
Territorial cohesion and regional competitiveness: Defining key-notions in the EU's regional policy

Bernard Elissalde¹, Frédéric Santamaria²

¹UFR de Lettres et Sciences Humaines, Université de Rouen, Mont Saint Aignan, France

²UFR Géographie, Histoire et Sciences de la Société, Université Paris Diderot-Paris 7, Paris, France

Email address:

Bernard.Elissalde@univ-rouen.fr (B. Elissalde), santamaria.f@free.fr (F. Santamaria)

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Abstract: By using three types of sources (official sources of the European Union, results of a questionnaire to practitioners, results of applied researches on European spatial planning), we demonstrate that no precise definitions can be given of two main notions of European spatial planning. This result is coherent with the literature on this field. This situation questions the operational interest of such notions. Some consider that a “pragmatic” view must be adopted. For them, research on that field should take into account what the notions are “doing” instead of trying to understand what “are” these notions. Nevertheless, a strictly pragmatic approach evades the issue of the choice of policies that are always normative (or “essentialist”).

Keywords: Territorial Cohesion, Regional Competitiveness, Regional Policy, European Union, Notions

1. Introduction

The different treaties that established the European Union (EU) distributed responsibilities in such a way that for certain policies solely the EU is competent (for instance the monetary policy) while other responsibilities are shared between the EU and the Member States. This is the case for the regional policy. This policy, also known as the cohesion policy, aims to counterbalance the differences in development across the EU by way of European public funding, in order to help certain regions to “catch up”. This policy is also concerned with supporting development in regions where the level of development is already considered satisfactory so that they can act as a driving force in the EU as a whole. The cohesion policy also fosters cooperation between European territories for the promotion of common initiatives involving several countries. The mobilisation of financial means to be allocated to this policy is subject to negotiations between Member States and the Commission for seven-year periods. It is within the framework of this shared competence that the main orientations of the policy at national and regional level are decided upon. This decision-making process engenders an interaction of influences between the European level and the infra-European level [1], but it has

not seen the emergence of unequivocal usage and implementation of the main objectives defined at the outset.

In this context, the institutions of the EU, and first and foremost the European Commission¹, serve to guarantee the general orientations of Europe in the area of spatial planning and development. These orientations are translated into notions that are to serve as references for the various players in regional policies in designing and implementing their policies. The EU has therefore tended to develop an *ad hoc* vocabulary for these key-notions. These wordings are either original coinings, or have been transferred from other domains and are adapted to the area of regional policies. The notions most often entail reference to a spatial dimension. Certain authors call them *spatial concepts*. For these authors, the value of these notions is that they synthesise complex realities, and at the same time link up with policy objectives fixed by the EU in territorial interventions [2].

However, the academic literature on regional policy in the EU shows that these notions are often defined in rather vague manner, and can *in fine* be interpreted in different ways. This situation can be explained by the setting in

¹One of the main bodies in the EU, which proposes and implements European policies.

which these concepts are developed. First of all, the institutional setting encourages the European authorities to bolster their legitimacy by developing a specific discourse, which is relatively stable over time and is upheld by recurrent notions. However contingent changes in political orientations negotiated with the Member States in the course of time lead to alterations in the meaning of these notions [3].

Further to this, the notions need to be applicable to geographical and institutional contexts that are necessarily varied across Europe. Consequently, the vagueness of the concepts helps to adapt to different situations without calling the wordings used into question. Authors such as Andreas Faludi [4, 5, 6, 7] have hypothesised that the orientations of the EU in the area of spatial development were less intended for *application* than for *implementation*. Concerning the use of these notions, this hypothesis implies that each notion should be adapted to the context in which it is used, which would reflect a "shaping of minds" by the EU and thus contribute to a process of institutionalisation of European spatial planning policies [8].

The aim of the present article is to look at the way in which these notions circulate from one area of usage to another, and in particular the area of applied research in the domain of European spatial development on the one hand, and on the other among players implementing these European policies on national and infra-national scale.

