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Do new brooms sweep clean? Striving for ‘A Just Europe’ in the Territorial Agenda 2030

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ABSTRACT

The Territorial Agenda 2030, adopted in December 2020, introduces a new policy frame: that of ‘A Just Europe’. This intergovernmental policy document is intended to guide territorial cohesion policy and strategic spatial planning in and across the EU member states. But what does the adjective ‘just’ mean and to what extent *can* it become operational? Drawing on text analysis and expert interviews, the paper investigates the rationales and expectations underpinning this policy frame. It firstly contextualizes the policy frame of ‘a Just Europe’ within the policy and academic debates on spatial justice and territorial cohesion, and positions the Territorial Agenda 2030 against the backdrop of its forerunners. The analysis demonstrates that instead of guiding measures, the Territorial Agenda 2030, like its forerunners, essentially has a diagnostic and to some extent also a motivational function to mobilize policy actions. We do however identify and discuss three rather novel conditions which, unlike those of its forerunners, may revitalize the European spatial planning discourse. This contribution demonstrates that spatial justice is an inspiring notion to critically reflect on the current and future character and potentials of European spatial planning in general and territorial cohesion policy in particular.

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1. Introduction

‘A Green Europe’ and ‘A Just Europe’ are two new policy frames aimed at guiding future territorial cohesion policy and strategic spatial planning across the EU. They were introduced in the Territorial Agenda 2030 (TA 2030), an intergovernmental policy paper adopted in December 2020. It is the latter policy frame, a Just Europe, which we explore further. The TA 2030 stipulates that ‘[t]he priorities for a Just Europe underline the territorial dimension and spatial planning contributions to overarching policy priorities. These priorities include economic, social and territorial cohesion, the European Pillar of Social Rights, a Europe closer to citizens, a more inclusive, sustainable and integrated development of places, Just Transition and territorial integration in Europe.’ (MSPTD 2020, 13). But what is meant by a ‘Just Europe’ and how is it to be operationalized?

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Recently the notion of spatial justice has been used in academic debates (Madanipour, Shucksmith, and Brooks 2021) to assess the implications of having shifted the EU cohesion policy towards a place-based approach (Doucet, Böhme, and Zaucha 2014). In this paper, we explore how far the spatial justice analytical tool mobilized in academic circles relates to the newly established ‘Just Europe’ Territorial Agenda 2030 policy framework. Drawing upon a framing analysis developed by the school of interpretative policy analysis, we assess the ‘Just Europe’ policy frame in the new TA 2030, to understand whether it constitutes a clear sign of policy change. We discuss how far it may become a powerful guiding concept for revitalizing the European spatial planning discourse and enhancing territorial cohesion (Lüer and Böhme 2020, 10). We investigate the rationales and expectations underpinning this policy frame and its potential implications, by discussing elements and dimensions in the current spatial justice debate to which the TA 2030 alludes.

We firstly contextualize the policy frame of ‘A Just Europe’ within the policy and academic debates about spatial justice and territorial cohesion. Secondly, we present our methodological approach, before presenting our empirical findings. Finally, we discuss the rationales, expectations and potential implications of the ‘Just Europe’ policy frame before concluding our analysis.

2. Contextualizing the policy frame of ‘A Just Europe’ within debates about spatial justice and territorial cohesion

In recent years, several debates on spatial justice have animated planning studies. Different conceptions of justice have been discussed, using various interpretations in relation to how they relate to places and individuals, as well as to normative and moral choices regarding what ‘just’ means, and for whom (Campbell and Marshall 2006; Davoudi and Brooks 2014; Moroni 2019). This diffusion in research is explained by the different points of departure from which justice is conceptualized in political theory (e.g. egalitarian, libertarian and utilitarian conceptions) (Dadashpoor and Alvandipour 2020; Stein and Harper 2005; Uitermark and Nicholls 2017). Another important aspect confusing the debate is the relation between ‘social’ and ‘spatial’ justice. Are they interchangeable, do they address different dimensions of justice, or do they condition each other? We follow the latter, as advocated by Iveson (2011), Marcuse (2009) and Soja (2009, 2010), since a spatial perspective is key to explaining the causes but specifically the implications of social (in)justice. This means, echoing Madanipour, Shucksmith, and Brooks (2022, 810), ‘if the concept of spatial justice is emptied of its social content, it loses its meaning and turns into an empty abstraction. [...] Spatial justice, therefore, stresses the relational spatiality of (in)justice in society.’ Hence, the social and its spatiality are inevitably entangled. A further tension in the debate around (spatial) justice is the relation between distributive and procedural justice. Whereas the former considers mainly ‘the fair and equitable distribution in space of socially valued resources and the opportunities to use them’ (Soja 2010, 62), the latter is concerned with structural and institutional conditions in policymaking, and how differences between social groups are socially and institutionally (re)produced, potentially hampering fair and inclusive processes (Hillier 1998; Young 2000).

