

“FORGOTTEN TERRITORIES” IN EUROPE: LESSONS FROM ITALY, SPAIN AND POLAND

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Abstract

This paper presents comparative research on place-based policies which address “forgotten territories” in Europe. It shows the variety of trajectories through which the territorial question is placed on the agenda and the ways of defining what constitute ‘forgotten’ territories within the different countries considered. This variety reveals specific processes linked to short- and long-term debates about the different nations and their development. The tools used to help these territories tend to converge, under the influence of methods coming from the European Union. However, the functions of these territories are still unclear in national planning strategies, particularly because their possible contributions to processes such as ecological transition and its associated economic models are only imperfectly defined.

Keywords

Regional inequalities, place-based strategy, Europe, Nation

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1. Introduction

The regional question is coming back in Europe. During the 2000s, numerous secessionist movements emerged from wealthy regions such as Northern Italy, Flanders, and Catalonia (Davezies, 2015). In the following decade, 'left-behind' regions became the focus of political debate in many states. Following the UK's 'Brexit' referendum in 2016, the presidential elections in France in 2017 and 2022, and in Austria in 2016, some argued that populist votes might be explained by the feeling that the inhabitants of disadvantaged regions are losing out (Dijkstra et al., 2020). A geographical interpretation of such electoral results became dominant in some analyses and media accounts of such political developments (Sykes, 2018). In this context, the theme of forgotten, peripheral, or left-behind regions has risen to prominence in public discourse and in academic reflection. The aim of this paper is not to evaluate the accuracy of such interpretations of social or political geographies and movements. Many scholars have already critiqued their approximate, analytically inadequate, and political nature (Delpirou, 2018). Rather, this article seeks to understand, through case studies in three European countries, what public policies exist to address the issues of these so-called 'forgotten territories' and the effects of such policies.

Our main argument is that though vigorous territorial public policies exist in different European countries to promote local developments, and that these policies are justified by the desire to 'upgrade' these territories, these policies do not succeed in erasing or mitigating the feelings of 'territorial decline' in these areas. They fail to do so not only because they are insufficiently generous in terms of the funding they offer (which may well be the case), but above all because they are neither designed to allow 'autonomous' development in these territories, nor define what the effective territorial functions of these areas within Europe might be. We also contend that the ecological transition, which could have been an opportunity to redefine the functions of these territories in their national and European contexts - in particular by reinforcing their role as places of food and energy production and provision of other ecosystem services - is an opportunity that has still not been seized.

To explore these issues, we address three research themes and related questions in three European states; Italy, Spain, and Poland. First, we explore the criteria for defining problem regions asking questions such as: How are the 'forgotten' territories in Italy, Poland and Spain defined in public policies? Which categories are used to define them? Can we identify an influence of political, scientific or media debates on this production of public policies? Secondly, we compare the main public policy instruments used to help them, and pose questions such as - Are they increasingly similar? What is the influence of EU policies in driving any convergence? Thirdly, and finally, we explore ecological transition asking - How does the ecological transition lead to a redefinition of the ways and means of developing these peripheral territories? Before addressing these questions, the following section reviews existent academic literature on regional development and the 'return' to prominence of the 'regional question' in political and academic debates over the past decade.

2. Literature Review: The Return of the Regional Question

The resurgence of territorial and interregional debates in many European countries has been reflected in academic literature. The return to prominence of these issues was perhaps, in some ways, surprising from an academic perspective. Economists, for example, could point to the fact that strong increases in interregional inequalities were hardly ubiquitous. Although Williamson's hypothesis (Williamson, 1965) of a gradual reduction in inter-regional inequalities no longer seems to hold true in every context, the fact remains that development gaps are not systematically increasing. Lessmann and Seidel (2017) have shown, for example, that inter-regional inequalities decreased in two thirds of the world's countries between 1992 and 2012. Moreover, beyond development gaps, income gaps are even smaller in Europe, as welfare states play a powerful territorial equalising role (Davezies, 2021; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). Evidence shows that there are 'negative slopes in the relationship between net fiscal balances by states or regions, when classified according to their level of development per capita' which 'signal a territorially progressive fiscal system using public funds aimed at maintaining welfare in the worst/off areas' (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018, 203). It follows, that territorial debate is not directly indexed or correlated to the "real" development or income gap. Indeed, since Tocqueville (1997) if not before, the feeling of inequality is never as strong as in societies of 'near equals'.

