Polycentrism in national spatial plans in Europe
- towards a common spatial vision?
Abstract
In this thesis I analyze how national spatial plans that have been adopted in European countries during the last decade have interpreted the polycentric development concept. A survey revealed that fifteen European countries have developed a national spatial plan and the formal influence of the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) is clearly demonstrated in these plans. The development visions presented in the spatial planning documents are, at a formal level, relatively homogenous regardless of national differences regarding the size of the population and the geographical area.

In the thesis I also pose the question whether the national spatial plans will contribute towards a polycentric development on a European level. The findings presented in the thesis suggest that even though the national spatial plans have been inspired by the ESDP and its aim of developing a polycentric development the interpretation of polycentrism on the national level seem to be contradictory to the policy aim at the European level. Also, the Swedish planning experience of the 1960/70s highlights the difficult task of prioritising the development in some cities at the expense of others. Thus, it is concluded that even if the spatial plans are better coordinated so that they contribute towards a common spatial vision it is still highly doubtful that they will be able to deliver on their objective to create a more balanced urban system.
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1. Introduction

The European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) set out a common spatial vision for Europe. The document was developed by the member states of the European Union in cooperation with the European Commission. One of the main reasons for adopting common objectives for spatial development was to establish a common reference framework for spatial development policies in Europe which would enable spatial policies of the Member States to complement each other and by that influence the sectoral policies of the EU. In the ESDP document it is suggested that Member States prepare “standardised information on important aspects of national spatial development policy and its implementation in national spatial development reports, basing this on the structure of the ESDP” (CEC, 1999: 38). Thus, it can be argued that the ESDP represent an attempt to harmonize spatial planning in Europe and to make it more cohesive.

A central concept in the ESDP is polycentricity, or polycentric development. The idea is that a more polycentric Europe will contribute to a more balanced competitiveness of the European territory. The concept of polycentricity has received much scholarly and political attention since the ESDP was adopted in 1999. The concept itself is the outcome of a political compromise and it has not received an exact definition (Waterhout, 2002: 96). Consequently, there are disagreements both between and among scholars, planners and politicians regarding how to interpret the concept. In the aftermath of the ESDP many European countries have adopted national spatial planning documents that set out a vision for the territorial development. Polycenrtism is a central theme in these spatial plans and visions and in this thesis I will analyze the way the concept is given a national context in the different national spatial plans.

The practice of developing national spatial plans is not new and the approach signifies a return of a planning method that was developed in Europe after the Second World War. Europe was in the post-war era guided by a planning optimism and a belief in the ability of central authorities to further a more balanced regional/urban structure through rational planning. The German geographer Walter Christaller provided the theoretical base for this planning approach. Sweden was one of the countries where the idea of creating a balanced urban structure on a national level was pursued in practice. Here, a regional policy was introduced that was based on a hierarchically structured system of cities. The aim was to further a more a balanced regional development by supporting strategically selected cities. This aim of establishing a territorially balanced urban structure is similar to the aim inherent in the concept of polycentric development. In the theoretical chapter I will trace these links and show how the concept of polycentric development can be seen as a modern version of the central place theory.

The development of national spatial plans to outline a comprehensive picture of the territorial development met increased opposition in the 1970s. The practice of developing comprehensive spatial plans was to a large extent replaced by a more liberal oriented market view on planning and a focus on regional development. In Sweden, the support for the city system policy steadily declined and by the end of the decennium the policy was more or less outdated. Planning became less about dispersing growth between cities and regions and more about using resources to adapt to unpredicted events and financing individual projects (Törnqvist, 1996: 23 and Healey, 2004: 45). However, from the 1990s onwards the practice of developing spatial plans to guide the development has once again gained momentum. In contrast to a regional development approach, which focuses on a limited geographical area, a spatial plan is more comprehensive and takes into account the spatial implications of all
policies affecting the territory. The spatial planning trend has been actively supported by the European Union. In 1994, the European Commission published *Europe 2000+*. This policy document emphasized the European dimension in planning policies of individual Member States. However, it was with the ESDP that the first real spatial plan on a European level was introduced. Spatial plans are also developed and adopted on a national level. A survey of national spatial planning documents in Europe revealed that at least fifteen countries have adopted a national document that present a comprehensive picture of how the territory should develop in the future. The urban system is in focus in these spatial plans but compared to the Swedish city system policy there has been a policy shift from redistributing growth to stimulating growth in all cities and regions. The survey, conducted in Swedish, is attached in the appendix.

1.1 Outline of the thesis

Thus, it seems like the ideas from the post-war era has returned although in a different version. In this thesis I will analyse the concept of polycentric development and situate it in a theoretical context. The central place theory developed by Christaller offers important insights as well as the Swedish spatial planning approach of the 1960/70s in which the central place theory was developed into a city system policy. The analysis of the polycentric development concept will be used to pursue the main objective of this thesis which is to investigate the interpretation of the polycentric development concept in national spatial plans. This investigation is based on a survey that map national spatial plans and visions adopted in Europe in the aftermath of the ESDP. The survey reveals the way that the countries have interpreted the jointly adopted European objective of a polycentric and balanced urban system.

The ESDP promotes several spatial concepts for directing the future development of Europe. Three concepts will be focused in this thesis in order to break down the ESDP vision of a polycentric Europe: a polycentric urban system, urban-rural partnership, and balanced development. These three concepts are central to the development vision presented in the ESDP but the concepts are not given a clear definition. Therefore, taking the starting point in the ESDP I will clarify how the concepts will be interpreted in this thesis. On the basis of the three concepts I will then analyze how polycentric development has been interpreted in the national spatial plans. In the final part of the thesis I will reflect on the value of the adopted national spatial plans. The insights offered by two Swedish national planners active during the adoption of the Swedish city system policy will be used to add a critical perspective on the usefulness of the polycentric development concept in countries with a small population on a large area.

1.2 Problem formulation

The objective of this thesis is to investigate how the concept, adopted in the ESDP, of a polycentric development has been given a national context in national spatial plans in Europe. The main question that will be used to guide the analysis is: *How do national spatial planning documents in European countries interpret the European spatial planning objective of a polycentric development?*

Analysing the national spatial planning documents in Europe will provide an insight into the influence of the ESDP on a rhetorical level. In this thesis I will bring the analysis one step further and discuss whether the national spatial plans also can contribute to polycentric development at a European level. The following question serves as a guide for this discussion: *Will the national spatial plans contribute to a polycentric development at a European level?*
1.3 Method
The thesis is based on a qualitative approach and I have used the deductive method for analysing the empirical material. In accordance with Tim May’s understanding of a deductive method (2001: 32) I started my analysis by exploring the theoretical concept (polycentric development) that later were used to analyse the empirical research material (the national spatial plans). The national spatial plans cover a wide range of aspects and the deductive method has helped me to focus on certain aspects of the material while ignoring other. The danger of using the deductive approach is that “data collection is driven by theoretical interests, not the other way around” (May, 2001: 33). This means that the researcher has to be aware of the subjective evaluations and decisions that he/she make will have an effect on how the material is interpreted. A key task for the researcher is to make sure that the material is not manipulated in order to fit the theoretical framework.

To elaborate the theoretical concepts that have been in focus in this thesis has been crucial for approaching the empirical material. However, the development of the theoretical framework has followed a process which has been guided by the content of the empirical material, i.e. the national spatial plans. After having received a basic insight into the issues addressed in the spatial plans the theoretical approach has allowed me to deepen my understanding of the issues raised in the spatial plans and approach them more critically.

