

The politics of 'the region' in policy transformations

This is an invitation and call for papers for a small-scale conference on the politics of 'the region' in contemporary policy transformations, co-organized by the Critical and Interpretive Public Administration Research (CIPA) colloquium of the Netherlands Institute of Governance (NIG), and Erasmus School of Health Policy & Management (ESHPM), Erasmus University Rotterdam. In this call, we invite researchers, both junior and senior, to participate in and contribute to the conference.

Introduction

Regional areas are increasingly being (re)discovered and addressed by policymakers, politicians and practitioners as places for organizing public services. 'The region' has emerged as a guiding concept, scale, mechanism, instrument or framework to address pressing societal issues. This suggests an underlying belief that the region can serve as a policy strategy to break through institutional silos that prevent networked ways of working to address the needs and preferences for local populations (Boogers & Peters, 2024; Groenleer & Hendriks, 2020). Examples of the uprise of the region in policy transformations include energy, biodiversity and social- and healthcare policies. The rise of the region in the governance of spatial planning of renewable energy marks a rescaling of authority as regional territories become the arena where energy policy, spatial planning, and political responsibility are renegotiated (Gerritsen, 2024). The rise of the region in landscape governance can be seen as an alternative to sectoral policies and a potential way of realizing change for biodiversity (de Koning, 2024). The region here can be seen as an arena where discourses are formed and contested. Regionally-based healthcare policies are considered suitable for handling challenges like increasing demands for older persons in the face of a declining workforce (Schuurmans et al., 2021). The region as a geographical place here can be seen here as a governance strategy to steer and coordinate actions despite (or to deal with) institutional silos. Institutional arrangements in healthcare policies, for instance, promote competition while regional policy initiatives simultaneously seek to mediate between local interests and regulatory frameworks to stimulate the formation of regional networks (van der Woerd et al., 2025).

The politics of the region

The growing emphasis among policymakers, politicians, and practitioners on the region tends to imply that regions are bounded geographical and administrative entities that are well-defined and usable for policy strategies (Schuurmans et al., 2021). This assumption overlooks the ways in which regions are continuously (re)produced, maintained and contested between and across administrative, institutional, organizational, and network levels, and the power dynamics involved in these processes (Lorne et al., 2019). The region is, therefore, not a pre-given entity, but one that is actively constituted through the interactions of diverse actors. From this perspective, the growing prominence of the region in policy transformations further invites and initiates public and scholarly debates on its provisional, political and multi-layered nature. This moves beyond focusing on the region merely as a formal government structure or authority, or the scale of intermunicipal collaboration (Boogers & Peters, 2024). After all, the use of regions in policy transformations extends both *between* and *beyond* municipalities. In regionally-based policies for older person care, for instance, municipalities are often not included. Given the emergence of regional fora and regional networks, concerns have raised about their democratic legitimacy, as decision-making processes are often opaque. Local

councils often possess limited capacity to monitor or influence regional decisions. Moreover, the absence of democratic oversight and the presence of ill-fitting accountability structures at the regional level can lead to increasing power imbalances. The issues described raise a range of administrative and institutional questions that benefit from a critical-interpretive lens:

- How are regions made?
- What role do regions play in driving policy changes in different public domains, and what does this mean for the delivery of public services?
- How does the patchwork of regional boundaries work out in practice and how are policies coordinated over regional boundaries?
- How can democratic legitimacy be sustained? And how do regional decision-making processes come about?
- How can the region be made an object of inspection for public services?
- How to account for structural regional differences in terms of network capital?
- How do regional dynamics feed back into traditional policy processes?

It is precisely these questions that have inspired this conference in the context of the Critical and Interpretive Public Administration Research (CIPA) colloquium.

Conference aim

The aim of this small-scale conference is to critically reflect on the region in policy transformations. From a critical-interpretative lens, the conference aims to move beyond taken-for-granted understandings of regions as pre-existing, bounded territories. Through plenary sessions and panel discussions, it seeks to problematize, refine and contribute to current analyses of the region in policy shifts and bring together different generations of researchers, (master's) students, and policymakers that study or work with the region.

Themes

In order to structure discussions about the politics of the region in policy transformations, we distinguish three interrelated sub themes: (1) the region as a *concept*; (2) the region as a *governing practice*; and (3) the region as a *research field*. These themes lead to dedicated plenary blocks and parallel panel sessions during the conference day.

1. The region as a concept

This theme seeks to theoretically explore the region as a concept. What counts as a region? From a historical perspective, how novel is the region as a phenomenon? In what ways has its conceptualization evolved, and what could explain its contemporary relevance? This theme intends to explore the use of the region and its implications in academic and policy discourses, as well as spatial politics in policy transformations.

2. The region as a governing practice

Moving beyond conceptual abstractions, what does it mean to 'do' the region? This theme seeks to unravel the meanings, workings, and doings of the region. How is the region enacted in everyday life and by whom? It emphasizes the agency of diverse actors, varying from citizens, politicians, governments, policymakers and practitioners. It highlights how the region as an instrument of governance is actively (re)produced between administrative, institutional, organizational, and network levels, and the power dynamics involved in these processes.

3. The region as a research field

This methodological theme explores the region as an empirical field of research, questioning how to move beyond taken-for-granted notions and approach the region critically. It considers how researchers navigate and relate to the region, what such a perspective implies for those engaged in its study, and which methods are most appropriate, including how these methods performatively shape the region itself. How to position within these processes, and what to learn from the interplay between science, policy, practice and consultancy in how knowledge is produced?

Conference set up

The conference will take place on 30 June 2026, from 9:30 to 17:30 CET. The program includes a plenary session followed by parallel sessions. The plenary session features thought-provoking keynote speakers, after which participants break out into sub-sessions focused on providing feedback on ongoing research work. In this call for papers, we invite researchers, both junior and senior, to participate in and contribute to the conference. We also invite (master) students, policymakers, politicians and practitioners to join the conference and engage in the discussions.

Practicalities

Interested applicants are invited to submit abstracts of approximately 500 words before the deadline of 27 April 2026 at 9:00 CET. The selected applicants are to present their work during one of the panel sessions during the conference. We also offer the possibility to present other contributions (e.g. a research program with preliminary findings, or a presentation based on a dissertation). Please send your abstract to the organizers (see below).

Venue

The conference will be held at Utrecht University (details to follow). There is no fee required to participate. Lunch and refreshments will be provided.

Contact information

Please do not hesitate to contact the organizers if there are any questions regarding the invitation and open call:

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