

Study on the construction of a polycentric and balanced development model for the European territory

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

The ESDP, adopted in Potsdam in 1999 by the Ministers in charge of spatial planning, set as a priority the principle of a “Polycentric and balanced spatial development within the EU”. The present study was designed with a view to examining this concept in greater detail and imagining what kind of configuration this particular option might take in Europe’s peripheries, both in terms of content (policy options) and form (mapping scenario). The work was organised at European level under the coordination of the CPMR and its Maritime Peripheries Forward Studies Unit and was contracted out to a team of experts in charge of the national and thematic approaches, further enriched by a number of “test” interviews with public- and private-sector players. The idea behind this approach was to analyse the concept of polycentrism in its two dimensions:

- “European polycentrism”, the main objective of which is to enhance, on a Europe-wide scale, conurbations and urban systems with enough demographic weight and economic potential to enable them to interact directly with the main European and global decision-making centres and spread their influence over large peripheral areas.
- “functional polycentrism”, which aims to encourage better complementarity between the European urban areas so that they may play a more structuring role in achieving a greater balance between the territories. Functional polycentrism is a concept that can be applied at a wide variety of different levels, according to the kinds of functions that need to be better integrated.

Evaluation and typology of the peripheral urban systems

To start with, the team selected 41 “European-ranking” urban systems identified as being likely to underpin a European polycentric project. This does not however prevent other smaller conurbations or systems from being subsequently included in more detailed studies. These urban systems represent approximately 25% of the territory covered by the study and concentrate around 45% of its population. The systems were configured according to a certain number of criteria. These included the presence of a conurbation with a population of at least 500,000 inhabitants and the identification of other urban centres with a population greater than 150,000 and located at a maximum distance of approximately 130km, connected by motorway. It was agreed that the system as a whole should have a population of approximately at least one million inhabitants.

The urban systems and conurbations of peripheral regions were assessed on this basis and compared, as far as possible, with the situation of the three Pentagon-based systems in the countries covered by the study (London, Paris and Milan). From this evaluation, we can clearly see that, despite having a few features in common, the peripheral urban systems show a high level of diversity between themselves, and likewise with regard to the Pentagon. It is easy to see significant differences in the extent to which each of the systems have accumulated setbacks, preventing them from playing the full role that could be expected of them in the near future. The criteria for which disparities in favour of the Pentagon are most evident are mass, measured by population and by GDP, economic decision-making centres and connectivity by air. In contrast, the peripheral systems showing the highest levels of performance achieve similar scores to the Pentagon-based systems for other indicators such as GDP per capita in ppp in relation to the EU average, and productivity. The top-ranking peripheral systems

occasionally fare better than the Pentagon-based systems in factors such as educational attainment or research and development (mainly the Nordic systems) and in respect of drivers of change, e.g. growth in GDP per capita in purchasing power parity (Madrid), productivity (Galicia) and population (Toulouse). However, there are still wide gaps between the peripheral systems themselves, both in terms of stock and dynamic indicators.

The peripheral urban systems do not therefore have the same advantages when it comes to facing the objective of European polycentrism. According to the approach adopted in this study, polycentric development relies on a number of key conditions being met:

- competitiveness of the systems,
- connectivity (mainly by rail and air) and cooperation between the urban systems,
- their functional relations and the development of threshold and range effects, which create synergies that are essential in overcoming the setbacks related to their peripherality,
- interlinking the peripheral urban systems with the main European and world centres, thus allowing them to become more involved in the dynamics of the world economy.

A typology gives an indication of the main roles and functions that the peripheral urban systems currently assume within the European territory. Five indicators were used in order to establish this typology and concern competitiveness, economic decision-making centres, human capital, connectivity and drivers of change. After cross-referencing these five aspects, the urban systems were classed into five different categories: peripheral gateways, rising stars, promising systems, dilemma systems and the most peripheral systems.

Sectoral drivers, national characteristics and the credibility of a polycentric project

The study also drew on the results of some 150 interviews with private- and public-sector operators working at European, national or regional level. Presented in the form of a succinct summary, it offers an interpretation of the polycentric project with regard to certain sectoral trends or a number of major national characteristics summarised on the basis of four factors, these being of a geo-strategic, socio-cultural/historic, administrative and political nature.

Three thematic approaches were selected in order to examine in greater detail whether or not they contributed towards polycentrism. These were enterprise development, research & development and innovation and transport. These three approaches led to a certain number of common conclusions, which confirm the dominant notion that the main factors of competitiveness are subject to an increasingly marked spatial segregation. Market-led thinking is becoming increasingly important in determining the fate of the territories, whether in terms of the choice of business locations, R&D policies or transport infrastructures. Few remedial measures are provided by public policies to offset this trend, if indeed this were possible. On the contrary, the underlying idea is to see how market forces may be exploited in a more balanced way within each of these sectors, by opting to foster certain effects brought about through concentration and/or specialisation in the peripheries.

These phenomena are generally in play in each of the countries studied, although they may of course take on different forms. However, a comparison of the national situations provides a wealth of information as to the way in which public authorities look at this issue, and how it may be addressed. This comparison shows that there is still a certain degree of national short-sightedness as far as territorial matters are concerned, although the long-term trends point towards greater spatial integration. However, the polycentric project has not yet been taken on board to a great extent in national, regional and urban policies, despite the fact that it represents a rising concern.

