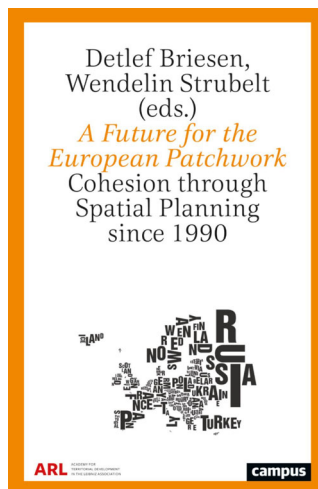


Briesen, Detlef; Strubelt, Wendelin (eds.) (2026): A Future for the European Patchwork: Cohesion through Spatial Planning since 1990

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The publication “A Future for the European Patchwork: Cohesion through Spatial Planning since 1990” by Detlef Briesen and Wendelin Strubelt brings together 20 professional chapters on 424 pages, supplemented by an introduction and a commemorative text “In Memory of Patsy Healey”, to which 24 authors contributed. The book is based on an international conference held in Rome (Italy) in 2024 and organized by the ARL – Academy for Territorial Development in the Leibniz-Association. The contributions are divided into four core parts: Part I –

History and Future of Cohesion Policies: six chapters, Part II – Cohesion through Spatial Planning in National Contexts: five chapters, Part III – Cohesion Policy within the Context of European Regions: nine chapters, Part IV – Aspects of Cohesion outside of Europe: two chapters. The authors represent a wide range of views on the issue of cohesion, both from the perspective of specific professional positions and from the perspective of geography or scale. It is a pity that the editors did not include a more representative collection of authors from the countries that joined the European Union after 2000 (apart from Sylwia Dołzbłasz from Poland), although the enlargement of the EU to include these countries brought fundamental changes in both policies and conceptual views on cohesion and territorial cohesion, including the contributions from the ARL – Academy of Territorial Development in the Leibniz-Association. Chapters by authors from Vietnam, India and the United Kingdom suitably complement the publication with their views from a perspective outside the European Union.

The issue of cohesion and especially territorial cohesion is still a hotly debated topic despite several decades of political and professional discussion. This is due not only to the dynamic economic, social and environmental developments in Europe and the enlargement of the European Union, but also to the fact that this very topic is one where professional reflection on developments, professional discussions and prospective conceptual work lag behind political discussions.

The editors of the book, Detlef Briesen and Wendelin Strubelt, set out to examine the extent to which spatial planning has contributed to the cohesion of European societies since 1990. The discussions are based on the belief that spatial planning is not just a technical or sectoral tool, but

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an important factor in social, regional and transnational integration.

Specifically, the editors aim to

- analyse how territorial and territorial cohesion policies have contributed to the unification of Europe at European, national, regional and cross-border levels,
- assess the successes and shortcomings of these policies over the past three decades,
- show that territorial cohesion is an important tool for dealing with current challenges (globalization, regional disparities, Brexit, cross-border cooperation, ecological transformation and other “poly-crises”),
- point out that the importance of spatial planning in building social cohesion is often underestimated or overlooked.

In the context of this ambition and the degree of its fulfilment, the publication can be considered a very valuable contribution not only to the current scientific debate but also to the political discussion. It is obvious that one publication cannot cover such a complex and explosive topic as cohesion and territorial cohesion in all its complexity, but the time gap between some of the conceptual approaches, practical steps or policies already allows for an objective critical evaluation, both from a scientific and professional perspective and from the practice perspective of European and national policies. Precisely such a critical view could move the professional debate forward to more than descriptive views, although the usefulness of the latter cannot be denied either.

