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The spatial strategies of Italian regions

edited by Ignazio Vinci



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The spatial strategies of Italian regions

edited by Ignazio Vinci

FRANCOANGELI

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1. Planning the space of regions, regions as space for planning. An introduction to the Italian experience

Ignazio Vinci

1. The rise and reinvention of regionalism in Europe

Over the last two decades the regional dimension has once more become the centre of growing political and academic attention. In the nineties in particular, the *Europe of Regions* emerged as a powerful rhetoric between the media and policymakers committed to the construction of the European Union. This cannot be considered a completely new phenomenon on the old continent. In fact, when in the sixties and seventies several European countries reshaped their institutional frameworks to provide larger political and administrative power to their intermediate level of government, the concept of “region” informed the debate within the regionalist and federalist cultures. And even then discussions were supported by a huge amount of analysis and interpretation, from a variety of academic and scientific perspectives, on the social, economic and functional advantages of a regional organisation of the State (Le Galès and Lequesne, 1998).

What happened in the nineties, however, was more intense and pervasive. In a few years, the intersection of global processes with the processes of economic restructuring and political reorganisation that occurred on the continent quickly placed on the regional dimension extraordinary expectations in all European countries. Regions (together with cities) are increasingly seen as the pillars of a new development paradigm which calls into question the relationship between economies, institutions and territories upon which the European model of development was constructed during the twentieth century.

The reasons for this change of perspective – which are together political and strategic, structural and cognitive – are based upon three interdependent processes.

The first process is that of economic globalisation which rises with particular intensity during the eighties and nineties. As it is mainly based on technological innovation and the dominant role of ICT, globalisation has drastically changed the perception of space and “distance”, restructuring on new territorial bases the international division of labour. This new technological paradigm, together with the deregulation of financial markets, has led multinational firms to search in a more dynamic way advantages at a global scale, creating new forms of interactions with territory and places.

Veltz (1996) has written that one of the consequences of the growing interplay among global and local scales is a decline of the relationship between economy and territory as we conceived it in the Fordist phase of industrial development. While the world economy has long been described as a “mosaic” of national and vertically integrated productive systems, massified on a limited number of development poles, now it appears as an “archipelago” of regional and local productive systems which interact outside and through national borders. It does not mean, as argued by Veltz, that national systems have lost their capacity to regulating their economies at different territorial scales, but rather that there are territorial dimensions – such as functional regions with high capacity of innovation, global metropolitan areas, and highly specialised industrial districts – with growing political and strategic autonomy.

The emergence of this new regional paradigm, it has been argued (Storper, 1997; Scott, 1998; Scott and Storper, 2003), is a distinctive feature of the new relationship between economy and territory, production and space, established by globalisation. The consequences for the concepts of region and regionalism of these processes are of two kinds. On the one hand, it has been questioned the traditional description of regional identities as an appendix of national economies, while regions increasingly appear as a fragment of complex and multiscalar relations (often beyond the national boundaries) given by the productive, commercial and political networks into which they are immersed. On the other hand, these processes have drastically reshaped the role of regions in terms of strategic actors, as they need to operate within a new political economy in which new forms of multi-level governance are required in order to promote their own resources and competitive advantages.

From our European perspective, the second process that has radically transformed the regional dimension is the institutional reorganisation and the devolution of powers from the old nation-states. Keating (1998b) has defined this movement as “top-down regionalism”, a tendency that spread in Europe in the post-war period when several European countries (including Germany, France, UK and Italy) identified institutional regions as a tool for the mod-

ernisation of the state and the reduction of territorial disparities. The demand for a regionalised state in Europe derives also from the need for the recognition of cultural and political minorities, as evident in the case of Spain in the seventies and Belgium in the eighties. In other national contexts, the process of devolution is also characterised by the demand for greater autonomy in economic and fiscal terms, as has been emphasised in the process of devolution in the United Kingdom in the nineties.