1.3.1 Qualitative interviews
Apart from making use of written sources I have also made two interviews. These have been semi-structured personal interviews which were recorded and lasted for around two hours each. The two interviewees, Gösta Oscarsson and Erik Casten Carlberg will be presented in chapter four and here I will just mention that they have both worked as planners at the national level and held key positions. I choose to use the semi-structured qualitative interviews because it is a flexible method that allow the researcher to expand on a topic when it becomes interesting (May, 2001:123). In preparing for the interviews I wrote down a list of questions but during the interviews I was open to let the interviewees elaborate their answers and expand them beyond the original question. However, in comparison to an unstructured approach the semi-structured interview allowed me to select the themes and decide when to change the subject. Both interviews were conducted in Swedish and in the thesis I have included a few quotations which I have translated into English, being careful not to distort the original meaning.

1.4 Limitations
By limiting my empirical material to national spatial plans I have not been able to study what effect the spatial plans have had on a regional level. It would have been interesting to investigate how the national spatial plans have been received and implemented at different spatial levels. The intention has however never been to provide any undisputable and absolute answers to the research questions. Rather, the objective has been to provide well founded reflections on the subject as well as a starting point from which the subject can be explored more systematically.

1.5 Source evaluation
The polycentric development concept has received a lot of attention since the publication of the ESDP. The wide range of papers and debates has mainly focused on the wider European level as well as on the urban regional and city level. Polycentric development policies on the national level are less common. An exception is Meijers et al. (2007) who divide the type of polycentric policies pursued in European countries into two types: those that aim to bridge the
gaps between different categories of cities and those that aim to bridge the gap between cities located in regions at different levels of socio-economic development. Their categorization of the different policies pursued has provided a valuable insight. My approach for understanding the meaning of polycentrism has, however, mainly been to go to the primary source, i.e. the ESDP. Also, Adolphsson et al. (2006) provided a useful introduction for understanding the difference between different basic urban structures.

In answering the second research question I am partly relying on the two interviews that I made with Gösta Oscarsson and Erik Casten Carlberg. These two planners represent two opposite strands in the planning tradition; economic development planning and physical development planning respectively. Their diverging background and the experience they have gained from working with planning issues in key positions for several decades make these persons relevant to interview. However, by relying on only two people I can not claim to present reality in an academically verifiable and objective sense. Neither has this been the purpose of the interviews. Instead, the purpose has been to approach the national spatial plans from a different perspective by making use of the subjective perspectives of two planners with unique practical experience of working with a national urban structure.

Finally, my choice of focus on Denmark, Ireland and the Netherlands as compared to any other of the included countries in the survey has to do with both practical and theoretical reasons. Many of the national spatial plans only exist in the original language or have only a very short English summary. In the three selected countries it has been possible to find more comprehensive information in English. The reason for choosing Ireland and not Wales or Scotland has to do with the fact that Ireland was the first of these countries to develop a national plan and has served as inspiration for the other two countries. I believe that the analysis gains from a geographical spread and from including countries with different planning traditions. This motivates my choice of Denmark and the Netherlands as additional focus countries.
2. Theoretical perspective

2.1 Spatial planning – a comprehensive planning approach

Spatial planning is a so called Euro-English concept and does not exist in the American or British planning vocabulary. The concept spatial planning is very often treated synonymously with concepts such as spatial policy, spatial development, spatial strategy and other similar concepts. For instance, the ESDP uses the term perspective rather than plan and many national spatial plans use the term spatial strategies. According to Faludi (2002: 4-5), one of the reasons for this is that the concept of planning has become politically charged in many European countries. Different countries have different planning traditions and cultures and therefore understand spatial planning in slightly diverging ways. Therefore, the concept of planning is sometimes substituted for what is seen as a more “neutral” alternative. However, in my view the differences are often merely semantic and in this thesis the concept spatial planning will be utilized when there is a deliberate action to develop a document that set out a vision for spatial development as well as specific measures for reaching this vision.

Spatial planning in modern Europe can be traced back to the early post-war era. In 1950, a map was published by Walter Christaller that outlined the system of central places in Europe. The map addressed Europe in its spatial dimensions and Christaller normatively argued for a hierarchy of European cities (Kunzmann, 2006: 44). Because of the geo-political situation of post-war Europe, in which the continent was divided in an eastern and western part, this map was never used as a strategic document. From the 1990s and onwards Europe has witnessed a steady increase in spatial strategy-making at various levels such as the transnational, national and regional level. At the European level, Alden (2006: 26) traces the transition from old style land use planning and master-planning to a new style spatial planning to the European Commission’s publication of Europe 2000+ in 1994. This policy document emphasized the European dimension in planning policies of individual Member States.

A spatial plan provides a roadmap for the future development of a territory. Features that characterize spatial plans are that they address a limited geographical area such as a nation or a region and treat all policies affecting the area as a coherent whole. The focus within spatial planning is on the \textit{spatial dimension} of different sectoral policies as well as the \textit{effect} of different policies on the territory. In this vein, Andreas Faludi (2002: 5) describes spatial planning as “the systematic preparation of spatial policies”. Neil Adams et al. (2006: 4) argue that it injects the question of “where?” into all policy sectors. As a method, spatial planning seeks to combine physical land-use planning with economic, social and environmental development policies. According to Jeremy Alden, this comprehensive approach has created a need for an increased involvement of stakeholders in the planning process. The author argues that another characteristic of spatial planning in recent years is references to the idea of a balanced and sustainable urban development (Alden, 2006: 28-30).

E.J. Meijers et al. (2007: 7) make a distinction between two general policy options that can be used to further a more balanced and cohesive national urban system:

- Enhancing the increase in growth in terms of population or economic importance relatively more in smaller/less economically significant cities
- Dispersing growth from top-ranked cities to cities with a lower rank as regards population or economic importance
A comparison between the national spatial planning strategies adopted in Europe today and the Swedish city system strategy of the 1960/70s reveals that the former are more focused on the first option while the latter is closer linked to the second option. This difference reflects a general shift in thinking about the role of the state in regional policy. The dispersion of growth was more commonly used in traditional regional policy as part of the general welfare state policy. A practical implication of this policy could be to support peripheral regions by dispersing national government institutions (Meijers et al. 2007: 8). The new style regional policy, on the other hand, is seen as a more dynamic and proactive method for guiding spatial change. The focus is on potentials rather than the distribution of activities (Alden, 2006: 28).

2.2 Polycentric development – a new concept for conventional theories and ideas
The concept of polycentric development is central to the ESDP document and it is around this concept that the vision for the future spatial development of the European space is formed. The vision that is outlined in the ESDP is not based on empirical or theoretical studies. However, it is possible to trace implicit links to old ideas and theories and here I will situate the concept in a theoretical context.

2.2.1 A historical background – the central place theory
The geographical distribution of and external relations between cities has been studied for a long period of time. Economic theories and planning theories have aimed at explaining localisation patterns and finding solutions to social and economic problems (Adolphsson et al., 2006: 5). Empirical observations have served as the basis for constructing theories that seek to explain how city systems are structured. In the early 20th century, Felix Auerbach came up with the rank size rule to explain the connection between the sizes of the cities within a country. According to the rank-size rule, the sixth largest city has 1/6 of the population of the largest city in the country. The tenth largest city has 1/10 of the population of the largest city, and so forth (Öhman, 1991: 32).