Given the restricted scope of the article, it is not possible to review all the notions concerning European spatial development. Two key-notions have been chosen, corresponding to two main objectives in regional policy: the notion of "territorial cohesion", and that of "regional competitiveness". These two notions are the two facets of the purpose of regional policies, that is to say:

- guaranteeing the European citizens comparable access to services whatever their place of residence (territorial cohesion)
- supporting potential for economic growth of the European territory in a regional framework (regional competitiveness).

For this purpose, three analytical tools are used:

- the first consists in proposing a definition of the notions from the EU viewpoint via a "genealogical" approach, mobilising the different official and academic sources
- the second is based on a survey conducted within the ESPON programme² on the definition and use of notions of European spatial development among players on national, regional and local level. The analysis was conducted on the responses to a questionnaire addressed to players in spatial development in different European countries³. Here the aim is not to propose a representative sample, but rather to

provide an overview of the definitions and usages of the notions by the players interviewed in a fairly large corpus of responses (102 respondents⁴) on trans-national scale (survey in 8 European countries⁵).

- the third is an analysis of applied research work conducted within ESPON 2013 concerning the definition and mobilisation of these notions relating to European spatial development in final reports.

This procedure enables the various spheres of usage of the notions to be covered: the official usage on the level of the EU, that of development practitioners at infra-European level, and that of academic research.

We will show that while these notions appear normative at European level, their wording enables diversity across Europe to be accommodated, and contradictions to be articulated [9]. In addition, the survey questionnaire demonstrates the wide diversity in approaches to these European concepts. Finally, we will also explore the diversity of academic usage, which varies from one author and one theme to another. The article will conclude with a discussion of the types of approach to development notions that should be fostered: a normative approach or a pragmatic approach.

2. The Notion of "Territorial Cohesion" Seen from the EU Perspective

The notion of territorial cohesion is set in the continuation of the policy known as "economic and social cohesion in the EU". This expression refers to one of the historical objectives of Europe: the reduction of disparities and imbalances between States and European regions, so as to enable the establishment of an interior market and improve quality-of-life for all European citizens. This desire for cohesion, here between territories, is related to a certain idea of "spatial justice", and a European model for society that has been repeatedly set out in the different treaties.

It was in the Amsterdam treaty of 1997 that the notion of "territorial cohesion" was introduced into the main European texts. However, this decision was only reached after lengthy debate. Before the Single European Act (SEA) which in 1986 introduced the idea of "social and economic cohesion"⁶ there was no explicit reference to the term cohesion. The idea is nevertheless fundamentally rooted in the societal objectives on which the Treaty of Rome

²ESPON (European Observation Network for Territorial Development and Cohesion) is an applied research project funded by the EU and specifically concerned with European spatial development.

³This survey was conducted in 2011 within the project ESPON 2013 entitled Capitalisation and dissemination of ESPON concepts (CaDEC).

⁴The final report of the project comprises a list of people interviewed, and a presentation of the distribution according to professional responsibilities and level of action (national, regional, local). The report can be consulted on http://www.espon.eu/main/Menu_Projects/Menu_TransnationalNetworkingActivities/cadec.html.

⁵Belgium, Spain, France, Italy, Latvia, the Netherlands, Romania, Slovakia

⁶Single European Act, 1986: this specifies that to promote the harmonious development of the Community, it should develop and pursue its action towards the strengthening of its economic and social cohesion. In particular, the Community should aim to reduce gaps between the different regions, and the delays in development in the least privileged regions (Article 23).

founding the EU (1957) was constructed. This treaty stressed the need to reduce development disparities between regions, and the need to find means for harmonious development of all Member States.

