

## POLITICAL REGION: VIN NOUVEAU WITH AN OLD LABEL

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**Abstract:** Globalization, international cooperation, development of democracy, strengthening of the civic society and many other political, social, economic and cultural phenomena which can be observed in the world (especially Europe) in the recent years tend to add new meanings to certain established concepts in political science or political geography. The concept of the 'political region' can certainly be included among them.

In recent years, some geographers have reopened a discussion on the contemporary meaning of the concept of 'political region' (state), when processes generally known under the name of globalization have led to a situation in which what could be dubbed as an internal coherence of a political system, what distinguished it from its vicinity (that is, other political regions) and determined its very existence (was its logo or label in a sense) started to play a lesser and lesser role. Among geographers who voice such reservations is Paasi (2002), who pointed out that the tenet which until recently was quite popular that the notion of region/place pertains to a 'bounded space' and must be reformulated. The above discussion indicates that contemporarily the term 'political region' is not so unequivocally understood as it has been, until recently. The basic attributes of the new political region include increased participation of individual citizens and NGOs in governance (at the state, regional and local level); liberalization of the economy (including its greater openness towards the economies of other political regions) and a gradual withdrawal from certain cultural and historical as well as political and historical symbols, which used to be treated as inseparably associated with the very concept of the political region (such as state borders). Another characteristic feature of the 'new' political region can be seen in its numerous external relations. This may create an impression that such a region is fuzzy, or amorphous (open), as compared to a classical political region.

**Key words:** political region, globalization, democracy, civil society

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Globalization, international cooperation, development of democracy, strengthening of the civic society and many other political, social, economic and cultural phenomena which can be observed in the world (especially Europe) in the recent years tend to add new meanings to certain established concepts in political science or political geography. The concept of the 'political region' can certainly be included among them.

## 2. CLASSICAL DEFINITION OF THE TERM 'POLITICAL REGION'

In the classical approach, the political region is frequently defined in practice as: (1) *"a politically uniform or consolidated area"* and (2) *"an area which enjoys considerable independence and is an administrative region"* (Baczwarow, Suliborski, 2002, p. 150).

M. Koter (1993, pp. 51-52) proposes a much more interesting view. Although he is of the opinion that *"a political region seems to be a formal, single-factor region because one factor – being a part of one state or its dependence on a specific political power determines its delineation and range"*, on another occasion he expresses, quite rightly, a contradictory view that: *"a political region is not a single-factor or a single-attribute region [...] On the contrary, it is a region that represents a complex spatial system, made up of specific population (linguistic, religious, social, etc.) structures, settlement patterns and transport networks, land divisions, distinct forms of architecture and art, institutional arrangements, legal and administrative systems, forms of management, and many other things. At the same time, it is a functional and nodal region as it draws on a comprehensive interaction between the central metropolis and its natural hinterland"*.

In the above definition, two aspects seem to be of particular importance. Firstly, in Koter's opinion, historical and cultural factors (which he dubs as 'traditions') are significant determinants of a political region. Secondly, at the end of the above definition the author points out that a political region can be treated as a functional region because it is an arena of different interactions between what he refers to as 'metropolis' and its 'hinterland'. Owing to these two aspects, a political region should not be treated statically, but as a dynamic system in a temporal sense and a changeable one in the spatial aspect.

## 3. THE 'POLITICAL REGION' AS PLACE

Many researchers in the field of political geography point out that, upon a thorough analysis, the notion of a 'political region' is close in meaning to the concept of *place*. It is so because other factors, in addition to the territory, socio-economic relations and institutions of power which determine the existence of a political region include emotional ties between those who inhabit the region, common history, cultural traditions, etc. This is how Koter sees the region; his views are also shared by Agnew (1987, p. 1), who points out that countries (which he calls *territorial states*) *"...are made out of places..."* as a result of long historical processes. According to Agnew, the main constituents needed for any place to come into existence include: social interactions, location in a geographical space and existing ties between people and the place, which happen to be similar factors to those which determine the creation of states.