Looking at these long-standing processes together with the advent of globalisation, from a radical perspective Omahe (1995) and Badie (1995) have asserted that they are witnessing the end of the nation-state or the strong limitation of territorial sovereignty as exercised in the past. Other scholars such as Rhodes (1997) and Jessop (2004) have instead described this process as a “hollowing out” of the nation state, of which regionalisation constitutes one of the main components. According to Rhodes, nation-states increasingly lose power and competencies – towards regions but also towards supra-national institutions – since they are immersed in a global political environment which requires multilevel and more flexible modes of governance instead of the hierarchical mode of government. The increasing of regional powers, therefore, is one of the ways through which the state and the national authorities tend to reformulate their sovereignty in response to global changes.

In general terms, the transfer of powers from the states to the regions took place in Europe according to three main demands: (a) functional adaptation, in order to make regions more efficient and less state-dependent in some strategic sectors for the communities’ quality of life, such as health, social policy or public transport; (b) fiscal devolution, in order to shift taxation at a level closer to citizens, binding expected revenues to public investments made in the regions; (c) transfer of legal competencies, with the purpose to better support regulation of regional economies and satisfy the demand for political autonomy coming from the regional minorities. While the global financial crisis is apparently refocusing on national (and supra-national) levels of government some crucial tasks of economic regulation, the need for more efficient institutions is also concentrating upon regions increasing responsibilities.

The third process that has fuelled the emergence of a new regionalised order is the process of European integration. Since the eighties, particularly under the presidency of Jacques Delors (1985-1995), the strengthening of the European Community has been accompanied by a growing perception of the polycentric nature of Europe and its territory. The European space, with its productive resources and localised economies, is no longer seen merely as an *ensemble* of rigid national systems, but rather as a patchwork

of strongly differentiated regional identities. This alternative vision of the European territory is justified not only with the positive view of the neo-liberal agenda imposed by globalisation, but also as the response to the growing territorial disparities after the relative process of regional convergence during the fifties and the sixties (Amin and Tomaney, 1995).

For institutional regions, this phase of reforms at the European level has some relevant consequences both in operational and political terms: they extend their planning competencies as regional authorities with more direct responsibilities in the management of the structural funds; and, politically, they acquire greater capacity of representation (see, for example, the role of the Committee of Regions established in 1994) becoming real nodes of the polycentric governance resulting from European integration (Hooge, 1996; Marks et al., 1996). Under the impulse of this changed institutional landscape, regional governments have rapidly shifted their approach to development policy. Internally they were forced to adapt their decisional structure to the more demanding procedures imposed by the European regulations. Externally they act, within the neo-liberal environment stimulated by globalisation (but also well tolerated by the European institutions), through new forms of public entrepreneurship.

The impact of the global crisis, and the return of centrality of national and supra-national regulators, has only marginally affected the regional paradigm established with European integration. While a growing number of regional authorities have demonstrated poor capacity to influence the trajectories of social and economic development (EC, 2010), the regional perspective preserves all its relevance and there is a wide consensus on the fact that the EU's policy has drastically changed the perception of regions and reshaped the political economy of Europe.

Ultimately, it is clear that regions must be perceived as deeply different from the past: no longer only a spatial metaphor to express cultural and geographical identities, neither an optimal level to devolve functions from the state; no more a political space to mediate tensions between localist claims with nationalist interests, nor merely an economic player able to move independently in the globalised scene. According to Keating (1997), the neo-regional paradigm in Europe requires that regions should be experienced as a mediation of these different identities and tensions: the result of the interaction among interests and social groups, bounded around a shared vision of regional identity, which must be able to keep together stable elements, such as culture or regional traditions, with more dynamic elements such as the strategies for economic development.

