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**DOI**

[10.26530/OAPEN\\_623610](https://doi.org/10.26530/OAPEN_623610)

**Publication date**

2016

**Document Version**

Final published version

**Published in**

Urban Europe

**License**

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[Link to publication](#)

**Citation for published version (APA):**

Savini, F. (2016). A Europe of Peripheries. In V. Mamadouh, & A. V. Wageningen (Eds.), *Urban Europe: Fifty Tales of the City* (pp. 385-391). AUP.  
[https://doi.org/10.26530/OAPEN\\_623610](https://doi.org/10.26530/OAPEN_623610)

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## 48. A Europe of peripheries

*Federico Savini*

Europe is a diversified territory made of towns, cities, agglomerations, conurbations and regional networks. The very notion of a 'European city' might seem obsolete with respect to the kaleidoscopic and undefined urban structure of Europe. The fuzzy boundaries of urban areas in the EU have been politically defined, and statistically homogenised in the past decades in order to set the stage for a common European urban policy framework. The past programmes of urban restructuring and regional growth (URBAN I-II, TEN-T etc.) have been largely tailored to a clear identification of a European urban-regional network made of nodes and corridors. The European city has no particular perimeter or recognisable morphological physiognomy. What characterises the European city is a way of governing, a particular form of governability, a tradition of policymaking and a multi-scalar organisation of governance. It is not a spatial character per se. The main problem of today's urban policies is the misconception, certainly inherited from two decades of urban policymaking, that 'urban' is synonymous with 'city', and that an urban policy is a policy that targets to the 'city'. Urbanity is not exclusively a feature of what we imagine as fully fledged cities. Today's urban areas are instead increasingly characterised by polycentric organisation of functional and lived space, which often combines historically consolidated cores with emerging postmodern zones of social and economic dynamism.

The hundreds of thousands of commuters from the hinterlands of Milan, Paris, Athens or London, as well as the mass of people that every morning move across regional clusters of activities, aptly demonstrate this new polycentrism. European citizens are highly mobile and distributed. The wealthy Brianza in the Lombardy region, as well as the widespread urbanisation between Cologne and Bonn, are less 'urban' than the inner

quarters of any European historical city. Yet, it is there that important sectors of the urban economy and population of the EU are today located, from chemical companies to clusters of high-level scientific research and large residential areas. Yet non-urban (i.e. suburban spaces) are also areas of marginalisation and exclusion. The large pockets of poverty in East London districts, as well as the housing estates of the fringes of Budapest, still seem to suffer a submissive position towards their urban cores, and to the economic and governmental headquarters of Europe. These are also the first spaces to suffer from austerity policies, and from the lack of investments and jobs. The majority of the European population live in such non-urban spaces, not in urban cores. The urban periphery is also the nest of the EU's cultural value, as demonstrated by the Stelling van Amsterdam (the defence line of Amsterdam), the châteaux on the Loire, and the Blaenavon Industrial Landscape.

Why does it make sense to think about the suburban, the non-urban and other peripheral spaces in order to reconstruct a cohesive Europe? The main challenge of an urban agenda for policymaking is to emancipate the 'urban' from the 'city', to embrace a wider and more inclusive definition of the European city, and to establish a broad policy framework able to adapt to the variegated territorial manifestations of European city-zenship.

### **An urban agenda for balanced urban development?**

The European institutions have recently started to recognise this need of diversification of urban policies and interventions. Yet this process has not yet crystallised into a genuine and innovative framework of urban and territorial cohesion that is able to include the periphery of cities. While outer areas are certainly identified as core targets for investments and social regeneration, they are still framed as fully functional and dependent on the well-being of the urban core. Nonetheless, there are several indications that a truly sustainable urban development model

for Europe cannot further overlook the different forms of urban organisation and ignore them as socio-economical entities. The *Cities of Tomorrow* conference (2011) as well as the Leipzig Charter (adopted in 2010 by the European Ministers), the Toledo declaration (by the EU Urban Development Ministers, 2010), and the Territorial agenda of the EU 2020 research programme of the European Commission all underline that the European urban system is *polycentric, fragmented and diversified*, with small, medium and large *communities*. The European Parliament elected in 2014 has confirmed that

functional urban areas in the EU are not limited only to big cities but also include a unique polycentric structure built around large, medium-sized and small towns and cities and peri-urban areas, thus going beyond the traditional administrative borders to encompass various territories linked by their economic, social, environmental and demographic challenges (Draft Report on the urban dimension of EU policies, Committee on Regional Development, 2014/2213-INI. p. 5 item B.)

These in-between spaces, medium- and small-sized urban communities are functionally linked to larger city cores. Yet they have their own specificity and their own position within the European multi-level governance, which is still dominated by regional governments and large municipal authorities. The urban challenges of Europe – including the key challenges expressed in the future urban agenda – need to show sensitivity to the asymmetric development between these urban formations, and to appreciate the potential of in-between spaces and peri-urban areas. In practice, Europe shows a wide array of best practices on this aspect, most of which have built on self-organising regionalism between municipalities and proactive local governments. The best examples are those that build on the idea of European citizenship, smart specialisation within the European market and socio-cultural characterisation to establish cohesive urban

networks. The regions of Lisbon, Lyon, Turin or Eindhoven (to name a few) have built upon a sentiment of inclusiveness in the European social, cultural and economic space, found their specialised character, valorised their cultural and industrial heritage and stimulated important redistributive policies. Others regions are instead still largely focused on mono-centric development patterns, often sustained by institutionally fragmented governance and divided between leading and following municipalities. Paris and Amsterdam metropolitan areas are examples of the latter.

