

# Introduction

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The last three decades, marked by the collapse of the Cold War division of Europe and the accession of more than a dozen new member states to the European Union after 2004, have had a powerful impact on the study of regions and regionalism. The growing research interest in supranational and subnational regional frameworks was an important venue of innovation, even if these discussions were mainly taking place in political science (with a focus on the institutional structures of cooperation “above” and “below” the nation-states) and in cultural history, where the rekindled interest in so-called nonnational historical spaces of interaction naturally pointed to the issue of multiethnic/transnational regions as specific *lieux de mémoire*. In a broader sense, all of this fits into a spatial turn in the social sciences, and to a certain extent also in the humanities, manifest in the growing interest in territoriality, landscape, and cartography, the introduction of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) in various disciplines, and the rise of urban studies and environmental history. Similarly, the last decades have brought an interest in developing new frameworks of historical research that could provide a common intellectual and methodological framework for scholars coming from different national and linguistic contexts. One of the most important developments along these lines was the collective effort to devise a nonnationally based conceptual history, a branch of historiography that has traditionally been rather nation-centered due to its concern with particular vernaculars and semiospheres.

An important incentive for studying regionalizing concepts historically originated with the assertive spatial turn in neighboring disciplinary fields.<sup>1</sup> While theorists of history, among others, have contributed to it by fleshing out the notion of mental mapping, it was geographers, anthropologists and economists who under-

cut the “container” and “natural-scientific” concept of space, emphasizing instead the social production of spatial frameworks.<sup>2</sup> Rather than assuming that space exists independently of humans and that historical processes unfold within it as in a closed vessel and are even predetermined by it, present-day theorists conceive of it as the product of human agency and perception, as both the medium and presupposition for sociability and historicity. Crucial to this understanding of space is not so much its material morphology as the premises of its social production, its ideological underpinnings, as well as the various forms of interpretation and representation that it embodies.<sup>3</sup>

Our aim in this volume, resulting from a long-term international research collaboration hosted by the *Center for Advanced Study Sofia* and generously funded by the *Stifterverband für die Deutsche Wissenschaft*, is to bring in the methodological and thematic innovation of the spatial turn to the discussion on a trans-European conceptual history focusing on mesoregional terminologies and discourses. The volume is based on a focus-group investigation of an overarching topic: *how European transnational historical (meso)regions have been, and are being, conceptualized and delimited over time, across different disciplines and academic traditions, in different fields of activity and national/regional contexts*. It seeks to reconstruct the historical itineraries of the conceptualization of regional frameworks and their frontiers in relation to political, historical, and cultural usages or discursive practices.

Going beyond the usual taxonomic focus on the different regional units, the volume is organized in two parts: *European mesoregions* (part I) and *Disciplinary traditions of regionalization* (part II). The units of investigation are conceptual clusters rather than individual concepts: for example, Central Europe, East Central Europe, Danubian Europe; or the Balkans, Southeastern/Southeast Europe, Turkey-in-Europe; or Scandinavia, Norden. While the contributors focus on nineteenth- and twentieth-century usages, earlier registers of a given concept are also taken into account.

Chapters are structured in view of several major directions of analysis:

- The cultural, academic and political contexts of the use of a given regional terminology
- The morphology of the conceptual clusters used for regionalizing the European space
- Boundaries and delimitations
- Discourses of othering and counter-concepts.

Attention has been paid not only to local usages and regionalist discourses, but also to cross-regional conceptualizations and the occurrences of cross-references in different conceptual clusters (e.g., the usage of the Balkans as

a counter-concept in Central European discourses, or of Western Europe in Eastern and Southern European discourses, or the Baltic in Scandinavian discourses and the other way around). Thus the volume goes beyond the local practices of regionalization, and seeks to reconstruct internal and external regionalizing practices, also paying attention to the different logic of conceptualization characteristic of various disciplinary traditions. Such an approach allows us to temporalize our spatial terminology, and, in turn, analyze the ways historical change is encapsulated by spatial categories.

