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*Stadtregionale Politik im finnischen und österreichischen Planungssystem: Nationale Initiativen und europäische Möglichkeiten*

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# City-regional policies in the planning systems of Finland and Austria: National initiatives and European opportunities

*Stadtregionale Politik im finnischen und österreichischen Planungssystem:  
Nationale Initiativen und europäische Möglichkeiten*

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## Introduction

- 1 Functional regions and new geographies crossing administrative borders have received increased attention in planning and policy making during the last decades. While such soft spaces are said to better represent the real geographies of problems and opportunities (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2009), the implementation of policies in these new regions is particularly challenging, as responsibilities and jurisdictions are not clearly defined. While some processes of regionalisation emerge in a bottom-up manner, also the European Union (EU), and national governments have started to promote new regional delineations (Purkarthofer, 2018a). To this end, these superordinate levels of government stimulate the cooperation between existing municipalities and regions, be it through financial incentives, legal provisions or other measures.
- 2 This contribution is interested in policies at the national and European level, which support functional city regions and the cooperation across municipal borders in urban areas. It investigates how city regions are promoted through national and European policies and how national and European interventions complement or contradict each other. In order to answer these research questions, the article takes up a comparative

perspective and juxtaposes the approaches towards city-regional policy in Austria and Finland. A comparison between the two countries is especially interesting due to their distinct administrative cultures and planning systems. Austria is a federation consisting of nine federal states, which enjoy a high degree of autonomy in urban planning and regional development matters. Finland, in turn, is a unitarian state with strong local governments. These structural differences result in distinct national policies to support city regions in Austria and Finland. At the same time, however, Austria and Finland show similarities when it comes to their exposure to European policies, not least because both countries joined the EU in 1995. Yet, as the EU has no competence to directly enact city-regional policies, domestic actors enjoy a significant leeway in interpreting and implementing European inputs (Purkarthofer, 2018b).

- 3 This article first presents the theoretical concept of soft spaces and relates it to the notion of city regions. It then introduces an analytical framework to classify and compare city-regional policies. In the following sections, it elaborates on the EU support for city regions and explores the Finnish and Austrian national policy initiatives respectively. Finally, the article juxtaposes national and European initiatives aimed at supporting city regions and discusses the findings with a view to the research questions.

## Theoretical and conceptual background

- 4 During the last decade, research has increasingly acknowledged the existence and importance of soft spaces for spatial planning. The notion of soft spaces was initially coined in the context of British politics and planning (Haughton and Allmendinger, 2007; Allmendinger and Haughton, 2009), referring to fluid areas with fuzzy boundaries which exist between and alongside administrative territories. Soft spaces thus do not coincide with statutory planning scales or processes, which typically rely upon administrative entities with fixed boundaries and clear jurisdiction. As a result, the governance arrangements associated with soft spaces are typically characterised by complexity, informality and fragmentation. Yet, soft spaces hold the potential to successfully tackle planning challenges, as they reflect the real geographies of problems better and enable more flexible and faster solutions by bypassing bureaucracies and rigidities associated with administrative boundaries and statutory planning (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2009). Following Allmendinger and Haughton's ideas, soft spaces have subsequently been identified at various scales, such as macro-regions, cross-border regions or city regions (Faludi, 2010; Metzger and Schmitt, 2012; Allmendinger, Chilla and Sielker, 2014; Stead, 2014; Hincks, Deas and Haughton, 2017).
- 5 This article focuses on the city region, a spatial concept that emerged approximately 100 years ago in the context of Western urbanization (Moisio and Jonas, 2018, pp. 285-287) and that has recently attracted attention in planning research and practice, albeit sometimes under different terms and with somewhat varying definitions. Internationally, the OECD understands city regions as "functional economic units" based on population density and commuter patterns (OECD, 2019b, 2019a). The European statistics office Eurostat uses similar definitions, such as "functional urban areas" based on commuter relations or "urban morphological zones" based on the built environment (Eurostat, 2009, 2018). Independent from statistical definitions, there is little doubt about the de facto interdependence of cities and their surroundings. Administrative boundaries do not delineate the activity spaces of human behaviour, including work, mobility, leisure time

