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Region



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The term region is defined and understood quite differently depending on the scientific, political, cultural or socio-economic context. There is consensus that there are no generally applicable 'universal regions' and that regions are rather constructs based on specific characteristics and purposes. Regions are created based on empirical and analytic considerations or from a normative and programmatic perspective; likewise, they can be defined according to similarity or interactional principles.

1 Terminology

In general, a 'region' is defined as a contiguous, medium-sized spatial subdivision that can be demarcated based on certain characteristics within an overall space. In everyday language, the term *region* or the attribute *regional* is mostly used in connection with situations or processes that extend beyond the merely local context but take place at a level below or outside the national level.

Originally, the word *region* was derived from the Latin *regio*, meaning 'direction, district, area, territory' or *regere*, meaning 'to straighten, guide, direct'. The term 'region' now has various meanings and uses in German depending on the context.

The use of the term 'region' in politics and administration is fairly recent. The traditional levels of the administrative structure (▷ *Administration, public*) do not include any elements designated as regions. In places where they have been introduced in the past as an additional administrative hierarchical level, e.g. in France, Belgium, Italy or Spain, they are primarily a manifestation of aspirations towards decentralisation and autonomy. The planning regions (▷ *Federal state spatial planning, federal state development; ▷ Regional planning*) defined by the German federal states by law or ordinance for ▷ *Spatial planning* serve to fulfil tasks for which the existing administrative units are not or are no longer suitable due to their spatial layout, without having to change the existing administrative structure with its three general levels of hierarchy (municipalities, districts, government regions) below the level of the federal state.

While there is frequent mention of regions in an economic and social context, the territorial units in which the economy and society are variously organised, including in a spatial sense, are usually referred to officially as districts, areas or territories (sales territory, marketing area, chamber of industry and commerce districts, jurisdictional districts, etc.) and are usually demarcated according to administrative or technical considerations. Where there is explicit mention of regions, the focus is on the analytical and planning aspect (labour market regions, spatial planning regions), the cross-border aspect (EUREGION) or a spatially-related programme (regions as funding areas or action spaces).

In a cultural context, in German the word *region* is often used as a modern-day synonym for homeland, linguistic area or ▷ *Landscape*. This is at times associated with political or ideological notions of regions, which focus on the inner cohesion of population groups or religious communities and their distinction from the outside sphere up to the point of separation from the superordinate state structure.

The term *region* is also used in a scientific context. In addition to geography, where the region is a constituent element of the inherent object of study, numerous other disciplines have developed and used the term 'region'. Specific branches of regional sciences have evolved in economics and the social sciences (▷ *Regional economics*), and, likewise, academic concepts of regions have been developed in law and public administration, history and linguistics.

The term 'region' has undergone a comprehensive reassessment in the more recent discussions in the social sciences. 'Region' is no longer only used as a formal, i.e. objective classification term, but also as a constitutive element of the formation of economic and socio-spatial structure. A region is not a formal 'container' for the economy and society, but also expresses an interactional

relationship and action context based on institutional and spatial proximities. Accordingly, the notion of region has also gained new significance for policymaking and planning (Blotevogel 2005: 366).

2 Theoretical concepts

The theoretical analysis of the concept of region has always turned around the question of whether there are 'natural' or 'true' regions, which are equally suitable for quite divergent purposes of analysis and action. The notion that such 'universal regions' – in the sense of holistic, singular realities – exist was advanced primarily by geographers specialising in regional studies and in the debate on regionalism. In France and in the United States, regional demarcations were introduced and administratively embedded based on this perception (*régions géographiques*, *state economic areas*). For the territory of the European Economic Community, proposals for a regional subdivision were also advanced as early as 1959 to reflect the totality of spatially-relevant factors and which should therefore be equally suited for analytical as well as for administrative or planning purposes.