Development scenarios of the peripheral urban systems

On the basis of these initial analyses, two scenarios were established: i) a “straight-line” scenario, taking into consideration a continued progression of the various developments identified, without any specific public intervention in favour of a polycentric project at European level; and ii) a “voluntarist” scenario which, while remaining realistic, would result in the implementation within the next 20 or 30 years of a voluntarist policy in favour of this model, involving all spheres of government.

The “straight-line” hypothesis would lead quite quickly to a gradual expansion of the Pentagon, as it spreads its influence towards the centre of the UK, northern Italy, south-eastern France and the southern Baltic area. It would also see the emergence of a number of peripheral gateways such as Madrid and the North European capitals. Very few peripheral urban systems will emerge strongly outside of the extended Pentagon area. Only Lisbon, Barcelona, Toulouse and Göteborg seem to show a reassuring level of drive. A few promising urban systems located along the major transport corridors could emerge here and there, while a large number of dilemma or highly peripheral areas will continue to face a very uncertain future. Such a scenario would soon result in a reinforcement of polarisation and specialisation phenomena to the advantage of a limited number of peripheral urban systems, thus contributing towards increased territorial asymmetries.

A voluntarist hypothesis in favour of redressing the balance of the European territory and developing polycentrism is based on a situation where all political levels – from European level, to national, regional and urban level – contribute towards structuring cooperation areas that are able to better polarise certain development factors. In order to achieve this, it would be necessary to work on three different scales. In order of priority, they are as follows:

- strengthening of the “Metropolitan European Growth Areas” (MEGA). These are areas comprising the identified urban systems and their wider sphere of influence, and polarising factors of competitiveness. Priority would be given to encouraging cooperation at this level, which would require the strong intervention of a certain number of sectoral policies, a significant adaptation of the current regional policy, accompanying measures for national policies to break up the concentration of economic activity, and finally a strong involvement and cooperation on the part of the regional and urban areas;
- accompanying measures to aid the emergence of new development corridors resulting from the networking and cooperation efforts between several MEGAs, mainly through transport policies;
- progressive accompanying measures over a more long-term period for what the ESDP refers to as global economic integration zones (GIZ).

The implementation of such a policy would call for a greater coordination between the different levels of public services acting within the territories, in order to reinforce the impact and leverage effects of public-sector action in circumstances where budgets are often tight. In particular, this would mean applying policies that, by nature, would exercise a certain positive discrimination, a practice which is not particularly widespread at present. This can only work if there is a much greater show of solidarity among territories, not only on a European scale, but also on more specific territorial levels. Such strategies would need to be studied in greater detail, especially with regard to Interreg actions, of which one of the main virtues is to closely involve the different players. Furthermore, they might also draw on the more in-depth studies currently being undertaken within the ESPON.

This perspective could for example result in a spatial vision of the peripheries, which might be outlined as follows:

* Structuring of the Atlantic area into three development corridors:

- An Iberian Atlantic Zone, which despite being strongly connected to Madrid, is managing nonetheless to redress the balance through a step-by-step structuring of the territory involving the coastal systems of Galicia, Porto and Lisbon on towards Seville in the west, and a strengthening of the cross-border system of the Basque Country in the north.
- A “North Atlantic” Zone, giving a central role to the urban system of Manchester-Liverpool, notably in its relations with Ireland, North America and Scandinavia. The area extends northwards to Glasgow-Edinburgh, westwards to Dublin and Belfast, to Birmingham-Coventry and Nottingham-Derby in the centre, and southwards to Bristol-Cardiff-Swindon, thus providing a credible territorial offer to complement London and the home counties.
- A French Atlantic Zone which is much more voluntarist and uncertain in respect of the high level of dependency of each system on Paris. Strengthening the MEGAs of Loire-Bretagne the Basque region or Bordeaux area, or other secondary systems such a Poitou-Charentes, appears as such to be a long-term objective.

* Structuring of the Nordic area around two development corridors, that are already showing different levels of consolidation:

- to the west, the development corridor formed by the Scandinavian capitals, which already shows a high degree of territorial integration,
- to the east, the development corridor of the Gulf of Finland, whose future remains more uncertain despite the foreseeable drivers of change and opportunities that should arise with the enlargement of the European Union to the east and the consolidation of Russia’s development process

* Structuring of the Mediterranean area covered by the study into three corridors:

- An Iberian Mediterranean Zone, structured notably on the basis of the integration of the systems of Andalusia and Murcia-Alicante and of the systems of Valencia and Catalonia, offering Barcelona a role as European gateway.
- A Central Mediterranean and Alpine Zone that includes mainly northern and central Italy and south-eastern France.
- A Southern Italian Zone that could gradually structure itself on a bipolar basis where Rome and Naples play a pivotal role, with the other urban systems clustering around them.

Subsequent studies designed to enrich this initial approach deserve to be undertaken, so that the main players might agree on whether or not to uphold these initial working hypotheses, and more importantly so that these proposals might be applied to more specific territorial levels in accordance with projects that are up and running in these areas.