One of the most influential theories to explain the rank-size rule has been the central place theory introduced by Walter Christaller in 1933. Christaller argued that all cities have to reach a minimum threshold of citizens to be able to provide certain services or goods. Christaller also presented a hypothesis about the maximum distance that people are willing to travel in order to obtain a service or a good. According to the theory, the logic of the market will over time create a spatially hierarchical system of cities that control the growth of the cities. In this way, Christaller was in his central place theory guided by market principles and the logic of supply and demand. According to the market logic, an area with a high population and developed infrastructure can reach out to a bigger market and can thus attract producers of specialized goods and skilled workers. This means that the city will reach a high position in the urban hierarchy (Adolphsson et al., 2006: 5). Thus, the hierarchical position of a city is based on the degree of specialisation and diversification of activities within the city and the surrounding region. Empirical studies have shown that the largest cities have more or less upheld their positions in the city hierarchy since the 19th century. However, another influential scholar, Allan Pred, has showed that the stable position of the largest cities stands in sharp contrast to the middle size and small cities in which the size of the population vary over time (Öhman, 1991: 32-33, 44).
The figure shows how the central place system is organized. In the centre is a strong urban core which is connected to surrounding cities and towns. These towns are in turn connected to villages and the surrounding countryside. Source: Boverket, 1994: 53

2.3 The Swedish city system policy – an example of the central place theory in practice

Christaller’s central place theory was used as inspiration for Swedish regional policy in the post-war era. This was most clearly expressed with the municipal reforms that were organized in two steps; the first in 1952 and the second was completed in 1974. During this time the number of municipalities was reduced from around 2500 to 275. The idea was that each municipality needed a minimum number of citizens and at least one main city or municipal centre that would be able to provide basic public services to its citizens (Öhman, 1994: 87-90). Oscarsson argues that the aim of this policy was to establish sufficient capacity for a massive decentralization of public services (interview, 2009).

Marcus Adolphsson et al. present a theoretical background to the policy aim of a hierarchical urban structure that intends to maximize the functional capacity of a region. The authors’ theoretical discussion provides a background to understanding the central place theory as well as an insight into the objective of the Swedish regional policy of the 1960/70s. Accordingly, a region with a small population will maximize the overall welfare if one city expands at the expense of the others. The reason is that if a region with a small population contains two cities of similar size then none of them will reach an optimal size. However, if one of the cities expands at the expense of the other then this city will be able to improve the welfare of the region. This also means that the first city can provide more welfare then the two cities previously could do combined. Thus, a diversified and developed society is dependent on reaching a critical mass. The size of the municipalities need be big enough to safeguard accessibility to public services. By reaching a critical mass of people in the municipal centres the provision of basic welfare to the people living in the municipalities can be guaranteed. Therefore, it is crucial that the municipality centres have a market area big enough to sustain certain forms of specialized activities such as banks, post offices, schools etc (Adolphsson et al., 2006: 5, 15-16 and Öhman, 1994: 88).

The overarching problem that the Swedish regional policy during this time sought to address was the negative effects caused by industrial imbalances. In 1970, the idea of a city system based on four hierarchical levels was introduced by ERU (the expert group for regional development research). The four levels of the city system were made up by major cities, major city alternatives, regional growth centres, and service centres. This categorization was, according to Jan Öhman, motivated by the rank size rule. The aim of regional policy was to
reduce imbalances by combining restrictive and stimulating policies. Two of the tools that were used to achieve a more balanced distribution of qualified services across the country were to relocate state agencies and establish regional universities. Both the relocated state agencies and the new regional universities were located in the identified major city alternatives (Öhman, 1994: 89-90 and Gorpe et al., 2000: 37, 51).

The city system was intended to create a more stable regional structure less vulnerable to the fluctuations of the market. The city system implied a hierarchical regional structure that was intended to guide state authorities when deciding on regional investments. With the city system policy the national government was provided a theoretical role in determining the localization of industries (SOU 1974: 25). The policy illustrates a wide spread belief in the ability of centrally initiated regional policy to control the development of the national urban structure.

Christaller’s hypothesis about the market principle was in a Swedish Government Official Report (SOU) from 1974 used as the theoretical basis to explain the hierarchical structure of the urban system. The objective of the SOU was to follow-up the city system policy. The report characterizes the city system policy as the spatial interpretation of the aims guiding the development of the society. In the report it is stated that strategies and initiatives used to further regional development have to be based on the city system (SOU, 1974: 350).

According to the SOU, some activities and functions can only be carried out in cities that reach out to a large population. As seen above, the municipal reform was guided by the aim to create areas big enough to guarantee accessibility to public services. However, not all newly created municipalities could expect governmental support. Prioritizations were needed in order to make the best use of resources. Thus, a regional structure was created that divided the municipalities into four categories. The idea was that each municipality would have one principal city. The activities in this city needed to be linked to both regional and national markets. A national urban structure was thus established that categorized the cities within four basic levels. The intention was to ensure that the functions provided in the largest city would be more qualified than the ones provided in the group of cities belonging to the second tier which, in turn, would be more qualified than the functions provided in cities within the third tier, and so on. In this way, the municipalities became interlinked into a system of dependencies (SOU, 1974: 342, 345-6). However, the original idea to create between 4-6 major city alternatives proved to be too politically sensitive. Instead, each of Sweden’s 24 counties was allowed to select one regional centre and together they formed the second tier under Malmö, Göteborg and Stockholm (Oscarsson, interview 2009: chpt 17).

With the city system policy, a plan was developed that covered the whole country. The belief in the ability of planning to control the market forces was in the SOU expressed in the following way:


(The plan for developing the regional structure has within the framework of the established municipal reform created a basis for a different development of the city system than what would have been the case if the market forces are left unrestrained (my translation)).

The quote above bears witness to the confidence at the time in the ability of planners to direct development in a more rational way than what market forces would be able to. It was believed
that the growth rate in the three major cities needed to be curbed in order to achieve a more balanced development of the country. Activities that previously had been concentrated in the three major cities were to be promoted in the major city alternatives. It was for example considered very important to link the urban structure to the expansion of the university system. However, one of the core ideas behind the city system disappeared with the principle, introduced in the proposition, that all 24 regional centres were to be treated more or less equally (Oscarsson, interview 2009: chpt 18).

2.4 The ESDP – a modern expression of the central place theory

In 1999, the process of developing a spatial plan for the future development of the European space finally came to an end. The process had been going on for almost a decade and bears many marks of political compromises. The ESDP document introduces the idea of creating a balanced regional structure through linking and supporting cities on a transnational level. The aim is to reduce regional imbalances in Europe by stimulating significant growth in several “second level” economically dynamic areas distributed throughout the EU territory. The cores of these areas are the internationally accessible metropolitan regions which, in turn, are connected to their linked hinterland. This model thus implies a hierarchical urban structure on a European level in which the position of the cities depends on their size and economic importance.

In chapter three of the ESDP three spatial development guidelines are introduced:

- polycentric spatial development and a new urban-rural partnership;
- parity of access to infrastructure and knowledge;
- wise management of the natural and cultural heritage.

In order to clarify how these three policy options relate to the polycentric development concept the French Presidency analyzed these links one year after the publication of the ESDP. The outcome of this was a document which established that polycentricity encapsulates all three spatial development guidelines (Waterhout, 2008: 59). In the following sections I will analyze these links and show that parity of access to infrastructure and knowledge constitute an integral part of the urban-rural partnership principle while wise management of the natural and cultural heritage constitute an important aspect of a balanced development. The overall objective of the polycentric development concept is to contribute to a “more balanced competitiveness of the European territory” (CEC, 1999).

The ESDP makes no explicit study of polycentricity. Therefore, the concepts which are in focus in the ESDP remains vague. The ambiguous nature of the concepts provides room for diverging interpretations. In this thesis I will focus on three concepts that are central for understanding the spatial development vision of the ESDP: polycentric urban system, urban-rural partnership, and balanced development. These three concepts provide the basis for my analysis of the national spatial plans in Europe and will now be further elaborated.

2.4.1 Polycentric urban system

The polycentric development concept can mean different things depending on at what level it is applied. There are three basic urban structures that can be identified: monocentric region, hierarchical polycentric region and complementary polycentric region. A monocentric region is either dominated by one urban centre or by several urban centres that are geographically and functionally isolated from each other. A hierarchical polycentric region contains several urban centres which are organized in a hierarchical central place structure. In this urban
structure, one centre is dominating the others and the smaller centres are dependent on the bigger for the supply of specialized goods and services. A *complementary polycentric region* contains several urban centres which are organized in a complementary urban structure. No centre is dominant in terms of being able to provide access to more activities and services than the others. There is a close cooperation between the cities and together they reach a critical mass that the cities wouldn’t be able to reach individually (Adolphsson et al., 2006: 10).

