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European regional policy

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Konrad Lammers

European regional policy

Contents

The European Union has a comprehensive regional policy, and the associated measures cover the whole territory of the EU, albeit to a differing degree. EU regional policy is closely linked to the process of European integration, and aims to shape the impact of this process on spatial economic development. Its main objective is to help poor countries and regions catch up with their more prosperous counterparts. In addition, its purpose is to contribute to achieving economic growth and other macroeconomic goals of the EU.

1 What is European regional policy?

'Regional policy is the EU's main investment policy. Regional policy targets all regions and cities in the European Union in order to support job creation, business competitiveness, economic growth and sustainable development, and improve improve citizens' quality of life' (European Commission 2014a: 1). In European Union (EU, ▷ *European Union*) parlance, it is often referred to as *cohesion policy* (cf. European Commission 2014b).

It is notable that this definition gives no indication that regional policy is targeted towards specific regions (▷ *Region*). Although it refers to regions and cities, regional policy is explicitly aimed at all regions and cities rather than individual ones. This points to a special feature of EU regional policy: contrary to the conventional understanding of regional policy, it covers the entire economic area of the EU and not just selected areas. Nonetheless, EU regional policy does have a spatial component, because although it is implemented throughout the whole territory, the level of support varies considerably according to the location in question.

2 EU regional policy in the context of European integration

The reason why EU regional policy is so significant today is closely linked to the process of European integration. It is essential to bear in mind how extremely important this process is from the perspective of spatial development. The elimination of national borders, following the establishment of the four freedoms (free trade in goods and free movement of services, capital and people), essentially translates into lower ▷ *Costs for bridging spatial distances* in connection with cross-border activities between the member states. Every deepening of the EU has reduced these costs, and every enlargement has lowered them for activities between the acceding countries and the existing area of integration. As a result of these falling costs for bridging spatial distances, economic stakeholders are likely to tap into the advantages that open up to them, either through increased trade in goods and services, relocation of businesses to other member states, changes in cross-border capital flows or workforce migration. In brief, a reduction in costs for bridging spatial distances changes the pattern of economic activity in the area affected and ultimately spatial growth patterns too. This gives rise to the following questions: should the process of integration, and its spatial consequences, be influenced by a regional policy at Community level and – if so – on what theoretical foundation and for what purpose? These questions have accompanied the integration process from the outset, and have been answered differently with the passage of time.

The Treaty establishing the European Economic Community (EEC) did not provide for any regional policy competence at Community level. The expectation at the time – based on the traditional theory of international trade – was that the creation of a common market would be of economic benefit to all countries, and would promote convergence in terms of economic performance. Regional problems were not seen as a Community issue first and foremost, but rather as a matter for each individual country. The positive effects that were expected to occur because of integration were seen as a means of helping member states to tackle their regional problems themselves. During the treaty negotiations, Italy had in fact called for a common fund to foster the development of disadvantaged areas, but was ultimately unable to push through this demand. Instead, the Treaty established the European Investment Bank, which, among other things, was to provide loans and guarantees for projects in ‘less developed areas’ and fund itself via the capital markets (cf. von der Groeben/von Boeckh 1958: 467 et seq.).

1973 saw the first enlargement of the EEC to include Denmark, Ireland and the United Kingdom. The United Kingdom considered itself to be at a disadvantage because of the vast flow of monies under the Common Agricultural Policy. It was in order to compensate at least partially for these payments that the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) was set up (cf. Krieger-Boden 1987: 86 et seq.). From 1975, this fund was used to replace the resources that member states had previously raised themselves for their own regional policy. Even so, the creation of the ERDF did not signal the advent of a dedicated regional policy at Community level.

From the mid-1980s, considerable efforts were made – at the initiative of the European Commission – to stimulate economic development in the Community through comprehensive deepening. This process culminated in the programme for the completion of the single market. The single market initiative coincided with negotiations for the accession of Spain and Portugal to the Community. Both countries made their accession dependent on being granted substantial financial assistance to prevent them from lagging behind the wealthy core countries in terms of economic development. Their demands were backed up by recent developments in international trade theory, according to which a dismantling of trade barriers may lead to economic disadvantages for a given country. A common regional policy was finally enshrined in the Single European Act. The European Commission was given far-reaching powers to shape this policy. The resources available under the ERDF were vastly increased. The ERDF, the European Social Fund and the Agricultural Fund (the Guidance Section) were all directed towards the promotion of processes that would help underdeveloped areas to close the gap. The first programming period for a dedicated EU regional policy was launched in 1988.