or use of services, nor do they reflect functional economic areas, such as job markets or real estate markets, making city regions a commonly used concept in the context of competitiveness (Herrschel, 2013). Administrative entities also do not describe ecological and environmental relations such as animal habitats, groundwater reservoirs or soil pollution. As planning seeks to accommodate and coordinate all these aspects, it needs to take into account functional relations even where they transcend administrative boundaries. The conceptualisation of city regions as soft spaces, however, goes beyond the analysis and mapping of functional relations. Instead, city regions need to be understood as frameworks for cooperation and coordination and as arenas for political debate and policy making. This article focuses on the governance and policy dimension of city regions without further discussing the statistical patterns underlying the idea of the city region.

- 6 City regions thus emphasise a relational understanding of space and provide a governance arena to tackle challenges related to social, spatial and economic development across administrative borders (Herrschel, 2009, 2013). However, the implementation of city-regional plans and policies often proves difficult if administrative capacity, political decision-making mechanisms and democratic control remain bound to administrative entities. As there are often no formal administrative and political actors at the city-regional scale, activities originate from bottom-up or top-down processes. This article focuses on top-down policies, i.e. national and European initiatives aimed at supporting city regions and city-regional cooperation, because of their potentially wide impact, transferability and potential to frame policy development beyond single cases. Thus, while a multitude of examples for city-regional cooperation exists, also in Austria and Finland, the two case countries discussed, these singular processes will not be studied further in this article. However, other scholars have elaborated on specific city-regional cooperation processes in Austria (Schaffer and Zuckerstätter, 2012; Amt der Oö. Landesregierung, 2017; Patti, 2017) and Finland (Hytönen et al., 2016; Kanninen, 2017; Salo and Mäntysalo, 2017; Granqvist, Sarjamo and Mäntysalo, 2019).
- 7 In order to study national and European policies, this article sets out from a framework introduced to understand national urban policies in France, Germany, Spain and the UK (d'Albergo, 2010). In his study, d'Albergo builds on two dimensions. On the one hand, he distinguishes between policies with an urban focus (*explicit* policies), and policies without urban focus (*implicit* policies). On the other hand, he distinguishes between national level policies directly addressing urban issues (*direct* policies), and national policies empowering other actors to tackle urban challenges (*indirect* policies). In this article, we apply the matrix resulting from d'Albergo's classification to analyse and compare city-regional policies. Setting out from the perspective of spatial planning, we understand city-regional policies as interventions aimed at improving governance and cooperation in city regions, as well as policies intended to solve problems arising at the city-regional scale. While city regions are not exclusively a planning issue, spatial planning has been in the focus of debate more than other sectoral policies (Salet and Woltjer, 2009). In order to grasp the complexity associated with the governance of soft spaces such as city regions, we alter d'Albergo's analytical framework by not differentiating between *direct* and *indirect* policies but instead distinguishing between *regulatory*, *discursive* and *remunerative* policy interventions, a classification used in EU policy research (Purkarthofer, 2016, 2018b). Derived from Etzioni's three types of authoritative power (Etzioni, 1975) and Vedung's "carrots, sticks and sermons" of policy instruments (Vedung, 1998), this

classification enables to picture the plurality and complexity of policy interventions and potential policy packaging (Givoni et al., 2013). This helps us to acknowledge and accommodate the different legal preconditions of the unitarian state of Finland, the federalist state of Austria as well as the supra-national organization of the European Union.