## 4. CONTEMPORARY UNDERSTANDING OF THE NOTION POLITICAL REGION

In recent years, some geographers have reopened a discussion on the contemporary meaning of the concept of 'political region' (state), when processes generally known under the name of globalization have led to a situation in which what could be dubbed as

an internal coherence of a political system, what distinguished it from its vicinity (that is, other political regions) and determined its very existence (was its logo or label in a sense) started to play a lesser and lesser role. Among researchers who are alive to this issue is Pietraś (2002), who came to the conclusion that the implications of globalization include *detritorialization* and *delocalization*, which can relate to countries and other political units (e.g. administrative regions).

The weakening role of the state was already noticed many years ago by the authors of the *public choice theory* (Tullock 1965, Buchanan, Tollison 1972). Also, one of Fukuyama's recent books (2005) offered an opinion highlighting the diminishing role of contemporary state in the context of its functions and their scope (which are being gradually taken over by other institutions). Fukuyama is convinced that the weakness of the state is a result of growing difficulties in enforcing its competences, not only because of an increasing significance of deconcentration and decentralization processes (weakening caused by internal factors), but also due to a significant role of supranational institutions: economic (corporations), social (NGOs) and political, such as the UN or the European Union (external factors).

Discussion on the current and future face of Europe has been going on for years, inspired mainly by researchers who deal with integration issues and debate whether what we can now see is the 'Europe of metropolises' (in which multinational corporations are among the key players) or the 'Europe of regions' (where such issues as national/regional identity and historical factors play a leading role). Also, other concepts of Europe's regional development, popularly referred to as 'blue banana', 'archipelago Europe' or the 'European grape' prove that various views are being discussed as regards the role of traditionally understood political regions in contemporary world (Grzeszczak, 2004).

Among geographers who voice such reservations is Paasi (2002), who pointed out that the tenet which until recently was quite popular that the notion of region/place pertains to a 'bounded space' and must be reformulated. According to Paasi, in political and cultural geography (just as among experts in international relations) one can frequently encounter criticism of the approach to the world as a mosaic of different cultures. For this reason, the notion of *region/place* should be related to a specific fragment of space only to a limited extent (Paasi, 2002, p. 807). Shelley (2003, p. 605) expressed a similar opinion. In his view, in the 1990s numerous contradictions appeared between the structures traditionally defined as *states* and spatial systems treated as *places* (which were due to the fact that in the concept of place national and ethnic issues are of great significance). Therefore, in Shelley's opinion, the term 'place' should be discussed anew in contemporary political geography; maybe even replaced with a new term. As an argument against the traditional interpretation of 'place' Shelley considered the fact that, owing to a rapid development of IT and telecommunications, social interactions are less and less connected with a specific, physical place because they depend on the individual's profession, religion, language, nationality, and not geographical proximity (Shelley, 2003, p. 606).

## 5. AMORPHOUSNESS AND/OR EVOLUTION OF POLITICAL REGIONS

The above discussion indicates that contemporarily the term 'political region' is not so unequivocally understood as it has been, until recently. Its attributes – being dynamic

in temporal and spatial sense – mean that it can be treated as something amorphous (ambivalent), fuzzy and therefore evading any precise definition.

A question should be asked however whether the amorphousness of political regions is a relatively recent phenomenon or maybe it is their inherent (and thereby permanent) feature which has either escaped everybody's notice or has been deliberately omitted (if we take into account the relatively subordinate role of political geography to political science and the former's relations with what could be dubbed as ideology). In view of the above, three questions can be posed:

1. Is the amorphousness of political regions a factor underpinning their further evolution?
2. Is the amorphousness of political regions a factor accompanying their evolution?
3. Is the amorphousness of political regions a result of their evolution?

If the first hypothesis is correct, its geographical vagueness (strong differentiation of natural conditions, inconsistencies in how the borders run), ethnic/religious mosaic, differences in the economic level, etc. is the reason for any future evolution of a political region. We can say therefore that the aim of the evolution of the political region is to progress from an imperfect model to a nearly ideal one.

If we think that the second hypothesis is acceptable it means that we agree with the view that a political region 'is in the making' and not 'is'. This means that it should be looked at as a process and not a stable phenomenon. In this sense, amorphousness is an inherent (immanent) feature of a political region.