2. Regions, space and territoriality

Again, Michael Keating wrote that «while there is consensus that the term (region) refers to space, the notion of space itself can have several meanings: territorial space; political space and space of social interaction; economic space; functional space. A region is the result of the meeting of various concepts of space» (Keating, 1998b, p. 11). Bailly (1998) has argued that by considering regions from a spatial perspective we cannot avoid referring at least to three different morphologies: region as “natural area”, or a living space for its inhabitants who aim for the conservation of their resources; region as “existential space”, which is an expression of processes of cultural identification; region as an “organised space”, influenced by the distributive, locational and power rationalities that look to it as a geopolitical context. The work of other authors, such as Gilbert (1988) or Paasi (2002), by reviewing multiple perspectives in literature, provide other evidence that, by intersecting concepts such as region, space and place, we must accept plural and sometimes ambiguous interpretations.

In fact, the intersection of the concepts of “region” and “space” is open to various interpretations because both terms can assume very different meanings depending on the political and cultural perspective that is taken. This interaction is the product of an intellectual history which unfolds throughout the entire twentieth century: first of all, it appears as the result of the effort of geographic thinking in his attempt to move from a static idea of region – consisting of spatial elements objectively recognisable – to a plural and dynamic conception in which regions are seen as the result of a social production of space. A brief excursion into this intellectual history may help to support the perspective assumed in this work.

It is widely recognised that one of the initial steps in this cognitive process took place when the work of Vidal de la Blache on the French regions provided the basis for a renovated idea of regional geography¹. Under the influence of the new theories on evolution, and in the midst of the dramatic changes in the French rural *pays* provided by the late industrial revolution, Vidal started to develop a geographical theory in which regions are seen as the result of a long-lasting coevolutionary process of interaction between environment and human activities. A central concept in the Vidalian region is that of “localness”, which Jonas (1988, p. 102) later defines as «an intimate, dialectical relationship (...) between local natural conditions and local material cultures».

1. His first extensive analysis on French territory was collected in the *Tableau de la Géographie de la France* (1903), while a collection of his writings is in the book *Principes de la géographie humaine* (1922), later translated into English (Vidal de la Blache, 1926).

According to Vidal, while nature and the physical geography of places may constitute significant constraints to the development of human activities, the environment is in turn shaped by local societies, defining territorial structures, landscapes and *genre de vie* with an attitude to remain stable over time. In the Vidalian conception the regional dimension appears as a microcosm (or a set of microcosms), in which a particular form of symbiosis or equilibrium is established between communities and territory. The peculiar character of a region's identity, consequently, is the result of a process of cultural stratification, which is not necessarily stable over time or sheltered by dramatic events, but is perfectly recognisable through a historical reconstruction.

The thought and activity of Patrick Geddes, widely celebrated as one of the most influential pioneers in planning culture, explicitly recall the Vidalian concept of region. With the French geographer, Geddes shared the idea of a regional space as the product of complex processes of interaction between the natural and cultural dimensions of territories. His criticism towards the disruptive effects of the industrial revolution brings Geddes to formulate a concept of city-region relationship in which technological change does not serve as an instrument for unlimited growth but rather as the key for the creation of sustainable and human-scale communities as polycentric regions (Geddes, 1915). The line between the Vidalian concept of region and the planning interpretation of Geddes has been later continued and systemised by several followers of their thought, including Lewis Mumford², who certainly represents the most influential figure of the second half of the century³.

Another crucial historical shift in the conceptualisation of the region-space relationship is that which took place with the birth and evolution of regional science as an autonomous discipline. The preconditions of this process can probably be traced back to the pioneering work of Walter Christaller in Germany in the thirties (Christaller, 1966), which opened up a broader reconsideration of space within the economic disciplines. In the following decades, a growing number of scholars tried to reverse the attitude to underestimate the spatial variables in the economic analysis. Mainly through empirical efforts, a new emphasis was placed on the role of space and territorial diversity on locational choices and economic development.