## City-regional policies at the European Union level

- 8 At the level of the European Union, city regions have received increasing attention as part of a broader European storyline on diminishing borders and conflating spaces, which claims that challenges do not adhere to national borders and administrative boundaries and thus argues in favour of a functional understanding of space (Purkarthofer, 2018a). Although the EU does not have any competence for spatial planning or urban/metropolitan issues (Chilla, 2012; Purkarthofer, 2019) and can thus not enforce the reduction of administrative borders or creation of soft spaces, it supports city-regional cooperation rhetorically and financially.
- 9 Most explicitly, the EU addresses city regions through the research network ESPON. Already during the first ESPON programme in the early 2000s, city regions have been discussed as functional urban areas (ESPON, 2005, 2007). Subsequently, city regions became both the objects of study and the scales of analysis in many ESPON activities (Raugze, 2017). In 2018, for instance, ESPON launched a call for the development of a tool to provide territorial evidence on socioeconomic processes in functional urban areas, which should help to improve the governance of these areas (ESPON, 2018). ESPON thus supports the European discourse on city regions and contributes to knowledge creation and dissemination.
- 10 In a more implicit manner, also other European policies promote city regions discursively. On the one hand, reports published by the European Commission, primarily by the Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy, emphasise the importance of functional regions for planning and governance (European Commission, 2011, 2014a). On the other hand, intergovernmental documents agreed upon by the national ministers responsible for spatial development convey the same message, referring to metropolitan regions (CEC, 1999), city regions (CEC, 2007) or functional areas and regions (CEC, 2011; EU Ministers Responsible for Urban Matters, 2016).
- 11 Additionally, city regions can receive financial support from the European funding instruments, and specifically the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). While city regions are not an explicit priority within the ERDF, remunerative interventions can implicitly support city-regional cooperation, for example through investments in transport infrastructure or public administration. In addition, recently introduced financing instruments such as Community-Led Local Development (CLLD), and Integrated Territorial Investment (ITI), allow the use of new spatial delineations (European Commission, 2014b; Servillo, 2019). Both CLLD and ITI could thus serve to frame projects in a city-regional context. Whether the ERDF benefits city-regional cooperation, however, depends on its application by domestic actors and their use of the opportunities provided by the EU, as described for example in the case of Graz in Austria (Purkarthofer, 2018a).

## City-regional policies in Finland

- 12 Finland is characterised as unitarian welfare state with strong local government (Humer, Rauhut & Marques da Costa, 2013; Mattila, 2018). Correspondingly, the central state and the municipalities are the cornerstones of the Finnish planning system, although the Land Use and Building Act (Ministry of Environment, 1999) defines three planning levels. At the national level, the Ministry of Environment enacts the National Land Use Guidelines, which frame spatial development issues of nation-wide importance. Other ministries affect spatial development indirectly with regard to their specific sectoral focus, such as transport, economic development or agriculture and forestry. At the regional level, the 18 regions prepare Regional Land Use Plans and Regional Development Programmes. At the local level, the 311 municipalities develop and enact Local Master Plans and Local Detailed Plans. The municipalities enjoy a “planning monopoly”, referring to their sole control regarding planning issues, which leaves the regional level in an ambiguous position. While regional plans are hierarchically higher than municipal plans, they are enacted by the Regional Councils, which are not independent authorities but joint municipal boards, thus consisting of local political representatives. This leads to an asymmetrical distribution of power in favour of the local level (Hirvonen-Kantola and Mäntysalo, 2014) and the over-representation of local interests in regional plans (Kilpeläinen, Laakso & Loikkanen, 2011). At the time of writing, the Finnish regions are facing a fundamental reform, triggered by the need to reorganise social and health care services but potentially bringing about significant changes to planning (Purkarthofer and Mattila, 2018).
- 13 Moving from legal framework to spatial reality, interesting processes can be observed in Finland. The country is going through a comparatively late but still ongoing phase of urbanisation, which started in the 1960s and was accompanied by the fast transformation from an agricultural to an industrial and later service economy. Finland’s major cities are thus continuously growing, while peripheries and predominantly rural parts of the country are facing depopulation and a weakening economy. This led to an increasing focus of spatial policies on urban and city-regional matters as well as economic growth zones and corridors (Jauhiainen et al., 2007; Kalliomäki, 2012; Hytönen et al., 2016), partly influenced by EU Regional Policy (Luukkonen, 2012). At the same time, spatial planning has seen an increase in strategic and legally non-binding processes framing spatial development (Mäntysalo et al., 2015). In many cases, these processes have outlined new geographies and supported new governance arrangements, thus relating to the discourse on soft spaces and soft planning.
- 14 Most prominently in the Finnish context, soft spaces have manifested themselves as city regions. Although there exists no general definition of city regions in Finland, the nation-wide discourse is sometimes based on statistical delineations, provided for instance by the Finnish Environment Institute (see maps at SYKE, 2019). However, in practice, city-regional cooperation spaces often deviate from statistically computed areas and are instead shaped by an array of factors, including the willingness of actors to collaborate. Some city-regional initiatives have emerged in a bottom-up manner, such as the establishment of the Tampere City Region joint authority. More importantly though, the policy interventions originating from the nation-state level have been decisive to put city regions on the map. This article will briefly discuss four national city-regional policies,

