


"Emptied Spain" and the limits of domestic and EU territorial mobilisation

"España Vacía" e os límites da mobilización territorial en España e na UE

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Abstract

The term "*España Vacía*" has recently been coined to define the long-term trend of depopulation in Spain's inland areas. It has gained traction as it spilled over from a local issue to the national agenda. At the same time, the European Union has made steps to give greater prevalence to the topic of demographic decline. This article maps out and provides a narrative of the failed attempts of territorial mobilisation around this issue since 2016. It examines a number of territorial actors as they try to shape both Spain's Demographic strategy against demographic decline as well as their rent-seeking efforts towards EU Cohesion Policy post 2020 by way of maps and a novel definition. They try to address the same territorial challenge, the growing depopulation of vast areas of inland Spain, but are unable to coalesce around common solutions due to their different priorities and approaches.

Keywords: Depopulation; Territorial Mobilisation; Rent Seeking; Territorial Cohesion; Spain.

Resumo

"*España Vacía*" é un termo recente para definir a tendencia a longo prazo de despoboamento das zonas interiores de España, que foi gañando forza a medida que emerxeu da axenda local á nacional. Ao mesmo tempo, a Unión Europea (UE) foi progresivamente dando unha maior prevalencia nas súas prioridades políticas ao descenso demográfico. Este artigo analiza os esforzos fracasados de mobilización territorial desde 2016, de varios actores, para influenciar as definicións e mapas da estratexia demográfica de España, e as prioridades da Política de Cohesión da UE coa finalidade da busca de rendas. Examina os límites da articulación de intereses territoriais, dentro de España e en toda a UE, cando a formulación dun problema territorial non consegue facer coincidir diferentes prioridades e enfoques.

Palabras chave: Despoboamento; Mobilización territorial; Rent Seeking; Cohesión territorial; España.

JEL Codes: D71; D72; D73.



1. INTRODUCTION

Half of European population will be living in demographically declining regions by 2040 ([European Commission \[EC\], 2022a](#)). It is an issue that has slowly gained prominence in the European agenda with the territorial aspects of depopulation increasingly being seen as a separate category of the wider topic of ageing or “demographic change,” most notably since having a dedicated Commission Vice-Presidency since 2019 ([European Commission, 2020](#)). A key driver for this trend is the articulation of territorial interests at EU level representing, or claiming to represent, “left behind” areas ([Hepburn, 2016](#)).

Demographic decline is widespread in Europe and is difficult to frame into specific policies. It is particularly ill-fitting with the pressing political, high societal goals of climate and digital priorities by Commission President Von der Leyen’s ([Von der Leyen, 2019](#); [Sabato and Mandelli, 2020](#)). Neither this challenge gels well with an efficient allocation of public funds, known in EU Cohesion’s terminology jargon as thematic concentration and additionality.

Drawing from the actor-centred institutionalism model ([Sharp 1997](#); [Pazos-Vidal 2019a](#)) this article seeks to specifically look at how Spanish territorial actors aimed to frame, for the purposes of rent-seeking, an EU definition of demographically declining areas in the policy and negotiation cycle of EU Cohesion Policy and State Aid rules for 2021-2027.

It will examine the different forms of territorial mobilisation in Spain towards the EU around this issue and try to understand their (in principle successful, but in practice limited) ability in articulating a coherent demand towards the EU level.

Territorial mobilisation towards the EU often involves forming territorial issue networks and advocacy networks ([Adshead, 1996](#); [Dowding, 1995](#)) both at Member State level and subsequently spilling over towards the EU level. This involves multilevel coalition-building with territorial actors from other Member States (TMS) and creating ‘pan-European networks. To influence those EU negotiations this can be by way of a structured “Type I” multilevel coalition or a looser “Type II” coalition -as defined in [Hooghe and Marks’ \(2003\)](#) typology-.

