‘The region’ as organized uncertainty

Mette van den Heuvel, MSc, essay based on reflections and observations of the 'The politics of ‘the region’ in policy transformations' conference, June 30th, Utrecht

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‘The region’ might be the most overused and, at the same time, the most necessary concept in contemporary governance. It appears everywhere, in policy, research, funding arrangements, and public discourse, but it rarely means the same thing twice. It is invoked in healthcare, energy, mobility, education and spatial planning, yet every sector seems to construct its own version of what a region is and what it should do.

During the conference ‘*The politics of ‘the region’ in policy transformations*,’ this ambiguity was not resolved. If anything, it became more visible. As was stated in the opening, the region is a buzzword. A container term that can carry almost anything, and therefore risks meaning very little on its own. Perhaps the most striking insight of the day was not that we do not understand regions, but that we understand them in too many ways at once.

Throughout the conference one question kept resurfacing, explicitly in Dr. Nick Zonneveld's reflections, but implicitly in almost every presentation: when should we zoom in, and when should we zoom out? In other words, what should be organized at which scale? Rather than providing a definitive answer, the conference revealed something perhaps more valuable: a growing awareness of what we still do not know. What initially appears as chaos may actually be what Zonneveld described as *productive uncertainty*.

The region simultaneously emerged as an administrative scale for policy implementation, a network of collaborating organizations, a lived space of everyday experience, and a symbolic field in which identity is continuously negotiated. In this sense, the region is not an object that can be clearly defined, but a shifting arrangement of practices, relationships and meanings that constantly changes shape. This immediately raises another question: what actually makes a region a region?

Dr. Nick Zonneveld formulated this uncertainty through a series of deceptively simple questions. What is place in the first place? Where is the organization in this discussion? Are regions stable or inherently dynamic? How do different regions interact with one another? And perhaps most importantly: are regions genuinely helping practice, or are they primarily a way of organizing complexity from above? None of these questions received a definitive answer. Instead, they demonstrated that the region itself is not a fixed entity, but something continuously produced through interaction.

Prof. Roland Bal described this as a layered reality in which no single actor controls the whole. Regions are not coherent systems, but stacked layers that only partially overlap. Once these layers become disconnected, coherence begins to dissolve. His argument also challenged the common tendency to assume that more regionalization automatically leads to better governance. As he sharply observed, we often end up *"throwing money at the regions without looking at the bigger picture."*

Across multiple contributions, a similar tension emerged around governance itself. Regions are expected to function as solutions to complex societal challenges, yet responsibility within them often remains unclear. In practice, no one fully owns the region. Funding, mandate, accountability and implementation are frequently distributed across different actors and institutional levels.

Dr. Martijn Gerritsen captured this beautifully through the notion of 'patchy policymaking.' warning that experimental governance arrangements may ultimately produce what he called 'organized irresponsibility.' The paradox is striking: the more actors become involved in coordination, the more diffuse responsibility becomes. Collaboration, in other words, does not automatically translate into implementation.

This phenomenon was also the main conclusion from my own master thesis 'Governing Grid Congestion in Amsterdam'. Collaboration within the Task Force Grid Congestion was well established between different organizations and people, but the bridge to actual implementation was still difficult.

This ambiguity is reinforced by the changing nature of decision-making itself. Prof. Edith Hooge remarked that *"a decision is a performance in itself."* In many regional networks, decision-making is no longer a clear endpoint, but something embedded in ongoing processes of coordination, negotiation and trust-building. Yet, the question remains whether these processes actually produce decisions, or merely create the appearance of collective action.

At the same time, the conference reminded us that regions are not merely governance structures. They are also lived and emotional spaces. Lorena Ortiz Cabero, MSc illustrated how regional belonging emerges through both attachments to place and the politics of belonging. Some regions possess a 'thick' identity rooted in history and tradition, while others struggle with a more fragile or even negative identity. The region is therefore not only an administrative scale, but also a narrative that shapes how people understand themselves and each other.

Similarly, Dr. Marleen Buizer demonstrated how place-based governance attempts to overcome the limitations of sectoral thinking by starting from the everyday realities of places. Yet, even this approach has its own blind spots. While place-based working values local knowledge and participation, it may also lead to projectification, fragmentation and the disappearance of broader political questions. Following Doreen Massey's notion of 'throwntogetherness,' places are never coherent wholes, but temporary assemblages of people, interests and institutions.

Perhaps the strongest thread running throughout the conference was the tension between learning and steering. Regional governance arrangements are increasingly designed as spaces for experimentation and learning, yet they continue to be evaluated through demands for control, accountability and measurable outcomes. This becomes particularly visible in healthcare and energy governance, where KPI systems and funding arrangements often shape behavior in ways that unintentionally reduce ambition or encourage strategic compliance rather than societal impact. Dr. Robin Peeters captured this tension: *"Your integration is my fragmentation."* Every attempt to integrate creates new boundaries elsewhere. Drawing one

regional boundary inevitably reshapes another. Regional governance is therefore never confined to a single territory; it constantly produces effects beyond its own borders.

This observation resonates with a broader conclusion that surfaced repeatedly throughout the day: there is no optimal regional model. There is no final institutional design that resolves the tensions between flexibility and accountability, coordination and autonomy, learning and implementation. Every governance arrangement creates its own trade-offs. As one panel discussion concluded, *"every way of organizing something comes with trade-offs."* Rather than searching for the perfect regional scale, perhaps the more fruitful question is how we learn to govern within permanent imperfection.

That, in my view, also points towards a shared research agenda. We need to move beyond asking *what* a region is and begin investigating how regions are continuously enacted. How do organizations, professionals, citizens and policymakers actively create, sustain and reshape regional governance? How do funding arrangements distribute power? Under what conditions does coordination become implementation? How do policy ideas travel, or fail to travel, between regions? And how can governance remain experimental and learning-oriented while still providing sufficient mandate, responsibility and accountability?

In the end, the region appears less as a solution to complexity than as the form complexity takes once we attempt to organize it. It is not a stable answer. It is an ongoing, never-ending dance between scaling up and scaling down. And perhaps our task as researchers is not to choreograph that dance into perfection, but to better understand how, and by whom, it is continuously performed.