In 1993, in the perspective of the Amsterdam Intergovernmental Conference, an interest group (ARE or Assembly of European Regions) decided to organise debate on the future of Europe. The report by the working group in charge of examining the impact of community policies on territories was approved by this Assembly in a unanimously voted resolution in 1995. This resolution spoke of the considerable but differentiated impact of European policies, and the risk of territorial de-structuring that might result. It therefore proposed that the concept of economic and social cohesion should be extended in a future treaty to territories, suggesting adding the notion of territorial cohesion. Two years later, a reference to territorial cohesion was included in the Amsterdam Treaty, in an article relating to services of general economic interest and the role they have in the promotion of social and territorial cohesion on that scale⁷. Although generally escaping notice at the time, the notion of territorial cohesion was later promoted to a major policy objective in the EU.

In 2001, following the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP, 1999⁸), the second report on cohesion⁹ devoted particular attention to the new concept. The third report on cohesion (2004) explicitly sets out the relationship between social and economic cohesion on the one hand and territorial cohesion on the other. While social and economic cohesion remained a main objective for the EU, the creation of a borderless space and the establishment of economic and monetary unity meant that European citizens should enjoy the same opportunities wherever they were living. From this point of view, territorial cohesion, via the maintenance of a balance in the development of European territories, should ensure more harmonious economic development.

Overall, territorial cohesion provides a conceptual basis for the EU regional policy, and is part of the aim to strengthen economic and social cohesion. It also implies the idea of a common destiny for Europeans, where to bring different peoples together requires cohesion among their different territories.

The phrase "territorial cohesion" focuses at once on the diversity of European societies and nations, and on the need to avoid straining links between European territories, and indeed the need to strengthen them. In this sense, territorial cohesion enables public intervention to be sustained across territories, alongside the objective of

economic development of the EU. It therefore qualifies the action of the EU in matters of spatial development, even if this mandate is not formally allocated to European bodies.

From the point of view of the implementation of policies, territories appear as the main places where the sector policies of the different players articulate. This reflects a particular conception based on the idea that the basis for development is to be found on territorial scales that are shaped by concrete modes of functioning, among which the regions are prominent.

The territorial dimension of cohesion entails the following:

- the need to take account of the specific features of the various territories - urban, rural, mountainous, coastal, insular, peripheral, subject to natural hazards etc.
- the need to take account of the territorial incidence of other Community policies, so that they too can contribute to the aim of cohesion, or at least avoid working against it.
- consideration of the attachment of individuals to territories for cultural and historical reasons. This territorial reference to roots should enable a distinction to be made between what is specifically European in relation to other continents.

Far from opposing one another, these three approaches are complementary, although different categories of players tend to favour one more than the other¹⁰. The first issue is particularly favoured by associations of regions belonging to a given category¹¹, while the second approach is above all advanced by development or environment professionals anxious to promote integrated, multi-sector strategies. In addition, the reference to the territorial dimension enables each player to identify his/her preferred area of action – the EU for the Commission, the States for the Member States, or strategic development ensembles to which players see themselves as belonging (e.g. the macro-regions), and finally the regions. Territorial cohesion is thus a phrase that enables a multi-scalar approach that is very useful when defining and implementing European policies. It is indeed the EU territories as a whole that are concerned by cohesion, while the territorial reference also introduces a notion of development that is suited to the different European territories in terms of endogenous potential and preservation of their diversity. Stressing these three issues shows the flexible nature and adaptability of the concept.

3. The Notion of "Territorial Cohesion" as Seen by Players on Infra-European Scale

Responses provided by interviewees highlight the

⁷Services of general economic interest entail public service obligations for Member States

⁸A document setting out the general objective fixed by the Member States in the area of European spatial development.

⁹Reports on cohesion are documents for the follow-up of the implementation and the effects of regional policy. They also enable new perspectives to be opened for this policy.

¹⁰See Ph. DOUCET, "Territorial Cohesion of Tomorrow: A Path to Cooperation or Competition?", *European Planning Studies*, 14, 10, November, pp. 1473-1485, 2006

¹¹Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions of Europe (CPMR), association of delegates from mountain regions, Euro-cities, etc.

following main trends:

- Territorial cohesion viewed as a principle and an objective

The function of territorial cohesion is that it ensures balanced development across all territories (urban and rural), providing inhabitants with the appropriate quality-of-life. The task is "to reduce social and economic disparities, with particular attention to the least developed territories".