The issue of depopulating areas, which should mainly concern domestic policies and investments has quickly scaled up from Spain to the European level, partly due to the rigidity of domestic policy change but also due to the abundant resources, financial and policy-wise, potentially available from the EU level. Article 3(3) of the Treaty of the European Union (TEU) mandates the EU to address Territorial Cohesion. Its Cohesion policy with well over €300bn has been, pre-COVID-19 at least, the largest territorial development policy in the world ([McCann and Varga, 2015](#)). However, it has not specifically addressed demographic decline as an independent variable for EU resource allocation, one that is separate from the main allocation criteria that have long been per capita Gross Domestic Product growth and unemployment ([Bachtler et al., 2019](#)).

This provides a test case of the difficulties of defining a public policy problem (“framing” as conceived in [Goffman, 1974](#)) when such definition will have direct distributive consequences (“pork barrel”, as in [Ellwood and Patashnik, 1993](#)) for the different policy entrepreneurs ([Kingdon, 1984](#)) advocating it. Particularly if the perceived asymmetry of the potential beneficiaries makes it difficult for those actors to coalesce around a shared issue or advocacy network.

Demographic decline is implicitly contained in the various forms of territorial mobilisation at pan-European level, namely Europe-wide organisations seeking to influence EU Regional or Cohesion Policy, specifically the advocacy or issue networks representing

islands, networks, mountain areas, rural-urban, peripheral, or deindustrialising areas (De Martino 2021; Guderjan and Verhelst, 2021). Even if demographically declining areas have long been recognised by EU treaties (Article 174 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union [TFEU]) as territories requiring EU support, only specific EU rules and policies for Scandinavia reflect the particular situation and specific policy and funding provisions for sparsely populating areas. Something that the Finnish and Swedish governments negotiated when they acceded to the EU in 1995.

Mirroring that precedent, and in the wake of a growing wave of public concern and territorial mobilisation around the depopulating "Empty Spain", this issue has gained great prominence in Spain in terms of territorial mobilisation, policy influencing, policy entrepreneurship and ultimately rent-seeking (Pinilla and Sáez 2017), to a much larger extent than other parts of Europe with similar or even bigger demographically declining areas.

This political economy problem is not just about its definition but ultimately about maps. More specifically, this concerns defining a new geography at EU level for the purpose of accessing EU Cohesion funding or granting preferential conditions in accessing public subsidies (EU state aid rules). In other words, to define EU eurorregions. This means creating new geographies in EU policies, legislation and funds that target demographically declining areas with ringfenced and additional support than other areas. This would mirror what already happens with dedicated EU funding or state aid maps for eligible border regions (Galicia-Norte de Portugal, for instance), interregional spaces (Atlantic Area, North West Europe) and EU macroregional areas such as those of the Danube, Baltic, Alpine, etc. (Noferini et al., 2020).

Defining a widely accepted map to describe demographically declining regions both illustrates the geography of a problem and helps advocating for its recognition through the political decision-making process. The aim is to gerrymander the rules that set eligibility of public funds, European, national, or local (Zerbinati, 2012). Paraphrasing Williams (1995) the one that defines something owns it: public policy as rent seeking. Hence territorial mobilisation can be reduced to a competition of alternative definitions and maps.

Defining a public policy problem, is not just about bottom-up campaigning but ultimately rests on the body politic: the institutions recognise it as a public problem, shape policies (Easton, 1965) and ultimately identify beneficiaries through spatial targeting. However, this often clashes with pre-existing policies, their path-dependencies, and their flexibility to address a new problem (Krasner, 1984) or, as in this case, to tackle a long-running problem in a different way. This article will specifically test this by looking at the Spanish territorial mobilisation towards the EU and their impact in shaping the 2021-2027 EU Cohesion funds and state aid rules.

This study aims to address the following research questions:

- Q1. To which extent interest aggregation versus interest competition between territorial actors is able to shape Spain's and EU public policies towards supporting demographically declining territories for the 2021-2027 EU programming period?
- Q2. To which extent existing and new Spanish and EU policy frameworks, strategies and funding are able to overcome path dependencies to address the specific needs to demographically declining territories in the context of EU Cohesion Policy and State Aid review for 2021-2027?