Spatial categories have a historicity which is not apparent, as their users tend to naturalize them. In this sense, the conceptual historical perspective relativizes these notions and opens them up for a more reflective historical usage. Becoming aware of the historical contingency of spatial terminology also contributes to questioning the underlying assumptions of national historical cultures based on the purported naturalness of space. Regions thus do not emerge as objectified and disjointed units functioning as quasi-national entities with fixed boundaries and clear-cut lines between insiders and outsiders, but rather as flexible and historically changing frameworks for interpreting certain phenomena.

Normative political and cultural presumptions have spurred regionalization since antiquity: while the principal spatial axis of antiquity was the East–West one, in the late medieval and early modern periods the division of Europe into a “civilized” South and a “barbaric” North became prevalent. This was eventually remodeled to a tripartite scheme containing a moderate middle region between the northern and southern extremes, while the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries witnessed the return of a strongly normative East–West divide. Religious divides (Catholic Latin, Protestant Germanic, and Orthodox Greco-Slavic), often underscored by racial ones, have been similarly powerful engines of cultural-spiritual regionalizations. The great transition in the spatialization of historical experience, however, coincided with the advent of the era of high modernity and found its original form in the post-Enlightenment logic of organizing knowledge along civilizational dividing lines. Temporal terms—such as development, progress, conservatism, stagnation, or delay—acquired spatial embeddedness, and spatial terms—such as the East, the West, the North, the South, as well as center, periphery, borderlands, or just “the lands beyond”—became historical terms. It was this peculiar merging of cultural-historical and spatial imaginations that inspired a new symbolic map of Europe, whose taxonomic (and hierarchically graded) units cut across the administrative boundaries of empires and nation-states, as well as the cultural boundaries of religion.

These considerations lead to questions concerning the premises and understanding of regions with regard to three historical periods. The first is

the era dominated by multinational empires and composite states. The second era is marked by the principle of sovereign statehood and nationality. Importantly, supranational regions evolved parallel to the consolidation of the nation-state as the European norm. An improved conceptual apparatus is needed to make sense of the implications of this historical convergence and of the complex and varied patterns of spatiality production beyond territorially demarcated and institutionally integrated political entities. The third is the more recent situation of undermined nation-state power, (re)emergence of old or new territorialities (hence insider-outsider definitions) and spatially related identities.

Specific branches of spatializing Europe related to regionalization (with macro-, meso- and microversions) bring in various conceptualizations. One is that of territorial versus nonterritorial (e.g., “spiritual-cultural,” metaphoric) regions and borders; a second refers to alternative concepts of national space (e.g., federalist or pan-ideologies); a third is the conceptualization of delimitations (discourses about where a given region “ends,” the metaphors of in-betweenness); and a fourth involves the discourses of othering through spatialization (Orientalism, Occidentalism, Balkanism, etc.). Needless to say, these aspects have a different logic and are subject to different research traditions. Therefore, our intention is to focus on mechanisms of conceptualizing regions while placing them in the broader framework mentioned above. In this context we have to take into account the close relationship between regional, imperial, and national conceptualizations, since many nineteenth- and twentieth-century nation-building projects were framed as imperial or federalist, like Russia or Germany, and hence comprised several regions.

Regional categories are far from being stable, and various intellectual and political projects have devised different, partially overlapping, regional frameworks. The geographical coverage of concepts like Central Europe/*Mitteleuropa*, Eastern Europe/*Osteuropa*, Southeastern Europe/*Südosteuropa*, Southern Europe, or Western Europe/the West changed dramatically over time, and these notions often designated parallel scholarly ventures stemming from various political, academic, and disciplinary subcultures. Its new currency notwithstanding, the Eurasian idea, **Mark Bassin** tells us in his study, remains highly fragmented and unstable, which makes it impossible to talk about the particular contents of the idea and moves the discussion toward distinct contemporary incarnations of Eurasia. Thus, despite their strong affinities in the economic sphere, Putin’s and Nazarbaev’s “Eurasianisms” convey divergent (geo)political and ideological connotations. In the longer run, the same is true of the notions of Western Europe and the West, developed as much in the peripheries as in the center, a fact that **Stefan Berger**’s chapter throws into sharp relief.