The notion of periphery, to indicate outer areas, is well known in European circles, yet it is biased towards a nationalistic and international definition. It is used to identify the marginal regions of the European Union. The new Member States in former Eastern Europe do get substantial subsidies and funds from the EU to boost economic development and they are becoming prominent targets of European economic policies. This is not the right scale to use this term. The Polish, Rumanian or Hungarian city centres are less peripheral than the suburban *banlieues* of Paris or Marseilles, or the sprawling areas of Naples. While the concept of periphery was traditionally used to emphasise the socio-economic asymmetries between the highly developed and the less developed regions of Europe, the contemporary notion of periphery shall emphasise the diversified urban territory rather than an East-West and a North-South divide. In doing so, it should better tailor urban policies *within* each region of Europe.

In the last 20 years of urban policy in many European states, the urban periphery has become an important geographical, social and political target for policymaking and policy analysis, but this awareness among academics and practitioners has not been recognised within European policy levels. EU institutions do naturally tend to look at the systemic interdependencies beyond Member States, at a large scale, and thus tend to problematize the interregional relations. Regions are still targeted as aggregated statistical units or as solid administrative spaces. As such, the EU is not yet geared to appreciate the internal

nuances of regional urban systems, despite the fact that these nuances are the key variables for both European problems and opportunities. Furthermore, European policies addressed to problematic poorer areas tend to be difficult to coordinate, both horizontally towards integrated policy actions and vertically through the alignment of national, local and EU policies. This is due to the mismatch between the spatial logics of EU policies and the real socio-spatial development of city-regions. The former is being built on the political and economic leadership of core cities, while the others are increasingly being developed along polycentric patterns of functional distribution.

### **A new urban policy process?**

A policy for the European city needs to appreciate the large variety of socio-spatial relations in urban areas, and valorise the potentials of peripheral, marginal, suburban and peri-urban spaces. This is possible only through a process which valorises bottom-up inputs and existent successful experiences in urban regions and that enable the sharing of knowledge between local administrations. This also requires a political sensitivity towards the new urban equilibrium of Europe. This is much more a political and institutional question rather than a matter of statistical organisation and data management.

The very idea of the 'periphery', the 'sub-urban' or the 'peri-urban' is politically constructed in the multi-scalar process of European policy making. As such, it reflects mental representations of the European Union by its citizens and inhabitants. The European Union provides several ways to understand marginal and excluded areas, often defined according to measurable socio-economic standards. Yet these definitions underlie social and psychological elements, which need to be appreciated in the way they manifest themselves in political action. In the urban and regional spaces of the EU, the urban tension between central and peripheral areas is not

merely a local matter. It affects, and is affected by, the multi-scalar articulation of the European space, which is founded on principles of subsidiarity and proportionality. Centrality and 'peripherality' are political categories. By conceiving the periphery as a marginalised space (a space of exclusion or dependence from the core), the EU is perpetually reproduced as non-cohesive space. The main challenge for policymakers today is thus to understand the symbolic and political iconography that is used for interventions on the periphery. Encouraging the prominence of urban cores, and arguing for their wealth for the cohesion of Europe, means to further promote a conflictual view of polycentrism. And this is the death of any idea of cohesive development.

The effects of this asymmetric conception of European urban areas are very evident today. The geography of emerging political movements oriented towards hyper-localism and anti-European feelings has a relatively clear spatial pattern. The recent electoral success of (neo)nationalism has found its electoral base outside the urban cores. Euro-scepticism has recently increased in peripheral territories of Europe and current research also reports spatially polarised patterns of trust in different EU regions. The ongoing economic crisis, and the EU's subsequent responses, tend to be increasingly delegitimised by emergent groups because of their spatial selectiveness. Central areas are said to benefit from institutionalised links with EU institutions and to benefit the most from scarce EU resources. These policies generate a sense of political exclusion and fierce political discontent. The wave of anti-European movements cover transversally most Member States, including France, Italy, Greece, the UK, Spain and the Netherlands. Separatism is in many cases, but not always, connected to sentiments against the ideas of globalisation and internationalisation. These movements accuse globalisation and international competition to be (re)producers of exclusion from the political arenas and from the labour markets, as well as residential exclusion between the wealthy core and the poorer outer areas. The EU is perceived as either a passive actor or at

times an active enemy of local specialisation and of the territorial potential of growing peri-urban areas.

Only by *re*-placing the urban periphery at the centre of the European urban agenda it is possible to truly set the conditions for addressing important EU problems and to re-establish a European citizenry of diversified communities. The nature of polycentric regions contains the seeds for smart specialisation, social cohesion and social development. Tailor-made development policies of the urban periphery and the understanding of the wide variety of cultural identities and indigenous communities is a necessary condition to enable diversified regional economies and dynamic urban environments.

## The author

**Federico Savini** is assistant professor at the University of Amsterdam. He researches urban politics and planning institutions, with particular focus on the urban periphery. Coordinated APRILab project on adaptation of urban development in the periphery of cities currently conducts research on institutional change and urban experimentation CODALoop.

## Further reading

Savini Federico, Willem Salet & Stan Majoor. 2015. 'Urban peripheries: reflecting on politics and projects in Amsterdam, Milan, and Paris', in: *Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy* 33(3) 457-474.