Such attempts to delimit objective regions in the sense of natural, social, economic or cultural spaces independent of (epistemic) interests are, however, confronted with the criticism that regions are always spatial subdivisions for a specific purpose, the demarcations of which must differ according to the actual factual circumstances or intentions. Regions are therefore an intellectual construct created by the selection of identification and demarcation criteria related to a specific epistemic interest or problem. The question about the scientific value or social relevance of regional demarcations can therefore only be resolved in accordance with the underlying epistemic or action purposes and in relation to specific addressees.

The creation of regions as a conceptual abstraction and generalisation process tends to lead to simplifications of problems by reducing complex ecological, economic or social systematic contexts to their spatial dimension, thus making them more easily comprehensible (Weichart 1996: 33). This reduction of complexity can be a particularly efficient means to provide a practical solution for everyday problems, particularly in the context of spatial planning and federal state spatial planning. However, each case should be examined as to whether a spatial abstraction would help to better understand the social or economic context of the problem. In addition, there are grounds for presuming that modern, functionally differentiated societies can no longer be easily grouped into spatial aggregates as was the case in pre-modern, hierarchically structured societies. Modern day individuals, groups, institutions or enterprises often have very expansive, heterogeneous and discontinuous reference spaces which manifest themselves in diverse ways, without recognisable hierarchies and without any clear regional demarcations.

Nevertheless, the fact that generally applicable or multifunctional regional demarcations are postulated time and again and are in particular designed for spatial analysis and spatial planning purposes may also be related to the fact that regional demarcations in fact quite frequently coincide despite being based on extremely diverse criteria. There are frequently spatial coincidences between the structural patterns of natural, cultural, social and economic spaces that are the result of historical processes of interaction. In this regard, it is, among other things, the identification and designation of certain geographic spaces as a region which leads to a certain

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(occasionally intended) own dynamic towards an approximation of internal structures and a stabilisation of external borders.

For some time now, there has increasingly been talk of a renaissance of the regional concept and of a reawakening of regional awareness in science and policymaking. This is said to be caused by the European integration process and the increasing ▷ *Globalisation* of economic ties and interactions. Both lead to an objective loss of national or state autonomy and steering capability. Regions should in this context offer manageable identification and action spaces as a type of counter model to actual or presumptive social and political trends of centralisation and alienation. The reason for the increased significance of regional organisational models is also presumed to be based on the fact that hierarchically organised unitary states are increasingly reaching the limits of their capacities to undertake increasingly complex tasks and to resolve the growing number of conflicts of interest.

3 Types and creation of regions

Regions can be identified and demarcated in various ways. A distinction must be made between a combined empirical and analytical approach and normative, programmatic approaches. Blotevogel proposes to describe the former as 'regions for analysis and description' and the latter as 'regions for activities or programmes'. In addition, he defines a type which he refers to as 'regions of perception and identity' (Blotevogel 2005).

Regions for analysis and description are based on a formal, spatially-relevant classification approach. This approach views regions as structures for the spatial ordering and regulation of objects. The regionalisation processes used to this end are among the elementary working methods in the spatial sciences. In this context, the creation of regions is a variation of the classification of spatial elements where the need for a spatial context (contiguity or shared borders) of the spatial units to be created must be taken into account as well. The similarity or interactional principles can be used to create regions based on empirical and analytical considerations. In technical terms, analysis of variance methods, factor analysis or main components analysis, cluster analysis as well as gravitation and potential models are used in this regard.

According to the similarity principle, certain basic spatial units, such as municipalities, measuring points or grid elements are joined based on one or more features to form regions or types of space that are as far as possible homogeneous. These regions are also known as structural regions. Unlike homogeneous regions, homogeneous types of space may be spatially disconnected and should therefore not be referred to as regions in the strict sense.

Examples of homogeneous regions that are relevant for spatial planning purposes are natural spatial units, landscapes, linguistic areas or more general spaces which share a certain regional awareness. Examples of homogeneous types of space or spatial categories are densely populated areas, agglomeration areas (▷ *Agglomeration, agglomeration area*), ▷ *Rural areas*, industrial regions, tourist regions, problem areas and assisted areas (▷ *Territorial categories*). The most basic case of spatial typification according to the homogeneity principle is the classification of basic spatial units (e.g. municipalities) according to a single characteristic (e.g. population density), as is typical for cartographic illustrations.

