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INFORME

**INNOVATIVE REGIONS IN THE EU**

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**RESUMEN**

El siguiente artículo analiza las condiciones que deben de ser cumplidas por parte de las regiones en la UE para ser considerados innovadores. La Estrategia Europa 2020 servirá como fondo y criterio para este análisis. Vamos a explorar las posibilidades y oportunidades de las regiones para seguir una política de innovación bien dirigida para su desarrollo su económica y social.

**ABSTRACT**

The following article deals with the question of what conditions regions will have to fulfil in order to be considered innovative in the EU. The Europe 2020 strategy will serve as both background and yardstick for this. We will look at what chances regions have to pursue a well-aimed innovation policy for the advancement of their economical as well as their social development.

**I. INTRODUCTION**

The implementation of the Europe 2020 strategy for growth has an important role for the European regions, which coincides with the increased importance across the board of regions in the European multi-layered system. In the following article we will shed light on this connection a little further down the line. It can be argued however, that the creation of new ideas and practices, which is the central meaning of the term innovation, needs an environment that promotes such developments. Based on regions, we are questioning the political, legal, economic and social conditions and framework necessary for a successful innovation policy, which allows for growth and facilitates social problem-solving.

**II. AIMS OF THE EUROPE 2020 STRATEGY**

With its 'Europe 2020 Strategy', underpinned by 7 flagship initiatives, the European Union is striving for a stronger economic capability which can push through with higher employment rates. This is embedded at the same time however in social and environmental objectives and that is why development is perceived in three ways by the EU, as '**smart, sustainable and inclusive growth**'<sup>1</sup>. In the course of this the spheres of knowledge around education, research and development should play a central role in the economy (**smart growth**), business should be orientated more strongly towards climate-friendly and resource-conserving production (**sustainable growth**) and politics should devote its concentration towards the problems of poverty and

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unemployment (*inclusive growth*). From the perspective of the EU the 'Europe 2020' strategy can be regarded as a solution to the social and economic repercussions of the current financial and debt crises, but it is above all designed as an answer to the long-term challenges Europe has faced, including demographic change, health issues, climate change and social exclusion. Table 1 shows the envisioned implementation of the European growth strategy in concrete development aims, which are each taken as cross-cutting issues for different fields of policy.

Table 1: The Europe 2020 Strategy

Aims	Areas	Targets
Smart Growth	Employment	Employment rate 75% (of those between 20 and 64 years of age)
	Research and Development	3% of the GDP for Research and Development
Sustainable Growth	Climate change	20% less emissions (compared with 1990)
	Industry and energy policy	20% of energy from renewable sources 20% more efficiency
Inclusive Growth	Education	Below 10% without high school diploma 40% of EU citizens under 35 years of age with high school diploma
	Poverty Reduction	Bring 20mill citizens out of poverty

The member states of the EU have agreed to mould the implementation of these targets into national reform programmes. This is where the respective national circumstances in each individual policy area should be taken into account, in order to be able to target the approach at specific problems. These reform programmes should be discussed and decided by the wider civil society. What is especially important for this is the commitment of subnational regions, which we will discuss specifically. Member states and the Commission are together monitoring the progress of the pursuit of the strategic targets, through the publication of reports and recommendations. The Committee of the Regions maintains a 'Europe 2020 Monitoring Platform', which reports on concrete initiatives and networking in more than 150 regions, towns and communities.

The term innovation is crucial for the Europe 2020 strategy. Public as well as private investments should be aimed at achieving new knowledge, new products and new economic activity, but at the same time should go towards the development and strengthening of new practices and processes in social and political areas. The broad term 'development' is thus associated with a broad term of 'innovation'. Innovation can be understood as both technological and economic reform as well as a qualitative improvement of social circumstances (better education, improved health, a more intact environment). What will be emphasized here is the interaction between technological progress, which is more orientated towards seeking economic profits, and social innovation, which is more about changing practices within society with the objective of better welfare. Some good examples for this might be the rise in the employment rate as a result of economic recovery, the integration of marginalised groups through new technological means or the reinforcement of an 'innovation culture' due to better standards of education and more of a say in political decision-making.<sup>2</sup> According to

2. For a general discussion of the term innovation, see *Hämäläinen, Timo/ Heisala, Risto (Hrsg.) 2007: Social Innovations, Institutional Change and Economic Performance, Cheltenham; Pol, Eduardo/Ville, Simon 2009: Social Innovation: Buzz Word or Enduring Term?, in: The Journal of Socio-Economics, Vol. 38, P. 878-885.*

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the European Commission the attainment of the targets set out by Europe 2020 and the ability of Europe to cope with serious economic, environmental and social challenges will only be possible when a widely understood innovation policy such as this steers its political and social contributors.