Mats Johansson (2006: 27) has shown how the nature of polycentrism has been interpreted differently in different studies and by different scholars. In this thesis, polycentrism is, in accordance with the third definition above, understood as a *complementary urban structure in which there are several urban centres of equal importance*. This means that the cities in a polycentric system have approximately the same size, are evenly spread out geographically and are more or less equally accessible. In accordance with this definition, Meijers et al. (2007: 7) defines a policy with the aim to achieve a polycentric development as “a policy that addresses the distribution of economic and/or economically relevant functions over the urban system in such a way that the urban hierarchy is flattened in a territorially balanced way.”

The ESDP is foremost focused on the wider European inter-regional level and the overarching aim is to correct the regional imbalances in Europe. Europe is in the ESDP described as having a monocentric urban structure with one dominant centre, the pentagon, which stretches between the cities of London, Paris, Hamburg, München and Milano. The aim is thus to create a more complementary polycentric Europe by stimulating the creation of zones with strong growth dynamic across Europe. In practice this implies stimulating the growth in economically dynamic “second level” cities such as Stockholm, Dublin, Madrid etc. The pursuit of the concept of polycentric development will “help to avoid further excessive economic and demographic concentration in the core area of the EU” (CEC, 1999: 20).

A potential source of conflict is that a polycentric development policy on the European level might conflict with policy aims of individual member states to establish a polycentric urban structure on a national level. This is because strengthening global economic integration zones outside the pentagon can lead to a further increase of the monocentric urban structure in countries with a dominant capital such as Denmark, Latvia and Ireland. In the same way, supporting a more complementary polycentric urban structure on the national level can have negative consequences for the development of the national capitals. If the most economically competitive cities loose dynamics then this would in turn weaken the economic competitiveness of the EU and prevent the development of global economic integration zones on the trans-national level (Adolphsson et al., 2006: 20-21).

Thus, in a polycentric urban system there must be several dominant cities (economically, socially and culturally) relatively evenly located across the territory and well connected through developed communication links. In the analysis I will focus on the way the concept of polycentric development has been interpreted in the national spatial plans. This analysis will form the basis for a discussion of how the national spatial plans contribute to the spatial vision that is outlined in the ESDP.

2.4.2 Urban-rural partnership

It is becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish the physical and functional boundaries between what traditionally is regarded as urban and rural areas. Urban and rural areas can no longer be treated as mutually exclusive entities and focus has instead been on their linkages.
The ESDP acknowledges this link by introducing the term urban-rural partnership. A key issue in the ESDP is to strengthen the urban-rural relationships “in a way that benefits both urban and rural populations” (ESPRID, 2002). The traditional instrument for strengthening this partnership has been the car that has enabled people to live on the countryside while working in the urban areas.

The ESDP argues that in order to improve the spatial balance in Europe it is necessary to create “several dynamic zones of global economic integration, well distributed throughout the EU territory and comprising a network of internationally accessible metropolitan regions and their linked hinterland (towns, cities and rural areas of varying sizes)” (CEC, 1999: 20). In order to create a more balanced settlement structure it is important that rural areas are provided opportunities for development. A polycentric urban structure is also dependent on the ability of cities and regions to cooperate and complement each other. Towns in rural areas have an important function as engines of growth for regional economic development. The towns can provide access to infrastructural networks and services which provide opportunities for rural areas to exploit their potentials and to preserve their natural and cultural landscape. Therefore, infrastructural investments are seen as a prerequisite for strengthening peripheral regions: “Spatial differences in the EU cannot be reduced without a fundamental improvement of transport infrastructure and services to and within the regions where lack of access to transport and communication infrastructure restricts economic development” (CEC, 1999: 26).

2.4.3 Balanced development
A balanced development is in the ESDP primarily interpreted as the need to reduce inter-regional disparities. It is believed that a more balanced Europe will improve Europe’s competitiveness. Waterhout (2008: 101-103, 110) presents two types of policies that can be used to facilitate a balanced development. On the one side is a policy that aims at guaranteeing the provision of services of general interests to the more sparsely populated and less accessible regions. For this approach, some form of subsidies are necessary in order to provide services such as postal services, gas, water, transport etc. in areas and regions that are not profitable for the market. On the other side are policies designed to encourage regions to develop their potentials. The regional potentials are different in different regions and depends on for example the size of the region, natural resources, quality of life. According to the second approach, rural and peripheral regions are encouraged to exploit their unique territorial capital.

A balanced development needs also to contribute to a sustainable development in social, environmental and economic terms. The third spatial development guideline promotes wise management of the natural and cultural heritage as an integral part of polycentric development. Thus, the ESDP envisions a balanced development as one that contributes both to an improved competitiveness by exploiting regional potentials and to protect valuable natural and cultural areas.
3. Polycentric development in national spatial plans in Europe

The aim of the analysis is to investigate how the polycentric development concept has been applied in national spatial planning documents adopted in European countries since the publication of the ESDP. This chapter starts by discussing the nature of the national spatial planning documents that are in focus of this analysis. It will then move on to the content of the spatial plans and there I will focus on the three spatial concepts defined above.

3.1 The relationship between the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) and the national spatial plans

Establishing a polycentric and balanced urban system is a central objective of the ESDP document. In connection with the publication of the ESDP the member states made commitments to develop spatial development policies that reflect this wider European goal. A survey of the national spatial plans adopted in Europe in the aftermath of the ESDP revealed that at least fifteen European countries have developed a spatial plan that set out a vision for the territorial development (see map below). A summary in Swedish of each spatial strategy is included in the appendix. I will discuss the central findings of this mapping exercise by comparing the different strategies and the way spatial development is expressed in the text and envisioned in maps and pictures. Based on the survey, I will draw some general conclusions about common features and central ideas in the national spatial plans. The survey also provides an insight into the characteristics of contemporary national spatial planning. This overall comparison will be followed by a more comprehensive analysis of the spatial plans in three countries. The analysis specifies how the spatial planning documents relate to the polycentric development concept.

Yellow countries...
...have developed a national spatial plan

Grey countries...
...lack a coherent national spatial plan

White countries...
...have not been considered in the study

3.2 Common features in the national spatial plans in Europe

In the theoretical chapter spatial planning was defined as an integrated approach that seeks to coordinate all policies that have an impact on the territory. One method to further this objective is to develop a long term perspective on territorial development. Through making a survey of national spatial plans in Europe, adopted after the publication of the ESDP, I was
able to identify fifteen national spatial plans which all share some common features. There are essentially three basic characteristics that make up the national spatial plans which can be summarized as vision, plan and law.

A vision – an optimistic vision for the future spatial development is outlined in the documents. The role of the vision is to guide spatial development in the whole country. The focus of the vision is on the economic, environmental and social potentials of cities and regions.

A plan – the planning aspect is represented by the specification of activities and investments that need to be coordinated on a regional or national level. It is also represented by the specification of valuable natural and cultural areas that need to be protected.

Law – The spatial planning documents are non-binding documents that offer a strategic framework for guiding the future development. The documents can be seen as constituting a platform for the exchange of information and as a support for discussing future actions and policies. Some countries specify the aims of the spatial plans by adopting action programs. Others include references to governmental policies, laws etc. which the municipalities must respect in the town and country planning.¹

The intention behind the development of the national spatial plans is that they will serve as an instrument to coordinate regional development on the national level. The minister responsible for Wales’ spatial plan characterizes the plan as “a strategic framework to guide future development throughout Wales” (Alden, 2006: 33). This characterisation applies to most of the national spatial plans that are covered in the survey.

3.3 General findings from the survey - similar polycentric development visions

The national spatial planning documents present very similar polycentric urban development visions. It is striking that no national spatial planning document discusses how the polycentric development concept has been interpreted in the specific national context. The relationship between the polycentric development vision on the European level and vision for a balanced urban structure on the national level is completely ignored. Apart from spatial plans on the national and European level references to polycentrism is also a recurrent theme in spatial planning documents on the local level represented by urban regions such as London, Zurich, Seville and Stockholm as well as in administrative regions that cover wider geographical areas.