which differ considerably regarding their type of intervention as well as their spatial focus and impact: (1), the joint municipal master plan, (2), the PARAS project, (3), the MAL agreements and (4), the SOTE reform. While this order reflects the chronological establishment of policies, we do not intend to imply that the policies represent a logical sequence of action, as considerable differences can be observed regarding motivations for enactment and implementation. In the discussion section, these Finnish interventions are juxtaposed with Austrian and European city-regional policies.

- 15 In the most recent reform of the Land Use and Building Act in 1999, the nation state has given municipalities the opportunity to enact joint municipal master plans. The joint master plan does not explicitly focus on city regions but offers a suitable framework for inter-municipal cooperation, given that two or more municipalities come to an agreement, which they are willing to turn into a legally binding plan. While this would be a suitable tool to tackle many of the planning issues of functional city regions, the opportunity to enact a joint municipal master plan has to date barely been exploited. The lack of interest might result from the absence of incentives and limited potential for innovation associated with the plan. In other words, the joint municipal master plan does not offer any obvious procedural or outcome-related advantages compared to the municipal land use plan, while reducing the leeway and autonomy of local actors by enacting a binding plan codetermined by other municipalities.
- 16 Motivated by Finland's sparse population and dispersed settlement structure and the resulting economic challenges, the central government implemented the PARAS project between 2007 and 2012. The project aimed to reform municipal structures and increase efficiency of service provision through mergers of smaller municipalities or establishment of service provision cooperation areas. Additionally, city regions were of special importance in the PARAS project, which instructed municipalities in 17 urban regions to jointly prepare strategic city-regional plans focusing on land use, housing and transportation (Sisäasiainministeriö, 2007). Although the municipalities developed their city-regional plans in a bottom-up manner and municipal mergers were not enforced but realised based on voluntary commitment, the nation state employed different types of policy interventions to support the implementation of the PARAS project. Regulatory specifications regarding mergers and city-regional cooperation were defined in the PARAS act (Sisäasiainministeriö, 2007) while merger grants were offered as remunerative incentive. As a result, the number of municipalities was reduced by almost 100, or 25%, between 2007 and 2013 (Meklin and Pekola-Sjöblom, 2013). Despite this reduction in numbers, the PARAS project has been criticised for its simplified assumptions regarding functional regions and economies of scale (Mäntysalo et al., 2018) as well as the state-induced pressure for city-regional planning cooperation and municipal mergers, which led to misrepresentations and defensive actions rather than effective political debate and collaboration (Hytönen et al., 2016). Due to its voluntary character, the project has moreover resulted in an imbalanced commitment to city-regional cooperation and curious municipal geographies, which are not based on functional relations but on willingness to cooperate (Mäntysalo et al., 2018).
- 17 Starting from 2011, the central state has introduced MAL agreements as a new national initiative to support city-regional cooperation regarding land use, housing and transportation (Bäcklund et al., 2017). In an informal letter of intent, the central state and the municipalities within a city region commit themselves to support city-regional cooperation: the municipalities through joint strategic spatial development and the state

by providing funding for infrastructure. MAL agreements can thus be understood as a primarily remunerative tool explicitly focused on city regions and planning-related issues. To date, MAL agreements have only been established between the state and the four biggest city regions (Helsinki, Tampere, Turku & Oulu). Currently in their third round (2011-2012, 2013-2015, 2016-2019), the MAL agreements are generally well received by participating municipalities due to the associated financial incentives. However, they have also faced criticism, for instance related to their lack of transparency, the limited opportunities for public participation and the tensions with other plans at the municipal and regional level (Bäcklund et al., 2017).