Although the notion of spatial justice is predominantly used to analyse the extent and causes of inequalities within urban areas (Fainstein 2010; Soja 2010), several authors have

specifically related the spatial justice debate to EU territorial cohesion policy (Dabinett 2017; Jones et al. 2019; Madanipour, Shucksmith, and Brooks 2021; Weck, Madanipour, and Schmitt 2022; Weckroth and Moisiso 2020). For instance, Madanipour, Shucksmith, and Brooks (2021) analyse seven treaties that shaped the EU and its institutional forerunners, as well as seven cohesion reports, in terms of spatial justice. They conclude that although the EU acknowledges (growing) spatial imbalances and regional inequalities, territorial cohesion policy is an additional dimension, distinct from economic and social cohesion. ‘While territorial cohesion brings into focus important questions of spatiality, they are not intertwined with the questions of social justice’ (ibid, 816). Based on their analysis of EU cohesion reports and speeches by EU Commissioners, Weckroth and Moisiso (2020) reach similar conclusions. They note that between 2004 and 2013, territorial cohesion policy aimed to tackle mainly regional economic disparities and bring Eastern European member states closer to the average EU GDP. They also observe another rationale brought forward by territorial cohesion policy, which resonates with a more individual perspective on inequalities and is articulated in the third Cohesion Report: ‘[p]eople should not be disadvantaged by wherever they happen to live or work in the Union’ (EC 2004, 27). They argue that this policy statement ‘adds a new political-economic component to territorial cohesion and reflects a qualitative shift from highlighting the economic performance of regions to underlining the structural strengths and weaknesses of regions’ (Weckroth and Moisiso 2020, 186). However, these arguments have not aided ‘deeper understandings of social inclusion or spatial justice [...] in the framings of the territorial cohesion of the EU’ (Ibid, p. 190).

Meanwhile, the discourse on territorial cohesion policy has been significantly pushed across the EU with the ascendance of the ‘left-behind places’ label (Pike et al. 2023) and the emergence of a research agenda dedicated to ‘uneven development’ (Peck, Werner, and Jones 2022). After a decade of convergence within the EU, the financial crisis halted this trend and interregional structural, social and economic inequalities have arisen (World Bank 2018). The geography of right-wing voters, Euroscepticism, and Brexit proponents has been analysed as ‘the revenge of places that don’t matter’ (Rodríguez-Pose 2018). The underpinning arguments are not necessarily only structuralist, but also capture individual fates (Díaz-Lanchas, Sojka, and Di Pietro 2021), specifically in those places left behind, perhaps even ‘kept’ behind (Davoudi 2020, 15). Scholars indicate not only why some places don’t matter, but also the reactions of people living there (Dijkstra, Poelman, and Rodríguez-Pose 2020; Weckroth and Moisiso 2020).

Overall, the literature clearly shows that neither territorial cohesion policy nor the ‘left-behind places’ analyses actively deal with the notion of spatial justice (Lang and Görmar 2019; Madanipour, Shucksmith, and Brooks 2021). Yet Weckroth and Moisiso (2020) recognize a move towards a more contextual, individual-based rationale of territorial cohesion policy, informed by the acknowledgement that individuals in different types of territories have very different potentials to gain from it. They conclude that territorial cohesion policy ‘could benefit from the academic discourses on spatial justice, capabilities, and human agency’ (ibid, 190). Similarly, Jones et al. (2019) argue that the concept of spatial justice offers reflections on supporting regions’ abilities to proactively shape their futures, instead of viewing them mainly as containers of financial support. For them, spatial justice offers a plural understanding of what development, wellbeing and equality may mean in a territorial perspective, instead of reverting to the ‘catching

up' rhetoric, where places or localities are measured in GDP. Hence, the crucial question is whether the TA 2030, subtitled 'A future for all places' and with the policy frame of 'A Just Europe', provides a policy response to these various issues, elements and dimensions raised in the spatial justice and related debates.

3. Methodological approach

We examine the origin of the policy frame of a 'A Just Europe' and what knowledge has been used to define its significance. For Rein and Schön 'framing is [...] a way of selecting, organizing, interpreting and making sense of a complex reality so as to provide guideposts for knowing, analysing, persuading and acting' (1991, 263). As framing usually takes place within a nested context requiring critical investigation of government programmes and broader policy environments (Rein and Schön 1991, 271), we aim to identify the proponents and alliances backing this new policy frame, and the conditions influencing its shape and content. According to Lindekilde (2014, 207), '[f]rame analysis focuses on how more or less established ideological constructs are used strategically to frame a particular topic – like a picture frame that accentuates certain things, hides others, and borders off reality in a certain way.' We use the three types of framing he distinguishes: diagnostic framing sheds light on a problem; prognostic framing promotes a solution to the identified problem, indicating strategies, tactics and goals. Together, these two types of framing mobilize consensus by creating a shared picture of problem and solution, thus 'pushing collective action on the basis of shared perceptions' (*ibid.*). Finally, motivational framing forms a rationale for action. Hence, analysis of policy frames aids understanding the rationales for constructing policy frames and their implications (Rein and Schön 1993). As the implications of this policy frame will emerge in a few years, our analysis concentrates on the rationales driving its adoption.