The very name “European Patchwork” refers to the dual character of Europe: on the one hand, its great cultural, linguistic, social and economic diversity, and on the other hand, the common value systems, historical ties and connections that create a relatively cohesive space. The authors of the publication examine the potential of spatial planning to contribute to maintaining this unity in diversity, critically assessing the role of spatial planning as a tool for strengthening territorial and social cohesion in Europe after 1990. The authors generally proceed from the knowledge that the concept of cohesion has shifted significantly since the beginning of the 1990s. It is no longer just about the economic equalization of regional differences, which dominated in the period before the major EU enlargements, but about a broader understanding encompassing territorial cohesion, polycentric development, cross-border and trans-regional and trans-national cooperation, the resilience of regions and the ability to cope with diversity. The authors even emphasize that cohesion must be constantly redefined in light of historical challenges and the changing borders of Europe. A more critical view of the persistence with which regional differences have been assessed as targets for political and economic interventions, leading to ineffective policy

settings – and this despite declarations concerning the importance of capitalizing on diversity – would contribute to the current debate on a new understanding of cohesion.

In his chapter “Territorial Cohesion, the Magic Stick to Unite Europe”, Klaus Kunzmann interprets territorial cohesion as an attempt to find a new integration principle for an increasingly heterogeneous Europe. The EU enlargements in 2004, 2007 and 2013, according to this line of thinking, showed that economic convergence alone is not enough. It is necessary to consider the spatial relations between the core and the periphery, cities and the countryside, or old and new member states. Territorial cohesion thus becomes a political concept that is supposed to help “keep Europe together”.

Karl-Peter Schön’s chapter “European Territorial Development Policy: an Unfinished Project” shows that the concept of cohesion has expanded along with the development of European spatial policy (ESDP, Territorial Agenda). The enlargement of the Union has brought new territorial disparities and increased the importance of coordination between member states. Cohesion is no longer understood only as a redistribution of funds, but also as the coordination of development strategies in a multinational space. However, Karl-Peter Schön also points out that the EU has limited competences in the field of spatial planning, and that the project of European territorial cohesion therefore remains unfinished.

Jean Peyrony focuses on cross-border regions. In his chapter, he considers the enlargement of the EU to be a crucial moment, as it has shifted attention from national inequalities to relations between regions on both sides of borders. Cohesion is understood here as the ability to create functional spaces that transcend national borders. In an enlarged Union, the aim is no longer simply to reduce disparities, but to build interconnectedness and joint territorial governance.

Maria Prezioso looks at the Italian case and stresses that European cohesion policies have gradually moved from a sectoral approach to integrated and multi-level territorial governance. EU enlargement has brought greater emphasis on the competitiveness, sustainability and territorial identity of regions. Cohesion therefore no longer means just “balancing”, but also the ability of regions to use their own potential in the European network.

Cliff Hague reflects on the current situation through the concept of polycrisis (climate change, geopolitical conflicts, energy crisis, migration). In this context, the understanding of cohesion expands again: it is no longer just about convergence between regions, but about the resilience and ability of societies to cope with shocks. However, the idea that the enlarged EU is more diverse and hence more vulnerable, and therefore cohesion must be understood dynamically

and adaptively, could be argued against in its causal form, especially in the context of knowledge about resilience.

If we look at the second part of the book, containing contributions by five authors (Maria Prezioso (Italy), Guy Baudelle (France), Victoria Grau (United Kingdom), Felix Leyendecker (Scotland) and Markus Hesse (Luxemburg/Germany)), we encounter analyses of how the principles of territorial cohesion and spatial planning are manifested in a specific state or region.

Considering the addressees of the publication, it is very valuable that the authors do not deal with cohesion only as an EU economic policy, but as a result of the operation of planning instruments, territorial development and public interventions in the area of Western Europe and Italy; however, authors representing other planning cultures in Europe are missing. The discussions focus on the relationship between national identity, state policy and European integration. Topics include planning reforms (Italy), decentralization of state functions (France), the consequences of Brexit (United Kingdom), Scottish efforts for greater autonomy or independence, and cross-border integration in the Luxembourg-French space. In the chapters addressing the issue of Brexit, the reader would be enriched by a deeper analytical perspective going beyond the framework of evaluating the development of British territorial cohesion and regional development policy and considering the extent to which British approaches after Brexit follow on from concepts of territorial cohesion developed within the EU.