2. For an intellectual excursus of Mumford's thinking see, among others, Huges and Huges (1990).

3. These ecological interpretations of regional space, though characterised by an anti-capitalistic vein, were later strongly criticised by the critical geography of Marxian inspiration for their normative character and lack of radicalism towards the divisive forces provided by the capitalist model of production (see, among others, Thrift, 1983).

The interest for such new empirical perspectives will not only enlarge the field of observation for regional scientists, but will also constitute the methodological base for several planning experiments in the western countries. Over time, the works of scientists such as Lösch, Perroux, Isard, and Alonso – together with those particularly focused on developing countries such as Myrdal or Hirschman – will make the regional sciences an autonomous field in the larger context of social and economic sciences. The foundation of the *Regional Science Association* in 1954 represented an arrival point for this process of disciplinary construction, with the added transdisciplinary value of putting under a common roof not only economists but also geographers, urban planners, sociologists and political scientists. As a consequence of this cultural hybridisation, the focus of regional science increasingly shifted from the issue of localisation (for the industrial or the services sectors) to a variety of interactions between space and human activities, including land use at urban and regional scale, the interaction between transport and the built environment, the impact of economic activities on the environment, and later also the evaluation of social capital and endogenous resources in the process of innovation and economic specialisation.

These different points of view in regional sciences over time have brought about heterogeneous conceptions of space and territory: from the two-dimensions physical space, upon which the attention of the modelling approach in the sixties and seventies was mainly focused, to the flexible and reticular space of a globalised world which has captured the attention of a growing number of regional scientists since the nineties. As a consequence, the regional dimension – and the concepts of “region” and “regionality” themselves – have been increasingly seen together as spaces of geographical proximity and as nodes of increasingly wider economic and political interactions.

While different paradigms have been developed around this perspective – for a review see McCann (2001) or Fujita and Thisse (2002) – a common ground within this “new economic geography” is that regions are the spatial dimension in which the opportunities given by the flexible and reticular nature of the new economy can be better exploited. The resulting challenge for the regional geography emerging from this perspective is that, beside the material factors so much focused by the classical approaches to regional science, a growing attention should also be paid to the intangible resources of development, such as cultural values, social capital, propensity to innovation, capacity to merge institutional reorganisation with economic competitiveness.

The criticism of quantitative models provided by the classical approaches in regional science is also the starting point for a third stream in the geographical thought which arrives at very different conclusions in conceptualising space in the regional dimension. Since the eighties, this perspective is mainly based on the work of Harvey (1985, 1996) and other geographers such as Thrift (1983), Massey (1984), and Soja (1985), who tried to see spatial changes mainly as the product of social and political interactions. This line of reflection – which may be summed up under the label of “new regional geography” (for a literature review see MacLeod and Jones, 2001; Paasi, 2002) – in its most recent developments may be described as a theoretical, methodological and political stance that stresses interconnectedness, hybridity and possibility (Thrift, 1998).

From our point of view, the interest of this perspective lies in the challenge to the traditional idea of region as a “bounded space” and its replacement with a concept of region as the result of a broader social production of space (Allen et al., 1998). The theoretical assumption is that besides a conception of administrative and functional region – in respect of which public institutions are legitimated to structure actions of government and regulation –, we must consider an idea of region as a political construction: a stratification of processes of strategy-making which can only partly be encompassed within formal boundaries.

In these respects, Amin (2004) has argued that regions (and cities), as they are immersed in a field of composite forces like those provided by globalisation (transnational flow of ideas, information, knowledge, money, people and cultural influences), tend to appear as sites with no clear spatial boundaries. It does not mean that the geographical or administrative borders that they have inherited from the past disappear, but rather that «in this emerging new order, spatial configurations and spatial boundaries are no longer necessarily or purposively territorial or scalar, since the social, economic, political and cultural inside and outside are constituted through the topologies of actor networks which are becoming increasingly dynamic and varied in spatial constitution» (Amin, 2004, p. 2). Seen in this perspective, regions are dissolving their integrity as territorial systems: they appear instead as the realm of juxtaposition, porosity and relational connectivity. The plural and dynamic character of this new spatial order, consequently, requires a review of the traditional concepts of space and place and above all an examining of the possibility of making their uses and meanings exchangeable.