To address these two questions a narrative starting in 2016 (as this year marks the moment where the salience of this issue and its repercussions towards the EU level started becoming really prominent in Spain) will be provided at two levels:

- At Spanish domestic level, an assessment of the territorial actors' ability to organise and influence policy thinking as the Spanish Government attempt to define the EU funding and state aid elements in the first ever "National Strategy Against the Demographic Challenge" ([Spanish Government, 2019a](#)) and its eventual translation into public policy and funding solutions, partly by way of EU Structural Funds allocations and, as a result of COVID-19, Next Generation EU funds.
- At EU level, an assessment of the ability of the said Spanish territorial actors to aggregate interest at EU level and influence the shaping of the post 2020 policy and funding priorities of the EU Cohesion Policy framework, both as regards to the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) 2021-2027 and the related Regional State Aid Guidelines.

2. RESEARCH AND METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

Participant observation since 2016 will be the basis of this work – the author was participant and actor on key parts of the campaigns to be analysed. Following the model proposed by [Dupeyron \(2008\)](#) he closely worked and advised, simultaneously and *pro bono*, all the coalitions and actors described in this article, as a participant *that also* observes following the classification proposed by [Yin \(2010\)](#). As noted by [Jorgensen \(1989, pp. 64-65\)](#) this insider role has unique advantages in the access of information but requires to be able to compartmentalise both roles and to gather information rigorously. However, given that this issue is of high public visibility, with abundant pieces of evidence cited in this research that can be independently verifiable, the author finds that, on balance, the benefits of adding light to a yet unexplored academic research topic outweigh potential concerns on objectivity. In fact, this piece of research can be of use to prompt a wider interest on this topic for future academic literature on political economy, economic geography, and political science.

The focus will be to address network and stakeholder analysis – focusing and starting form on a discrete group of Spanish territorial actors and coalitions – which we will brand as 'Soria', 'Zamora', Southern Sparsely Populated Areas (SSPA) and *Serranía Celtibérica* - identifying issue networks and coalition building as well as assessing their impact in influencing public decisions in Spain and EU level.

It is important to clarify that the focus on these actors alone is due to the fact that they specifically focused their advocacy towards shaping EU rules -either by aiming to influence the Spanish Government's EU negotiating position or directly advocating it at the EU institutions- during the observed period. By contrast, larger and increasingly more influential organisations (such as the National Platform for Emptied Spain or new provincial parties such as *Teruel Existe*) did progressively incorporate these demands towards EU policy change, but in a more reactive way as they were much more focused in shaping Spanish domestic policies rather than the EU's.

3. RELEVANCE OF THE TOPIC

Spain is an outlier. Despite *not* being, by a long distance ([European Commission, 2020](#)), the EU Member State that is suffering the most severe demographic decline in a significant part of its territory (*España Vacía*) it is nevertheless the one where this has reached the

highest levels of public consciousness. Conversely, it features very prominently in the political and party-political agenda.

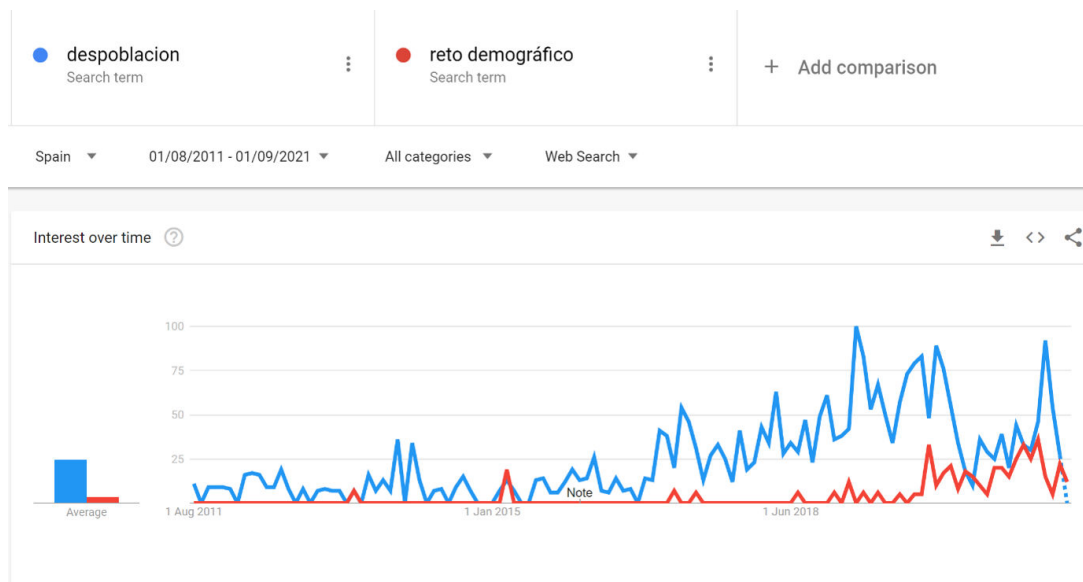
Furthermore, “depopulation” as this issue is colloquially known, is commonly understood in Spanish public discourse mainly as a territorial cohesion problem, and not just as a spatial by-product of economic and employment decisions by individual and economic actors.