Accepting the third hypothesis would indicate that in our opinion the amorphousness of political regions is a consequence of their evolution. The assumption underlying such a view is that at some moment in history a political region may not be amorphous and then it can be quite precisely defined. This invites the question when such a situation takes place. The question posed in the introductory part suggests that at the beginning of the evolutionary process. Again, why is a political region evolving? To lose its 'unequivocal' and 'distinct character and disappear (become 'fuzzy') in consequence?

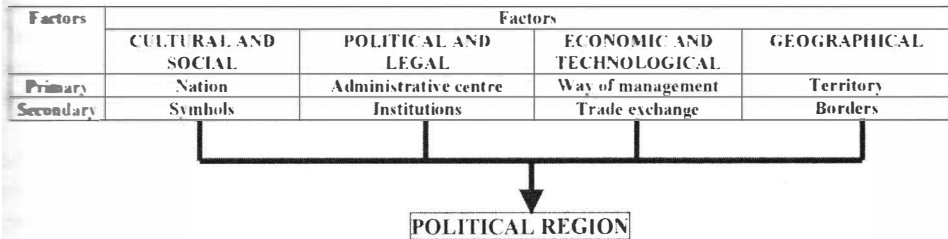
The experiences so far indicate that the second hypothesis is the most plausible of all, although many empirical examples can be found to argue it does not stand in contradiction to the first one.

## 6. EVOLUTION OF POLITICAL REGIONS

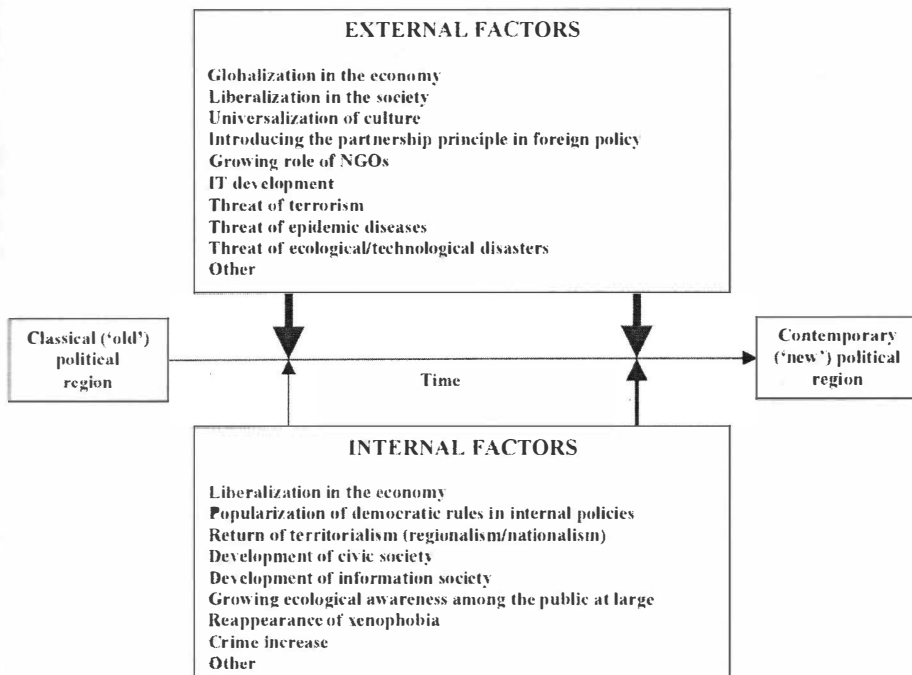
It has been proved in the previous chapter that the political region is not a static entity and that by its very nature its character (internal structure, relations to other regions) is prone to change. Such changes are briefly outlined below.

First of all, it should be pointed out that the emergence of a political region assumes the presence of at least four groups of factors: cultural and social; political and legal; economic and technological, and, last but not least, geographical (spatial, environmental). These factors can be of primary or secondary importance in the process of the region's emergence, and such factors as nation, form of the economy, links with a given territory of creation of a power centre are as a rule primary vis à vis the emergence of symbols, political institutions or strictly delineated external borders (Figure 1).

Geographical factors play a crucial role in the emergence of a political region. In the early phase of this process, they largely determine the shape of the economy, its internal political coherence, political system, etc. Over time, geographical factors tend to lose in importance. In such a situation, other factors may come to the fore, and their role at the individual stages of the historical process may vary.