The plurality of meanings of these regional notions is due not only to the cultural and political multiplicity of users but also to the variety of loci where regionalization is actually produced. The main sources of conceptualization which, for analytical purposes, can be isolated are academic circles, policy makers and expert communities, international organizations, and the media. Thus, after the 2004–07 accession phase, the Western Balkans became salient in international relations as a security-related and, to some extent, financial-administrative concept in the vocabulary of the EU, but one with no presence in the social sciences and very limited use in local public discourses. In contrast, as **Xosé Manoel Núñez Seixas** points out, Iberia has implied very little in the way of a common political agenda, as it remained mainly an externally generated and noninstitutional notion. Southern Europe, **Guido Franzinetti** argues, has also remained a fragile, underconceptualized construction, whose sole relatively consequential incarnation was in post-World War II social sciences. It presents an exceptional case, among those discussed in this collection, of a largely failed conceptualization, despite the availability of favorable prerequisites at certain historical junctures. The metaphoric function of the Mediterranean, the Balkans, or Western Europe, on the other hand, have made these regions experience “an excess of discursiveness” and deterritorialization.

Most mesoregional geographical terms emerged in the first half of the nineteenth century and were the products of the rise of “scientific geography” and the search for “natural” geographic boundaries. They soon migrated to, and in turn were informed by, other disciplinary fields: ethnography, linguistics, literature, history. By the turn of the twentieth century, however, all these scholarly concepts had been imbued with strong political meanings, especially in their external usage, usually assimilating previous geopolitical connotations. A case in point is the Baltic (see **Pärtel Piirimäe**’s text), which crystallized into a political notion gradually, shifting its reference from the premodern and German-dominated Baltic provinces to the three national entities (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania) and eventually becoming a geopolitical entity in Cold War parlance on both sides of the Iron Curtain (as the victims of “illegitimate Soviet expansionism” and as *Pribaltika*, a specific cultural and economic region of the USSR, respectively). The politicization of regional terminology within the regions themselves also had its own specific logic, partly responding to the geopolitical challenges of imperialism, but mostly providing a frame for various nationalist or federalist strategies, as is conspicuously the case with the Balkans, the Baltics, and Norden/Scandinavia.

Scholarly regionalizations thus became, as a rule, politicized, and many so-called scientific classifications served, tacitly or bluntly, political agendas. For much of the late nineteenth and twentieth century, the partitions of Eu-

rope by political geography and geopolitics, as **Virginie Mamadouh** and **Martin Müller** demonstrate, were (almost by default) political acts where discrete state interests played the central role. Thus *Mittleuropa* was not just the German translation of Central Europe—it was coextensive with the German sphere of interest, as pre–World War I Slavic Europe was with the Russian sphere of influence. These two instances point to another source of politicization: the recurrent fusion of regionalist and nationalist designs, which might be played out in the fields of politics, economy, or culture. Indeed, there is no clear-cut difference, but a complex relationship between the conceptualizations of the national and the regional. Nationalist arguments may be adduced to buttress—and give meaning to—a regionalist framework, and the identification of a supranational region may serve to bolster a nationalist project. A good example is Russian “Eurasianism,” which was integrated into the framework of post–Soviet Russian nationalism even though originally it offered an alternative spatial framework to it. An even more striking instance of politicization is that of the demographic Hajnal line, separating family patterns, which became an ideological tool in Estonia in the context of the country’s struggle for emancipation from Soviet dominance.

Due to its comparative logic and tendency to organize data in terms of regional subsets, national economics in the late nineteenth century also contributed to the remapping of Europe in terms of regions. Furthermore, supra-national ideologies were emerging in entangled ways: despite their divergent logic and dynamism, pan-Germanism, pan-Slavism and pan-Scandinavianism may serve as another set of eloquent examples, throwing into full relief these concepts’ inherently relational, mutually-conditioned meanings.