- Cohesion therefore carries with it the values of the EU

It is thus seen as promoting cooperation among peoples and territories ("improvement of territorial integration and promotion of regional cooperation").

- It materialises the idea of "equity" transposed to the territorial dimension, of living standards that are comparable, and of equal access for inhabitants to basic services ("policies should aim to organise forms of solidarity and levelling-out needed to compensate for the deleterious effects of the dominant economic model and the risk of exclusion"). In this respect, players and practitioners underline the key role of public bodies (at EU, national and regional level) in the redistribution process. The link between the concept and the efficient use of funds in regional policies is often mentioned.

- A positive and even approving view

Territorial cohesion, endowed with every virtue, is seen as a sort of ideal situation in the functioning of our living environment: "territorial cohesion is a concept linked to the harmonious, balanced development of a territory". It is seen as enabling sustainable development in all EU regions, and the promotion of equal living standards across regions: "territorial cohesion is the balanced distribution of human activities, and is the territorial translation of the objective of sustainable development".

- Territorial cohesion is also seen as a tool

Territorial cohesion serves to correct the deleterious trends of the economic system: "territorial cohesion is an intervention and solidarity tool that can reduce inequalities in national economies". It is seen as making it possible to "combat segregation and social exclusion, which are risks encountered on all levels of territory". Emphasis is placed on developing the least developed regions, using structural funds: "territorial cohesion aims to smooth differences between regions, using different financial tools".

- Evaluation of territorial cohesion

As they are confronted with concrete demands, the different players wonder how to assess territorial cohesion - how can new measures be evaluated via case studies integrating the following: quality-of-life, quality of social relationships, access to facilities, economic productivity, accessibility, mobility? Certain players suggest studying territorial cohesion in ways other than mere statistics, in particular by taking into account new forms of territorial organisation (metropolitan urban, zones, peri-urban zones, rural areas etc). Others stress the fact that this notion needs to be linked to other European notions that players have to deal with: what are the relationships between territorial

cohesion and regional competitiveness, or between territorial cohesion and polycentric development for example?

4. The Notion of Territorial Cohesion in Applied Research Reports in the ESPON Project

Territorial cohesion, seen as a major objective, is indirectly or directly present in the work within the ESPON project, where it is used as an objective or a yardstick to diagnose the quality or inadequacy of a situation.

The reports considered here are as follows:

- Territorial Impact Package for Transport and Agricultural Policies (TIPTAP)

- European Development Opportunities in Rural Areas (EDORA),

- Demographic and Migratory Flows Affecting European Regions and Cities (DEMIFER)

- Territorial Impact of Globalization for Europe and its Regions (TIGER)

In these reports, territorial cohesion is a reference frame for the methodologies developed in the studies. Hence there is not, properly speaking, any definition of the concept to which reference is made, but a set of criteria or variables supposedly linking the object of study (demographics, rural areas, transport etc) and territorial cohesion. Territorial cohesion is approached in numerous manners, and apprehended indirectly. The contours of territorial cohesion are deduced from the indicators mobilised in its name. The concept of territorial cohesion is assumed as a major dimension of European territorial policies, and serves to map out the procedures, the indicators and the scenarios imagined in the study reports.

Thus, in the TIPTAP report, territorial cohesion is approached via a triptych formed by territorial quality, territorial efficiency and territorial identity. This approach is based on a range of territorial attributes – social, environmental and economic factors, such as quality-of-life, working conditions, poverty alleviation, economic performances, quality of services and transport, conservation of natural resources etc.

In the case of the EDORA report, there is a top-down approach. This report recalls that the mission of the cohesion policy is to support all the rural areas to enable them to realise their full potential, in the light of specifically rural challenges such as remoteness and sparse population. The authors conclude to the need to introduce "rural cohesion" via a wide range of domains, tested in relation to the efficacy of Community policies for rural areas.