The 'return' of the regional question was also a surprise for some political scientists. For example, observers such as Lipset and Rokkan (1967), had predicted that debates about values and wealth-sharing were set to supplant territorial debates as organisers of national politics. Such forecasts now seem to have been overtaken by developments over the past decade. Meanwhile, in the 2000s, geographers had highlighted the increase in 'intra-regional' (and intra-metropolitan) inequalities, and particularly those that had arisen as a result of the new dynamics of capital accumulation and changing lifestyles (Brenner, 2004). Inter-regional inequalities had, in contrast, taken a back seat in their territorial analyses (Lévy, 2007).

The revived attention given to issues of regional development and inequality, and notably assertions that some places had been 'forgotten', also came as a surprise for regional planners; for policies to support declining regions had never really died out. It was true that a discourse critical of territorial policies had been spreading since the beginning of the century among through the work of authors such as Duranton (2015). Their main argument has been that the best way to help the disadvantaged is not to help poor territories but to help individuals adapt, possibly by migrating to areas of greater opportunity. However, despite such arguments, place-based policies have continued to be promoted and delivered by governments. Meanwhile, within the European Union, a broad debate on the future of regional policy did take place after the accession of ten new states in 2004. However, the Barca report of 2008 marked the end of this debate in favour of maintaining a territorial policy of redistribution (Barca, 2008). Given the academic and policy contexts outlined above, the question therefore arises of why the inter-regional debate is resurfacing?

The first element is that territorial redistribution through welfare states is not without complications and disillusion. Though it remains important and still plays a powerful role across the EU, the 'weight' of individual welfare states may be changing. After the 2008 crisis, for example, in Italy and Spain, there was a decline in public spending. Such fluctuating budgetary cycles can make some territories fear an "abandonment" and loss of support. Even where there is a more constant level of budgetary support, evolutions in networks of public services can be unfavourable to low-density areas. For example, in health or policing, the evolution of technologies can lead to a reduction in the (given) network. This means that a certain number of access points - police stations, maternity wards, etc., may be closed on grounds of cost, or 'rationalisation' of service provision. This can contribute to difficulties for some territories and to feelings of abandonment (Courcelle et al., 2017; Taulelle, 2012).

Moreover, there may be feeling of a symbolic, social, or cultural division. The British journalist David Goodhart has contrasted people from somewhere with people from anywhere (Goodhart, 2017). In a similar vein, the French essayist Christophe Guilluy contrasts a 'peripheral France' with a France of metropolises that concentrate both immigrants and employees who are in the most buoyant economic and cultural sectors (Guilluy, 2015). The feeling of socio-cultural divides is spreading. Moreover, the actors in the 'forgotten' areas can also 'turn the stigma around' and define themselves politically and culturally in opposition to big cities. In short, attention to the issues of the so-called forgotten or left behind regions has grown. Informed by this context this paper asks - how have public policies reacted to the emergence of these territorial debates and claims; have new regional aid policies been put in place; and what have been their results? The methodological approach adopted to respond to these questions is outlined in the next section.

3. Research Methodology

The paper adopts a comparative research approach to explore the cases of Italy, Spain, and Poland. The main issues explored in each of these states are: what are places which are considered to be "forgotten"? Has this geography evolved and, if so, how and why? Are issues of regional disparity and development matters of public discussion? What are the policies implemented to address these issues? How are local, national, international actors and institutions involved?

The study is based on three series of research stages:

- A survey of academic literature and public reports on categories of territory that have to be supported;

- Field interviews with actors in so-called forgotten territories. In each country, an average of ten semi-structured interviews were conducted with mayors, members of parliaments, public or private actors of local economic development;
- Interviews with politicians, civil servants, and academics at the national level, to discuss our findings and interpretations.

The study areas within the three states were chosen according to national issues and illustrate the polysemic meaning of “being forgotten” in different settings.

In northern Italy, the medium-sized town of Vercelli, was once the prosperous centre of a rich industrial and agricultural province. The province of Vercelli has around 180,000 inhabitants, with a density of 86 inhabitants per km². Vercelli has about 45,000 inhabitants. The town of Vercelli is losing its role and rank because of globalization and metropolisation. The weight of Milan and Turin, some 80 kilometres away, have contributed to emptying Vercelli of its key functions (trade, banking, higher education and higher education facilities and training), while the main activities of the province (rice production, industrial plumbing, and mountain tourism) are becoming globalised and there is no longer need for its services.