**III. REGIONS IN THE EUROPEAN INNOVATION POLICY**

The regional level, of which the diversity is classified by the NUTS system, is seen by the European Commission as an important point of coordination in the implementation of the Europe 2020 strategy. First and foremost because in many EU states the administrative area of responsibility for the policy fields central to implementation of the strategy, such as research and development, labour market, infrastructure, education and poverty policies, lays in the hands of regional and local authorities. Only by being integrated into the multi-level organisation can an effective implementation of the European growth strategy be anticipated.

A second reason which justifies the regional focus can be found in the concern for the 'innovation divide'. Previous experiences, especially in the area of EU structural funds, show significant regional disparities in research and innovation performance. The gaps which have grown between regions during the financial crisis represent an immediate threat to the end objective of inclusive growth, which involves social and territorial cohesion. The European Commission is searching for the answer in the concept of 'smart specialisation', which emanates from an endogenously developed concentration on specific development areas, which fit into the complete profile of the respective regions. Existing strengths should be called upon and focussed on. Regional politics make the determination of strategic priorities and suitable measures as well as the presentation of a network formation in civil society of utmost importance. (European Commission 2011) This is where European policy takes on an academic discourse, which assumes an increased meaning for the regional level of the innovation process. On a theoretical level the conceptual understanding of innovation has developed from a linear to a systematic approach. (Lundvall 1992; Seravalli 2009) The interactions, networks and feedback between political actors, economy, civil society and knowledge take place in a systemic space. Social, political and economic contextual factors can be seen as a critical framework for the formation and advance of innovative potentials. Innovation thrives (or withers) in specific three-dimensional contexts. Innovations processes have therefore a territorial character that is not only shaped by the nation state but also by the regional level.

In recent decades a paradigm shift has taken place on an economic level, as a consequence regional development has been more understood in terms of mobilisation of endogenous potential than of nation-state design and macro-economic objectives. The 'new regionalism' sees regions at the centre of an internationalised economic competition, which then again has also produced new cooperative relations. As a result a regional dimension has been increasingly recognised in national and European programmes of innovation policy. (Keating 1998)

On a civil society level the commitment of citizens and their voluntary organisations are more significant in the solution of social problems, especially in the case of failures by the state or a collapse in the market. If we look to the regions we can consider the requirement of resources such as the many dense organisations on a civil and social level, social capital and collective identity for a successful network of state and private contributors to the effect of a common regional innovation strategy. (Jeffery 2000, Karolewski, 2012)

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Finally, on a political level the increase in regional authorities looking at legislative and administrative competences means that the regions are becoming more important as the 'laboratories' of innovation. Even though no standardised European development has been produced, regions have still become decision makers in central domestic politics in a growing number of EU states. (Hooghe, Marks, Schakel 2008) Thus the quality of regional politics has gained significance in a regions' chances of innovation. This is also reinforced by the fact that the options in national, trans-regional and European representation of interests have multiplied in the European multilevel system. The playing-skills of political actors on the European keyboard –whether in the participation process of their nation-state, regional partnerships or in the run up to the decisions of the board and commission– can mean the difference between success and failure in a regional innovation policy.

#### **IV. GENERAL CONDITIONS NEEDED FOR A REGIONAL INNOVATION POLICY**

We can assume that the creation of new ideas and practices needs an atmosphere which favours the development of technological as well as social innovation and which allows for exchanges between contributors in various fields of expertise. Hence light has to be shed on the institutional context of innovation yet also emphasizes the strategic role of actors (entrepreneurs, as we see them) in the public sector, in the markets and in civil society. We are inquiring into the political, legal, economic and social requirements and framework for an independent regional innovation policy. Under what conditions can innovation flourish?