**Figure 1** Factors establishing a political region



**Figure 2** Internal and external factors driving the transformation of political regions

To put it simply, it can be assumed that the historical process of the formation of political regions was crowned by the emergence of regions which were shaped in the second half of the 20th century, in the form of states with democratic political systems (in the generally acknowledged meaning of the word). However, starting from the 1970s or 1980s, we have witnessed considerable changes in the functioning of political regions. These changes affect both the states and the regions and local systems which make them

up. Both external and internal circumstances exerted an influence on the transformation of political regions in the last decades of the 20th century (Figure 2). It should be assumed however that external factors are playing a greater role in the process of change in political regions than internal ones. A classical political region which has many characteristics of the so-called contained region, shows a tendency to maintain an equilibrium, as any other system, and is not prone to change caused by internal stimuli. It is only external stimuli (such as ideology, new technological developments, economic linkages) that make an 'old' political region slowly transform, lose its 'contained' character and become the so-called open region. Therefore, one of the cardinal differences between a classical and a contemporary political region is a greater openness of the latter.

As mentioned above, the first qualitative changes in the structures which could be described as political regions appeared as early as approximately 1970, and can be ascribed to such phenomena as a crisis of the so-called welfare state, counterculture, liberalization of social attitudes, global economic slump (caused by the energy crisis), increasing ecological awareness (following the publications of the so-called Club of Rome and U Thant's Report), etc. As a result of all these circumstances, the institution of the state in the shape it existed so far no longer corresponded to the society's expectations and requirements of modern economy. In such a situation, the state began to change its mode of operation through the introduction of decentralization and deconcentration of power, a gradual retreat from interventionism and protectionism in the economy, acceptance for the participation of NGOs in governance and opening to possible suggestions from international organizations and other governments (e.g. in the human rights sphere). Naturally, such an evolution of the functioning of the state at the central level implied similar changes in the functioning of political and social structures at the regional and local levels. The slogan 'think globally, act locally' can be seen as a tangible proof of changes in the operation of political regions in this new situation.

## **7. DOES THE NOTION OF "POLITICAL REGION" MAKE ANY SENSE NOWADAYS?**

The process described above lasted throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, and led, towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, to the emergence of an utterly new category of political regions (Table 1).

The basic attributes of the new political region include increased participation of individual citizens and NGOs in governance (at the state, regional and local level); liberalization of the economy (including its greater openness towards the economies of other political regions) and a gradual withdrawal from certain cultural and historical as well as political and historical symbols, which used to be treated as inseparably associated with the very concept of the political region (such as state borders)<sup>1</sup>. Another

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<sup>1</sup> However, such events as 09.11 and the proclamation of war against terror by the US, its efforts to isolate the so-called rogue states, rebirth of imperial tendencies in Russia, rapid economic (for the time being at least!) expansion of China, internal difficulties in the EU, escalating conflict between a part of Islam and other religions, revival of conservatism in the American society, xenophobic attitudes in some European societies can hamper and even reverse this process.

characteristic feature of the 'new' political region can be seen in its numerous external relations. This may create an impression that such a region is fuzzy, or amorphous (open), as compared to a classical political region.

**Table 1** The differences between classical ("old") and contemporary ("new") political regions

Types of regions	Attributes of the region	Role	Remarks
Classical ('old') political regions	Nation Territory Capital city Borders Symbols Government institutions NGOs External economic relations	Important Important Important Important Important ? Important	Or space
Contemporary ('new') political regions	Nation Territory Capital city Borders Symbols Government institutions NGOs External economic relations	Important Important ? ? ? Important Important Important	Or society Or place

The latter issue however entails a certain problem. In recent years, a trend has appeared in various subdisciplines of socio-economic geography not only to debate the meaning of the term 'region' but also to question the very purpose of its use. Concepts which can be in this case seen as a kind of alternative to the theory of the region include the concept of *networking* and the concept of *embeddedness*. Such reservations can also refer to a contemporary political region, which is increasingly becoming akin to the so-called open region, thus losing its fundamental attributes such as territory. Such an opinion was expressed, among others, by Spiegel (2003, p. 121) who claimed that in an era of globalization, the role of the territory is decreasing, at least in the case of modern states. In this context, the question posed at the beginning of the chapter, whether the traditionally understood notion of political region make any sense, seems quite pertinent.