This drive for politicization does not mean, however, that public and scholarly regionalist discourses and concepts necessarily overlap. Politicians and the media, on the one hand, and academics, on the other, often operate with the same regionalist terminology, but their semantics are rarely identical. The agents of the imperialist geopolitical visions of the Mediterranean in the interwar period collided conspicuously with the idea of a common Mediterranean homeland and humanist essence that contemporary French intellectuals and academic institutions espoused. In our own day, the (politically-driven) regionalism of the EU draws on a completely different set of so-called structural similarities from that employed by historians, ethnographers, social and even political scientists. But academic concepts may also be contingent on popular culture and the market. The integration of the Mediterranean in the world tourist market, **Vaso Seirinidou** tells us, has transformed academic Mediterraneanism into a mass consumption commodity. Political, popular, and scholarly regionalizations, in brief, interact and amalgamate in many ways and on different levels, but this interaction is not tantamount to complete

conformity (or opportunism/mimicry on the part of academia) nor should it blind us to the inherent politics of the scholarly concepts themselves.

Conceptualizations emerging inside and outside of the regions in question interact in similarly intricate ways, while the outcome rarely signifies a clean victory for either. Local regionalizations to some extent mirror, but do not replicate the external ones. Eastern Europe presents an extreme case in this respect, for, as **Frithjof Benjamin Schenk** argues, it has always been almost exclusively a term denoting an “other” and “foreign” geographical, political, and cultural space. As a historiographic concept originating in interwar debates within the region, however, it has enjoyed a long and prolific life. Conversely, for much of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century, Western Europe had not been a popular term of self-description, but served as ubiquitous terms of reference in Central and Eastern Europe. Whereas the external understandings of the North drew largely from the mythology of the exotic, the construction from within of a Nordic region evolved around the (shifting) semantics of two key concepts of Norden and Scandinavia (see the contribution by **Bo Stråth** and **Marja Jalava**). As intraregional and extra-regional (geo)political agendas diverged considerably, so did the justification and vocabulary of regionality. The fluctuation of natural and cultural markers is a case in point: certain regional projects operated mainly by drawing natural boundaries (mountain chains, rivers), while others put the emphasis on language, religion, or shared political-institutional experience.

There are thus parallel external or internal processes of conceptualization that are not necessarily connected or commensurate. An extremely complex case is that of the émigré communities and centers, which often acted either as bridges between external and internal regionalizations or as autonomous regionalizing agents. A case in point is the Baltic exile community during the Cold War, which sought to present a common regional agenda; the individual nations were hardly visible on the symbolic map of Western societies, but sticking to the common label of Baltic states made it possible to keep the memory of Soviet aggression alive.

As for the epistemic background of these regionalizing discourses, different disciplines participated with different force at different points of time in producing regionalities. Up to the mid-nineteenth century, geography was crucial for the emergence of mesoregional subdivisions in Europe, and in the early twentieth century (especially German) geopolitics became a matrix of regionalization. Linguistics became increasingly important from the second half of the nineteenth century, reaching a central position in conceptualizing such regional frameworks as the Balkan *Sprachbund* at the turn of the century, which at the turn of the twenty-first century morphed into a new conception of a *European Sprachbund* (see **Uwe Hinrichs**' chapter). Historiography has

contributed and, as **Stefan Troebst** shows, continues to contribute substantially to the (re)conceptualization of European regions, including of Europe itself. Demography, on the other hand, which experienced a boom in the mid-twentieth century contemporaneous with that of social history, has by now abdicated its earlier aspirations to conjure up regionalizing models (see **Attila Melegh**'s contribution). Similarly, while art history and comparative literature have been concerned with "spacing" Europe in order to localize certain cultural products in view of the milieu shaping them, these disciplines have rarely operated with a coherent mesoregional model of Europe. They did, however, eventually work with a Western/non-Western divide, while retaining some specific regional references for certain groups of countries in the semiperiphery of the West (most commonly Scandinavia, Central Europe, and the Balkans) and often taking Russian culture as a "significant other" of the West (see the studies by **Eric Storm** and **Alex Drace-Francis**). By contrast, the post-1989 restructuring of European economic space has produced, as **Georgy Ganey**'s chapter indicates, an abundance of metaphorically framed regions in an attempt to capture the dynamics of a "multispeed Europe."