Attention has to be focused on the political and legal scope as well as at the economic and social perspective to get an overall picture. In the political debate literature on subnational mobilisation, which deals with the political commitments of regions within Europe, has to be taken into account. (Hooghe, 1995; Jeffery 2000) The current academic debate emphasizes the stark differences between sub-nations, which are established with varying potentials. Powerful regions with far-reaching constitutional capabilities, materials resources and their own political-cultural identity can take on a more significant role than other subnational units who lack these attributes when it comes to representing their specific interests within Europe. (Bauer, Börzel 2010) Looking at regions with strong legislative power has also shown that national participation rights, as such granted by Article 23 of the German Basic Law, are estimated by regional actors to be more effective than the rather vague chances of influence and long-winded learning processes which are the result of regional lobbying in Brussels. Both national and supranational options are used, but European channels are considered an addition to the actual gameplay which runs on the nation state level. (Hogenauer 2011)

The focus on powerful regions shouldn't conceal the fact, however, that weaker regions can pursue an effective European policy too. At the centre of this is the concentration of limited materials and administrative resources on selected policy fields, the priority of which is assigned to regional development. But the gains made in expertise through targeted cooperation with European institutions, which also assists in trans-regional associations and the establishment of regional networks with contributors to both economy and civil society can also compensate for existing weaknesses. (Moore 2008) Such a specifically targeted European strategy that focusses on niche markets and partnerships can allow the weaker regions to punch above their weight (here a parallel can be drawn with the smaller EU member states). (Crickemans, Duran 2010) Comparing stronger and weaker regions may even show that the latter have greater channels of influence within Europe than the stronger regions. The help of European

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partners is particularly helpful when at home representation of the peoples' voice is lacking in its capability and influence.

Regions' political capacity to act in European innovation policy can be determined accordingly by basing an analysis on 3 dimensions, which will direct our empirical research.

**Table 2: Political Capacity of Regions**

Participation in EU politics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• National Participation rights</li> <li>• Cooperation with EU organs</li> <li>• CoR and "Paradiplomacy"</li> </ul>
Strategic handling ("Entrepreneurship")	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Political Leadership</li> <li>• Administrative Adaptation</li> <li>• Transregional Networks</li> </ul>
Policy Scopes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Legislative Competences</li> <li>• Fiscal Resources</li> <li>• Cooperation with Business and Society</li> </ul>

The first dimension, which is primarily institutionally orientated, questions that national and European channels of subnational special interest groups in European politics. On a national level this is about the formal and informal influence of regional contributors in the establishment of negotiation positions for European decisions. In federal systems constitutionally statutory methods of participation could be established, which reach from the opinions of regions on European legislative projects to the leadership of national delegations in particular policy fields in the state government. Also in decentralised systems, such as Great Britain and Italy, procedures of regional participation have developed, which has promoted horizontal cooperation of subnational units too. Informal contacts are also relevant here, such as the position of top regional political leaders in national parties or the coordination between specialised ministers of various political levels.

What should be primarily considered when dealing with European channels of regional lobby groups and special interest groups is the cooperation with the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission, the influence over the Committee of the Regions –whose expertise and competences have expanded over the years– as well as the representation of the regions in Brussels, which can take on important information and representation functions. (Rowe, Carolyn 2011)

The second dimension on the powers of regions in Europe refers to the strategy of actions of political actors. This is about the targeted use of existing resources for euro-political aims. These include primarily an effective administrative adjustment to the demands of EU politics, such as the reinforcement in the ministries of expertise on Europe, the establishment of political levels in European politics and cooperation with other regions in trans-regional partnerships and networks. (Jeffery 2000)

The third dimension appreciates that the existing capacity of the regions innovation projects should be given their space. The creative power of regions depends on their

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legislative competency and fiscal resources and therefore so does the possibility of an advancement in endogenous development through political projects. Horizontal networks between regional politics and social spheres are important here too. In the analysis of regional innovation policies the capacity of the cooperation between the public and private sectors can be easily comprehended. Various authors pointed out also the relevance of a strong regional civil society and a high social capital, which can legitimise claims of regional self-development. (Jeffery 2000; Sturm 2006)

**V. CONCLUSIONS**

The innovation policy represents a good example for governing a multilevel system. The mutually agreed targets on the European level should be implemented in specifically adapted national and regional programs of action. The coordination between levels can thus provide for a common framework of politics that can still be flexibly moulded to be able to better meet the requirements each level may have.

Regions are becoming important in European innovation policy. This has to do with their important position in the many areas which are effected by the Europe 2020 strategy. In our contribution we have emphasized that the research into regional innovation strategies can provide the key to understanding this political field. Yet at the same time it seems crucial to question regions' possibilities for action. That is why we have suggested an analytical framework which researches three dimensions –precisely the participation of regions in European politics, the strategies of key contributors and 'policy scopes' of the regions– to what extent the regions are capable of conducting an independent innovation policy. Therefore we have assumed, from all the considerations made, that in order to thrive innovation requires a context that promotes new developments and grants links between the political, economic and social spheres. The constitutional position of regions is an important factor in these deliberations, but will only be complete by looking at the actions of key contributors on the European stage and in their respective regions.

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