In applying an interpretative policy frame analysis, we triangulated two qualitative research methods. Firstly, a policy document analysis of the TA 2030, its forerunners and other related policy papers and instruments enabled us to determine particularly the diagnostic dimension by identifying a chronology of events, arguments and institutions promoting change. Against this background, we identified experts within key institutions and conducted six semi-structured expert interviews to refine our findings and elucidate how the policy frame had been implemented. Interviewees included senior civil servants from two national ministries, the European Commission (Directorates General for 'Regional and Urban Policy' and 'Research and Innovation'), the Committee of the Regions (CoR), and a representative of the lead consultancy firm behind the TA 2030. The interviews were conducted online before transcription and coding using the MAXQDA software. The CoR interview was a group interview (four people). To guarantee the anonymity of our interviewees, we provide neither names nor institutional affiliations. Though this cohort of interviewees is small, they represent different institutional contexts of stakeholders with key roles in relation to the TA 2030. Despite the usual shortcomings of the interpretative approach (relying on hermeneutics, i.e. the researcher's capability to construe the interviewees' reflections and statements in various policy papers), the strength of the interpretative policy frame analysis is to unpack the main character of the policy frame of a Just Europe. We were able to identify the reasons behind the Just Europe policy frame (diagnostic dimension), how key

policymakers interpret and intend to work with it (motivational dimension), and what this policy frame may imply for policy action, i.e. how it relates to other strategies and available policy instruments (prognostic dimension).

In the next section, we trace the rationales, expectations and potential implications of introducing ‘A Just Europe’ as a new policy frame, and further contextualize the TA 2030 with other intergovernmental/EU policy papers. Finally, we discuss whether this new policy frame is merely an empty signifier that fits the political rhetoric, or a well-substantiated and potentially powerful guiding concept for revitalizing future European spatial planning discourse.

4. Tracing the policy frame of ‘A Just Europe’

4.1. Contextualizing key messages from the TA 2030 in relation to other intergovernmental/EU policy papers and instruments

The TA 2030, adopted in 2020, is the third of its kind. This policy document renews what the two forerunners did, the Territorial Agenda from 2007 (MUDTCEU 2007) and the Territorial Agenda (TA 2020) adopted in 2011 (MSPTD 2011). These three Territorial Agendas adopted over 15 years must be seen in the light of what Faludi (2010, 106) calls the ‘mother document of European spatial planning,’ the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) (CEC 1999). Indeed, the process leading to the adoption of the ESDP in 1999 and subsequent years has triggered interest in the European spatial planning discourse (ibid). However, none of the following TAs (from 2007 and 2011) have been able to frame policy concepts or norms similar to the ESDP. Nor have they indicated the added value of a European approach towards territorial cohesion (Böhme, Holstein, and Toptsidou 2015; Marques et al. 2018). Hence, as Lüer and Böhme (2020) argue, in view of the TA 2030, we need to reenergise European spatial planning and ‘focus on deeds rather than on words.’ (2020, 10)

Notably, neither the ESDP nor any of the three Territorial Agendas directly incorporates financial instruments or implementation mechanisms. Their only means are communication and persuasion. The TA 2030 launches six pilot actions for the first time. Yet the two earlier Territorial Agendas outlined an Action Programme (under the Portuguese presidency in 2007) and a Roadmap (under the Polish presidency in 2011), but these were rather modest regarding their application (Doucet, Böhme, and Zaucha 2014; Faludi 2009). Therefore, these pilot actions aim to ‘demonstrate, test and develop practices which contribute to achieving Territorial Agenda priorities. As such they show increasing recognition of the importance of place-based policies by showing how the territorial dimension of regional, national and European policies can be actively addressed.’ (<https://territorialagenda.eu/pilot-actions/>). For this, a report entitled ‘Implementing the Territorial Agenda 2030 – Examples for a territorial approach in policy design and delivery’ was issued in 2020 (BMI 2020). In addition, an ‘Atlas for the Territorial Agenda 2030’ was published, highlighting several territorial policy challenges via thematic maps, diagrams and text passages, thus offering a clear diagnostic perspective on both policy frames (BMI & BBSR, 2020).

The TA 2030 is the result of two years of discussions involving different actors in all EU member states and neighbouring countries, bringing together groups working under

the aegis of ministers responsible for spatial planning and territorial development as well as the European Commission, the Parliament, the Economic and Social Committee, the Investment Bank Group and other European and national associations (Lüer and Böhme 2020, 10). The preamble to the TA 2030 endorses a number of other policy frameworks and agendas issued by the United Nations (e.g. the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals), the European Commission (e.g. proposal for future EU cohesion policy 2021–2027), the OECD principles on Urban Policy and Rural Policy (2019), and the intergovernmental council on Urban Matters (i.e. New Leipzig Charter, 2020). Important here is the relation to the European Green Deal, intended to mobilize at least €1 trillion to support sustainable investment over the next decade through the EU budget, and the associated Sustainable Europe Investment Plan (2020) as its investment instrument. The Just Transition Mechanism (2020) is included in this plan and targets a fair and just green transition, mobilizing at least €100 billion in investment over the period 2021–2027 to support the most impacted regions (EC 2020a). The Just Transition Mechanism was set up ‘to leave no person and no region behind in the transition towards a climate-neutral economy’ (EC 2021, 2). It covers the 28 member states and targets 100 NUTS 3 regions (EC 2020b).