Polycentrism is in the spatial plans interpreted as a development in which the most important cities across the country are strengthened. These cities are expected to function as engines for the development of their surrounding region and ensure balance in the national urban system. There is an urban-rural dimension in this. The idea is that supporting the development in the biggest cities will create opportunities for the smaller cities and towns in the surrounding area and for the countryside as a whole. Central for this is an improved access to different service functions and communication networks. The strategic importance of the different cities depends on their sizes and functions. By establishing urban networks it is expected that the different urban centres will be able to complement each other by specialising on different functions and services. This cooperation will make it easier for cities to exploit their specific advantages and compensate for disadvantages. Also the surrounding areas are expected to benefit from the cooperation in urban networks by improving the accessibility of

¹ These characteristics were elaborated together with Erik Casten Carlberg.
communication networks and services. This provides an opportunity for these areas to make use of and develop their unique potentials.

Although the national spatial plans share the aim of contributing to a polycentric and balanced urban system the spatial plans differ in their interpretation of which these urban cores or centres are and what role they should play. The development of the capital cities are prioritized in most spatial plans. Most countries recognize that the capital cities play an important role for strengthening the country’s economic competitiveness. However, there is a difference in the way that the spatial plans envision the role and function of their capital. Countries such as Ireland, Luxemburg and France are focusing on reducing the concentration of functions in the capital city. The focus is instead on spreading economic growth to what can be interpreted as major city alternatives. By contrast, countries such as the Baltic States seek to strengthen the country’s international competitiveness by focusing on the development of the capital as the most important centre.

Identifying the most important cities on a European level turned out to be too politically sensitive and instead the ESDP leave it up to each country to specify the polycentric development concept and integrate it within a national context. For similar reasons it proved impossible to include any maps in the ESDP document. By contrast, maps and pictures form an integral part of many of the national spatial plans. Some of these maps present a hierarchical division of the cities within the country. This division distinguish between cities of international and national importance and cities with a more regional and local character. The implication of this division for future strategies and the distribution of public funds is often vaguely described.

In Ireland, nine cities are identified as having a strategic role as engines for the national and regional development. Supporting these nine urban centres is expected to lead to a more even distribution of the economic and demographic growth that today is concentrated to Dublin. Luxemburg has identified fifteen “centres of development and attraction” that are expected to provide good complements to the capital and to which some functions and services will be out located. The spatial plan of Germany makes a division between nationally important metropolitan cities and cities of a more regional character. The metropolitan cities are ascribed the role to function as engines for economic, social and cultural growth.

Among the national spatial plans there are differences concerning which cities of national importance that have been selected. The size of the cities in countries such as Luxemburg and Estonia with 0, 5 - 1, 4 million inhabitants are significantly smaller than the cities in countries such as France and Germany with 60 – 82 million inhabitants. This means the cities that have been identified as “major city alternatives” in the different countries cannot be compared in a European perspective. Selecting how the cities will be hierarchically structured in the national urban system is politically contentious. Lithuania provides an illustrating case. Two regional development strategies form a common base for the regional development policy on the national level. A coordinated strategy is however complicated by the fact that the two documents have ascribed different urban centres the role of major city alternatives.

3.3.1 Making use of potentials to further a balanced development

Another recurrent theme in the spatial plans is that areas and regions have to make better use of their own specific advantages and potentials. Some spatial plans include maps that identify what the potentials are in the different regions of the country. The development potentials include unique natural and cultural resources, geographically strategic position with closeness
to communication networks and international markets, specific identity and unique environmental quality. Also areas with specific problems are identified which often include border areas, mountain areas and areas that faces the risk of natural catastrophes. These areas need to make efforts to overcome their problems and turn them into advantages, for example by attracting tourism. A policy aim included in many spatial plans is that citizens must have access to opportunities and elementary service regardless of where in the country they live. The German spatial plan presents a map over the calculated demographic development over the next forty years. These changed conditions are intended to help regions to make priorities so that access to education, recreational activities and public services can be guaranteed in the future. A better concentration of the provided services might in some regions be necessary.

3.4 A complementary urban structure in the Netherlands
In 2006 the Netherlands adopted the planning document National Spatial Strategy: Creating space for development. The vision for spatial development in the Netherlands is in the planning document expressed as four overarching goals.

- strengthening the international competitive position of the Netherlands;
- promoting strong cities and a vibrant, dynamic countryside;
- securing and developing important national and international spatial values;
- ensuring public safety.

**Polycentric urban system**
The National spatial strategy (NSS) makes in the first planning objective references to the country’s international competitive position. In order to further this position it is suggested that the innovative opportunities and potentials of knowledge clusters in the most competitive regions should be fully exploited. The government identifies six national urban networks which spatially express the geographical position of these competitive regions (see map). A national urban network is made up of cities of varying sizes and the open areas between these. The cities and urban centres that comprise these urban networks are to complement and reinforce each others’ strengths. Infrastructural development and urbanization will be concentrated within these networks.

Cooperation between cities is a prioritized issue in the NSS and is believed to create urban development opportunities. In the document it is argued that the concentration of people and companies in urban agglomerations provide the economic base for the country’s development.

Urbanization and infrastructure is to be concentrated in the six national urban networks
Urban-rural partnership
The urban-rural partnership concept is not mentioned in the NSS and the focus is on urban problems and potentials. The second planning objective argues that the surrounding municipalities have to share both the benefits and help finding solutions to the problems in the cities. Infrastructure is concentrated in the national urban networks and for the long term development it is argued that “teamwork, coordination of individual efforts and division of labour between cities and urban regions are very important” (Nota Ruimte, 2006: 4).

The role of the more scarcely populated rural areas is not mentioned in connection to the national urban networks. However, the NSS recognizes the need to provide the spatial pre-conditions for a dynamic countryside and a separate agenda is published\(^2\) that set out the policy for the countryside. The NSS does not provide any insights into what these spatial pre-conditions are.

Balanced development
In order to reduce regional disparities the NSS calls for a dynamic, development-driven spatial policy. The government “is placing more emphasis on development planning and less on development control planning” (NSS, 2006: 7. The local and regional levels are given more opportunities to take individual initiatives but there will at the same time be restrictions to protect national interests.

The third spatial planning objective recognizes the importance of developing and preserving natural, landscape-oriented and cultural values. According to the NSS, the landscape in the Netherlands is becoming more fragmented and less coherent and there is therefore a need to design new spatial values. The NSS argues that the current ecological network is too fragmented and twelve coherent ecological links will be established. This will create coherent nature areas and link ecosystems to each other both within and across the national borders. Tough restrictions are introduced for preventing activities and projects to be carried out in these nature protected areas.

Reflections
The NSS makes no hierarchical division between the identified economic core areas and urban networks. Concentrating urbanisation and infrastructure within the urban networks is expected to support the cities “in their function as economic and cultural motors” (The NSS, 2006: 12). The urban structure presented in the NSS resembles the complementary polycentric model. According to the spatial vision the cities within each urban network will complement each other. However, no references are made to how the designated urban networks might contribute to a balanced and polycentric development on a European level.

3.5 Towards a more polycentric urban structure in Denmark
In 2006 Denmark adopted the planning document the national planning report: the new map of Denmark (NPR). The vision for spatial development in Denmark is in the planning document expressed as five overarching goals. These spatial planning goals have been identified by the government and will be used to guide spatial development in Denmark.

- **Rural and urban areas should be distinct.** Undesired urban sprawl must be prevented.

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\(^2\) Agenda Vitaal Platteland, 2006
• Development should benefit all of Denmark. The Danish capital as well as city regions with a strong international position must continue to develop and create opportunities for all of Denmark.