The Spanish region of Aragon has, for a long time, been losing its population, today it has a density close to Lapland, of under 5 inhabitants per km² in rural areas. As a result of a long-term rural exodus, reinforced by planning policies favouring cities, its situation has become a national issue that has raised the issue of what can be done with such empty spaces? Our field study in the region focused on the *comarcas* of Jiloca and Gallocanta, respectively in the provinces of Zaragoza and Teruel. These two intermunicipal bodies gather around 15,000 inhabitants, with an average density of around 5 inhabitants per kilometre. We met members of parliaments, representatives of the autonomous community and the mayors of Gallocanta, Daroca and Anento.

In Poland, the case study is in Podlasie, near the Belarussian and Lithuanian borders, more precisely, the *powiats* of Hajnówka and of Bielski-Podlaski. These two *powiats* gather 45,000 inhabitants (with a population density of 29 inhabitants per km²) for Hajnówka, and 58,225 inhabitants (42 inhabitants per km²) for Bielski-Podlaski. We met local members of parliaments, representatives of the *voivodies* (region), and conducted interviews with the mayors of Orla and Hajnówka - two small villages, close to Belarussian border in an area with has a long history of wars and destruction. Today it is losing its population and, because of its location, does not attract investors. Questions for the area include whether heritage (the Yiddishland memory) and natural wealth (the Białowieża forest) can become assets for a new development.

The following sections explore three key themes – the definition of a ‘problem’ region in each case study state; what instruments are mobilized by public policies to deal with these spaces; and, how can local actors redraw paths for development?

4. How Territories Can Be Forgotten: Three Case Studies

Our first question concerns the way in which the categories of problem territories are constructed in the different countries. For each country, firstly some key data on the territorial debate in the country is presented, followed by a brief overview of the main regional zoning proposed by the State.

4.1. In Italy, from North-South to a ‘Leopard Skin’ Intervention

In Italy, the southern question remains almost an obsession (Donolo, 1999; Pescosolido, 2019; Trigilia, 1992). It was the basis of the largest post-war national experiment in spatial planning with the creation of the *Casa Per Il Mezzogiorno*. For more than three decades between 1950 and 1984, vast policy was carried out to develop agriculture (after an agrarian reform), industry (notably through direct investments by state companies) and reduce the infrastructure gap (through the development of new infrastructure, notably investment in transport etc.). This policy, despite its obvious successes, did not resolve the north-south contrast, which

has been accentuated since the Italian unification of 1860. The causes of this failure have been analysed by abundant scientific and operational literature (Faraoni, 2013; Lieutaud, 1992; Putnam et al., 1993). They include the absence of brakes on development in the north, the weak knock-on effect of industries located in the south on the rest of the economic fabric, and corruption. This literature has also challenged the analysis of a homogeneous south, as some successes have also been observed in the area (Viesti, 2021).

However, more recently the Italian State seems to have 'forgotten' the South. Though, this is not strictly the case, the state has transferred to European policies the task of carrying out territorialised monetary transfers to the South on the one hand and deepened decentralisation on the other. Thus, the Italian state has moved towards providing more 'methodological' than 'substantive' support to territories in difficulty and has proposed a multitude of schemes to assist local development. This shift has been facilitated by the long Italian intellectual tradition which emphasizes the importance of social capital to foster local development; following the seminal work of Arnaldo Bagnasco and his colleagues on the *Third Italy*, the region between the North (Turino, Milano and Genova) and the Mezzogiorno, whose development, based on small and medium-sized firms, is account for as being a result of the quality of the social relations between entrepreneurs, local administration and civil society (Bagnasco, 1977).

The most recent major experiment is the policy of support for *aree interne* (Inner Areas)¹, which mainly aims to assist 72 territories marked by their distance from employment and service centres. These are areas affected by physical geography such as isolated mountainous areas, which can be found in both the north and the south. This Inner Areas programme was launched in 2013. Two kinds of funds are mobilised under this programme: funds for the improvement of existing public services (such as education and health) to make these more efficient, and funds to finance local development projects defined by local actors.

