

**BOOK REVIEW**

**Heinz Fassmann, Daniel Rauhut, Eduarda Marques da Costa and Alois Humer (Eds.)**  
*Services of General Interest and Territorial Cohesion: European Perspectives and National Insights*

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The topic of territorial cohesion lies at the centre of regional science's research interest, and not just since Andrés Rodríguez-Pose's influential 2018 paper, "The revenge of the places that don't matter". Since the beginning of the 2010s, regional science scholars have highlighted the need for place-based, or at least place-sensitive, policies, especially for regions affected by processes of decline. Many of these declining regions are congruent with Rodríguez-Pose's so-called places that don't matter and are insufficiently supported, also in terms of facilities. This leads to the observation that regional disparities in economic and population development are strongly related to disparities in the endowment of public services. Nevertheless, these dependencies have rarely been examined in much detail.

Even though the book "Services of General Interest and Territorial Cohesion: European Perspectives and National Insights", edited by Heinz Fassmann, Daniel Rauhut, Eduarda Marques da Costa, and Alois Humer, was already published in 2015, it is still highly relevant for today's debate on territorial cohesion and place-sensitive policies as it sheds light on the need for fair access to basic services. These basic services are often endangered due to socio-economic developments such as demographic ageing, out-migration, or economic decline. This edited volume provides pertinent background information on the provision of basic services in different contexts.

The book starts out with a general introduction on the contextual, legal, and policy perspectives on services of general interest (SGI), and presents an overview of the chapters that follow. The editors highlight the needs for SGI that have been at the core of the European integration process, but also point out that the term itself does not exist in the policy vocabulary

of any EU member states so far and has no shared formal definition. The plurality of meanings that come with such legal and definitional fuzziness is also one reason for the considerable breadth of discourse on the provision of basic services. With this volume, the editors seek to bring some clarity to the concept of services of general interest by discussing it from three different angles: (1) the contextual backgrounds; (2) the legal requirements; and (3) the political structures that influence SGI provision.

The book itself is arranged in two main parts. First, general perspectives of SGI from different disciplines and approaches are presented. Chapter one, by Alexander Milstein, highlights legal challenges in defining SGI at the scale of EU law, where the distinction between economic and non-economic services is crucial. Chapter two, co-authored by Hild Marte Bjørnsen, Olaf Foss, and Steinar Johansen, argues for a pragmatic approach to the clarification of the analytical concept of SGI. The third chapter, by Alois Humer, Daniel Rauhut, and Heinz Fassmann, highlights the manifold drivers that shape the provision of SGI, such as external demographic regimes and social, economic, and environmental systems. Eduarda Marques da Costa, Pedro Palma, and Nuno Marques da Costa look in chapter four at regional disparities in SGI provision and their impact on territorial cohesion inside the EU. In chapter five, Luciane Aguiar Borges, Alois Humer, and Christopher J. Smith discuss three scenarios for Europe's possible SGI futures.

After the conceptual discussion about services of general interest and its influences through and impacts on EU policies, the volume's second part "allows for a thematically selective insight into specific national and regional situations of SGI provision" (p. 16). Chapter six, authored by Elisabeth Gruber, Heinz Fassmann, and Alois Humer, investigates the effect of demographic change on SGI demands using the example of Austria. In chapter seven, Hjalti Jóhannesson analyses the provision and development of SGI under extreme conditions in the case of Iceland, one of Europe's edge regions. Xavier Velasco Echeverría then highlights the importance of EU policies for the improvement of SGI provision in Spain in chapter eight. Daniela-Luminita Constantin, Raluca Mariana Grosu, Claudiu Herteliu, and Adriana Dardala focus on the issue of healthcare services in the North-East region of Romania in chapter nine by examining interregional and intraregional disparities in access to healthcare in relation to general regional development disparities. Chapter ten, authored by István Ferencsik, Antonia Milbert, and Marcin Stępnik, compares the accessibility of SGI in different spatial categories through a comparative case study in Germany, Poland, and Hungary. In chapter eleven, Gregory Hamez and Sophie de Ruffray emphasize the specific situation of SGI provision in France,

where “service public” have a long tradition dating back to the French Revolution of 1789, but also extend their focus through the elaboration of a cross-border typology of local accessibility.

Following these conceptual and country-specific contributions, Andreas Faludi, Dominic Stead, and Alois Humer recapitulate the discussion and highlight some important aspects of SGI for future debate. In their short concluding chapter, the authors: (1) discuss the relation between SGI and the European concept of territorial cohesion; (2) focus on the diversity of national social models and their influence on the provision of public services; and (3) consider the potentials of SGIs to promote the goals of the EUs “Europe 2020” strategy. The three authors also present a round-up on the debate and outline future challenges for the discourse – not only in regional sciences but also in policymaking in the sphere of multi-level governance.

What specific relevance does this 2015 published volume have for the current debate on territorial cohesion and the discussion of challenges in SGI provision? First, it gives a condensed overview of different perspectives for analysing public services: theoretical, legal, and policy-oriented. As the debate on the concept of SGI has remained fuzzy and broad, this edited volume attempts to scope the wider relevance and impact of SGI for regional development. Second, in offering insights drawn from country-specific situations of SGI provision that also include different spatial categories, the book allows a linkage to the scientific debate on the places that don’t matter, as insufficient public service provision can be seen as a main driver of discontent. The current debate on geographies of discontent and the need for place-sensitive policies receives a further basis for argumentation by adding the findings contained herein. Third, the volume once more highlights the fact that public services are not simply there, but are modes of governance in a complex system that includes numerous actors and institutions working on different spatial scales. The provision of services of general interest is a complex process that needs to overcome several challenges. Through the case studies presented in this edited volume, the reader will gain broad insights into this complex process and become sensitized to the pitfalls that plague the provision of fair access to public services and achievement of territorial cohesion.

Overall, the book provides a profound overview of a concept that serves as the basis for one core principle of European integration: the accessibility to SGI as the means to territorial cohesion. Although these SGI are often – though to greatly varying degrees – considered in debates on territorial cohesion, deeper insights into the provision and impact “of those basic services that society vitally needs for its development and economy to function” (p. 11) are needed. The primary value of this edited volume is the way it addresses this need. However, the

impact of the book is reduced by several weaknesses. First, it offers no common definition of the concept of services of general interest. The five chapters in part one that focus on conceptual issues of SGI each contain a theoretical discussion. This leads to several redundancies that make reading occasionally tedious. An introductory chapter featuring a common definition and clarification of the concept of SGI could have helped to avoid these redundancies. Second, the edited volume provides no justification for the case studies chosen in this edited volume (derived from the ESPON 2013 Programme funded project “Indicators and Perspectives for Services of General Interest in Territorial Cohesion and Development”). Why are these case studies of particular interest for the study of SGI provision? What are their specifics? Some introductory remarks could have revealed the criteria for selecting the case study regions and therefore strengthened the project’s reliability. Third, some of the chapters could benefit from more accurate proofreading, as both grammatical and orthographical errors appear. While this does not lessen the book’s overall contribution, it interferes in the reading experience. Nevertheless, “Services of General Interest and Territorial Cohesion: European Perspectives and National Insights” offers a valuable overview of the conceptualization of services of general interest and its impact on territorial cohesion. Furthermore, it allows a widening of scope on the debate of geographies of discontent and therefore remains highly relevant. With its focus on public services and territorial cohesion, this book is of interest to researchers, students, practitioners, and policymakers, and should provide them with a helpful reference volume.