- 18 While the PARAS project and the MAL agreements supported new functional geographies, they did not suggest to formally strengthen the regional administrative tier. Only recently, the Finnish state started to prepare a wide-ranging regional government reform focusing on the reorganisation of social and health care service provision (“SOTE”), (Kivelä, 2018, p. 163). If the reform were realised as currently envisioned, regional governments would in the future represent a directly elected government level, thus replacing the Regional Councils, which are joint municipal authorities. The SOTE reform is as such a nation-wide matter, thus not explicitly dealing with city regions, but it is likely to have territorial implications by being better suited for densely populated, well-accessible regions. By introducing more liberalised models of healthcare provision and following the regional economic logic of clustering and specialization, the SOTE reform is likely to favour urbanized regions, which have the critical mass for specialised services. The overall strengthening of the regional level as government scale, as envisioned in the SOTE reform, will potentially reflect city-regional relationships better by emphasising supra-local territories. However, the envisioned SOTE regions will be based on existing administrative regions and not follow a functional, relational understanding of space.

## City-regional policies in Austria

- 19 Austria is a federation with three tiers of government. The nation state and the nine federal states are equipped with legislative powers, while the approximately 2100 municipalities are handling administrative tasks on behalf of the federal states and issues of local concern as independent administrative bodies. Spatial planning is characterised by fragmentation in the Austrian administrative system. The federal states hold the competences for spatial planning and urban and regional development, consequently each federal state issues its own spatial planning law and has its own interpretation of the central places concept. The municipalities are responsible for local issues related to land use planning, building, housing, local technical infrastructure and not least public finances. While the federal states and municipalities have formal planning processes, the national tier relies on voluntary, cooperative forms of policy making, which build on the joint responsibility of municipalities and federal states in the matter. Two associations represent the interests of municipalities on the national level, the *Gemeindebund* (representing rather rural municipalities), and the *Städtebund* (representing rather urban municipalities). The most important national planning organisation is the *Austrian Conference on Spatial Planning* (“ÖROK”), which can be described as cooperative multi-governmental organization. It incorporates the local level (through *Gemeindebund* and *Städtebund*), the regional level (represented by the nine federal states), and the national level (represented by all national ministries and the chancellor’s office), into one

organisation with advisory status. Additionally, some spatially relevant matters lie within the responsibility of specific actors on national level, such as the Ministry of Sustainability and Tourism addressing rural issues or the Ministry for Transport, Innovation and Technology emphasising infrastructural matters. However, there is no advocate for urban or city-regional matters in the Austrian national political landscape and there exists “nothing that could be called urban policy in Austria” (Schindegger, 2007, p. 65).