The common denominator of all these indicators is that they are all more or less correlated with ideas of equity and solidarity. This is true of DEMIFER, where differences in potential demographic evolution across European territories bring the territorial cohesion of the whole into the equation; it is also the case for the TIGER report, where

territorial cohesion can be evaluated from the observation of disparities in GDP per inhabitant in the main globalisation zones.

The DEMIFER report broaches the issue of demographic trends on the scale of the regions. It successively looks at ageing and population decline, the impact of migration, and that of regionally differentiated dynamics in the working population. These different questions are considered as challenges to be met by certain regions, and as obstacles to the achievement of territorial cohesion.

In the TIPTAP report, territorial cohesion provides the theoretical framework for measurement of territorial impact. The three components of territorial cohesion, as defined by the project, are broken down into criteria. For each criterion, indicators are formed with a view to quantitative measurement, and different scenarios are tested. In the area of transport, three scenarios were used: one based on all the investments achieved or planned for horizon 2030, another integrating new infrastructures, and finally one where the regulations in the area of transport are stepped up (fares, security). For each indicator, then for each criterion and finally for each dimension of territorial cohesion, according to evolution scenarios, conclusions can be drawn on the effects of one or other policy in the area of territorial cohesion.

The EDORA project puts the emphasis on a multi-level approach as a way of strengthening territorial cohesion in rural areas, while at the same time considering that change in rural environments and differentiation processes occur on different spatial scales. On local scale, the approach is based on the notion of territorial capital and immaterial aspects of rural identity - human and natural landscape heritage. These are endogenous factors grouped under the heading of development. These approaches raise the question of how interventions aiming to support territorial cohesion in rural areas can be added to the range of policies in the form of autonomous measures enabling the notion of "rural cohesion" to be promoted. The concept of territorial cohesion is mainly mobilised via two themes:

- that of rural-urban relationships – the notions of urbanisation and "counter-urbanisation", of periphery, and of alternating migrations are central elements here
- that of "remote under-populated areas", which are a classic component both in rural development and in cohesion policies. Here it is the most remote rural areas subjected to an "impoverishment" trend in their populations and their economic activities via a self-sustaining process. This report does not set out to provide answers to the question of territorial cohesion, but the typologies and the scenarios it provides aim to produce information enabling adjustment of the measures proposed in favour of cohesion.

In the TIGER report, territorial cohesion is approached by comparing spaces in a given category with respect to their ability to resist the pressures of world competition, and in particular comparing European metropolises that can be described as "global" with the others. The report makes alternate use of this concept and that of "social and

territorial cohesion", mobilised in the paragraphs devoted to the place of Europe in the world. The concept is used in a comparative perspective between the European Space, NAFTA and ASEAN. Territorial cohesion is estimated inside each zone, from the GDP per inhabitant and a ratio between the wealthiest and the poorest regions. This ratio fluctuates according to the period for Europe and NAFTA, while there is a regular decrease for ASEAN.

5. The Notion of "Regional Competitiveness" Seen from the EU

The notion of regional competitiveness relates to a conception of economic development whereby regions are considered as entities that compete with one another, and where their competitiveness is based on the existence of certain socio-economic factors in some territories making them more attractive and innovating than others.

The concept of competitiveness, well-known in business economy, was transferred to spatial economy by M.E. Porter. For this author, competitiveness and the standard of living in a region are determined by productivity arising from the way in which resources are used. He underlines the importance of a specific "environment" via his well-known diagram known as the "diamond". M.E. Porter thus claims that the driving forces of prosperity are "moving to the microeconomic level-to the capabilities and behaviour of units below the whole economy such as individuals, firms, industries and clusters [...] it is becoming more apparent that suppliers, relationships, partnerships, and many other resources that firms draw upon have much to do with the locations at which company activities are based" [10, p. 140].

Academic research then continued to refine this theoretical framework with the contributions by G. Bristow [11], who established the regional scale as a new basis for economic development because of the greater impact of potential outside factors on local economies. Criticism from R. Camagni [12] questioned the mere transferability of the world of business to that of territories. For him, regions are in direct competition with one another on the basis of absolute rather than comparative advantages, enabling each to sustain its level of development via functional specialisation.