The third part of the book brings a shift from a national perspective to a networked and multi-level understanding of European space. The authors understand cohesion policy as a process of building relationships and functional links rather than a simple redistribution of resources. They underline that Europe's territorial cohesion is increasingly the result of regional, cross-border and transregional cooperation linking municipalities, cities and regions into functional networks capable of responding to current economic, social and environmental challenges.

Philipp Gareis shows that the economic resilience of European regions depends on their structure, institutional capacity and ability to adapt to repeated shocks. Regions do not respond to crises in the same way, and cohesion policy must consider their specificities. Joaquín Farinós Dasí's discussion of rural-urban partnerships highlights that ecological transformation requires more intensive cooperation between cities and rural areas. Territorial cohesion is not only created in cities and between cities, but also through mutual links between different types of territories. Sylwia Dołzbłasz points out the benefits, but also the limits, of cross-border cooperation using the example of Poland, where, despite European support, administrative, cultural and political barriers persist, complicating the creation of

truly integrated border regions. Philipp Gareis, Jens Kurnol and Sina Redlich, examining whether transnational cooperation programmes (e.g. Interreg) can support more balanced territorial development, indicate that cooperation between regions creates new networks and knowledge, but its results are unevenly distributed. Eduarda Marques da Costa argues that small and medium-sized cities represent an important element of Europe's polycentric development. They can mitigate the concentration of economic activities in large metropolises and contribute to a more balanced spatial structure. Eduarda Marques da Costa shows that small and medium-sized cities represent an important element of the polycentric development of Europe, with their potential to mitigate the concentration of economic activities in large metropolises and contribute to a more balanced spatial structure. In his contribution, Jean Peyrony develops the idea of alternative concepts to classical territorialism, referring to Andreas Faludi's work "The poverty of territorialism" (Faludi 2020), which can be considered as a conceptual framework for this chapter.

Part 4 of the book (aspects of cohesion outside of Europe) presents a view of cohesion from a perspective outside the European space. Using examples from Vietnam and India, it shows that issues of territorial cohesion, regional disparities and planning are not exclusively a European phenomenon but have global significance. Nguyen Thi Thuy Hang analyses the development of regional and urban planning in the context of Vietnam's post-colonial and socialist transformation, showing how the state uses spatial planning to mitigate regional disparities and strengthen national cohesion. Kumaresan Raja pays attention to the problems of social and territorial inequality in rapidly developing India, discussing the extent to which spatial planning can contribute to more balanced regional development and the integration of a very heterogeneous society.

The publication "A Future for the European Patchwork: Cohesion through Spatial Planning since 1990" presents interdisciplinary reflection on the development of European territorial cohesion over the past (almost) five decades. The editors have excellently managed to assemble a colourful mosaic of contributions offering material for considering the extent to which spatial and territorial planning has contributed and continues to contribute to maintaining the social, economic and territorial cohesion of Europe in the era of globalization, European integration, regional inequalities, Brexit, migration crises and other current challenges. The book thus represents a valuable resource not only for researchers but also for active players in European integration, demonstrating that the future of the "European mosaic" depends on the ability to link economic competitiveness, social solidarity, environmental resilience and balanced spatial development. The publication combines historical, polit-

ical science, geographical and planning perspectives on the issue of cohesion, pointing out that spatial planning is not only a technical tool for regulating space, but also an important instrument for building social and political cohesion, which remains a key condition for European integration in a period of growing regional differences and geopolitical uncertainties.

Full reference of reviewed title:

Briesen, D.; Strubelt, W. (eds.) (2026): *A Future for the European Patchwork: Cohesion through Spatial Planning since 1990*. Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 424 pages.

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