The establishment of the European Monetary Union led to another institutional upgrade for EU regional policy and a further boost to its resources. The underlying reasoning, as had been the case with the single market initiative, was that poor countries would otherwise be unable to derive any economic benefit from the monetary union. In 1993, the Treaty of Maastricht included the reinforcement of economic and social cohesion as one of the core objectives of the EU, alongside the establishment of an economic and monetary union and the creation of an area without internal borders. The relatively poor and peripheral countries of Greece, Ireland, Portugal and Spain were guaranteed additional financial aid in return for their agreement to a monetary union. The Cohesion Fund was set up and used to support environmental and transport projects in these countries, henceforth known as the ‘cohesion countries’. Resources from the other funds were also substantially increased for their benefit.

The eastern enlargement of the EU in 2004 and 2007 gave rise to a fundamental conflict regarding the distribution of resources under the regional policy. Compared with the EU average, all the accession countries were poor, and so under the prevailing rules, funding should have been concentrated on them. But this would have meant a considerable financial loss for the old member states, particularly the cohesion countries. Consequently, the latter were keen to limit the impact of the redistribution of resources triggered by the accession of the new member states. In the 2007-2013 programming period, these concerns were taken into account through continued allocation of funding to regions that otherwise would not have been eligible because, statistically speaking, their per capita income compared with the EU average had fallen below the eligibility threshold owing to the accession of even poorer countries.

For the 2007-2013 funding period, there was a corresponding realignment of regional policy. Regional policy was seen as the most important instrument of the EU for achieving the objectives of the Lisbon Strategy, namely to make the EU the most dynamic and competitive economy in the world by 2010. The new alignment included extended allocation of funding to the territory as a whole, and greater emphasis on support for activities that could propel economic growth in highly developed regions too. Since then, as well as supporting the catch-up process in economically underperforming regions, regional policy has explicitly pursued the aim of promoting economic growth throughout the entire EU. This dual aim also underpins the 2014-2020 programming period, and in line with the Europe 2020 Strategy, has been supplemented by environmental and climate goals as well as social inclusion.

3 Principles and phases of implementation

EU regional policy is based on four principles, which were applied to the very first programming period of 1988-1993 and then further refined with each subsequent programming period (cf. European Commission 2014d):

- *Concentration*: Resources should be allocated predominantly to the poorest countries and regions. In addition, attempts should be made to concentrate funding on certain economic activities.
- *Programming*: EU regional policy should support multi-annual programmes rather than individual projects. These multi-annual programmes are embedded in the overarching goals and strategies of EU policy (the Lisbon Strategy for the 2007-2013 period and the Europe 2020 Strategy for the 2014-2020 period).
- *Partnership*: Programmes for countries and regions should be drawn up within a consultation process. This process is to involve institutions at European, national, regional and local level. It must also include the social partners and civil society organisations.
- *Additionality*: Resources from the Structural Funds should not be used to replace monies that member states would have disbursed themselves without this support. For this reason, every member state must add its own contribution to funded measures, although the exact amount may vary according to the level of development of the region or country in question and the type of measure to be funded.

EU regional policy is implemented according to the following phases (cf. European Commission 2015):

- The Commission drafts a policy proposal for the next programming period on the budget, the distribution of resources and the rules to be applied.
- On the basis of the Commission's proposal, the European Council and the European Parliament must approve the budget, the distribution of resources and the rules to be applied. Unanimity is required in the Council.

- Every member state must submit a draft partnership agreement which presents the country's strategy and puts forward a list of suggested programmes. In addition, the member states have to draw up so-called operational programmes, which cover either regions or member states as a whole. The aim of the partnership agreements and the operational programmes is to define priorities within the scope of the rules and financial parameters. The Commission negotiates with the national authorities to finalise the details of the partnership agreements and operational programmes.
- The member states, or their regional government institutions, are responsible for implementing the programmes. This includes the selection, monitoring and evaluation of the individual projects that are eligible for funding under the approved operational programmes.
- The Commission provides the necessary financial resources.
- The Commission and the individual country jointly supervise the implementation of the programmes. Reports drafted on a regular basis by the Commission and member states serve as an important monitoring instrument.