Contiguous regions are more often demarcated according to the interactional principle than according to homogeneity criteria. This is achieved by grouping together the spatial elements that are interconnected through functional relations to form a region. In practice, functional regions are usually defined through the relations between their centres and the spatial elements which surround them and are interactively aligned with them. Those regions are referred to as nodal regions or interactional areas. Not all spatial interaction relations are distinctly aligned or hierarchically organised. In attempting to demarcate them, this leads to overlapping or nested functional regions. The definition of regions or types of space is rarely based on existing interactional situations between a large number of equivalent spatial elements.

Examples of functional regions that are relevant for spatial planning purposes are commuter and labour market regions, central-place interactional areas, intake areas or areas of responsibility associated with infrastructure facilities and institutions. Nearly all administrative spatial units fall into the category of functional regions with a central focus or were at least so characterised at the time of their establishment. The same is also true for urban regions (▷ *Urban region*), core-periphery associations, or metropolitan areas (▷ *Metropolitan region*), with the practical orientation playing an important role in the creation of regions (▷ *Governance*).

In addition to the analytical and descriptive notion of region, the term *region* is increasingly used in a normative political context. The activity or programme-related type of region is based on a social sciences model of the region and serves to create social and economic structures from a spatial perspective. These regions are formed by the actions of people (individuals and groups) and social organisations (e.g. enterprises, associations, ▷ *Territorial authority*) and their interactions (Blotevogel 2005). Modern day administrative territorial units also quite see themselves as activity and programme-based regions.

To the extent that methodical principles in the sense of logical criteria play a role at all in the demarcation of regions for administrative or programmatic purposes, this is usually by relying simultaneously on the similarity principle and interactional principle. The interactional relationship often leads to a homogenisation (of the hinterland); alternatively, structural homogeneity can be a prerequisite for the creation of a functional region. Examples of this combined type are most planning regions or action spaces associated with funding and development programmes.

In spatial planning and federal state spatial planning practice for creating regions and typifying spaces, heuristic methods are usually used in which analysis of variance techniques and classification methods can offer a data-based initial solution; subsequently, however, many further, often politically motivated considerations come into play. This is true for the planning regions of the federal states, the stipulations of which are laid down in the Federal Spatial Planning Act and in the relevant laws of the federal states, without further explanations of the demarcation criteria that have to be applied in this regard. It also applies in principle to the definition of regionalised assisted areas, which are initially identified and demarcated according to socio-economic criteria and indicators, although their final boundaries are the result of political negotiation processes. The 'macro-regions' proposed for the purposes of ▷ *European regional policy*, such as the Baltic Sea region or the Danube area, are primarily political and geographic constructs that aim to promote large-scale, cross-border cooperation.

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Regions of perception and identity are types of regions of our living environment. They are formed through social communication (face-to-face, mass media, policymaking, culture) and are based on the cognitive, emotional representation of certain spaces in the minds of individuals and/or their collective perceptions and judgments. Reinforcing group identities and the desire to set themselves apart as a prerequisite for finding their own identity (▷ *Identity, spatial*) are decisive factors in this regard. A sense of local rootedness and folklore are traditional manifestations of this type of creation of regions, which are nowadays promoted through marketing campaigns, e.g. for tourism regions (▷ *Urban and regional marketing*). At the local level, many people identify with their neighbourhoods, their 'hoods' or 'scene'. Regions of perception and identity are increasingly reference spaces for an active regionalism, which seeks to counteract the blurring of boundaries and borders as a social movement and resists the enforcement of general rules on the part of the state.