In the framework of the EU, the notion of regional competitiveness appeared in the European Council of Berlin in 1999. It was then a question of improving the competitiveness of regional economies, always in association with other objectives such as social cohesion and employment. The rise of this notion as a main reference was subsequently reinforced by the Lisbon strategy in 2000, a document with a political orientation that aimed to make the EU "the most competitive and dynamic knowledge economy in the world by 2010." As earlier, this objective was accompanied by that of sustainable growth and better social cohesion. Reference to the idea of competitiveness applied

to territory thereafter became systematic in official texts. We can cite the following:

- The 3rd report on cohesion (2004) entitled Cohesion, competitiveness, employment and growth
- The objective Regional competitiveness and employment in regional policy for the period 2007-2013
- The document Europe 2020 which aims to "stimulate intelligent growth" by investing more efficiently in education, research and innovation, and in sustainable growth by giving priority to economies with low carbon emissions and inclusive, competitive industry.

Beyond the fact that it was progressively institutionalised, the idea of regional competitiveness should be viewed as a change in direction in European regional policy. Unlike the tradition of a "compensatory" role in the use of funds in regional policies, the introduction of the idea of competitiveness relates to the notion that growth can be driven from inside by internal resources and abilities to adapt in territories. The emergence of this notion of competitiveness should therefore be repositioned in a context of reflection by the Community authorities on the most efficient means to improve the dynamics of a European economy in the process of being out-distanced in the race to globalisation, considering that while the causes of the problem are global, the repercussions are local and regional.

We can note the absence of any perceived contradiction between the redistribution aspects of regional policy and the drive for regional competitiveness. From this point of view, the orientations of regional policies apparently very easily articulate regional competitiveness and territorial cohesion, despite the fact that these two notions can appear difficult to reconcile¹².

6. The Notion of "Regional Competitiveness" as Seen by Players on Infra-European Scale

Definitions of regional competitiveness cover a wide range of interpretations. Mainly, regional competitiveness is linked to the idea of competition between territories, and to the notion of the quest for a dominant position in the setting of globalisation. Thus regional competitiveness is linked to the idea of taking part in globalisation. It therefore concerns the situation of competition between territories both on national and international scale. Working towards regional competitiveness should thus enable a region "to live up to the challenges of globalisation", and should enable it to "sustain competition with other regions" in a certain number of domains. This position is carried forward via the idea that regional competitiveness implies the emergence of areas of supremacy: "a combat between regions pursuing the same objective, and generating a

necessary rivalry between them". This therefore entails the ability of regions to improve their performances and their ranking in inter-regional competition, and also to improve scope for exchanges between them.

The idea of competitiveness is also associated with attractiveness, and with development. Attractiveness is based on the training and skills of the labour force, and the ability to attract outside investment. Consequently, there is an assimilation of regional competitiveness to regional attractiveness. This should translate into the strengthening of regions in world competition, and also into a search for complementarities between regions on national scale. It also means making good use of comparative regional advantages. This strategy mobilises potential (economic, social, environmental) and abilities (to attract investments and businesses, to react to change) specific to each region, which should be used as efficiently as possible (sustainable and efficient use of endogenous resources, for instance). Regional competitiveness is also defined via reference to the mobilisation of more specific strategies, such as the ability to anticipate economic change, to ensure cooperation between economic players to stimulate regional development, to implement infrastructures and to hand out direct aid.

A wider definition again relates to the identification of factors in regional competitiveness, such as those relating to the initial economic and social structure (specialisation, cooperation among players, collective learning abilities etc), to geographical location (e.g. accessibility), to resources available, which, combined and exploited, provide information on the relative capacities of regions in terms of competitiveness.

There is also a definition that is somewhat idealistic, where competitiveness is articulated with a development objective so as to generate high income and standards of living. In this case, regional competitiveness becomes a means to reach more balanced development and sustainable growth, reducing inequalities between regions and supporting the development of the regions that are lagging behind.