With rapid urbanisation following the 1936-1939 Civil War by 2018 over 80% of population lived in the urban areas that make 20% of the territory (Spanish Government, 2019 p.76). Furthermore, 65% of urban *and rural* Spaniards live in flats, the second largest share in the EU (European Union Statistical Office [Eurostat], 2022). Vertical living reflects not only much faster and later urbanisation than the rest of Western Europe (Spanish Government, 2019a) but also the cultural ascendancy of urban living patterns even in rural areas.

Despite this trend, depopulation has long been in the public mind as a political issue (e.g., Delibes, 1978). Its recent pre-eminence, though, started with the coining of the term “Empty Spain” (*España Vacía*) by del Molino (2016). This spawned a new genre of essays (Cerdá, 2017; Andrés Cabello, 2021) and even literature (Gascón, 2020; Lorenzo, 2020). The arrival of democracy in 1978 and Spain’s EU integration saw the expansion of the wellbeing and services in rural and intermediate urban areas (i.e., provincial capitals and cities around 100,000 inhabitants). However, this drastically reversed by the turn of the millennium (Spanish Government, 2019b). This is consistent with worldwide trends towards metropolisation and territorial specialisation (Aurambout et al., 2021)

Del Molino’s coinage of “Empty Spain” reflected a deep state of public consciousness so much that it (involuntarily) lit a fire in the public mood that led to its weaponization by another neologism by 2019: *España Vacuada* (“Empt-IED Spain”) suggesting that depopulation was a premeditated political choice that can be reversed by Politics.

Figure 1. “Depopulation” vs. “Demographic Challenge” in Spain.



Google Trends.

In that, Spain is also peculiar because this new centre-periphery and urban rural cleavage -as in Lipset and Rokkan’s (1967) model - does *not only* fuel hard right movements across the Western World, the so-called *Places that Don’t Matter* or *Geography of Discontent* (Dijkstra et

al., 2018) but also single-issue, centrist-,progressive, very local parties focused on depopulation: the rightwing VOX party started to be electorally successful in 2018 and by 2020 was Spain's third party, governing in coalition Castilla y León since 2022, one of Europe's largest and fast-depopulating regions (Modino and Pardo Fanjul, 2020). This region, alongside neighbouring Aragón, has also seen the recent emergence of electorally successful progressive-leaning political parties (*Soria Ya* and particularly *Teruel Existe*) representing a single province and focused primarily of the depopulation issue.

The Spanish peculiarity in Europe is that reformist territorial actors specifically protesting against depopulation have also broken into the nationwide political and policy arena, often after years when not decades of predominantly local activism (Amézaga and Marti, 2012): the most prominent are *Teruel Existe* (Teruel province in Aragon) and *Soria Ya* (the Soria province of the Castilla y León region is the least populated province in Spain). *Teruel Existe* won one MP at the 2019 General Election, a first for a provincial party, and key to prop the minority left-wing coalition government. *Soria Ya* won three parliamentarians at the 2022 Castilla y León regional elections. This is the third wave of Spain "new politics" since 2014 following the arrival of left-wing *Podemos*, liberal *Ciudadanos* and then VOX, upending 30 years of imperfect bipartisanship of PSOE/PP plus Catalan/Basque/Galician nationalists (Torcal and Christman, 2020; Barbeito and Iglesias, 2021, Rotger, 2020). With Cuenca (Castilla la Mancha region) these provinces are part of the *Sistema Ibérico* mountain range and its local movements are the most visible pillars of a new Spain-wide platform predictably called *España Vacuada*.