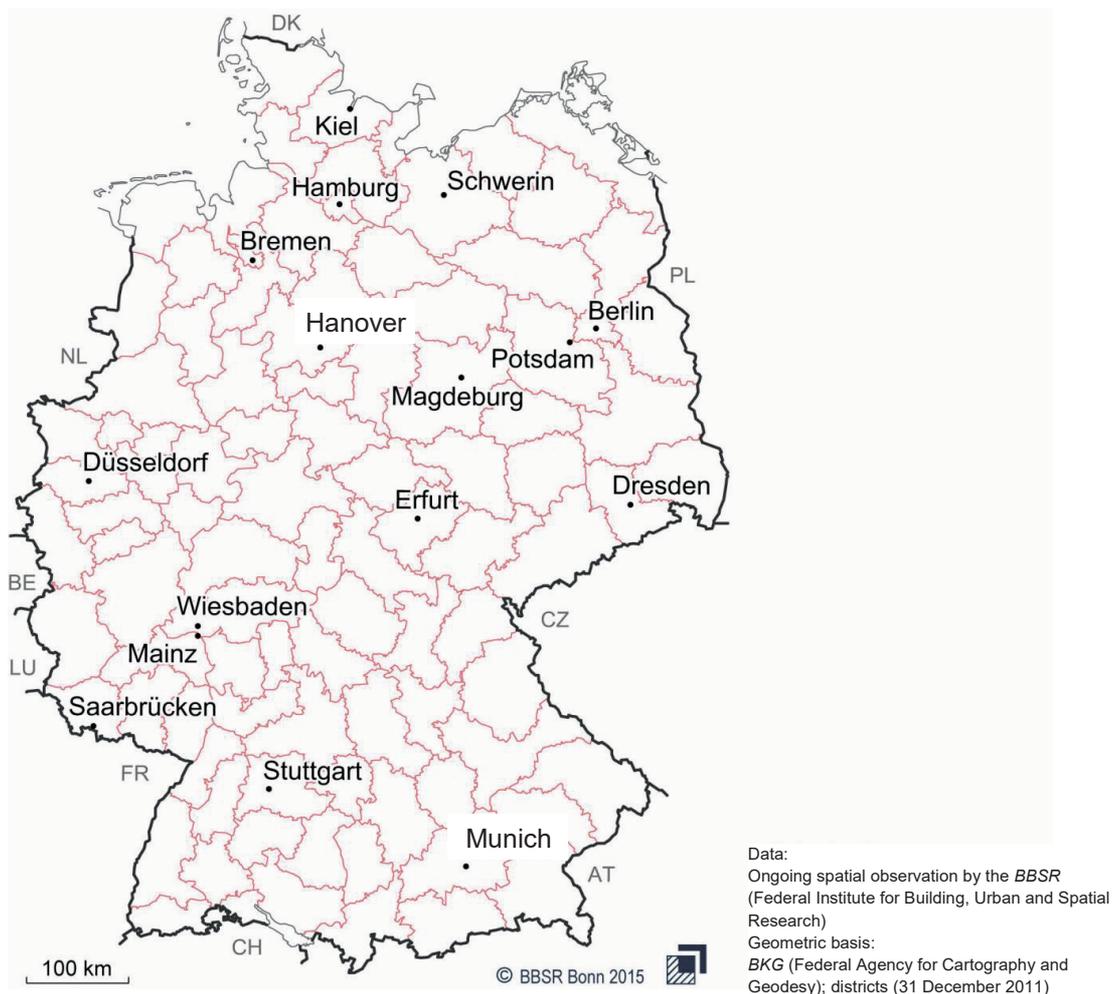
4 Regions in spatial planning

The purposes for which regions are demarcated and used in spatial research and spatial planning can also be either of a more analytical and descriptive nature or of a more political, normative and administrative nature. In the former case, they are referred to as analysis regions, and in the latter case as planning or administrative regions. Normative purposes also serve to demarcate programme regions or action spaces. In spatial planning and federal state spatial planning practice, descriptive purposes and normative elements are generally combined in the demarcation of regions.