The process of cultural globalisation, together with the growing cosmopolitanism that characterises our everyday lives, is rapidly changing the “sense of place” as it has been generally interpreted in the social science. On this argument, Massey (2005, 2007) has observed the emergence of a “global sense

of place”, the result of the immaterial process of reconfiguration (but with precise spatial effects) of the global-local interplay. Again Amin (2004), by invoking Foucault’s well-known expression, has written of a “heterotopic sense of place”, which does not necessarily cancel the sense of regional attachment felt by the inhabitants towards their space of life, but leads us to reconsider it as the result of multiple influences and a juxtaposition of proximity and long-distance relationships. From this relational point of view, regions appear as the most sensitive territorial dimension of the process of “glocalisation” introduced by Swyngedouw (1997) to indicate the combined process of globalisation and local-territorial reconfiguration. Paasi, in this respect, proposes an interesting distinction: while regions are conceptualised «as multiscalar institutional structures, places can be conceptualized as cumulative archives of personal spatial experience emerging from unique webs of situated life episodes. ‘Place’ is thus not bound to any specific location but conceptualized from the perspective of personal and family/household histories and life stories» (Paasi, 2002, p. 807).

This experiential perspective on the concept of place – seen as a construction of identities that can be individual or collective but related to specific localities situated in a geographical space – push back our argument on a conception of region as a political and social construct. While it is beyond any doubt that regions can be governed in relation to specific territorial partitions, their identities as space for planning policies must be conceived as the result of a process of strategic construction, or more precisely as the mediation between the strategic perspectives of a plurality of actors. The construction of regional identities, consequently, is closely related to a relational concept of territoriality, a conception that refuses the idea of the territory as a mere background for policies but rather, in the words of Amin (2004), as a topological dimension where the local brings together different scales of practices and social interactions. Cochrane (2012, p. 104) argues in this direction that what matters is that «territory is not taken as something given, somehow pre-existing and waiting to be filled with politics, but rather as something that is actively formed and shaped through the political process».

With similar arguments, Allen and Cochrane (2007) have proposed the concept of “regional assemblages”, a conceptual framework that recognises the processes of deconstruction in the power of territorial hierarchies and the related rise of forms of governance which are the expression of spatially discontinuous conceptions of regions. The construction of regional identities, in conclusion, as well as their use in the policy-making for territorial development, may be seen as the result of a complex process of institutionalisation where a plurality of different actors, strategies and actions make different use of space and territoriality (Cox, 2013). This relational idea of

regional identities, which is shared with the debate on governance change in Europe (see among other, Brenner, 1999, 2004; MacLeod, 1999; Gualini, 2006), provides a key conceptual framework to analyse critically the shifts in the territorial policy described in the following paragraph.

3. Regions, development and spatial planning: a European perspective

The optimism for regions and their role in the new European model of development in recent years has generally been replaced by a more cautious and reflective approach. The reasons for this changed attitude are several, owing to the drastic shift in perspective for territorial development imposed by the global crisis and the lack of trust towards European institutions for their capacity to regulate such a polycentric model of governance.

As a consequence of the economic crisis, several countries are reconsidering the role and autonomy of regional policies within a process that is linked to: (a) the return of powers of regulation to central institutions (such as the European Central Bank) apparently far from local interests; (b) the return of national protagonism in several areas of policy, such as economic development and the tackling of unemployment; (c) the shortage of financial transfers to regions due to the review of public spending; and (d) of high importance for our perspective – the lack of trust towards regional governments for the poor results they have achieved through development policies, particularly in the lagging regions.