Notably, although territorial cohesion is still addressed as a prominent policy frame in the TA 2030 (paragraphs 6 and 10), it is more accentuated in the last two TAs. The promotion of territorial cohesion aims to enable ‘more equal opportunities’ and to ‘reinforce solidarity to promote convergence and reduce inequalities between better-off places and those with less prosperous prospects or that are lagging behind,’ so limiting ‘inequalities between people and places require[s] joint efforts’ (MSPTD 2020, 3–4). A larger section in the TA 2030 depicts the social, economic and environmental challenges for ‘a future for all places’, which includes living conditions for all (§20). Unlike the two previous TAs, it reiterates that the EU has different types of places and territorial specificities, with different potentials and challenges (§21). Under the heading ‘People and places drift apart – Increasing imbalances and inequalities,’ seven ‘fields of action’ and related challenges are outlined (i.e. demographic and societal imbalances, interdependencies between places; §25), which are then unpacked over eight paragraphs under the heading ‘Territorial priorities for Europe’ (§45–52) and three sub-headings: ‘Balanced Europe’, ‘Functional Regions’ and ‘Integration Beyond Borders’ (Table 3). These fields of action add a motivational function to the policy frame of ‘A Just Europe’ by providing rationales for future action.

Neto Henriques et al. (2020) compare the TA 2030 with other intergovernmental/EU policy papers by counting how often some specific ‘policy keywords’ are mentioned (Table 1). Notably, ‘justice’ and ‘inequality’ are only prominently used in the latest TA 2030, the ‘European Green Deal’ and the ‘New Leipzig Charter,’ all from 2020. Whereas the policy keyword ‘justice’ appears in neither the ESDP nor the 2007 and 2011 TAs, it appears ten times in the TA 2030. But – as Neto Henriques et al. (2020) note – it comes in relation to Europe’s green transition and the key objectives of cohesion policy. For instance, §45 states: ‘The priorities for a Just Europe underline the territorial dimension and spatial planning contributions to overarching policy priorities. These priorities include economic, social and territorial cohesion, the European Pillar of Social Rights, a Europe closer to citizens, [...], Just Transition and territorial integration in Europe (MSPTD 2020, 15).’ The other two policy documents adopted in 2020, the

Table 1. Number of times six selected policy keywords are mentioned in European territorial/urban policy documents. Source: Neto Henriques et al. (2020, 159, amended).

Policy documents	Policy keywords					
	Environment	Inequality	Justice	Sustainability	Territory	Transition
TA 2030 (2020)	22	14	10	46	103	30
TA 2020 (2011)	13	1	0	23	169	1
TA (2007)	8	0	0	19	67	0
European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) (1999)	125	0	0	86	82	1
European Green Deal (2020)	73	0	11	82	2	52
New Leipzig Charter (2020)	9	2	7	16	10	0
Urban Agenda for the EU (2016)	7	0	0	25	37	4

European Green Deal and the New Leipzig Charter, use the policy keyword ‘justice’ to a similar extent.

Neto Henriques et al. (2020, 164) conclude that ‘[e]ven though a ‘Just Europe’ is designated as one of the two main overarching goals of the TA 2030, together with a ‘Green Europe’, we find a considerable lack of definition of what is meant by just and justice [...]. We are left with the impression that the word just was mostly used to lead the way to introduce policy documents such as the Just Transition Mechanism [...]. The concept of justice itself is not defined nor problematized [...] in these policy documents, which is especially problematic since the word can entail many different understandings and there are different and conflicting theories of justice – saying that ‘no one is left behind’ is, we claim, insufficient.’ We agree that the TA 2030 fails to define what a Just Europe may mean more concretely – and such concepts are hardly defined in strategic European policy papers (Marques et al. 2018). Even though the aforementioned atlas and the pilot projects provide some further diagnosis and even motivations regarding this policy frame, the origins and underlying rationales of the Just Europe policy frame need further investigation.

4.2. Origins and underlying rationales

The process of revising the TA 2030 can be divided into two main phases, with the ‘just’ dimension being thematised during the second phase. The revision process started with the assessment of the TA 2020 by the Luxembourg Presidency. This resulted in an inter-governmental taskforce being established during the Austrian Presidency (2018), which agreed on the milestones to be reached by the time the document was approved under the German Presidency (EPRS 2020). This first phase defined the extent and objectives for the TA 2030 in the context of the Yellow Vests movement, Brexit and the renewal of the European Parliament and the European Commission. The writing phase was coordinated by consultants (2019–2020) under the German Presidency. Table 2 lists the main documents influencing the writing of the TA 2030.

These documents establish the diagnostic and motivational dimensions of the TA 2030 policy frame, while emphasizing the necessity to improve implementation, since its forerunner, the TA 2020, was deemed not to have achieved its full impact (Böhme, Holstein, and Toptsidou 2015). The LU and AT Presidency reports (2015 and 2018) and the Committee of the Regions’ Opinion (CoR 2019) highlight the need to improve the readability of the next TA, to aid broader dissemination. Other documents

Table 2. Milestone documents that shaped the renewal process of the TA 2030. Documents in white stem from EU institutions, those in grey from the spatial planning epistemic community. Source: own compilation based on European Parliamentary Research Service, 2020.