7. The Notion of "Regional Competitiveness" in Reports on Applied Research in the ESPON Programme

The report entitled Regions at Risk of Energy Poverty (RERISK) uses a series of indicators, such as the ability for innovation in the field of energy in a region, which enable a comparison of the performances of economies one to the other. These innovations are thought to be able to contribute to reducing economic vulnerability, by diversifying economic structures via the creation of new industries. Competitiveness here is conditioned by the search for reductions in costs, mainly in the area of energy

¹²See op. cit. Jensen, Richardson on the question of the articulation of contradictions in European discourse on territorial development.

supply.

In the report *Demographic and Migratory Flows affecting European Regions and Cities (DEMIFER)* devoted to demographic trends, competitiveness is considered as a dependent variable for demographic and migratory evolutions. Variations upwards or downwards in the working population have an impact on economic growth and competitiveness.

The report entitled *Territorial Impact of Globalisation for Europe and its Regions (TIGER)* is organised around several questions on the relationship between competitiveness and cohesion. In the EU Territorial Agenda it is stated that the success of EU strategy will depend not only on integration among regions in Europe, but also on their integration with neighbouring countries, and even with countries worldwide¹³. In this context, the TIGER project consists in analysing whether the intensity and the nature of relationships (commercial exchanges, investment flows) between Europe and the rest of the world are liable to improve the internal cohesion of the European space. Are there territorial policies likely to contribute to improving Europe's position in the world while at the same time improving territorial cohesion? This report, by broaching the issue of the complex links between competitiveness, openness and connectedness of European territories on different scales, attempts to ascertain whether the emphasis on metropolitan areas, thought to "play an important part in the global maintenance of competitiveness in the EU" (EEC, 2011) is compatible with the objective of territorial cohesion, and whether it contributes to reducing the strong territorial polarisation of economic development, by avoiding the great regional disparities in the EU from becoming even more pronounced. At the same time, the TIGER report notes a certain number of questions on the relationships between competitiveness, metropolises and the EU territory as a whole:

- The difficulty in assessing the impact on competitiveness of an improvement in connectedness. While global networks are essential for "global cities", it is difficult to measure the impact for the other cities.

- There is no evidence that the strengthening of the main European metropolises would improve EU competitiveness as a whole.

Finally the question, often raised by analysts, of a possible contradiction or a difficulty reconciling opposing ideals such as cohesion and competitiveness is broached head-on in the report *Geographic Specificities and Development Potentials in Europe (GEOSPECS)*. On the one hand, compensating for geographical "handicaps" could create a context leading to greater social justice. On the other, the valorisation of territorial capital could do more to foster competitiveness. The classic scenarios

assume that the contradictions between cohesion and competitiveness are liable to increase with the process of metropolisation and the concentration of the weight of the European pentagon¹⁴. GEOSPECS shows, on the contrary, the need to aim for more refined scales (in particular infra-regional) for the analysis of growth and development models within regions, rather than focusing on the convergence or divergence between the various regions in a country or in the EU.

8. Discussion and Conclusion

As we have seen, the notions studied allow a degree of flexibility enabling them to be adapted to different contexts within Europe, and making it possible to articulate what might seem, theoretically or practically, to be contradictions.

Although it is not possible to establish any cause-effect link¹⁵, it must be conceded that the present deployment of these notions on infra-European scale gives considerable leeway to highly varied interpretations. The same is true for the mobilisation of these notions in European research applied to development issues. What is then the answer to the paradox resulting from the diversity of interpretations and ideas mobilised?

This question opens a wider debate concerning the usefulness of having clear notions available to which spatial development actions can be referred so as to meet community objectives. Indeed, certain authors [13] consider that blurred or ambiguous notions are difficult to implement and compromise the overall coherence of action undertaken. For a notion to be useful, it is therefore relevant to link it to a set of precise objectives, enabling it to be understood in the same manner by the individuals implementing it (researchers, elected delegates, practitioners, citizens).