This method of territorial categorisation cleverly involves going beyond a north/south divide while maintaining a role for the State. Even if, ultimately 95 percent of the funding still goes to the South². In this context, many researchers have pointed out that this division is imperfect for identifying social, ecological, and cultural difficulties. Italian geographers have proposed an alternative interpretation, for example that of an *Italia di Mezzo* (Lanzani and Curci, 2018). But the way in which the State defines territories in difficulty will never be able to satisfy these academic geographies as its objective is to propose a geography that shows concern for territories in difficulty, without forgetting any region or highlighting too much the imbalances which exist between the North and the South.

4.2. The Empty Spain

In Spain, the geography of public intervention is very different. Since the return of democracy in Spain after 1975, the place of the various Nations within the state has been the subject of continuous debate (Baron, 2010). The fairness of the territorial redistribution of public money is the subject of much analysis and political debate (Baron, 2016). Since the 2010s, the territorial debate is no longer only between the different regions and autonomous communities, it is also about the place to be given to the Spain of very low densities, and identifying an 'empty' or 'depopulated' Spain. The essayist Sergio de Molino has emphasised this theme, claiming that this is a Spanish singularity (Molino, 2016). In academic circles, however, many have sought to moderate this idea of Spanish exceptionalism, arguing that if densities are lower in Spain, it is not because of the intensity of the rural exodus, but simply because the rural population has always been smaller (Collantes and Pinilla Navarro, 2019). Nevertheless, since 2010, these territories have come to the forefront of the media and political scene.

A local development association founded in the early 2000s, *Teruel Existe!* (Teruel Exists!), decided in 2019 to go beyond the conduct of small tourism projects, and to present candidates in the legislative elections. In the province of Teruel, the list presented by *Teruel Existe!* saw one deputy out of two and two senators out

1 See <https://www.agenziacoesione.gov.it/strategia-nazionale-aree-interne/>

2 <https://www.ministropersud.gov.it/it/comunicazione/notizie/dpcm-comuni-marginali/>

of four elected. It was the deputy for Teruel, Tomás Guitarte, who made it possible for Pedro Sanchez of the PSOE (*Partido Socialista Obrero Español* - Spanish Socialist Workers' Party) to be nominated as Prime Minister by giving him his vote and so, a majority. Since then, Guitarte has obtained almost everything he has asked for to support the development of his province. This success has instilled the idea that if the empty territories coordinate to present localist candidates in elections, they could potentially secure about twenty deputies; a decisive number in terms of becoming a 'pivotal party' (or 'Kingmaker') in the outcome of elections.

Given this, the government seems to take the problem of empty territories seriously. It has created a *Delegation for the Demographic Challenge* (Ministerio para la Transición Ecológica y el Reto Demográfico, 2019), lobbied the European Union to obtain specific funds for the interregional empty Spain area, and begun a policy of locating national agencies in small towns within it. As an example, the national cybersecurity centre has moved to Leon, thus contributing to the installation of civil servants and the start of a digital ecosystem in this small city. Thanks to this new local corporatism - which some denounce as a form of depoliticization - Spain could perhaps rediscover its countryside. This rediscovery also shifts the political debate from the regional level - where the secessionist question is still present - towards support for local development programmes.

4.3. In Poland, Muted Territorial Inequalities in the Name of a “Finally Recovered” Nation.

On the eastern border of Poland, Podlasie is today a testimony of what was once the Polish-Lithuanian multi-ethnic and multicultural space. This region, the poorest in Poland, has not always been a land of borders. Until the end of the 18th century, it was at the heart of the Polish-Lithuanian Republic, where Jews, Poles, Balts, Ukrainians, Byelorussians, Russians, Tatars, Gypsies, and other groups mingled (Snyder, 2002).

The legacy of Poland's troubled history since the beginning of the 19th century is clearly visible in Podlasie. Like all 'Russian' parts of pre-1914 Poland, it is still marked by more than a century of underinvestment in infrastructure and a delay in agricultural modernisation (Mackré, 2011). The First and Second World Wars transformed the characteristics of the population through mass killings and deportations. Locally, there is no shared interpretation of this turbulent past among its various communities and political actors. There is no consensus on how to deal with memorialising how the Jewish population has been treated, how to evaluate the role of the Red Army during the Second World War, or the role of the resistance movements to the establishment of the communist regime in the late 1940s.