Date	Authors	Titles of documents	Main messages
July 2015	Spatial Foresight consultancy for the LU Presidency, as commissioned by TA 2020	Report on the Assessment of Territorial Cohesion and TA 2020 of the European Union	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Priorities, challenges and potentials of TA 2020 remain valid • Need to raise awareness of TA beyond community of experts
November 2018	Rosinak & Partner, COWI consultancy, for the AT Presidency, commissioned by intergovernmental taskforce	Austrian Presidency's Directors General Seminar 'Setting the Course for the Future of Territorial and Urban Policies at European level,' Summary report	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The narrative of TA 2030 should be 'strong[er]', making it more accessible • Governance mechanisms should be developed for improved implementation
May 2019	ESPN	European territorial reference framework study	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need for a new narrative supporting action beyond administrative boundaries • Tackle increasing territorial disparities and growing interdependencies
June 2019	Informal Meeting of EU Ministers Responsible for Urban Matters, 'Bucharest Declaration'	Towards a common framework for urban development in the European Union, Declaration of Ministers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve coordination between territorial and urban policies
October 2019	CoR Opinion	The CoR's contribution to the renewed Territorial Agenda with special emphasis on Community-Led Local Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Present a new narrative to strengthen and improve communication and effectiveness • Establish a body to monitor implementation of TA 2030
October 2019	CPMR	Regions at the heart of a reformed European Union	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthen the territorial dimension of EU policies. • Provide equal opportunities for all territories • Regions should be involved in shaping the territorial agenda
November 2019	Territorial thinkers (platform of experts coordinated by Spatial Foresight consultancy)	Territorial inequality: a new priority for Europe. Arguments for place-sensitive policies and investment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Territorial inequalities are sources of anti-EU sentiments and populism • EU policies need to adopt a place-sensitive approach and take account of their differentiated impacts
January 2020	Finnish Presidency	Online survey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of implementation of TA relates to lack of political ownership from various levels of governance
December 2020	German Presidency	TA 2030, Atlas for the Territorial Agenda 2030, Pilot Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • TA 2030 is adopted along with the 'Atlas for the Territorial Agenda 2030' and 'Pilot Actions' to document the sectoral impacts of EU integration and make the territorial approach widely accessible

suggest that involving lower tiers of governance in making and implementing the TA 2030 (AT Presidency Summary report 2018; CPMR 2019) would increase political ownership, according to an online survey under the Finnish Presidency in 2020. Another suggestion was to establish a body to monitor its implementation (CoR 2019).

The prognostic dimension of a 'Just Europe' does not emerge in any of the key documents adopted in intergovernmental meetings or by EU institutions (rows in white, Table 2). The central idea of a 'just and sustainable future for all places in Europe' was first coined in a briefing co-authored by experts forming an essential part of the European territorial development epistemic community (Territorial thinkers 2019). An epistemic community comprises the common learning processes leading to cognitive *rapprochement* among a specific group of experts (Faludi 2002, 904 quoting Héritier et al. 1996, p. 16). This epistemic community grew from the preparation of the ESDP in the late 1990s and has expanded since then (Faludi 2007), especially around activities within ESPON, an EU-funded programme delivering expertise to public authorities responsible for designing territorial policies.

According to our interviews and document analysis, policymakers developed an awareness of rising inequalities following the 2007 economic crisis. 'Since the outbreak of the economic crisis in 2007, the disparities among regions have increased again in a much more disproportionate way than the disparities among countries' (CoR 2017). Political events such as Brexit and the Yellow Vests movement contributed to raising awareness that disparities felt as inequalities at the national level can have major political consequences at the European level. The rise of Eurosceptic parties at the 2019 EU Parliament election and Brexit are examples of the major political consequences of distrust for EU integration and political process. 'After Brexit, if you don't invest in this togetherness, you will not be able to achieve your ambitions, [...] you'll have disintegration.' (Interviewee B). Tackling discontent becomes a major priority to ensure the continuity of the European project. The subsequent academic analyses demonstrating the spatial correlation between discontent and socioeconomic disparities (Dijkstra, Poelman, and Rodríguez-Pose 2020; Rodríguez-Pose 2018) have been particularly influential in this epistemic community in providing evidence supporting policymaking. 'Leaving no-one behind' was part of every expert's discourse, and the need to avoid 'increasing this geography of discontent' was one decisive factor for rethinking the content of the new TA and its implementation (interviewee C).

More importantly, spatial planning policymakers see in this literature a major contribution to raising awareness of territorial cohesion, which they recall as being an overall objective of the EU, albeit 'sometimes forgotten,' as it is associated with the huge realm of cohesion policy (interviewee B). Our interviewees accordingly emphasized that even if the territorial dimension of EU policies is well documented, particularly due to the long-standing work of ESPON, sector policies remain spatially blind, because of the structure within EU institutions and member states of working in thematic silos. 'In the commission we think about themes, [...] we have thematic commissioners, but within the Commission we tend not to think about territorial impacts in the first instance.' (Interviewee C). Overall, our interviewees agreed that the effectiveness of the TA 2030 depends on its capacity to make the territorial dimension clearer in relation to sector policies. Progress has also been made in using methods to evaluate the effects of legislation on specific regions, as suggested by the Better Regulation Guidelines and the Regulatory Scrutiny Board (Gaugitsch et al. 2020, 18).