• Spatial planning should be based on respect for nature and the environment. Green areas must be protected as well as valuable natural areas such as coasts and the countryside. The development potentials of the nature, landscape and cultural environment are recognized.

• Spatial planning and investment in infrastructure should be closely integrated. This goal recognizes the need for well-functioning transport infrastructure. Urban development, workplaces and institutions should be located in areas where public transport can be easily accessible.

• Spatial planning should be comprehensive. The municipal plans must consider national interests and their cities must be integrated into networks and serve as centres for their hinterlands.

Polycentric urban system
The second planning objective argues that a competitive capital city is an important prerequisite for the spatial development on a national level. The development of other city regions with strong international positions is seen as decisive for Denmark’s economic growth potential. The cities will be linked in city networks which are expected to facilitate cooperation and strengthen the competitiveness of the whole region that surrounds the cities. The map (see below) show how the major cities in Denmark are connected by important transport corridors.

Urban-rural partnership
The ESDP emphasised the mutual dependencies between urban and rural areas that was captured in the urban-rural partnership concept. A similar approach is visible in the Danish spatial plan. The NPR emphasise the importance of coalitions of actors acting together to “build bridges from the cities and towns to the rural districts and small-town regions such that all regions of Denmark become an integral part of development and growth” (NPR, 2006: 9).

The NPR argues that the city networks will contribute to ensure a balanced national urban system. In relation to the balance between urban and rural areas it is recognized that “open
landscapes, natural features and attractive townscapes are decisive for Denmark’s potential to ensure good living conditions in Denmark and to attract companies, employees and tourists in the future” (NRP, 2006: 10-11).

The fifth planning objective recognizes the need for cities to serve as centres for their hinterlands so that their important city functions can contribute to rural development. Regions without towns with more then 20,000 inhabitants need to dedicate their efforts to protect and make use of their natural qualities and uniqueness. One way to do this is by taking advantage of the natural assets and the unique environment by promoting recreational activities and tourism.

**Balanced development**
The NPR argues that differentiated planning will contribute to a balanced development that seeks a “balance between local development potential and common objectives and principles” (NPR, 2006: 10). It is recognized in the document that the prerequisite for development varies in the different parts of the country. For this reason, Denmark is divided into five types of settlement regions. Differentiated spatial planning is promoted that will be based on the economic growth potentials of each individual area.

The first spatial planning objectives (Rural and urban areas should be distinct) as well as the third (respect for nature and the environment) can be subcategorized under the balanced development concept. The NPR argues that preventing undesired urban sprawl help protect recreational areas and reduces the need for transportation. The nature and the environment are recognized as important assets which spatial planning must help to protect by promoting planning across the municipal boundaries. These assets, including the cultural environment, contribute to Denmark’s development potentials.

**Reflections**
The NPR recognizes the important role that the capital and the other major Danish cities have for promoting the country’s competitiveness on the international level. Thus, spatial planning “must show the will to give Greater Copenhagen and the Øresund Region the necessary potential and the necessary impetus” (NRP, 2006: 11). The two metropolitan regions comprise, together with economic growth hubs, the dynamic regional centres. Compared to the Dutch approach the Danish spatial plan portrays a more hierarchical city structure with dominating centres that informs the relations across the nation. The development of the most economically dynamic Danish cities is seen as prerequisite for growth. In the Irish spatial plan the hierarchical division of the cities is even more visible and further specified.

3.6 An hierarchical urban system in Ireland
Ireland adopted in 2002 the National Spatial Strategy for Ireland 2002-2020 (NSS). The overall aim of the NSS is to plan for future development in Ireland and achieve a balanced regional development. Five overarching goals have been adopted in order to achieve this:

- **Economic role of Dublin and of other regions** – sustain the role of Dublin and support other dynamic and strategically located cities so serve as engines of growth;
- **Quality of Life** – reduce long distance commuting and enable people to settle where they want;
- **Settlement** – recognize the need to protect the environment for the future generations and maintain future population growth within existing settlements;
• **Planning** – minimize urban sprawl by consolidating existing urban areas and promote public transport
• **Implementation** – The NSS is a planning framework that supports the coordination of investments to contribute to a balanced spatial structure.

**Polycentric urban system**
The first planning objective designates nine national level gateways. The idea is that these gateways will attract clusters of companies and act as engines for regional and national growth. The gateways must have sufficient scale and critical mass and the population goal is 100,000 or more inhabitants. The overall aim is to promote a more balanced population structure which means that that growth of Dublin must be distributed more evenly across the nation. At the same time, the role of Dublin as an engine of growth for the whole country must be sustained so that the overall development in Ireland is not jeopardized.

Urban-rural partnership
Apart from the nine gateways the NSS also identifies nine medium sized hubs. The role of the hubs is to support and be supported by the gateways and function as a link to the rural areas. The NSS outlines a hierarchical scheme in which the gateways act at the national level and the hubs at regional and county levels, in partnership with the towns. Together they serve as centres for businesses, services and residential areas. These centres will, in turn, support the smaller towns, villages and rural areas. The spatial structure is to be supported by a national transport framework that provides a network of roads and public transport services.

**Balanced development**
The NSS emphasise, just as the Dutch and Danish spatial plans, potentials rather than redistribution as means to further a more balanced spatial structure. The NSS defines balanced regional development as “developing the full potential of each area to contribute to the optimal performance of the State as a whole – economically, socially and environmentally” (2002: 11).
The rural areas must build upon their local strengths and focus on alternative employment. The specific potentials that the rural areas are suggested to develop further are found within agriculture, enterprise, tourism, local services, land and sea based natural resources. Small towns and villages will receive support for economic activities and housing in order to provide employment opportunities for the surrounding rural areas.

Protecting and enhancing the natural and cultural environment and biodiversity is a recurrent theme. The potential of the environment is recognized in relation to economic development such as recreational activities and attracting tourism. The potentials lie also in contributing to the quality of life of people.

Reflections
The NSS is focused on promoting local and regional actors to make use of the potentials of their area. The envisioned future spatial structure is based on a hierarchical urban system. Depending on its size, each city has a role to play as a node in the national urban network. On the top are the national gateways consisting of nine cities which have a role to function as national growth centres. For four of these cities the population goal of 100,000 inhabitants sounds like utopia since some of the designated gateways only reach one third of this number. The question that arises is how people and companies are to be convinced to settle in the designated gateways.
4. Reflections on spatial planning and polycentricity
This final chapter will be dedicated to reflect on the practical value of the adopted national spatial plans along with the core theme in these spatial plans; the polycentric development concept. The reflections will foremost be based on the insights provided by two Swedish planners with unique insights into the Swedish city system policy of the 1960/70’s. With their help I will discuss the applicability of polycentrism in a Swedish context. These reflections also serve as a platform for discussing the applicability of the polycentric development concept in other European countries with similar preconditions as Sweden, i.e. countries with a small population on a large area.

4.1 Introducing Carlberg and Oscarsson
Gösta Oscarsson worked for the Ministry of the Interior and was one of about 3-5 persons that were responsible for preparing the city system policy in Sweden. Apart from this Oscarsson has worked for the County Administrative Board of Karlstad, the Ministry of Employment as well as the Ministry of Industry. He has also been the director for the Nordic Institute of Regional Policy Research (now part of Nordregio). Erik Casten Carlberg started his career as a planner on the regional level. Carlberg played an important role in the development of legislation for the long term management of Sweden’s land and water resources, now being part of the Swedish Environmental Code. During the 1980s and 90s Carlberg worked as head of department for National Physical Planning in the Ministry of Housing, later in the Ministry of the Environment. During Sweden’s first year as member of the EU, Carlberg represented Sweden in the OECD group on urban affairs. Carlberg has also been head of the department for regional planning of the Swedish National Board for Physical Planning and Building. In the proposition 1972:111, which established the city system as a national policy, the Swedish prime minister signed an introductory statement that stated that economic development planning and physical development planning needed to be coordinated at the national level. Carlberg and Oscarsson represented these two respective sides. Their diverging background and long experience provide a unique insight into Swedish national planning from both a physical and economical development planning perspective.