- 20 However, starting from the early 2000s, the ÖROK and the Städtebund increasingly addressed questions related to inter-municipal cooperation and city-regional governance in their work programmes. The decennial *Austrian Spatial Development Strategy* (“ÖREK”), from 2001 (ÖROK, 2002) was highly inspired by European discourses and introduced notions related to the ESPD, such as polycentricity, urban-rural relations and functional regions (CEC, 1999). The ÖREK 2001 thus marked a starting point of engagement with city-regional questions in the Austrian context. A first interdisciplinary study statistically identified 35 city regions, altogether home to approximately 70% of Austria’s population (see maps at KDZ, 2015), and elaborated on related governance and strategic planning issues (ÖROK, 2009). Based on this exploratory study, the issue was more prominently addressed in the preparation of the next Austrian Spatial Development Strategy (ÖROK, 2011). Motivated by these processes, the Städtebund increasingly emphasised city regions as new activity spaces and highlighted their potential in sectoral questions like inter-municipal public transport planning. Within the implementation programme of the ÖREK 2011, several work groups and projects relevant to city regions were realised (Humer, 2018, p. 638). This ultimately resulted in the publication of a strategic document with politically ratified recommendations for city-regional cooperation in Austria called *Agenda Stadtregionen* (KDZ, 2015; ÖROK, 2016, 2017).
- 21 Overall, the national discourse on city-regional policies and planning in Austria is mainly driven by the ÖROK and the Städtebund and relies on the voluntary commitment of concerned public authorities and networks, while the private sector and civil society play no visible role. Efforts go towards mainstreaming city-regional thinking into various relevant policies at the national, regional and local level, and can thus be characterised as explicit and discursive. Legal changes or financial programmes have not been introduced - not least due to the lack of a formal body at the national level officially in charge of city-regional policies. Examples illustrating the ongoing discourse are the presentation of each city region on a joint, interactive website (KDZ, 2015) and the organization of annual conferences on the topic of city regions (*Stadtregionstage*).
- 22 Besides these explicit city-regional policies, no implicit policies supporting city regions can be identified at the national level in Austria, probably with the exception of national financial support for regional public transport, potentially covering city regions. However, if specific types of regions are supported through national policies and laws, it has traditionally been the “weak” peripheral regions which have been favoured, rather than urbanized regions (Schindegger, 2007, p. 66). This is confirmed in the current national government work programme for 2017-2022, which does not mention any specific commitment to city-regional initiatives in Austria. Instead, the objective of “cities’ future and life quality” is subordinate to the chapter “agriculture and rural regions” (Neue Volkspartei and Freiheitliche Partei Österreich, 2017, p. 158).

## Discussion: Comparing European and national city-regional policies

- 23 Table 1 classifies European and national city-regional policies according to the comparative framework presented at the beginning of this article, inspired by d'Albergo (2010) and Purkarthofer (2016). Policies with an explicit city-regional focus exist at the European level as well as in Finland and Austria, confirming that city regions are broadly recognised and regarded important. In addition, implicit city-regional policies can be identified, which incidentally, or *en passant*, support city-regional cooperation while primarily pursuing other spatial or sectoral objectives.

**Table 1. European and national city-regional policies.**

		Policy focus and impact	
		<i>explicit</i>	<i>implicit</i>
Type of policy intervention	<i>regulatory</i>	(FI) PARAS project	(FI) joint master plan (FI) SOTE reform
	<i>discursive</i>	(AT) Agenda Stadtregionen (EU) ESPON	(AT) ÖREK 2001 / 2011 (EU) ESDP / Territorial Agenda TA2020 / Urban Agenda Cities of Tomorrow
	<i>remunerative</i>	(FI) MAL agreements (FI) PARAS project	(EU) ERDF

**SOURCE: AUTHORS' OWN ELABORATION, INSPIRED BY D'ALBERGO (2010), AND PURKARTHOFFER (2016)**

- 24 Fundamental differences can be observed regarding the different types of policy intervention. Only the Finnish state intervenes through regulatory actions, mainly due to the fact that it is the only authority among the three that holds constitutional competences to enforce laws and formal rules regarding spatial planning and development. While the EU and the Austrian nation state lack this competence, they could make use of their legal authority regarding other spatially relevant sector policies to support city regions - yet, this opportunity is to date not exploited. Instead, the EU and the Austrian national level promote city regions explicitly and implicitly through discursive policies like informal strategy papers. In Finland, on the other hand, the city-regional discourse is a side product of regulatory and remunerative interventions, and does not manifest itself through separate documents. However, Finland has introduced very explicit financial incentives for city-regional cooperation, while remunerative interventions are not yet in place in Austria. Implicitly, also the EU provides remunerative support for city regions, especially through the ERDF, which holds the potential to foster cooperation through various programmes, including those aimed at cross-border regions. Overall, our analysis has uncovered different types of city-regional

policies: Finland's approach focuses on legal and financial interventions, the EU's way is highly discourse-led but also entails the potential of financial incentives, while Austria's interventions are so far limited to shaping a discursive agenda through inclusion of a broad range of stakeholders.