However, one interviewee stressed the importance of setting more ambitious objectives, stating that ‘there is a requirement for more comprehensive and regional approaches within the member states.’ (Interviewee C).

According to the interviewees, the shift towards a ‘just’ Europe is also crucial to promote a semantic alignment with the broader political debate and policy turn at the European level regarding the transition towards a green economy. The Commission-initiated ‘European Green Deal’ is defined as ‘the new growth strategy’ (EC 2019). Several interviewees referred to President von der Leyen’s speeches, aimed at ‘making sure that no-one is left behind’ (EC 2019). Along with adopting the Commission’s Green Deal Communication, she added: ‘This transition will either be working for all and be just, or it will not work at all’ (EC 2019). The TA 2030 similarly aims to be accessible to a wider audience. Regarding the ideal of justice, interviewees also perceive the adjective ‘just’ as a consensual ambition. They emphasized that it had been swiftly accepted among member states’ representatives, being easily translated into other European languages without any association with other policy frameworks or negative connotations. In sum, the adjective ‘just’ turns out to be a semantic and pragmatic positioning for the TA 2030 and, more broadly, for territorial policy to recognize the need to tackle rising inequalities and promote the transition towards a green economy.

The TA 2030 therefore aims to expand its territorial approach to policymaking to sector policies. Aligning with the EU’s broader policy discourse is a strategic approach to raise awareness of territorial cohesion policy within wider policy circles. Interviewees hoped to expand ownership of the TA 2030, thus increasing its impact on sector policies (interviewee A). It is also in this perspective that the TA 2030 organizes its main axis (i.e. territorial priorities) along two policy frames (i.e. Just Europe and Green Europe, Table 3) by explicitly referring to the European Green Deal and to six priorities that recall key notions from the ESDP (e.g. functional regions, connectivity, sustainability, integration).

Summing up, the policy frame of ‘A Just Europe’ adopted within the TA 2030 demonstrates the attempt to improve its impact and ownership in relation to sector policies. Surprisingly, our interviewees confirmed that the adjective ‘just’ is not necessarily associated with the notion of justice. How do experts then understand ‘just’ in the context of the TA 2030?

4.3. Understanding the significance of the ‘just’ narrative

When reflecting on the adjective ‘just,’ interviewees expressed their attempts to define ‘fair’ (interviewees A, B, D) or ‘equitable’ (interviewee A) policy responses to tackle

Table 3. The two overarching policy frames of the TA 2030 in relation to six priorities (own presentation).

Just Europe	Green Europe
<i>Balanced Europe</i>	<i>Healthy environment</i>
Better-balanced territorial development utilizing Europe’s diversity	Better ecological livelihoods, climate-neutral and resilient towns, cities and regions
<i>Functional regions</i>	<i>Circular economy</i>
Convergent local and regional development, less inequality between places	Strong and sustainable local economies in a globalized world
<i>Integration beyond borders</i>	<i>Sustainable connections</i>
Easier living and working across national borders	Sustainable digital and physical connectivity of places

spatial disparities. Experts also used the words ‘equal’ and ‘fairness’ (interviewees A, B, D). These terms are associated with ‘harmonious development’ (interviewee D). Some interviewees described avoiding the term ‘equality,’ as it could imply striving for ‘the same’ (interviewees, A, B, C, E), i.e. homogenizing across space, contradicting the ‘united in diversity’ motto. Similarly, two experts warned against a potential misunderstanding: aiming to provide ‘equal’ opportunities across the EU is undesirable in territorial terms, as it would conflict with territorial diversity (interviewees A and B). It was also argued that striving for ‘just’ or ‘fair’ access to opportunities in space is not only a policy objective, but also aligns with objectives clearly identified in the ESDP (e.g. access to public services). This ambition targets both individuals and territories. ‘Territories and people belong together. The benefits of a policy in a territory can only be found within the territory. The TA 2030 is supposed to bring together this perspective as well as better interplay between different policy levels in planning and strategy-making.’ (Interviewee D).

Besides conveniently aligning with other EU policy objectives (i.e. the Just Transition Fund), the adjective ‘just’ qualifies the cross-cutting objective to develop policies that actively adapt to territorial diversity, taking into account territories and people who can participate and have access to opportunities. Put simply, the ‘just Europe’ policy frame aims to provide everyone with adequate access to opportunities and a chance to participate, wherever they live in the EU (interviewee D). Beyond the apparent novelty of the narrative, the interviews demonstrate continuity with and proximity to the ambitions anchored in previous TAs.

Even though interviewees admit having overlooked academic discussions dealing with spatial justice, their statements reveal not only that their understanding of a ‘Just Europe’ connects with well-established discussions in the spatial justice literature, but also that using this literature more actively would strengthen its implementation. Interviewees firstly agreed that striving for a ‘Just Europe’ is a normative goal, ‘a Pole Star to aim for’ (interviewee E). Spatial justice is understood also in the academic literature as a normative notion where ‘justice refers to a desirable social, political and economic order’ (Morange and Quentin 2018, 1). Explicitly connecting this political ambition to academic reflection invites a critical assessment of its implementation, drawing lessons from experience and adaptation. Also, proactively accepting its normative character would invite a definition of how far pilot actions contribute to more just spatial development at local and regional levels, for instance. Pilot actions are currently rather used as demonstrative examples.