4.2 Why did the Swedish city system policy fail to guide spatial development?
The national spatial plans and visions adopted in Europe during the past decade do not include many specific actions that simply can be followed and implemented. The national spatial plans should rather be seen as a strategic form of planning that provides an indicative framework for future development (Adams et al. 2006: 268-9). The documents are intended to provide a framework for a continuing dialog and serve as a guide for future initiatives. It can thus be questioned whether the plans will have any practical significance. And even if they prove to be influential it might take a long time before the effects are visible. It remains to be seen what position the spatial plans will have in the national planning system and what influence they will have on distributing activities in space.

The Swedish planning experience of the 1970s provides a perspective on both the difficulties and opportunities associated with adopting a national spatial plan. The proposition 1972:111 constituted the peak of the acceptance for national planning in Sweden. After this came a great backlash which Sweden still hasn’t really recovered from. Oscarsson experienced how, especially through the accompanying county planning activities, the planning concept became discredited and associated with centralism. The fact that Sweden during the last decade has not developed a national spatial planning document might, according to Oscarsson, partly be explained by the failure of the city system policy.
So why did the city system policy fail to meet its expectations? The original ERU (the expert group for regional development research) proposal, which also was advocated by the Swedish national planners, among them Oscarsson, was to identify some strategic cities that could serve as alternatives to Sweden’s three major cities. However, in the actual proposal 1972:111 each of Sweden’s 24 counties had been allowed to select one regional centre each which constituted the second tier under the three major cities (see map below). According to Oscarsson, this took away the intellectual foundation for the city classification scheme. The idea of a decentralized concentration, as an alternative to metropolitan growth, became watered down with too many second tier cities. As an example, one of the main reasons for constructing a city classification scheme was to link it with the university system. However, instead of concentrating the Swedish universities to a few major city alternatives the principle became that all regional centres should be treated more or less equally.

The city system was based on an assumption that there was a risk that the great urbanization process taking place during the 1950/60’s, when the three Swedish major cities grew unproportionally large mainly at the expanse of the rural areas, would continue unchanged. However, several factors contributed to stop the further concentration of people in the major cities during the 1970s. These factors included a general economic decline spurred by the oil crises and an expansion of the public sector with around two percentage points each year between 1970 and 1976 which made it possible to radically increase economic transfers from the rich to the poor parts of Sweden. Perhaps even more importantly were the sizes of the local labour markets that exploded during this time thanks to the spread of cars. This meant that the commuting regions expanded tremendously and that people could continue to live in one city while working in another. When the city system policy was developed “we couldn’t
imagine that a great part of the Swedish population would consider the nearest 70-80 kilometres to be their local labour market” (Oscarsson, interview 2009: chpt 23, my translation).

4.3 The advantage of national spatial planning
The Swedish city system policy reveals some of the weaknesses of developing long-term spatial plans and visions. Extrapolating the development of the past years into the future is a very fragile method. So, what can be learned from this and is there at all a need to adopt comprehensive and long term spatial development plans?

The Swedish planners failed within the framework of the Swedish city system policy to make predictions and calculations for the future demographic development. The fast spread of cars and public transport meant that several villages and small towns that were predicted to die out instead prospered and served as complement to the municipal centre. Based on this experience Carlberg draws the conclusion that dividing cities in a country into a hierarchical urban system is a futile exercise. “We know practically nothing about the future development, why then should we divide cities hierarchically in accordance with how they shall develop” (Interview, 2009: chapter 8, my translation).

Carlberg’s conclusion stands in sharp contrast to the Irish approach of selecting nine cities from different parts of the country and promote these cities to reach a certain population figure. In the appendix we can also see that countries such as Germany, Luxembourg, Switzerland et al. have a similar approach as Ireland. Carlberg believes that suggesting a figure for the future urban population signifies a detachment from reality. Instead he argues that a certain degree of uncertainty is necessary for providing freedom of action and encouraging creative thinking. This might signify planning that is less concerned with determining where certain actions should take place and instead consider how planning can contribute to create freedom of action. However, Oscarsson sees a great value in connecting certain areas to specific functions. Big and important decisions such as expanding the university system or constructing new communication systems are dependent on a long-term development perspective. These investments take years and in order to be efficient ad hoc decisions should be avoided.

There is a great amount of insecurity when trying to predict future development. Therefore, Carlberg stresses that the measures that are taken ideally should fit into many alternative future scenarios. This is because people and companies are likely to value different things in fifteen years compared to today. The real value that Carlberg sees in the development of national spatial planning documents lies in the opportunity this opens up to discuss the type of activities and initiatives that need regional or national coordination. It also provides an opportunity to discuss what valuable areas, with for example unique natural and cultural potentials, that needs to be preserved.

Carlberg argues that the ideal is that national spatial planning documents provide a readiness for action and an intellectual preparedness for future challenges. In order to summarize the big ideas and provide a holistic approach it is necessary to have an open process where as many actors as possible can participate. The great task of planners is, according to Carlberg, to bring focus on valuable resources and areas with good development potentials that need to be preserved from negative impacts of infrastructural or other big investments. It is thus important to create a common understanding that the spatial plan is good for the country’s development. By describing the function of different cities it will also be possible to
characterize a region based on its resources, opportunities and potentials. From this description comes an understanding of regional differences in Sweden and what priorities that needs to be made. Carlberg claims that the difficult part is to describe the geography and geographical preconditions as they are and not as they should be.

Oscarsson believes that there is a need for some type of national spatial planning. Spatial plans can highlight the tendencies that people are living in and make future predictions that can serve as basic data for decision-making. According to Oscarsson, Sweden would have been in a more competitive position if the universities had been concentrated to a few strategically selected cities. With national spatial planning infrastructural investments and investments in housing and buildings could also have been coordinated more efficiently.

4.4 The problem with the polycentric development vision
The polycentric development vision is a dominating theme in the national spatial plans. The question is why countries with different history, economy, geography and population have chosen to adopt similar development visions. What does polycentrism mean to countries whose entire population is smaller than some of the bigger European cities? I will end this reflection chapter by providing a Swedish planning perspective on polycentrism.

Carlberg and Oscarsson both agree that polycentrism is not applicable in a country such as Sweden and that introducing this concept will not benefit Swedish planning. A polycentric urban structure might be well suited for countries with a large population and large and densely populated cities such as Paris and London. However, Oscarsson recognizes a difference in planning approaches in the different parts of Europe. The big divide is between countries where space is the scarce resource and countries where population is the scarce resource. Planning in countries with a population density higher than 200 inhabitants per square kilometre is very different compared to a country such as Sweden. Thus, Oscarsson sees a great risk in transferring European planning ideals to a Swedish context. Instead, he claims that not only does Stockholm function well with a population of around two million but that Sweden would lose a competitive advantage if a policy to further a more complementary polycentric region is introduced.