- 25 In addition to administrative systems and planning traditions, also current political agendas play a decisive role in shaping national policies. When scrutinising policies aimed at city regions, one must not forget that in both countries tensions between rural and urban areas, and consequently between rural-focused and urban-focused policies persist. The current conservative-led Finnish government has continued to implement city-regional policies, which were initiated by the previous liberal-led government, and has even made significant financial contributions to realise city-regional projects. Efforts to obtain EU funding for city regions could not be identified in Finland, presumably because it would be more difficult to align European frameworks with national legislation and objectives. Finland's city-regional national policies stand in contrast to the country's welfarist tradition, built around the central aims of equality and balanced development, traditionally supporting rural and peripheral areas. Yet, at the same time as supporting city regions, the current government also seems to emphasise regions, for instance through the plans for the regional SOTE reform. This can be interpreted as the government's attempt of holding onto the balancing objective and including rural regions. From this point of view, it is not surprising that the Finnish government does not underline its city-regional policies through discursive interventions, which would potentially decrease political support and further existing tensions between rural regions and the central state (Purkarthofer and Mattila, 2018). This is in line with the interpretation of city-regional MAL agreements as "bypassing publicity for getting things done" (Bäcklund et al., 2017) and the fact that the general public might not even be aware of these processes, let alone be able to influence them through means of participation. The Finnish policy approach towards city regions thus might be efficient in generating concrete outcomes, e.g. the construction of city-regional transport infrastructure. However, it has to be viewed critically with regard to democratic legitimacy, equality principles and balanced development. Moreover, the remunerative and agreement-based approach might result in one-dimensional solutions by focusing only on a few issues thus not necessarily supporting lasting cooperation and doing justice to the complexities associated with soft spaces such as city regions.
- 26 There is still no distinct urban or city-regional policy on the Austrian national political agenda. The development of a common policy is hampered by the horizontal and vertical fragmentation of competences and the persisting political divide between urban and rural areas. This divide can also be observed at the federal and municipal level, as a recent study highlights in the context of the federal state of Burgenland (Gruber, Rauhut & Humer, 2019). Against this background, the *Agenda Stadtregionen* is an important first step to acknowledge city regions as spatial reality and planning scale at the national level. Even if city-regional cooperation cannot be framed directly at the national level in the context of spatial planning, other sectoral policies, for instance regarding transport or environment, could include a city-regional perspective in their nation-wide policies. Although city regions do not play a role in the working programme of the current Austrian government, platforms and associations at the national level, such as the ÖROK and the Städtebund, might advance the city-regional debate in the years to come. Moreover, federal states are equipped with the competences to take regulatory or

remunerative measures at any point, for which a common city-regional discourse across Austria would provide an important framework. Recent initiatives, such as the spatial planning programme of the federal state of Upper Austria show promise regarding an increased awareness of the importance of the city-regional scale in planning on the one hand, and of the opportunities provided by the EU to fund city-regional cooperation (Amt der Oö. Landesregierung, 2017). However, to date the impression prevails that in most cases the federalist Austrian administrative system allows joint discourse but impedes actual collaboration and action.

- 27 Both countries could benefit from stronger links to EU policies. However, the EU also needs to reconsider how to achieve a more synergetic city-regional set of interventions in compliance with the ongoing support for administrative regions (Havlík, 2018). This could on the one hand mean to intensify the current approach by mainstreaming the city-regional discourse within EU regional policy and intergovernmental documents, such as the Urban Agenda (Purkarthofer, 2019). On the other hand, the EU might need to pay more attention to existing national city-regional policies, in order to offer financial incentives, which are complementary to regulatory and discursive policies in the member states.