Secondly, experts widely referred to the idea that EU cohesion policy should provide ‘the regions most affected by the zero-carbon economy [...] with a kind of compensation for participating [in transitioning their economy]’ (interviewee B). This recalls the principle of favouring the least advantaged (Stein and Harper 2005). In contrast to the previous programming period, which aimed to foster cohesion and competitiveness, we observe a clear assumption of a distributive focus, consistent with the need to address the ‘geographies of discontent’ and prevent worsening inequalities in the regions most affected by the energy transition. This policy aligns with the ambition of spatial justice to correct spatial inequalities. Spatial justice could also be used to plan the territory cohesively (Bret 2018).

Interviewees thirdly consider the cohesion policy as ‘a mechanism to give everybody and every territory a chance, right from the beginning’ (interviewee D), effectively implying the lower tiers of governance. By critically reconsidering how decisions are made, and by whom, procedural justice invites us to develop paths for active participation and to rethink the legitimacy of decision-making processes (Soja 2010). Rethinking how decisions are made and with whom, making sure to involve those directly affected by a policy in conceiving and developing it, would not only ensure that it fits local needs, but would also maximize its implementation and impact in the longer run (Barnett 2018). In this respect, interviewees systematically emphasized the need to make the TA more tangible in other sector policies and at lower tiers of governance. However, the pilot actions, the most tangible operationalization of the TA 2030, remain mainly driven by national institutions responsible for spatial planning, i.e. those institutions used to work on cross-sectoral issues and with a certain amount of territorial sensitivity. On the other side, it was argued that there is great potential in actively involving stakeholders responsible for regions affected by the Green Deal (i.e. those most affected by the economic, social and ecological transition), facilitating a great impact and legitimacy of this policy. In this vein, interviewee D argued that rethinking the procedural dimension of policy can contribute to moving away ‘from [the idea] that cohesion is basically only about money,’ to develop a ‘holistic approach.’

Overall, our analysis shows that the TA 2030 illustrates a semantic shift. However, a more explicit use of the spatial justice literature poses significant questions about *how* and *by whom* this new policy frame of ‘A Just Europe’ is conceptualized and applied, as discussed in the next section.

4.4. Challenges for application

In the absence of dedicated funding and as a non-binding policy strategy, the application of this intergovernmental document, the TA 2030, relies heavily on member states. Inspired by the Urban Agenda, pilot actions flag thematic territorial initiatives that are led locally or regionally, to strive for just and/or green territorial development. There are example pragmatic initiatives showcasing how the TA 2030 can be implemented on the TA 2030 website and in a manual edited by the German Presidency (interviewee D). However, they are essentially driven by member states. It remains to be seen whether and how lower tiers of governance will also assume leadership. Interviewees are aware of these limits. ‘The TA 2030 as such is not based on concrete deliverables, laws or programmes; it is soft.’ (Interviewee C). Interviewees emphasized the importance of aligning the TA 2030 objectives with cohesion policy programme priorities. Interviewees from the CoR and the Commission indicate that they have worked towards this end as the most effective way of ensuring implementation.

In the absence of tools, promoters of the TA 2030 have argued for continuing to use place-based development strategies (Barca 2009). In this respect, Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) and Integrated Territorial Investments (ITI) are the most prominent EU instruments, as they allow integrated local development strategies (Servillo 2019). ‘This is why we prioritise funding when our programmes coincide with the concrete needs of those strategies.’ (Interviewee C). Beyond renewing these tools, the main achievement, according to the interviewees, consists in the adoption of the new policy

objective 5: ‘Europe closer to citizens’ (PO 5) within the EU cohesion policy 2021–2027. This priority opens a budget line in all programmes funded by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) for developing integrated projects in functional areas facing multi-thematic challenges (INTERACT 2020). For the first time, managing authorities must fund projects working across sectors and beyond administrative boundaries. As such, it is a legal instrument that provides a frame for developing place-based strategies. Interviewees emphasized that it was far from consensual, as the territorial and place-based approach is a ‘foreign language for many.’ Although the impact of such a priority depends on ‘local interpretation of this policy objective and on local capacities to initiate and establish robust projects’ (interviewee B), it is a promising tool for funding cross-sectoral projects.

Besides this new policy objective (PO 5), interviewees referred to the so-called ‘New European Bauhaus initiative,’ another new policy framework intended to support ‘more holistic and territorial approaches’ (interviewee C). On the condition of being driven by towns and cities of at least 10,000 inhabitants, this policy framework funds projects that bring together public authorities, industry, academia and civil society (EC 2022), thus promoting transdisciplinary projects.

Being aware of the inherent limits of working intergovernmentally, the epistemic community driving the development of the TA 2030 is increasingly attempting to tighten its connections with the law, i.e. the legal basis of a policy framework for action. Members of the epistemic communities involved in the TA and in cohesion policy have endeavoured to build bridges to ensure consistency between the two. In other words, we can recognize a growing alignment between the intergovernmental spatial planning component of EU policies (here: the TA 2030) and the common cohesion policy framework governed by shared competence between the EU and the member states. This demonstrates that in the eyes of this epistemic community of policymakers, ‘using the law’ remains the most effective way to foster change, especially when working across policy sectors which, as we outlined earlier, was a major limitation of previous TAs.