Carlberg believes that it is sufficient to acknowledge that a type of urban hierarchy or structure is unavoidable since some cities will always be bigger than others and will have different strategic functions. Using the concept of polycentrism to summarize these functions will however be misleading. Instead, Carlberg believes it is more rewarding to use the concepts urban and rural, which are easier to relate to and are more commonly understood. Oscarsson, on the other hand, has troubles separating between what is urban and rural due to the urbanization of the rural areas where today only a small minority lives on what is produced there. Like Carlberg, Oscarsson rejects the idea to incorporate polycentrism in a Swedish planning context. He believes that polycentrism can be an efficient policy for regions that have an overconcentration of people. These regions can be well served by a policy that promotes good localization alternatives capable of attracting some type of jobs and services from overpopulated urban areas. However, Oscarsson does not see polycentrism as an alternative for Sweden and takes Västra Götaland as an example. According to the city system policy the major city of Göteborg was surrounded by regional centres such as Trollhättan, Skövde, Borås etc. These regional centres were intended to constitute labour market regions more or less independent of Göteborg. Today, these cities form a functional region centred on Göteborg where people can live in one city and work in the other. Within the next 10-15 years Oscarsson believes that up to 80 percent of the Swedish population will live in functional
areas centred on Malmö/Köpenhamn, Göteborg and Stockholm. Under such conditions it is pointless to introduce a polycentric development policy on a national level. With this, Oscarsson claims that the administrational division of Sweden into counties or even the today much debated superregional units will be a thing of the past. What he calls for instead is planning that covers the functional areas in the Southern region, Western region and the Eastern region that includes Stockholm, Sörmland, Uppsala, Västmanland. Oscarsson argues that politicians in these regions have a task communicate what they want to achieve for the future.
5. Concluding discussion
The main objective of this thesis has been to investigate how the concept, adopted in the ESDP, of a polycentric development has been interpreted in national spatial planning documents in Europe. The analysis was based on a survey in which I identified national spatial plans adopted in European countries since 1999. These spatial plans present a vision for the spatial development along with specific measures for reaching this vision.

My understanding of the polycentric development concept has been based on an analysis of how the concept is presented in the ESDP. Since the ESDP does not include a definition of polycentrism it became necessary to frame the concept. My approach for this was to investigate what the concept is intended to achieve. The three concepts of polycentric urban system, urban-rural partnership and balanced development offered important insights into this. Another approach for understanding the meaning of polycentrism was to link the concept to its historical roots. For this, Christaller’s central place theory provided valuable insights into underlying theories and ideas that have inspired the concept of polycentrism.

The central place system is organized according to a hierarchical urban structure. At its heart is a strong urban centre with differentiated industry, educational opportunities, advanced public and private services. This urban centre is surrounded by smaller towns and cities which, in turn, are connected to the surrounding villages and the countryside. The relationships and interconnections between the different units make up an urban system. The main difference compared to a polycentric urban structure is the latter’s emphasis on complementarity of the major cities. The idea is that by establishing urban networks several cities of similar size can coordinate their urban functions so that they jointly reach a critical mass of people that allows them to specialise and exploit their specific advantages and compensate for their disadvantages.

The overarching aim of the ESDP is to correct regional imbalances in Europe. Thus, the focus of the ESDP is on the inter-regional level and in my interviews Oscarsson and Carlberg argued that a polycentric urban structure is not applicable in a country such as Sweden that have a small population spread out on a large area. Their opinion is supported by Adolphsson et al. (2006: 39-41) who argue that densely populated regions can gain a lot from developing a more polycentric urban system. As an example they show how polycentric development in the pentagon has improved the complementarity between the cities and increased the competitiveness of the region. However, in more sparsely populated regions such as Sweden the authors conclude that a monocentric or a hierarchical polycentric urban system might be more efficient for making use of the country’s resources. This is because these countries have limited resources and have to make efficient use of the people living there. The backside to a monocentric development is that it might increase the regional imbalances within the country.

If the preconditions for polycentrism on a national level are different in the different parts of Europe then it could be presumed that this would be reflected in the spatial development visions presented in national spatial planning documents. However, my analysis of the national spatial plans in Europe revealed that polycentric development is a recurrent theme in densely as well as in sparsely populated countries. The spatial plans present quite homogenous spatial visions that are based on the cooperation of cities in networks. The urban networks are expected to increase the opportunities for the cities to complement each other and to make better use of the specific potentials of their areas. The major cities have a role to function as engines of growth and ensure balance in the national urban system. The focus is
on potentials rather than redistribution as the mean to further a more balanced spatial structure.

Many of the national spatial plans identify a group of cities which are the most economically important cities on the national level. These cities include the capital, the major cities and what can be described as major city alternatives. The role of these cities is to serve as engines of growth for their surrounding regions as well as the national economy. However, from a European perspective many of these cities are very small. In Ireland, an urban structure is presented that subcategorize cities into national and regional centres. The aim is to distribute the growth, which today is mainly concentrated to Dublin, more evenly across the nation. The implication of this is that the ESDP aim of reducing the spatial concentration in the pentagon by developing a polycentric urban structure on the pan-European level might be counteracted. According to the ESDP, a polycentric urban structure on a European level is dependent on the creation of alternatives to the pentagon. This means that other strong urban zones that provide global economic functions and services must be developed in Europe. The cities in these urban zones need to be globally competitive. For countries such as Ireland and Denmark it is only the capital cities that can gain such international positions. Supporting alternative urban centres on a national level in these countries would, according to this logic, not contribute to a European polycentric development.

Clarifying the meaning of the polycentric development concept could help avoiding that the policy aims at different spatial levels contradict each other. We have seen that the real benefit of spatial planning is to take into account the spatial implications of all policies affecting the territory and develop a comprehensive approach in which the aims of different policy sectors are coordinated. In order to be an efficient instrument it is therefore important that spatial plans at all levels contribute towards the same spatial vision.

The final chapter of this thesis was dedicated to reflecting on the advantages and limitations of national spatial plans. The Swedish city system policy offered an insight into both the advantages and limitations of a regional development policy that is based on a national urban structure. Furthermore, the Swedish case illustrated the complicated nature of national spatial planning. One conclusion that could be drawn from this was that it is hard to predict all the factors that might affect the future spatial development. Therefore, Oscarsson and Carlberg argued that it is pointless to divide cities into urban systems since it is impossible to predict how they will develop in the future. This does not mean that there is no need for developing a national planning perspective. Instead, Oscarsson argue that it is important to develop a long-term perspective on strategically important issues such as the development of the communication system. The long-term perspective should follow from a discussion of what is a desirable future development. Carlberg argues that the process of developing a national spatial planning document provides an opportunity to discuss the type of activities and initiatives that need regional or national coordination as well as an opportunity to discuss what valuable areas that needs to be preserved.

To conclude I would like to return to the two research questions set out in the introduction. The first question referred to how the national spatial plans are relating to the polycentric development concept. In the national spatial plans the formal influence of the ESDP has been clearly demonstrated. The development visions presented in the planning documents are, at a formal level, relatively homogenous regardless of national differences regarding the size of the geographical area and the population. In focus is urban cooperation in networks which is believed to contribute towards a more balanced urban structure by enhancing the cooperation
of cities and providing opportunities for the rural areas to specialise and develop their potentials. One problem with the national development visions are related to scale. The urban structure envisioned in the ESDP is based on the idea of creating alternative globally believable urban areas in different parts of the European territory. This means that strong internationally competitive cities need to cooperate more closely across the national borders and that the national governments make investments in order to strengthen the competitiveness of these urban areas. However, the urban structure envisioned in the individual countries does not take the international dimension into account and focus instead on the development of cities which from an international perspective are quite insignificant.

The second question guiding the thesis was concerned about whether the national spatial plans would contribute to a polycentric development on a European level. Based on what have been discussed here the answer to this question is negative. First of all, even though the national spatial plans have been inspired by the ESDP and its aim of developing a polycentric development the interpretation of polycentric development on a national level seem to be contradictory to the policy aim at the European level. Secondly, even if the spatial plans are better coordinated so that they contribute towards a common spatial vision they still have a lot to prove and it remains to be seen whether they can deliver on their objective to create a more balanced urban system. The Swedish planning experience highlighted the difficult task of prioritising the development in some cities at the expense of others. This places doubts about the possibility for a country such as Ireland to implement their envisioned urban system in which nine cities are promoted to establish a position of national importance. However, despite the potential conflicts of scale Waterhout suggests (2008: 5) that in the long run the sheer fact that some countries are using the ESDP as a frame of reference and have let themselves be inspired by it might prove to be a powerful tool for improving the coherence of spatial planning in Europe.
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Appendix

[See attached file]