This drastic shift of perspective has rapidly changed the context of regional policies in Europe, as much as globalisation and European integration had changed it in the previous decade. While several regions are demonstrating greater capacity to adapt to the global challenges they are facing, several others are more resistant to the structural changes required by the crisis, and the impact of cohesion policies can be considered still very limited (EC, 2010). The question of regional development, which twenty years ago appeared so promising and challenging, nowadays needs to be reformulated upon new and more intricate bases. Exploring the role of contemporary regions in territorial development – and with a particular focus on spatial planning policies as we are attempting – therefore entails some preliminary caveats.

The first mistake to avoid is to consider the European regions as homogeneous entities. In Europe there are regions – such as Baden-Württemberg in Germany, Catalonia in Spain, Rhône-Alpes in France, and Lombardia in Italy – that have a population and an economic potential comparable to some medium-sized countries like Sweden, Austria and Denmark. A sec-

ond distinction regards urban complexity and territorial diversity: some European regions enclose large cities or urban conurbations with a high concentration of infrastructures, populations and enterprises, which are often the engines of national economies. Other regions present a more polycentric pattern of development, with shared population or even underdeveloped areas. In some European countries, moreover, the differences in the level of development are fairly small (as in France, for example), while in others (such as Ireland, Spain or Italy) regional divergences are historically significant and still remain particularly marked.

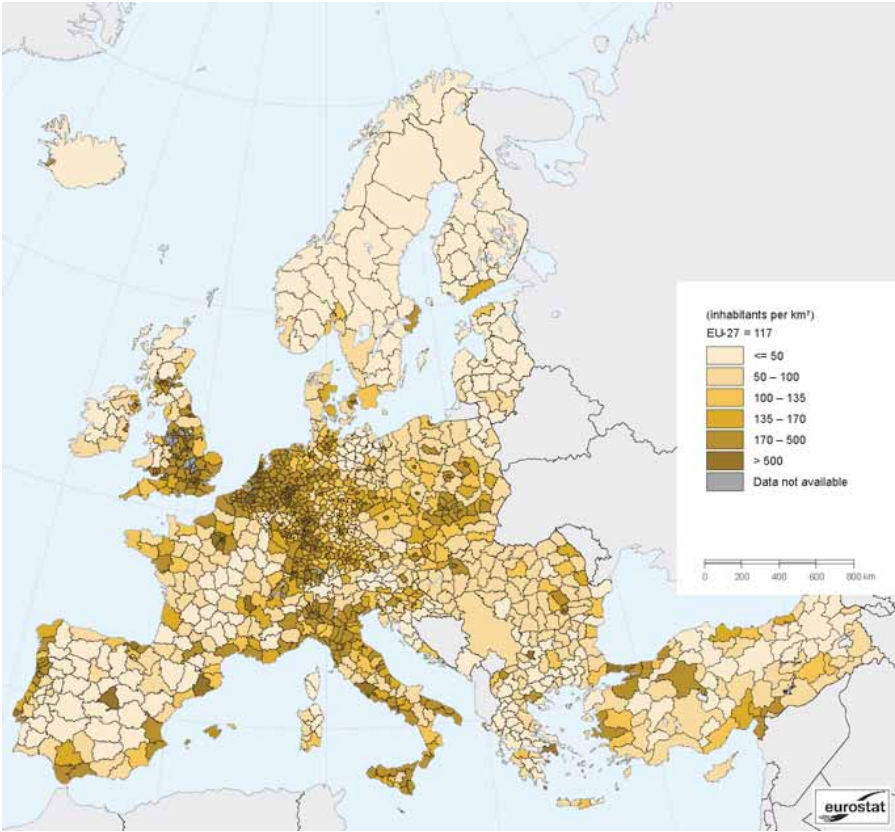


Fig. 1 – The diversity of regional Europe according to the density of population (source: Eurostat, 2011)

These divergences, together with those in the administrative and legal frameworks, have over time made the approach to regional policy and planning highly differentiated throughout Europe. Despite the EU's cohesion policy being a powerful driver in the convergence between the different national approaches, differences remain marked and it would be hard to arrive at common and shared definitions. It is clearly demonstrated by the number of comparative efforts that have tried to analyse the differences in the systems of regional policy and planning in European countries (Davies et al., 1989; Newmann and Thornely, 1996; EC, 1997; Balchin et al., 1999; Faludi, 2004; Adams et al., 2006; Espon, 2007; Janin Rivolin, 2008).