5. Conclusions and potential implications for European spatial planning

‘With the new TA, the notion of spatial planning, which faded out around 15 years ago, may return. So, we have to keep up the momentum at the intergovernmental level.’ (Interviewee C)

By introducing ‘A Green Europe’ and ‘A Just Europe’ as overarching policy frames aiming to guide territorial cohesion policies and spatial planning actions across the EU, the TA 2030 can be regarded as different from its forerunners. At first sight, an ambitious claim, bearing in mind that the tone of such intergovernmental policy documents is normally cautious rather than progressive. They usually align with common and established EU policy frames, such as the Europe 2020 strategy, and underline the importance of established normative concepts such as polycentric or sustainable development. They follow a rather technocratic approach in response to the ongoing EU integration process.

Our empirical analysis demonstrates that the TA 2030 and the policy frame of ‘A Just Europe’ have been developed in response to a heated political debate culminating in the Yellow Vests movement and Brexit, partly also in response to rising spatial disparities,

analysed as (the revenge of) places that don't matter (Rodríguez-Pose 2018). Our analysis shows that this new and hitherto unknown policy frame of 'A Just Europe' was not plucked from thin air; it is a well-anchored, ambitious policy response to an ongoing policy discourse, backed up by numerous voices from the academic literature. This new policy frame implies a diagnostic and to some extent also a motivational function to mobilize action, but hardly a prognostic one. This would have been a clear strategy for addressing injustice across Europe, which would have included a clearer message about what 'a Just Europe' may mean and, more importantly, what resources should be mobilized, and which stakeholders might play key roles. Instead, the TA 2030 addresses rather implicitly how this policy frame can be operationalized in concrete terms, as is rather common in such EU strategic territorial policy papers (Marques et al. 2018). In this vein, we concur with Neto Henriques et al.'s criticism (2020, 164) that the policy frame of 'A Just Europe' is neither defined nor problematized. However, our analysis shows that some intended meanings fit well with the more academic notion of spatial justice, since this notion offers a rather plural understanding of what development, wellbeing and equality mean, rather than falling back on the rhetoric of 'catching up,' which tends to stigmatize some regions and communities. Although the policy keywords have changed significantly in two intergovernmental documents that resemble European spatial planning (i.e. in the TA 2030 and in the New Leipzig Charter), the crucial question is how far these policy keywords will resonate with other documents and policy actions in the near future.

Nonetheless, based on our analysis, we argue that the policy frame of 'A Just Europe' can potentially revitalize the European spatial planning discourse, if some of the inherent challenges in its application are overcome and other opportunities utilized accordingly. Firstly, the newly created policy objective 5, 'a Europe closer to citizens,' provides a legal basis for a largely encompassing EU-wide ground since it allows funding of cross-sectoral place-based initiatives that are not tied to administrative boundaries for all ERDF programmes. In terms of application, its full impact will depend on how far individual programmes allocate budget to this new priority, and the responsiveness and capacity of local stakeholders to initiate projects.

Secondly, all our interviewees highlighted the envisaged pilot actions as a promising and illustrative way of showcasing how, in several countries, spatial planning can contribute to various aspects and dimensions of 'a just Europe' (BMI 2020). However, if these examples are to be seen as cases of good practice to inspire others when designing policies, programmes and projects, it is vitally important to consider what elements should and can be mobilized for facilitating policy learning elsewhere. In addition, the provision of institutional infrastructure is key to enabling the diffusion of good practice; a website alone will not suffice. Research on policy mobilities has shown that simple transfers from A to B are unrealistic (McCann and Ward 2012; Wood 2016). Hence, the question is not only how to mobilize and communicate lessons from such pilot actions; key actors must also consider how to adjust and prepare such good practice for implementation locally in other territorial and institutional contexts. These are crucial issues to consider if these pilot actions are to function as breeding grounds for policy learning across the EU.

Thirdly, under the heading of the European Green Deal, the Just Transition Mechanism aims to mobilize at least €100 billion in investment over the period 2021–2027. This incorporates the ongoing preparation of Territorial Just Transition Plans for around 100

European regions. This is a tremendous opportunity to demonstrate whether the Green and Just objectives articulated in the TA 2030 will guide the implementation of this enormous financial scheme. The key question is to what extent the redistributive logic of this fund will be guided not only by a place-based and inter-sectoral approach, but also by incorporating the new policy objective 5 to address spatial injustices across Europe.

Although the policy frame of ‘A Just Europe’ has been developed without being fully problematized, the three conditions referred to above show that it may coincide with an opportunity to revitalize a new European spatial planning discourse. This discourse could entail a place-sensitive approach, materialized particularly by Policy Objective 5, inspired by well-documented pilot actions that carefully distil what elements can be mobilized for policy learning and are geared towards the just transition of different types of territories across Europe. In other words, the epistemic community interested in revitalizing the notion of European spatial planning needs to seize the moment by demonstrating how the ‘Just Europe’ policy frame can guide territorial cohesion policy effectively. Only then may they demonstrate that the TA 2030 might be a useful and concrete vehicle going beyond the usual abstract rhetoric and claims of intersectoral integration, territorial sensitivity and sustainable development.

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