These movements-turned-parties are, however, just the most visible of a series of territorial actors against depopulation. Others are more specifically focused in just shaping Spanish and EU legal definitions, public policy and goods including EU funds post 2020. This paper will focus on those.

The EU has always had a disproportionate effect in framing Spanish territorial development policies. Urban and rural Spain are among the main beneficiaries of ESIF, including Rural Development (European Commission, 2022a). In Spain, a public policy problem tends to be defined as a legal concept first and only ancillary as an economic one, reflecting the weight of Spain's French-derived legalism and in contrast with New Public Management logics prevalent in other countries (Pollit and Bouckaert, 2011). The fight against *depopulation* is not an exception (Fernández Tomás et al., 2012).

Thus, this problem is framed primarily as rights and obligations that must be recognised -by definitions and maps- at national and EU level (application of the EU Treaty objective of Territorial Cohesion to those areas, vid. Margaras,2016) and that must be addressed by changing rules by way of *rural proofing* (Vernis et al., 2022).

This Spanish overreliance on "Europe" makes Spanish public policymaking (and territorial actors campaigning) hostage of EU path-dependencies and silos. The complex relationship between the Commission's Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policies (DG REGIO) and the Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development (DG AGRI) and their respective policy communities very much reflect Niskanen's (1974) bureaucrat utility maximisation model.

4. STAKEHOLDER ANALYSIS

Though *Soria Ya* and *Teruel Existe* are the most visible signs of this growing Spanish territorial mobilisation against depopulating inland Spain, this paper aims to scope the organisational ecosystem of territorial actors whose advocacy and policy initiatives eventually

spill-over to the public policy domain, particularly given the often-reactive posture of both the Spanish and EU institutions around depopulation.

Even if there are other influential territorial actors (e.g. the Spanish Network for Rural Development) for the purposes of the definition of depopulating areas in the EU Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and in regional state aid, the key actors were the campaign started by the mayor of Soria (hence we will call it the ‘Soria’ campaign), SSPA (i.e. the business organisations from Teruel, Soria and Cuenca), the Ourense Provincial Council and the so-called the National Board of Provincial Councils against Depopulation led by Zamora Provincial Council (*vid. Table 1*).

Table 1. Spanish depopulation territorial actors’ stakeholder mapping. Author’s elaboration

	Soria	SSPA	Serranía Celtibérica	Zamora	Ourense
Type	Public	Private mainly	Academic, voluntary	Public	Public
Range	Local, National, EU	Local, National, EU	Local, National, EU	Local, National	Local, National, EU
Priority Focus	Definition, EU Funding	Definition, EU Funding, State Aid	Definition	EU funding, State Aid	Definition, EU Funding
Hearing by:					
-Spanish Government	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes*	Yes*
-Spanish Congress	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
-European Commission	Yes	Yes	No	Yes*	No
-MEP	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
EU allies and platforms	CEMR* CoR	RUMRA* NSPA*	REDN-SESPA		Partenalia
National allies and platforms	FEMP* Prof. Molina El Hueco	CEOE* Soria, Teruel, Cuenca Provinces & Local Action Groups Univ. Zaragoza Hueco* Soria Ya*	Colegio Oficial de Ingenieros de Montes	Soria* SSPA* FEMP* Ourense*	FEMP* Zamora*
Media outreach	Local, National	Local, National	Local, National	Local	Local

Source: Author’s elaboration

* denotes partial connection

The mayor of Soria (Spain’s smallest provincial capital, less than 40,000 inhabitants) campaign was the more political. It used the window of opportunity -as in [Tarrow \(1988, p.77\)](#)- and institutional access resulting from his membership of the Spanish Municipalities and Provinces Federation (FEMP) Managing Board and, through it, the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR) where he was Vice-President during the observed time.

