of a shared vision of the future<sup>51</sup>. On the other side, governance makes the self-organization regulative principle prevail over that of hierarchical organization, typical of government<sup>52</sup>.

The actual limits of the traditional, top-down government intervention at the sub-national level are also evidenced by the fact that the regional administrations' strategic planning documents are largely conceived as communication instruments and frameworks for the structuring of partnership relations with stakeholders<sup>53</sup> – in which regional governments are only one among the agents of public policymaking. Policy planning seldom has a real impact, also because of

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<sup>51</sup> Even if, as Edelenbos and Klijn stress, while «greater input from a variety of parties generates a variety of ideas and potentially enriches process substance» in policymaking, nonetheless «greater input does not guarantee good outcomes» (J. Edelenbos - E.H. Klijn, *Managing Stakeholder Involvement in Decision Making: A Comparative Analysis of Six Interactive Processes in The Netherlands*, "Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory", vol. 16 (2005), n. 3, pp. 417-46 (435-36).

<sup>52</sup> According to the functionalist perspective, this should be regarded as the outcome of the development of flexible – and no longer hierarchical – relations in the market as well as between the public and private sectors, also in reaction to the failure of top-down economic policies.

<sup>53</sup> Bandera - Mazzoleni, *Metodi e strumenti della programmazione*, cit.

the lack of attention paid on *ex-ante* policy evaluation as well as of the virtual absence of any link between strategic plans and the budgets of regional authorities. Hence, most regional strategic documents, with the exception of Italian ones, have in time taken up essentially a communicative value and, at the same time, the role of instruments elaborated in order to fix the consensus of both public and private partners of regional authorities, notably where (in France and England) regions are far from being central actors of social and economic policymaking and, therefore, «do not possess the tools and legitimacy to assert their own visions and strategies»<sup>54</sup>. In other words, these documents are often produced «as political-cultural messages addressed to the regional society» more than strategic command documents addressed to the regional government's structures<sup>55</sup>.

### **Conclusions: the new challenges for the regions**

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century European regions maintain many features that, as seen in the initial sections of this paper, made up their constitutive traits in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. And yet, most of them have been re-interpreted by regional political actors themselves. From being either active promoters or passive objects of institutional devolution; from being targets of a technocratic redistribution of policy competences; and from being the focus of EU cohesion funds, political institutions of the “meso” level have been transforming into venues for the promotion of public policy integration, of territorial co-ordination of actors, of innovative forms of economic development and mutual learning.

In fact, a widespread trend for regions has been to constantly re-define themselves in a context in which governance has imposed itself as the regulating principle at the sub-national level in Europe. Similarly to what has occurred to the nation-state, the region is no longer just a government that rules – more or less autonomously, according to the constitutional settings of a country – over a territory, a community and an economic system through its own bureaucratic apparatus. The region has become the outcome of a process of politicisation made by

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<sup>54</sup> *Ibi*, pp. 245-46.

<sup>55</sup> A. Bruzzo, *L'evoluzione della programmazione regionale in Italia*, in S. Casini Benvenuti - G. Gorla (a cura di), *Avevo sentito parlare di Regional Science. Un tributo a Giuliano Bianchi*, Milano, 2010, pp. 153-72 (160).

both public and private actors<sup>56</sup>. Even in countries where regions have been recently established or «have still a weak democratic sense for the population» (such as in France), a political notion of regions can exist<sup>57</sup>. As we have argued above, this no longer lies only in proposing substantial solutions and providing policy responses on pre-defined templates, yet also in offering the moral, symbolic, and concrete incentives that may lead stakeholders to directly take part in the regional decision-making and to coordinate their actions. This, today, gives meaning and sense to the regions, but not necessarily and automatically policy coherence, which might indeed be altered or undermined by the fluxes which have been outlined above and which often cross regional boundaries. Both governmental and private actors of regional governance ought to learn in which ways and forms such coherence should be declined in order to favour integration and development of public action. In this respect, it seems possible to agree on the following assertion made some years ago:

Regional actors might play a game that is much more ambitious and interesting than the simple claim for spaces of sovereignty in accordance with the old conception of the state. European regionalism, even across the institutional and functional diversities that characterize the various national contexts, seems indeed to suffer from a two-fold complex. On one side, with regard to national states, it insists in demanding a legitimisation for the exercise of an adequate sovereignty according to the functions allotted to regions (which mainly concern welfare and competitiveness); it is a sort of battle to become “small states” in order to matter. On the other side, with regard to EU institutions, region still present themselves as territorial portions of nation-states, to which structural funds can be attributed; financial resources to which regions cannot afford renouncing.

Instead, the right perspective seems to lie in a different way to conceive the role and space of political action. The devolution of functions such as those presiding over social cohesion, welfare, and economic competitiveness, makes the regions institutional subjects that become the targets of expectations and demands by citizens ... typically, the need for security, jobs, and health<sup>58</sup>.

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<sup>56</sup> G. Gourgues, *Studying Regions as Spaces for Democracy: A Political Sociological Approach*, “Regional and Federal Studies”, vol. 20 (2010), n. 3, pp. 353-69 (354).

<sup>57</sup> *Ibi*, p. 367.

<sup>58</sup> IReR, *Società, governo e sviluppo del sistema lombardo. Lombardia 2010. Rapporto di legislatura*, Milano, 2009, pp. 5-6.



To conclude, European regions have partially adjusted their policymaking patterns in order to face the multiple challenges that globalisation poses to their politics and polity dimensions. Nowadays the regional space for public action ultimately lies more in the practices of opening up agenda-setting and policy formulation, rather than in the formal division of administrative competences and in the structure of governmental authority<sup>59</sup> which, nonetheless, still influence the styles of action of public institutions<sup>60</sup>. Regional governments have indeed differed, both quantitatively and qualitatively, in implementing this strategy and achieving results<sup>61</sup>.

The stress made on competitiveness among regional-level policies; the opening of inclusive governance through partnerships, which have become widespread; the efforts to strengthen internal efficacy and coherence of regional administrations throughout Europe; all regions now face the challenge of putting these features of governance to good use, in order to make it possible for themselves to survive in a context of poor means, high fluidity, and pervasive fluxes.

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<sup>59</sup> Lagendijk, *op. cit.*, p. 1202.

<sup>60</sup> While it is true that regions may redefine their own role and goals according to the variations of their context, it is nonetheless worth stressing that the model of behaviour, with which they do it, still largely depends on the administrative traditions as well as on the institutional autonomy they enjoy. These, in particular, seem to significantly influence the type of organizational culture existing in regional governments, as well as the patterns of interaction with and learning from non-governmental subjects. «For instance, Catalonia can be assimilated to a real nation-state, and this has relevant effects on the functioning of its administration, which lives and operates as a national one, particularly replicating the organizational rigidity and compartmentalisation of government's departments ... On the contrary, the structures and policies of regions presenting a lower extent of political autonomy show a larger cross-cutting and integrated character. ... In addition, the more autonomous a region is and the wider competences it has, the less need it seems to have to assert itself; thus, its main organizational efforts will be aimed at its own functioning, centring – for instance – on the process of strategic planning and policy implementation (such as for Catalonia and Lombardy). On the contrary, maybe in order to gain in external political legitimacy, regions enjoying limited powers and acting in not many policy fields, have tried to invest in the improvement and strengthening of the definition of policy goals» (Bandera - Mazzoleni, *La programmazione regionale in Europa*, cit., p. 15).

<sup>61</sup> As Keating concludes in his recent work: «some regions have emerged as spaces of government, with a capacity to set policy directions, mould economic change, differentiate in social priorities, and sustain local identities in the face of state and supranational pressures. Elsewhere, territory is disorganized and subject to the continued domination of the nation-state or to international markets» (Keating, *Rescaling the European State*, cit., p. 191).

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ISBN: 978-88-6780-162-6 / ISSN: 2239-7302

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