4 EU regional policy in the 2014-2020 programming period

EU regional policy is financed via the European Structural and Investment Funds, the so-called ESI Funds (cf. EU 2013):

- European Regional Development Fund (ERDF)
- European Social Fund (ESF)
- Cohesion Fund (CF)
- European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD)
- European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF)

The first two funds are used to tackle regional disparities. For this purpose, the territory of the EU is subdivided into three ▷ *Territorial categories*:

- less developed regions (per capita gross domestic product (GDP) below 75% of the EU 27 average, share of the EU population: 27%, volume: €182.2bn)
- transition regions (per capita GDP between 75% and 90% of the EU 27 average, share of the EU population: 12%, volume: €35.4bn)
- more developed regions (per capita GDP above 90% of the EU 27 average, share of the EU population: 61%, volume: €54.3bn)

In addition to regional support, countries as a whole can also receive funding from the Cohesion Fund (volume: €63.3bn) if their gross national income (GNI) per inhabitant is less than 90% of the EU 27 average. These countries include Croatia, all the countries that acceded in 2004 and 2007, as well as Greece and Portugal (funding for Cyprus was phased out within the programming period).

Resources from the EAFRD and the EMFF are allocated according to sectoral rather than regional priorities. This is why the European Commission does not classify these two funds as financial instruments for regional policy.

As in the previous programming period, cohesion policy is incorporated into an overarching strategy, namely the Europe 2020 Strategy. Unlike the Lisbon Strategy, the Europe 2020 Strategy defines key objectives, indicators for these objectives and quantitative targets for individual indicators. The five key objectives are: (1) employment, (2) research and development, (3) climate change and sustainable energy, (4) education and training, (5) eradication of poverty and social exclusion. The Europe 2020 Strategy extends far beyond the Lisbon Strategy, not just in terms of its clearly defined targets, but also because it specifically includes goals relating to climate change, energy supply and social inclusion.

EU regional policy reflects the objectives of this strategy, having defined eleven activities (thematic objectives) that are eligible for funding (cf. European Commission 2014b):

- strengthening research, technological development and innovation
- improving access to ▷ *Information and communication technology*
- enhancing the competitiveness of small and medium-sized enterprises
- supporting the shift towards a low carbon economy
- adapting to climate change (▷ *Climate, climate change*)
- protecting the environment and promoting the efficient use of resources
- promoting the ▷ *Sustainability* of transport and improving network infrastructure
- supporting sustainable and high-quality employment as well as labour mobility (▷ *Mobility*)
- promoting social inclusion and combatting poverty and discrimination
- investing in education, training, vocational training and life-long learning
- enhancing the efficiency of public administration (▷ *Administration, public*)

Quantitative targets are set for these activities in terms of the resources deployed (depending on the fund, they are graded according to territorial categories). A performance reserve was introduced as an incentive to comply with the targets: 6% of the available resources are initially set aside, and following a mid-term review in 2019, they will be allocated to those regions that have adhered to the targets specified in the operational programmes and achieved the best results (cf. European Commission 2014c): 246).

Regional policy is also set to be more closely aligned with the economic policy guidelines of the EU. Not only should measures be compatible with national reform programmes (for implementing the Europe 2020 Strategy), but they must also support the structural reforms defined in the country-specific recommendations under the European Semester. The Commission can compel member states to modify programmes that have already been approved, in order to support necessary structural reforms (macroeconomic conditionality clause). Ultimately, the Commission can also refuse to disburse funds if member states repeatedly contravene economic policy recommendations (cf. European Commission 2014c: 248 et seq.).

5 Objectives of EU regional policy

In theory, regional policy can be oriented towards two overarching objectives: correcting imbalances and fostering efficiency and/or growth (cf. Karl/Untiedt 2015: 11; Martin 1999). The aim of correcting imbalances, and thus reducing disparities, is pursued by means of financial transfers to poor regions in order to boost their resources and thus improve conditions for the inhabitants of these regions. An efficiency-driven regional policy, on the other hand, would strive for the highest possible output for the economy as a whole through an appropriate spatial distribution of resources. The de facto main objective of EU regional policy is to correct imbalances. Nonetheless, the European Commission maintains that its policies also serve to stimulate economic growth in the EU. This assertion is founded on the traditional neoclassical growth theory, according to which – in highly simplified terms – investments in poor regions contribute more to economic development than those in wealthy regions. More recent regional economic theories (the 'new economic geography'), as well as the endogenous growth theory, suggest that the correction of imbalances and the stimulation of growth are conflicting objectives.

If the aim of a policy is to correct imbalances, the aggregated output (average per capita GDP of all the regions taken together) will conceivably be lower than its maximum potential. This occurs if the redirected resources generate a lower return in poor regions than in the wealthy regions from which they are withdrawn. If the efficiency objective is prioritised, the policy, if successful, may well lead to a higher average per capita GDP compared with the territory as a whole, but it may also widen the gap in per capita GDP between poor and rich regions. This is what happens when the return on the redirected resources is higher in the rich regions than in the poor regions.