The 38 territorial units of the Federal Spatial Planning Programme of 1975 and the proposals for a system of balanced functional spaces for the then Federal Republic of Germany based on that programme amounted to demarcations of normative regions in that regions were explicitly constructed which were only able to fulfil their functions after the planning and policy-generated impact took effect (▷ *Federal Spatial Planning Programme*). A related system of regional development centres that was thus required was not put into operation in the programme. The controversial discussion regarding the territorial units showed clearly that the size and layout of such regions represent an implicit benchmark for the question of the (interregional) ▷ *Equivalence of living conditions*.

Spatial planning at the federal level has for some time relied on so-called spatial planning regions for spatial planning reporting purposes (cf. Fig. 1; ▷ *Reports on urban and spatial development*). This concerns functional regions, which are composed of districts and have productive central places (▷ *Central place*) of the highest order (higher-order centres) as labour market and supply centres. In many cases, the demarcation of the spatial planning regions coincides with the government regions or federal state planning stipulations in regard to analysis, planning and programme areas. Spatial planning regions are either identical with labour market regions or are composed of them (with certain allocation deviations at the regional level).

Figure 1: Spatial planning regions of the Federal Institute for Building, Urban and Spatial Research (BBSR)



Source: BBSR 2015

There are clear indications of the interactional areas of the higher-order centres in spatial planning regions gradually overlapping with a system of higher ranking metropolises, which increasingly develop into economic centres of the greater regions of European significance.

Most federal states of the Federal Republic of Germany have created statutory bases for regional planning, which are considered to be part of federal state spatial planning and understood to be a task of the state authorities and/or a joint task of the state and local self-governing authorities. Planning regions were established as analysis and programme areas for regional planning, which are in part identical with administrative spatial units such as government regions or districts or are composed of them or of municipalities. Planning regions are generally demarcated according to functional criteria and take the interactional areas of central places into account. Some federal

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states have attempted, as part of territorial and administrative reforms, to reconcile planning regions and administrative spatial units to a greater degree.

Demarcations of regions that are relevant for planning purposes include, in addition to planning regions, also core-periphery associations, voluntary municipal associations and cross-border cooperation spaces (▷ *Cooperation, cross-border*). Especially informal planning processes (▷ *Informal planning*), such as regional development strategies (▷ *Regional development*; ▷ *Regional management*) frequently relate to these non-administrative spatial classifications.

Unlike the spatial planning regions of the federation and the planning regions of the federal states, the analysis and programme regions on which the ▷ *European Union* relies for regional policy purposes (▷ *Regional economic policy*) are usually not demarcated in a functional sense but correspond, e.g. in the Federal Republic of Germany, to the administrative levels of municipality, districts, government regions and federal states. The European Union's systematic structure of the territorial units for statistical purposes (*Nomenclature des Unités Territoriales Statistiques/ Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics, NUTS*) shows considerable differences between member states in the degree of specificity at all four levels (▷ *European spatial development policy*). Both the usually non-functional demarcation and the unsatisfactory transnational comparability present a considerable validity problem for regional policy-related and spatial planning-related analyses and the strategies and programmes of the European Union based on them.

Irrespective of this rather methodological issue, the discussion of concepts of regions at the European level has clearly become more politically significant since the European Community is in a process of expanding and strengthening the European Union. The Maastricht Treaty on the European Union provides for the establishment of an advisory committee called the 'Committee of the Regions' consisting of representatives of regional and local territorial authorities (Article 198a-c; Council of the European Communities / COM EC 1992). The currently 353 members from all 28 EU member states are either elected office holders or important stakeholders of the local and regional territorial authorities in their home region. The Committee is heard by the Council or the Commission of the EU in matters of regional concern; the Committee can also issue comments on their own initiative. Germany is represented in the Committee of the Regions by the federal states, each with one or two members, and by the three associations of local authorities. Other member states of the EU mostly dispatch local representatives or are only represented by some of their regions and municipalities in the Committee.

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