

**UNCOVERING TERRITORIAL INEQUALITIES AND SPATIAL JUSTICE IN THE EU**

- **EDITORIAL** -

**Maria Plotnikova<sup>a,\*</sup>, Ana Viñuela<sup>b</sup>**

<sup>a</sup> Aberystwyth University, United Kingdom

<sup>b</sup> University of Oviedo, Spain

\* Corresponding author: Maria Plotnikova

Aberystwyth University, UK

Address: Hugh Owen Building Penglais Campus Aberystwyth University SY23 3DY

E-mail: map26@aber.ac.uk

**Biographical Notes**

**Maria Plotnikova** is a lecturer in Economics at Aberystwyth Business School. Her research interest are regional and urban economics, economics of inequality and poverty, economics of entrepreneurship.

**Ana Viñuela** is an associate professor at the University of Oviedo, Department of Applied Economics and REGIOlab. Her research deals with the definition of local labour markets and their possible applications in Regional Economics.

Territorial inequalities have long persisted in the EU. The European project has been a long-running process of the coming together of the European states into a single territorial unit. Following a period of convergence in the 1990s and early 2000s, the 2008 financial crisis had widened regional economic disparities in Europe. Territorial inequalities have been targets of policy intervention via regional policy and more recently, Cohesion policy with the objective to promote more balanced and more sustainable territorial development.

Understanding territorial inequalities requires greater attention to regional and local socio-economic contexts. Doing so brings to light the interrelationship between economic inequality and other location-specific factors such as differential capacity of regions and localities to sustain

economic activity, absorb economic shocks and respond to policy intervention, including Cohesion policies.

Horizon 2020 funded Integrative Mechanisms for Addressing Spatial Justice and Territorial Inequalities in Europe (IMAJINE)<sup>1</sup> project addresses the problem of territorial inequalities through an inter-disciplinary and multi-scalar approach that integrates perspectives from economics, human geography, political science and sociology and combines macro-scale econometric analysis and the generation and analysis of new quantitative survey data with regionally-focused qualitative empirical case study research in eleven EU member states.

This special issue draws on IMAJINE project research addressing the issues of territorial inequalities and linking it to the concept of spatial justice. The perspective of spatial justice offers a new angle for analysing and ultimately tackling territorial inequality. Inequalities may be understood as differences in opportunities available for individuals expressed through access to (e.g. education, jobs, healthcare, services, and, ultimately social mobility) that differ across space and spatial differences in access interact with its socio-economic determinants such as class, gender, age, ethnicity and others.

The first paper in this special issue by Bram Van Vulpen and Bettina Bock uses the concept of spatial justice to further our understanding of the forms of spatial inequalities analysed in the literature. Spatial justice is about how “social justice” fares in “space”. The analysis starts by noting the critical geography perspective that social justice can differ spatially and that spaces can produce social injustice. The study then asks a central question of how does social justice relate so spatial inequality? This question is answered through conducting a scoping review of 134 selected academic empirical papers on various dimensions of regional inequality and categorise them according to forms of “spatial” injustice. Each type of injustice is defined in relation to Fraser (2009)<sup>2</sup> dimensions of social justice, that being (Re)distribution, Recognition and Representation. The papers fitting the criteria for selection were grouped into six conceptual themes, with two themes corresponding to one of Fraser (2009) dimensions.

### The (Re)distribution dimension

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://imajine-project.eu/>

<sup>2</sup> Fraser, N. 2009. Scales of justice: reimagining political space in a globalizing world. New York: Columbia University Press.

“Economic marginalization in Uneven development” theme	“Deprivation in Peripheralization” theme
Territorial inequalities in economic performance may over-time lead to divergence in levels and trajectories of development among regions, preventing lagging regions from reaching their potential and necessitating fiscal transfers from richer ones.	Territorial inequalities in unemployment and health bring about clusters of multi-dimensional deprivation, increasing reliance on welfare disbursements and public provision of services.

The Recognition dimension

Disrespect in Territorial Stigmatization	Non-recognition in Environmental Justice
Place-based stigma has long-reaching consequences such as discouraging people and business from locating there.	Neglect of differential impact of natural resources on communities, including environmental hazards and risks

The Representation dimension

Misrepresentation in ‘Politics of resentment’	Misframing in Territorial politics
Perception of territorial inequalities in in ‘lagging’ or ‘left-behind’ regions may foster what has been termed as the “geography of discontent” expressed in grass-roots movements, support for extreme political parties and anti-establishment voting behaviour (e.g. Brexit vote outcome in the UK).	Inequalities, real or perceived, are used by separatist parties to frame their arguments and claims

This scoping review study suggests a framework for a (normative) discussion of “injustices that arise in uneven regional development”. This is an important deliberative issue for academics and policymakers to engage with, in order to improve wellbeing across diverse space, while not “leaving behind” regions and communities.

The second paper in this special issue by Maria Plotnikova addresses the issue of regional inequality expressed through differential uptake of incapacity benefits in the UK, and concerns “the distribution of wealth and resources”, the first of the Fraser (2009) dimensions of justice. Incapacity benefits are benefits one is eligible to receive if one can’t work because one becomes sick or disabled at work. The uptake of incapacity benefits is uneven across the country with a spatial pattern reflecting significantly higher uptake in less prosperous and peripheral areas. Thus, the spatial pattern in the uptake of benefits is indicative of the so-called discouraged worker effect when individuals leave the labour force faced with limited job opportunities.

In the taxonomy of Van Vulpen and Bock in this issue the subject analyzed would fall under the rubrics of Economic Marginalization in Uneven Development and Deprivation in Peripheralization. The root causes of increase and persistence of incapacity benefits uptake identified in the literature are macro-factors of deindustrialization and industrial restructuring, and individual health-related obstacles for employability and access to jobs. Drawing on the discussion in Van Vulpen and Bock, these are examples of spatial inequalities that are unjust.

The special issue concludes with the book review of Mario Polèse’s, *The Wealth and Poverty of Cities* by Daniela Constantin. The review emphasizes that the author challenges the notion that “cities are the primary drivers of the wealth of nations”. Instead cities are part of the development that takes place in space and the central message of the book is the importance of institutions that condition this development and growth.

In summary, making use of the concept of spatial justice for social scientists including economists provides a new perspective to uncover not only inequalities in the distribution of resources but also to further our understanding of the reproduction of inequalities of opportunities in geographic space.

**Acknowledgement:** This paper draws on the research funded from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 726950, “IMAJINE - Integrative Mechanisms for Addressing Spatial Justice and Territorial Inequalities in Europe” project. The Special Issue of the Romanian Journal of Regional Science entitled “Uncovering Territorial Inequalities and Spatial Justice in the EU” is included in the IMAJINE dissemination plan.

**Disclaimer:** This document reflects only the authors’ view. The Commission is not responsible for any use that may be made of the information it contains.