Poland's accession to the European Union (in 2004) and NATO (in 2003) changed the situation for Podlasie. Notably the region started to receive European manna and these floods of Euros led to a rapid modernisation of agriculture, with the size of farms increasing, and mechanisation intensifying. The regional development funds brought their share of infrastructure, equipment, and community services. However, Podlasie's situation has not really been fully transformed. The opening of access to the European labour market accelerated mass emigration. Adult men left for London or Berlin, leaving behind "Euro-orphans". Poland is replacing Germany as the "eastern flank" of the Atlantic alliance, which has once again become a zone of potential conflict in the face of an increasingly aggressive Russia. Since the summer of 2021 the region has been a zone of maximum tension with Belarus with plans to build a wall along the 400 km border.

Finally, EU membership has widened the gap between western Poland, which has benefited most from investment by western European firms, and eastern Poland, which includes Podlasie (Coudroy de Lille, 2007). However, Polish governments refuse to adopt macro-regional policies that discriminate in favour of the development of the country's poorest regions. This is undoubtedly an effect of the metropolitan preference (Geppert and Pielesiak, 2017) in policies. But this reluctance also stems from a more political issue that is internal to Poland. Podlasie is one of the last multi-ethnic regions in a country that was 'purified' by the shift to the West in 1945. Her Poles cohabit with people of Ukrainian and Belorussian origin, Catholics with Orthodox (and some Tatars). Although Polish laws are formally protective of minorities, it is not easy to claim to be Belorussian and Orthodox; for some conservative circles such declarations are a form of allegiance with the 'enemy'. National and cultural minorities therefore keep a low profile, while trying to save their memories, their languages, and their cultures.

The question of East-West imbalances is only rarely mentioned in contemporary political debates in Poland (Bański et al., 2018). On the government side, the current conservative and nationalist majority government, whose strong electoral base is in the East, prefers to insist on the unity of this (still) young nation (Ory, 2020; see also Ministry of Development Funds and Regional Policy, 2020). Moreover, support for individuals (especially via families) is considered more ideologically promising than support for territories as a means of strengthening its political base. Meanwhile, academic work focuses more on the internal imbalances of cities than on interregional imbalances (Koszewska, 2020).

In the three states considered above, we can see that the mapping of 'territorial problems to be solved' follows different logics. None of the countries has adopted the EU approach of considering 'GDP gradients' – e.g. the level of GDP per capita in different regions compared to state-wide or EU averages. The place of these regions is always linked, in one way or another, to national unity in each state. Southern Italy, for example, is durably marked by the impact of Italian unity. The massive regional policy carried out between 1950 and 1985 can be read as an attempt to make up for the failures of unity. Likewise, the silence that is now being maintained on the issue of the South's relatively lower development levels is linked to the secessionist threat from the more prosperous northern regions of Lombardy and Veneto. The recent revival of interest in Spain in the 'empty' part of the country has a double political purpose. On the one hand, this space overarches the geography of several autonomies and creates a common issue beyond the claims of autonomy or independence of some territories. On the other hand, it gives Castile - the object of all regionalist resentments - an argument with which to better access European funds. Meanwhile, Podlasie is a landmark, a concentrate of Polish history and more generally of Eastern European spaces. However, due to its cultural complexity and its location on Poland's eastern borders, it embodies a political problem in a state which does not wish to highlight its internal differences, but seeks rather to promote its overall homogeneity. In these three examples, the territorial mapping from the (respective) State is designed to solve political more than territorial problems. As a result the individual state's public interventions are more designed to address many localized discontents than to tackle macro-regional imbalances.

5. What are The Action Levers for Local Actors?

This section describes the tools put in place to support individual local developments and how they are activated at a local level. In the three states under consideration we find three main categories of action: negotiating for redistribution through the public finance system, fostering local development potential, and situating a territory within the context of ecological transition.

5.1. Negotiating a Territory's Place in the Welfare State System

The first lever is to negotiate a better place in the system of redistributive public spending. In all states considered, local elected representatives are seeking to gain a better understanding of how to maximise the benefits of this system, particularly in terms of infrastructure and/or facilities, and with regard to specific grants. In terms of facilities, all the local elected representatives told us about their 'fights' to keep existing facilities operational, or to develop new ones. In Vercelli in Italy, for example, the issue faced was one of preserving training facilities. In Spain, Daroca has "obtained" a prison which has generated more than 500 jobs in a town of 2,000 inhabitants. However, the pace of investment in infrastructure is very irregular. In Spain, while the introduction in 2004 of high-speed rail services to the station in the town of Calatayud, with a population of around 20,000, marked the peak of public investment in infrastructure, the cuts in investment after 2008 were brutal and massive (Fauchard, 2017). It seems that such contradictions can fuel a discourse amongst local actors which is rather suspicious as regards the support being received, with feelings that things are better elsewhere and were better in the past; processes which, cumulatively, distil the very essence of feeling left behind.