## Conclusion

- 28 By drawing on examples from Finland, Austria and the European Union, this article has presented different top-down interventions aimed at promoting city regions. The three cases provide examples of regulatory, discursive and remunerative policy interventions, which either explicitly or implicitly support city-regional cooperation. While the Finnish approach relies on national tools to regulate and finance cooperation, the Austrian approach remains largely discursive. The comparative framework thus reveals that the intervention logic of the EU is overlapping with Austrian but complementary to Finnish policies.
- 29 The plurality of interventions confirms the understanding of city regions as soft spaces, in which there is no single ideal approach to governance and planning. Instead, city-regional cooperation can be understood as diverse and multi-layered processes, which might require a plurality of policy responses. The existence of explicit city-regional policies, irrespective of the specific national approach, affirms that city regions are regarded a relevant planning scale across Europe. This has likely been supported by the discourse on city regions and other functional geographies at the European Union level (Purkarthofer, 2018a). Yet, EU funding instruments that could be used to support city-regional cooperation seem to be to date underused, at least in the case countries of this study.
- 30 While the analysis has revealed a broad range of different national and European city-regional policies, the limitations of top-down policy interventions need to be acknowledged. Statistical delineations and nationwide programmes might serve as starting points to foster the political discourse on and visibility of city regions. However, they cannot replace active collaboration within city regions, which is ultimately crucial for their conceptualisation as soft spaces. European and national top-down policies thus need to be viewed as complementary to each other, yet also complementary to bottom-up activities aimed at city-regional cooperation. Recently introduced financial instruments within EU Cohesion Policy, such as CLLD and ITI, hold the potential to master this

balancing act. They could be applied to frame city-regional development in a way that ensures financial support from higher administrative levels while relying on the initiative and knowledge of local actors to advance city region building and cooperation. The nation states could enact similar remunerative policies, or they could act as links and mediators between different scales, providing information and support where necessary. This article has highlighted the need for an intensified debate on national city-regional policies and has introduced a comparative framework suitable to analyse them, which could be applied to other countries in further research.

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## ABSTRACTS

The potential of city regions to frame spatial development is widely acknowledged, and lately increasingly supported by top-down policy interventions. This article investigates and compares national city-regional policies in Finland and Austria. Owing to differences in their administrative systems, planning traditions and political agendas, the two countries rely on a distinct set of policy interventions. Moreover, the article addresses city-regional policies originating from the European Union and discusses their overlap and complementarity with national initiatives. The three cases provide examples of regulatory, discursive and remunerative policy interventions, which either explicitly or implicitly support city-regional cooperation. The plurality of interventions confirms the understanding of city regions as soft spaces, in which there is no single ideal approach to governance and planning. Instead, city-regional cooperation can be understood as diverse and multi-layered processes, which might require a plurality of policy responses.

Das Potential von Stadtregionen zur Steuerung und Strukturierung der räumlichen Entwicklung ist durchwegs anerkannt und wurde zuletzt verstärkt durch politische top-down Interventionen gefördert. In diesem Artikel werden nationalstaatliche Politiken zu Stadtregionen in Finnland und Österreich gegenübergestellt. Aufgrund der unterschiedlichen administrativen Systeme, Planungstraditionen und politischen Agenden greifen diese zwei Staaten auf ein bestimmtes Set an politischen Interventionen zurück. Zudem werden im Artikel auch stadregionale Politiken der Europäischen Union und deren Überlagerung und Ergänzung mit nationalen Initiativen diskutiert. Diese drei Fälle bieten Beispiele für regulative, diskursive und fiskalische Interventionen, die jeweils eher explizit oder implizit stadregionale Kooperation unterstützen. Die Vielfalt an Interventionen unterstreicht das Verständnis von Stadtregionen als Soft Spaces, für die es nicht den einen idealen Governance- und Planungszugang gibt. Stattdessen kann stadregionale Kooperation als facettenreicher, vielschichtiger Prozess verstanden werden, für dessen Förderung es einer Vielzahl an politischen Handlungsweisen bedarf.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** city region, spatial planning, comparative framework, cooperation, soft space, European Union, Austria, Finland

**Schlüsselwörter:** Stadtregion, Raumentwicklung, Raumplanung, Kooperation, vergleichende Studie, Europäische Union, Österreich, Finnland

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