Based on our investigations, it is possible to identify a number of common features of the conceptual history of regional terms. Importantly, these terms tend to form part of regionalizing discourses, which means that they usually do not occur individually, but constitute a complex cluster of concepts. This is clear if one looks at, for instance, the extremely complex set of notions around the concepts of the Balkans/Southeastern Europe/and *Südosteuropa*; Western Europe/the West/Europe or *Mitteleuropa*/*Zwischeneuropa*/East Central Europe/the Masarykian "New Europe," or the "Other Europe" of the 1970s and 1980s. Tracing the shift of connotations and adjacent concepts over time, as well as the different local usages and cumulative traditions of usage, makes it possible to historicize these regional keywords and point to the wide variety of often conflicting meanings that they assumed.

On the whole, we found three main clusters of constitutive elements in these regionalizing discourses: physical and anthropogeographic conditions framing regions as "natural formations"; structures, institutions, and mentalities resulting from history/legacies/culture, which describe regions as cultural-historical spaces; and (geo)political designs and alignments, which frame regions as political concepts. Of course, this is above all an analytical distinction, and often these clusters merge. Eurasia could stand for the combined Euro-Asiatic landmass, for a zone marked by *longue durée* patterns of social and commercial interaction, and for the post-Soviet geopolitical or economic space.

Counter-concepts proved equally crucial in structuring regionalist discourses. This also confirms our intuition about the relational character of



concepts: one regional concept is defined vis-à-vis another, not necessarily a counter-concept but often an adjacent one (e.g., Central/Southeastern Europe; Eastern/Central Europe; Eurasia/both Europe and Asia; Baltic/Scandinavia; Levant/Mediterranean). This typically implies cross-regional conceptualizations, on the one hand, and, on the other, certain overlapping or intermediate/contested zones. Such conceptual interrelationships are crucial in the case of the formation of regional concepts, such as the West, Eastern Europe, the Balkans, which are actually framed more from the outside than from the inside. Here attention is due to the mutual reinforcement or, conversely, the “mirroring”/counterpoising of such internal and external spatial constructions. It is also remarkable that sometimes the same notion can be part of the cluster and a counter-concept: Southeastern Europe in certain periods could function as complementary and in others as a counter-concept to the Balkans. The same applies for Central Europe, East Central Europe, and *Mittleuropa*, which could be used both as overlapping and contrasting notions (see **Diana Mishkova’s** and **Balázs Trencsényi’s** studies, respectively).

A central mechanism of regional conceptualizations, as in the case of other spatial categories, is based on inclusion and exclusion. This does not mean that concepts could by default be inclusive or exclusive, but that they have both sides and yield to different discursive/political moves delimiting the political community. All this presents an opportunity to rethink the framework of the practice of conceptual history. Looking at spatial concepts, we can understand better how different layers of discourse are created by different communities of knowledge production, how in different orders of discourse we find different conceptual temporal layers, how transnational conceptualization—transcending discrete linguistic and political communities—operates, and, finally, we can obtain a more theoretically informed picture of the way regionalist terminologies are being politicized and ideologized. In this respect, conceptual history and the constructivist paradigm in political geography (and critical geopolitics) present a common epistemological ground, where they fruitfully interact.