Discourses on the need for public funding are sometimes more nuanced. In Spain, it is possible to open a school with as few as 5 pupils (Lorenzo Lacruz et al., 2019). This is, however, criticised at a regional level, with it being argued that this can lead to a scattering of facilities and resources with effects on public spending. More surprisingly, this possibility is also criticised by a few local elected representatives – for example, the Mayor of Anento has not taken-up this option in the name of the quality of teaching and school life for children.

Each time, local actors try to justify a more favourable position in the redistribution system. The classic arguments (specific needs of low density) are sometimes coupled with cultural arguments. In Poland, arguments for more resources are also justified by the presence of cultural minorities. Keeping services running is justified because it is a way to limit the scattering of these populations within Poland, and more widely within the European Union, which would lead to the disappearance of their cultural specificities. In Spain, there is a party movement, *Teruel Existe! (Teruel Exists!)*, that claims to be the defender of the forgotten territories. Its position in parliament has enabled it to obtain a specific national investment fund. This fund allows the financing of 'big' projects, not only smaller scale local initiatives. Recent major projects include a motorbike track, a dinosaur museum, and an airport. The new airport has been an unexpected success and was used as a storage and repair facility for grounded aircraft during the acute COVID crisis of 2020 and 2021.

5.2. Supporting Development Projects

In seeking to foster development, local actors play a double strategy (Halbert, 2013). The first element is to be in a position to attract investments thanks to the qualities of the amenities, the infrastructures and the labour availability. This approach is reflected by the attraction of investors such as Ikea in Orla (Podlasie) and Amazon in Vercelli (Italy). Even if this strategy could be criticized, it is quite impossible for a locality to unilaterally give up the "paradigm of attractivity". The second development path is that of local development. This involves activating territorial resources - heritage, agricultural production, know-how, social capital and so on. - as levers of development in the region. In Italy, there are many examples of this in a country which was one the first to develop this approach (Italian national network of young researchers for inner areas committee, 2021). European models of development are also used in the three states. These result in relatively "standardised" projects such as greenways, tourist accommodation, cultural centres, and support for companies that develop products of the soil, agriculture, and forestry. The local and regional development models supported by the European Union thus play a certain standardisation role here.

We also explored the ingredients for success of these models and identified two main factors: integration into multiple networks and "porosity" between the economic, political, and technical actors of local development. Orla is quite a "success story" of local development in the Polish context. The municipality is not very populated, with just over 2,500 inhabitants within its present boundaries, but there are many projects. The 18th century synagogue miraculously survived the massacres of the Second World War. Protected during the Communist period because it was used as an agricultural shed, the question arose of whether this half-Baroque, half-Classical building could now become a tourist attraction? The London-based Jewish Heritage Foundation has owned the site since 2010 and the municipality is trying to obtain from them a rapid rehabilitation of the building, to unlock the potential of using the synagogue for cultural and festive events. To welcome tourists, the central square of the village also needs to be rehabilitated and the mayor has called on architecture students from Warsaw to work on ideas for this project. The mayor also wants to transform a former slaughterhouse into a small local production unit for local products which could be offered to tourists. Orla thus provides a good example of a local development project that has started from the territory, is part of its history, has made links with multiple networks in Poland and abroad, and is making a cross-cutting approach to agricultural, heritage, cultural, economic and tourist issues. The same kind of approach can be found in Italy and Spain. Aniento, in Aragon, is a village that was almost abandoned in the early 1980s. Today, its success in attracting visitors can be gauged by the fact 40,000 cars per year use the local car park. This tourist development was facilitated by a commitment in the 1980s from young people, initially volunteers, to restore the village's local heritage. The town council then adopted a selective policy of focussing on public services which, in the long term, were seen as most favourable to the village's tourist development - for example it chose to share the school with a neighbouring village, and it invested in the quality of its public spaces, the development of a car park, and the construction of a place where people could eat.

In both villages, local development stories are not only based on local capacity. In both countries, the Common Agricultural Policy has helped the modernisation of agriculture. Beyond the new tractors and sheds, the effects of the European Structural Funds can also be discerned in the landscape - here an expressway, there a bicycle path, and signs acknowledging the support of the European Union on social centres and cultural sites. In short, these territories are not forgotten by national or European redistribution mechanisms. Each time, effective local development is a product of a good 'match' between local initiatives embedded in social networks, top-down policies, and global economic processes.