In the area of European spatial development, this debate is also present. In 2007, the European Commissioner for regional policy, Danuta Hübner, wanted a clear, common understanding of the notion of territorial cohesion to be proposed so as to assist the EU in developing its policy priorities more efficiently¹⁶. This approach led to the publication in 2008 of the Green Paper on territorial cohesion¹⁷. Starting from a public consultation implicating infra-European, national, regional and local institutions, this explored the different viewpoints possible for this

¹⁴Dynamic development zone in the EU outlined by London, Paris, Milan, Hamburg and Munich.

¹⁵The differences in definition of these notions are also probably connected to institutional and cultural differences that are national or even infra-national.

¹⁶D. Hübner, "Territorial cohesion: Towards a clear and common understanding of the concept. Speech delivered at the informal ministerial meeting on territorial cohesion and regional policy", Ponta Delgada, Azores, Portugal, November 2007. Available at <http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=SPEECH/07/743&format=HTML&aged=0&language=EN&guiLanguage=en> (accessed 12 December 2011).

¹⁷European Commission, 2008, Green paper on territorial cohesion.

¹³European Commission, "The territorial state and perspectives of the European Union, Background document for the Territorial Agenda of the EU 2020", 2011

notion.

Conversely, using certain empirical studies in the area of European territorial development, certain authors [14] consider that these different notions play a part in the elaboration of plans for action despite their lack of conceptual clarity. For Andreas Faludi, the notions mobilised by the EU have a "generative capacity" within existing policy frameworks or in the elaboration of new policies. Along the same lines, David Shaw and Olivier Sykes consider that the concept they studied, that of polycentrism, "performs in different ways in different planning processes and contexts" [15, p. 300]. In a recent article returning to the debate mentioned above, Gareth Abrahams concluded that, for these authors, it is less important to exactly determine what a notion covers than to identify what results it produces [16]. In the same article, the author extends the debate to development in general, referring to theoreticians of pragmatic planning, among whom he includes authors such as SM Stein and TL Harper [17]. For these authors, the tools developed from "essentialist" or normative definitions impose a set of rules to be followed, rather than encouraging innovating answers suited to contexts that are always singular. These authors thus rather advocate concepts with a degree of fluidity, opening up the way for usages that are better adjusted to the contexts in which they are to be deployed. This so-called pragmatic approach has today diffused among theoreticians of planning¹⁸.

This viewpoint is coherent with the analysis presented in this article. However we think it necessary to make a distinction between the operational point of view and the scientific and policy point of view. Indeed, in scientific terms, reducing the notions of European planning and development to a strictly pragmatic approach does not allow for apprehension of the intentions and the deployment of the notions in question on the level of the EU. Here what is at stake is not so much what these notions produce as the manner in which they are oriented towards certain implicit and explicit objectives, and the way in which they are designed and diffused in the European debate. Finally, a strictly pragmatic approach does not seem to us to be liable to identify the forces at work within the EU that explain the emergence and diffusion of certain key notions in planning and development of the European territory. In addition, while a pragmatic approach guarantees the adaptability of these notions, it can also compromise the efficiency of players on the different territorial levels, if they have only retained the "relativity" of European discourse on spatial planning and development.

¹⁸"Drawing on the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze, Hillier suggests that we should not only ask what concepts "do" in the actual world around us, but we should also speculate what these concepts "might do" and how they "might" affect what other concepts, practices and material entities "do". This broader, speculative approach to pragmatism may prove useful to groups whose research is intended to consider how concepts affect policy-making practice now and in the future" (Abrahams, 2013, p. 2).

In fine, the strictly pragmatic approach evades the issue of the choice of policies that are always normative (or essentialist). Consequently, it seems to us important to reflect too on the normative nature of these notions. To return to examples mentioned earlier, territorial cohesion offers a conceptual basis for action in the EU in territorial planning and development, which enables specific action in this area to be legitimised. Alongside, the notion of regional competitiveness could appear as a form of "essentialisation" of economic competition between European regions

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