The debate on regional policy does not focus primarily on this clash of objectives, however, but rather on the conflict between the correction of imbalances on the one hand, and economic growth on the other. Economic growth comes about when there are more resources available for production processes in the future than in the present. Since regional policy is all about shaping future developments, the prospect of growth is certainly in line with this goal. However, it is not at all certain whether regional policy interventions actually succeed in mobilising more resources for production processes. After all, stimulating investments in certain regions can cause a more substantial decline in investments in the regions that are bearing the cost of the funding in question. But even if this does not happen, the fundamental conflict between the goals of efficiency and balanced development still remains. A decisive question is where to channel additional investments. An efficiency-driven regional policy would direct additional investments to regions in which they are likely to yield the highest returns in the future. A regional policy geared towards correcting imbalances, on the other hand, would grant additional investments to regions most in need of support, though this may not (necessarily) lead to maximum growth of the economy as a whole (cf. Lammers 2012)

In its infancy, EU regional policy was very clearly focused on the correction of imbalances. It concentrated on countries and regions with a low per capita GDP, and was primarily geared towards fostering economic catch-up processes in countries and regions seen as disadvantaged with respect to integration processes. Little by little, however, EU regional policy also came to be understood as a means of creating new resources and thus making a positive contribution to growth in the EU economic area (cf. European Commission 2004: 7), a concept that was explicitly pursued by the 2007-2013 funding period with its alignment towards the Lisbon Strategy. The aims were to be achieved, on the one hand, by concentrating funding on research and development and investments in transport, energy, environmental protection and human capital. On the other hand, a greater emphasis on growth meant an extension of support throughout the entire territory, so as to include regions with a strong economy in the funding measures. As in the preceding periods, however, this approach ran counter to the objective of promoting regions with a low per capita GDP regardless of their growth prospects. This is highlighted not least by the fact that 82% of funds were earmarked for the poorest countries and regions (Lammers 2007: 297).

Correcting imbalances is also one of the top priorities of the 2014-2020 funding period. Accordingly, around 80% of resources are designated for regions and countries whose per capita income is below 90% of the EU average (cf. European Commission 2014b). Nonetheless, regional policy programmes still aim to stimulate growth in the EU. The thematic objectives are to contribute towards intelligent, smart and inclusive growth in the EU, in line with the Europe 2020 Strategy. Leaving aside the question of what is meant by growth of this type, it remains unclear whether an alternative spatial utilisation would have a greater effect on growth (or have a greater impact in terms of the individual thematic objectives), if indeed a positive effect on growth is achieved at all.

6 Spatial developments and EU regional policy

This section gives a brief overview of spatial development (▷ *Spatial development*; ▷ *Regional development*) in the EU, and then looks at how the EU's regional policy has contributed to this. The 1960s and 1970s were marked by a process of convergence between the countries and regions to the west of the Iron Curtain: disparities were reduced in terms of per capita GDP (▷ *Disparities, spatial*) (cf. Bröcker 1998). This development ground to a halt in the first half of the 1980s. Two significant catch-up processes then followed. The first of these occurred from the mid-1980s in the EU as it was at the time (EU15), when the poorest countries, Greece, Ireland, Spain and Portugal (the former cohesion countries), made considerable progress in closing the gap up until the start of the financial crisis in 2008. Ireland even overtook the EU average per capita GDP at the end of the 1990s, securing its place at the top of the income hierarchy after Luxembourg. It was precisely these countries, however, that were afflicted by a severe economic and sovereign debt crisis after 2008. All four countries saw their per capita GDP decline again after 2008 (cf. European Commission 2013, European Commission 2014c: 1 et seq.). The second catch-up process occurred from the mid-1990s, and enabled the countries that joined the EU from 2004 gradually to catch up with the EU average as regards per capita GDP. Following the opening up of their economies and their progressive integration into the economic area of western Europe, growth rates in the new member states were in some cases considerably higher than in the EU15. Although some of these countries (Hungary, the Baltic states) also experienced critical setbacks in the wake of the financial crisis, they were able to recover relatively quickly, unlike the former cohesion countries (cf. European Commission 2013).