5.3. Inventing a New Path Thanks to Ecological Transition?

Ecology can play different roles in local development projects. It can be used normatively as a form of positive image generation for local development projects, for example, to promote organic farming, “green” tourism, crafts, and city-countryside complementarities on water. But ecological transition can also play a deeper transformative role in territorial development.

In the three states considered in this paper, there are many conflicts or controversies relating to environmental issues. In Aragon, the predominance of agricultural jobs in rural areas explains the desire to strengthen the sector with a policy aimed at the industrialisation of production (intensive livestock farming, plot concentration) which is supported by the Autonomous Community of Aragon, and based on the Common Agricultural Policy. This conflicts with the desire to diversify economic activities, particularly through tourism, which is largely based on the attractiveness of a remarkable natural heritage (particularly the fauna of Lake Gallocanta), which is in danger due to agricultural activities. At the same time, the development of renewable energies raises different debates, being positive for the environment on a national and global scale, but seen by some as harmful at a local level. In Spain, wind turbines are developed in a very confused way, without planning or firm public control. They generate very little economic benefit in the areas in which they are installed; creating very little employment and damaging the landscape and its tourist appeal (Luque, 2015). So, although the very low population density of some of the ‘empty’ areas may seem ideal for the development of renewable energy this view, and the practical realisation of policies to the same effect, are not without issue.

A few kilometres from Orla lies what is often called the “last primary forest in Europe”, the Białowieża Forest, where bison were reintroduced in the 1930s. This area has been protected since the end of the First World War and the forest is a World Heritage Site. For several years, a conservation controversy has been engaging certain foresters, environmental associations, the Polish government, and some residents (Bieńkowska et al., 2019). Spruce trees, which make up 30% of the forest, are being attacked by bark beetles. For some - foresters, residents, and administrators - the felling of infested trees is a necessity to protect the rest of the forest. For environmentalists and officials from UNESCO and the European Union, this is simply a pretext for commercial exploitation of the forest. In 2017, the European Court of Justice asked the Polish government to stop the felling. This raised issues such as whether local residents should be forced to use charcoal for heating because they cannot use the wood from diseased trees near their homes? Beyond this kind of argument, used locally by the defenders of the right to cut down trees, there are also wider issues such as how to try and ensure that the inhabitants of sparsely populated areas benefit from internationally justified protection.

The last major lesson, for the reasons noted above in the cases of Spain and Poland, is the paradoxical situation of these territories regarding the challenges of ecological transition. The Polish and Spanish examples illustrate a considerable challenge that will only increase in the coming years and is derived from the fact that these territories are becoming both coveted sources of renewable energy and hyper-protected ‘tanks’ of biodiversity. Beyond the tensions that may arise between these two dimensions, the main issue is that of the development of these resources and the economic benefits for these territories and their inhabitants. These territories are no longer forgotten, but their place is still poorly defined in the territorial system that ecological transition implies.

6. Conclusion

Three main conclusions can be drawn from the comparative research presented in this paper.

First, what is seen as constituting a problem territory differs greatly from one state to another, despite the fact that each of the regions and states considered here is in the European Union. The findings reveal that “left-behind regions” and “territorial inequalities” are perceived very differently in different countries. These territorial inequalities take on meaning according to the socio-history of the construction of individual States and Nations. Moreover, the vigour of the debates on these inequalities is not linked to their intensity.

Second, the return of territory into public debate is notable, even if it seems less strong in Poland. As a result it cannot be concluded - as some have argued (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967) - that conflicts over territory are gradually being replaced by conflicts over value or the social sharing of resources. On the contrary, the Welfare State/s is subject to endless territorial negotiations and the creation of 'territorial' parties may lead to post-political discussions.

Third, ecological transition appears both as a threat or an opportunity for 'forgotten' or 'left behind' territories. Which trend emerges will depend in many ways on the capitalist and organisational form of the operators of the transition. If guided by distant political bodies and large international companies, transition may well result in a situation which sees the domination of a periphery of sparsely populated areas. The capacity of such territories to obtain dividends in terms of money, qualified jobs, or favourable policy, through the framework of the ecological transition looks set to be the major challenge of the coming decades, and might offer a way to reinvent the approach used to tackle problems of poor regions.

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