Starting from this literature, therefore, and before attempting any reflection on the spatial dimension of regional policy, it can be of help for our perspective to stress some common concepts. The first basic distinction within the different national traditions can be made between the concept of "regional planning" (within which spatial planning activities are generally encompassed) and the wider concept of "regional policy".

The *Compendium of spatial planning system and policies* (1997) defines "regional policy" as the attempt

«to influence the distribution of economic activity and social welfare between regions in order to address 'uneven development', and is usually undertaken by national governments. Regional policy measures include direct investments in physical and social infrastructure, fiscal incentives to influence the locational decisions of firms, and relaxation of regulations in areas of decline together with stricter controls in areas of 'excessive demands'» (EC, 1997, p. 24).

While the perspective of regional policy, looking at the imbalances between the different areas in a given national territory, is mostly supra-regional, regional planning is mainly focused on the internal imbalances within regions. It is also argued that "regional planning" can be defined as the effort

«to shape development patterns within a 'region' usually through a strategy which links physical change with economic and social policy. Regional planning operates at a level below the national level but above the local municipal level. It can be undertaken for administrative areas such as the territories of regional and provincial governments and administrations, or for functional planning areas such as 'city-regions'. Regional planning integrates the spatial implications and objectives of national policy with conditions in particular localities. It can operate at different levels within the same area such that sub-regional planning takes place within a regional planning area. Regional planning instruments are expressed in plan form but are strategic and rarely site specific» (EC, 1997, p. 24).

While in some European countries (for example, Ireland, the Netherlands, Denmark and Germany) regional development policies are driven by planning guidelines provided at national level, it is at regional level that an overall integration of objectives of economic development and of territorial cohesion can be generally practiced. In most of the national contexts, however, these competencies are shared between regional and sub-regional levels, with a very different degree of empowerment of the latter in the translation of spatial strategies of superior interest. Looking at the way in which this critical task is performed in the majority of European countries, the *Compendium* defines “spatial planning” as

«the methods used largely by the public sector to influence the future distribution of activities in space. It is undertaken with the aims of creating a more rational territorial organisation of land uses and the linkages between them, to balance demands for development with the need to protect the environment, and to achieve social and economic objectives. Spatial planning embraces measures to co-ordinate the spatial impacts of other sectoral policies, to achieve a more even distribution of economic development between regions than would otherwise be created by market forces, and to regulate the conversion of land and property uses» (EC, 1997, p. 24).

Beyond these common concepts and definitions, however, are the mechanisms through which spatial strategies are operationalised in practice to reveal the sharpest divergences in European approaches to planning. Adams and Harris (2005), in their review of regional planning in five European countries (Ireland, Wales, Belgium, Latvia and Lithuania), have identified two main types of strategies.

A first typology is that defined as “highly formalised” regional strategies, an approach where the objectives, methods of preparation and contents of plans are generally prescribed by legislation. In these cases the identification of the regional strategy is supported by extensive analysis of the territorial context and the documents are accompanied by very detailed action plans as well as the description of implementation and monitoring procedures. A second typology regards those that the authors have called “informal types” of regional strategies, which are not prescribed by law and where the process of planning, including stakeholders’ involvement, is generally carried out in more informal ways. In these cases, plan’s implementation requires further sectoral or thematic analysis and the plan is conceived as a framework in relation to others strategies provided at different institutional scales. This kind of plan may be described as a “platform for action” (Adams and Harris, 2005) where the plan takes the shape of reference or guidelines whose contents will be detailed