Looking at the temporal horizons of the conceptualization of regions, one can identify a number of momentous conceptual transformations (*Sattelzeiten*). Thus, in the early nineteenth century, we find a protoconceptual stage: notions without consistency or concepts without the corresponding notion. This stage is followed by the coexistence of older, often external regional notions and a new scientific thrust for “natural” regions (and boundaries). The late nineteenth century is marked by the stabilization of disciplinary usages and the expansion of geography as a formative scientific paradigm for explaining social phenomena. Regionalist terminology now permeated a wide array of disciplines, and the upsurge of comparatism was working in the same

direction. Continuing this expansion, the context of post–World War I geopolitical reorganization, and the interwar period in general, witnessed a veritable boom of regional concepts, while after World War II, in the binary framework of the Cold War, one observes a considerable reduction. The 1960s to 1980s saw once again the recovery of multiple conceptual frameworks of regionality, while the post–1989 years have been marked by a spatial turn accompanied by an interrogation of the premises of spatializing history and conceptualizing space as well as devising historical regions. A case in point is the debate about the Balkans after 1989, when it became clear that the core of this concept is not so much a certain localizable spatial entity, but rather a mental construct, a chain of metaphors and asymmetric counter-concepts used for defining the self and the other in highly politicized discursive situations.

To sum up, regional tropes and stereotypes have been and will continue to remain important elements of cultural and political discourse. Propelled by the economic crisis after 2008, the former division of North and South resurfaced in the pejorative but broadly used notion of “PIGS” (referring to Portugal, Italy, Greece, and Spain), while the recent refugee crisis of autumn 2015 was often framed as a clash between Western European postnationalism and Eastern European postcommunist ethnonationalism. The usefulness of conceptual history for questioning the seeming naturalness and self-evidence of these regional constructs is evident. It points to the inherent ambiguities of most geographical notions that usually define their object with regard to a constitutive other, constructing their community by defining it through—as it were—its borderline. All this became extremely important in the context of the destabilization of the nation-state-based framework of legitimization during the last decades of the twentieth century. Furthermore, such a historical reflection alerts us to the threatening quasi-nationalization of regions, where regions become substitutes for nations. This is visible in the way Europeaness is often constructed in terms of symbolic and actual administrative exclusion, but also in some of the “Euro-sceptic” regional narratives that construct Scandinavia or the Balkans as homogeneous entities characterized by certain common patterns of mentality, economic culture, and so on. Instead, the use of conceptual history in analyzing processes and projects of regionalization involves intraregional and cross-regional comparisons, and it is exactly this approach that can make explicit the implicit comparisons inherent to most regional discourses. The prevalence of asymmetrical counter-concepts in all frameworks of regionalization, rooted in these comparative mental operations, seems to be a central factor of historical dynamics.

We also found that mapping regional concepts and discourses provides a particularly rich field for studying both the interplay of different disciplinary

perspectives of knowledge production and the relationship of professional and public discourse. Similar to other keywords pertaining to political discourse, regions are essentially contested and relational terms. Behind the ostensibly rather stable regional conceptualizations, there are significant divergences from a disciplinary point of view: geographic divisions, historical regions, cultural areas, economic regions, and geopolitical cores and peripheries all generate different borderlines and also different symbolic connections between national entities.

Although the recent pan-European and global opening of the academic discussion might well be antagonistic to the self-contained nature of meso-regional notions, it does not seem to eliminate them completely: rather than talking about individual national contexts, most research tends to turn to regional units of analysis as a basis of these comparisons. Our volume seeks to prove that mesoregional concepts of Europe have been deeply embedded in the political, cultural, and academic discourses during the last two centuries and thus are likely to remain with us in the future as well. Historicizing them offers a necessary critical distance but also teaches us how basic notions of modernity are intimately linked to spatial/territorial categories. And the other way round: these spatial categories are themselves indicative of the co-existence and competition of different layers and visions of modernity.

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## Notes

The current text draws on our longer article, “Conceptualizing Spaces within Europe: The Case of Meso-Regions,” published in the programmatic volume of the European conceptual history network, *Conceptual History in the European Space* (Freeden, Steinmetz, Fernández Sebastián 2017).

1. For an overview of the implications of the spatial turn in recent historiography, see Kingston (2010).
2. Among the standard readings, see in particular Lefebvre (1974); Gregory and Urry (1985); and Soja (1989).
3. As illustrative of the current state of the art across a wide range of disciplines we can mention van Houtum, Kramsch, and Zierhofer (2005); Schenk (2007); and Döring and Thielmann (2008).

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