## 8. CONCLUSION

Changes in the meaning and scope of concepts is only natural in science, although it is not quite clear if as commendable. This is also true for geography, where many terms nowadays carry different meanings than when they were first used. One of such notions is the concept of the region, including that of the 'political region'. Although the changes which occurred at the turn of the 20th century lent new meanings to the content of the term 'political region', as a result of which its topical content is different than in the times of Ratzel, Vidal de la Blache or architects of geopolitics, it is still widely used.

Will it also be so in the future? Is the contemporary political region a mere *vin nouveau* of sorts, which – just as Beaujolais Nouveau recently harvested becomes ordinary wine once it loses its 'special taste'? Or, alternately, will the changes outlined in

the paper prove more lasting and the traditional notion of the 'political region' will be changed for good?

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## Region polityczny: *vin nouveau* ze starą etykietką

### Resume

Według M. Kotera jednym z elementów określających region polityczny są czynniki historyczno-kulturowe (nazywane przez autora „tradycjami”), jak również zachodzące w nim różnorodne interakcje między tym co jest określane jako centrum oraz peryferie. Te dwie kwestie sprawiają, iż region polityczny powinien być traktowany nie jako coś statycznego, ale jako układ dynamiczny w sensie czasowym oraz zmienny w aspekcie przestrzennym. Również J. A. Agnew zwraca uwagę, że państwa (zwane przez niego *territorial states*) powstały z miejsc (*are made out of places*) w wyniku długotrwałych procesów historycznych. Według cytowanego autora głównymi elementami wyróżniającymi powstania jakiegokolwiek miejsca są: istnienie interakcji społecznych, umiejscowienie w przestrzeni geograficznej oraz występowanie więzi między ludźmi a miejscem, a więc czynniki decydujące również o powstawaniu państw. W ostatnim czasie niektórzy geografowie zaczęli zastanawiać się nad obecnym znaczeniem pojęcia „region polityczny”, kiedy to procesy nazywane ogólnie globalizacją sprawiają, że to co można było nazwać wewnętrzną spójnością regionu politycznego, co różniło go od otoczenia (to znaczy od innych regionów politycznych) i co decydowało o jego istnieniu (było jego swoistym logo czy czymś w rodzaju etykiety) zaczęło odgrywać coraz mniejszą rolę (A. Paasi, F. M. Shelley).

To, iż region polityczny jest dynamiczny w sensie czasowym i przestrzennym oznacza, że można go traktować jako coś amorficznego (niejednoznacznego), rozmytego (*fuzzy*), a więc trudnego do precyzyjnego zdefiniowania. Zachodzi jednak pytanie: czy amorficzność regionów politycznych jest czymś co występuje dopiero od niedawna, czy też może jest ich immanentną (a tym samym stałą) cechą, której wcześniej nie dostrzegano lub świadomie pomijano (biorąc pod uwagę w pewnym stopniu służebną rolę geografii politycznej wobec nauk politycznych i jej związki z tym co można nazwać ideologią)? W związku z powyższym można postawić trzy pytania: (1) czy amorficzność regionów politycznych jest czymś co leży o podstaw ich późniejszej ewolucji, (2) czy amorficzność regionów politycznych jest cechą współtowarzyszącą



ich ewolucji, (3) czy amorficzność regionów politycznych jest wynikiem ich ewolucji? Doświadczenia wskazują, że najbardziej prawdopodobna jest druga hipoteza, aczkolwiek wiele empirycznych przykładów świadczy, iż nie jest ona sprzeczna z pierwszą.

Koncepcjami, które mogą być uznane za swoistą alternatywę dla teorii regionu jest koncepcja usieciowienia (*networking*) i koncepcja umocowania (*embeddedness*). Dotyczy to również regionu politycznego, który w coraz większym stopniu staje się bliski „regionowi otwartemu”, a więc traci swoje zasadnicze atrybuty, takie jak np. terytorium (S. L. Spiegel).