After the mid-1980s, there was only limited convergence between the regions of the EU, and in the aftermath of the financial crisis, regional convergence processes in the EU have come to a complete standstill (cf. European Commission 2014c: 5). Nonetheless, there is little point in considering developments between regions independently of the developments between countries. If one looks at national and regional effects separately, it becomes clear that even a small degree of regional convergence between European regions depends purely on the national impact. Without the catch-up processes in Ireland and in the countries of southern Europe from the mid-1980s until 2008, and in the new member states in northeastern, central eastern and southeastern Europe from the mid-1990s, there would have been no convergence between the European regions (cf. Lammers 2007: 292 et seq.). Rather, regional disparities within these countries have widened. The catch-up processes involved specific regions, usually around the capital cities and other agglomerations (▷ *Agglomeration, agglomeration area*), while many densely populated regions have lagged behind the respective national developments.

Given these findings and the existence of a comprehensive EU regional policy, the question arises of how this policy has contributed to the processes observed. Firstly, it should be noted that the catch-up processes occurred before there was an EU regional policy, or at least before it took effect. This is the case for the period up to the end of the 1980s, when a separate EU regional policy did not yet exist, and the resources deployed to support the member states' own regional policies were very limited. As for the catch-up process in the new member states in northeastern, central eastern and southern Europe from 1995, it should be borne in mind that these countries only started to participate in EU regional policy on a gradual basis. Before they joined the EU, they received very limited funding for cohesion policy measures (Pre-Accession Aid), then afterwards they were incorporated into the EU's cohesion policy in only a limited way from 2004 and were only fully integrated from 2007. Moreover, in the first few years, they experienced major difficulties in terms of absorbing the resources that were made available to them. Because of these delayed effects, it was only from 2007 onwards that the impact of EU regional policy slowly began to grow. Future studies will need to determine the extent to which EU regional policy contributed to the catch-up process in the new member states after 2007. In the meantime, this question is highly relevant as far as the old cohesion countries are concerned: from 1989 onwards, they received a huge amount of support under regional policy measures and, by 2008, had closed the gap considerably.

National and regional catch-up processes depend on many different factors. Those described above may stem not just from EU regional policy, but also – and in particular – from European integration (deepening and widening measures), as well as from the economic and locational policies of the individual countries. In order to determine the contribution of regional policy, one must first isolate the effects of regional policy from those of other possible factors. Studies of this type lead to widely diverging results. Some studies, for example, do not detect any significant influence of regional policy on regional growth, while others find evidence of an impact under certain conditions, for example with the 'right' institutions in the individual countries (cf. Varga/in 't Veld 2009; Hagen/Mohl 2009). Wherever a significant positive effect is identified, the correlation coefficients calculated are comparatively low. Calculations based on macroeconomic simulation models conclude that positive effects on growth in individual countries have indeed been achieved (cf. European Commission 2007: 95 et seq., European Commission 2014c: 230 et seq.). However, these calculations also show a negative impact of regional policy on growth in rich countries in the EU. This is because in these countries, the withdrawal of resources through a higher tax burden outweighs the positive effects of subsequent additional investments (cf. European Commission 2014c: 269.). And even where these calculations do show positive effects, EU regional policy was presumably not the dominating factor in the catch-up process. Notably in Ireland, which experienced particularly strong growth up to 2008 (and had received substantial funding until 2000), it seems that regional policy made no more than a minor contribution to the catch-up process that occurred there (cf. Lammers 2007: 296). It is the country's own locational policies and other factors that are more likely to have played a key role.

Moreover, economic growth in all the cohesion countries from the end of the 1990s until the onset of the financial crisis was probably facilitated above all by the establishment of the European Monetary Union. The inception of this monetary union brought about a single capital market in the common monetary area, leading to a severe drop in interest rates in the cohesion countries (cf. Sinn 2010). As a result, there was a sharp increase in private consumption (in all four countries) and in public consumption (particularly in Greece and Portugal), as well as in the demand for real estate (particularly in Ireland and Spain), but very little improvement in competitive economic structures. EU regional policy was not able to prevent these countries from undergoing a deep economic crisis after 2008 and falling behind in the catch-up process. It should be noted that spatial developments in the EU are determined to a large extent by factors other than regional policy.

The question remains whether regional policy stimulates the growth of the EU economy as a whole. With the help of one of the macroeconomic simulation models that quantify potential effects on individual countries, it is also possible to calculate potential effects for the whole of the EU. Hence, on the basis of the simulation model it used, the European Commission concludes that cohesion policy from 2014 to 2020 will lead to an increase of 0.4% in the EU's GDP in 2023 (cf. European Commission 2014c: 268). It is important to bear in mind, however, that this is reliant on the cause and effect relationship defined by the model. Whether these anticipated effects will actually materialise remains to be seen.

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