This ensured that FEMP and particularly CEMR assumed ownership of this topic, providing direct access to the EU Committee of the Regions (CoR), the territorial assembly bringing together a selection of subnational elected members, nominated by each MS government. CoR’s bureaucracy benefits from its EU official status and has a privileged access to EU policymaking and interinstitutional legislative negotiations at EU level in certain EU

policy areas close to its remit, such as Cohesion Policy (Piattoni and Schönlaue, 2015; Pazos-Vidal, 2019a).

In turn, this made possible to influence the European Parliament ESIF 2021-2027 negotiations, essentially via Spanish MEPs. They were instrumental in framing the first ever definition of what is a demographically declining sub-regional territory (provincial or local) for the purposes of prioritising ESIF allocations (or, more specifically, the ERDF Regulation for the 2021-2027 funding period).

For simplicity, we will call this the ‘Soria’ initiative. It would be challenging to call it an advocacy coalition in the sense of the looser, Type II multilevel coalition of Hooghe and Marks (2003), as many of the actors were not directly in touch with each other – nor they were aware of being part of this collective, as their involvement was sequential and diachronic. Rather than an issue network they implicitly formed a loose epistemic community. Shared national background was key as most of the actors were Spanish and thus aware of the importance of this topic in the Spanish public arena.

Serranía Celtibérica is a small but active territorial advocacy group that is centred in professor Burillo Mozota (2020) and Burillo Cuadrado (Burillo Cuadrado et al; 2019). This initiative is both an attempt to research and define a new geography as is a territorial entrepreneurship movement for rent-seeking purposes. It is a good example of how territorial actors with limited resources displayed under the mantle of academic authority and a clever use of maps can have disproportionate effect in public discourse. Even if, as we shall see, ultimately this does not translate into specific public policy decisions.

The ‘Zamora’ initiative, more explicitly the National Board of Provincial Councils against Depopulation (Pazos-Vidal, 2021a) was an attempt at territorial mobilisation of Spain’s intermediate territorial authorities -sitting between the over 8,000 municipalities and the 17 autonomous *regions*- both in terms of problem definition but also in terms of shaping national spatial targeting of EU funds and state aid. Zamora is Spain’s and one of Europe’s most rapidly declining provinces. Having declined 10% in 2010-2020 it is expected to decline a further 18% by 2050 (Spanish Government 2021a, p.257). It is an example that by benefiting from its institutional status the policy entrepreneurialism of a single *Diputación* (provincial council) can lead a wider territorial coalition. However, this also carries some institutional and party-political constraints.

Ourense Provincial Council is key to this narrative. Like Zamora, it is one of one of Western Europe’s most rapidly declining territories (Copus et. al, 2020). It also a good example that actors are not unitary. On the one hand its political leadership used its membership of FEMP’s Board and Ourense’s chairmanship of a small pan-European (though mainly Spanish) territorial advocacy network, *Partenalia*, to autonomously influence EU decisions – tough not necessarily in a positive way -vid. Infra-. Separately, and rather autonomously from the political level, its officer-level policy entrepreneurs cooperated with Soria and, more openly, with the ‘Zamora’ campaigns.

Southern Sparsely Populated Areas (SSPA) is a significantly different actor as it clearly aimed from the start to influence the EU agenda (its name is in English in the original) and does not come from the public sector, but from the provincial chapters of the Spanish Employer’s Federation (CEOE, key in Spain corporatist model of collective bargaining) of Soria, Teruel, and Cuenca. These provinces have the lowest population density in Spain (Copus et al., 2020). SSPA aims to seek recognition at EU level for those three provinces explicitly mirroring the Northern Sparsely Populated Areas (NSPA). Those were recognised in the EU Accession Treaties of Sweden and Finland and benefit from a range of recognition in terms of ESIF, state aid and territorial cooperation programmes. Building on previous pilot

programmes -e.g., "INTERREG Laponias Conectadas" (Núñez Tortosa, 2018)- SSPA aims to articulate similarly low densely districts of Southern Europe (Greece, Croatia) but is in practice only a Spanish campaign group aiming to shape EU agenda and through its Spanish EU funded and state aid programmes – (SSPA, 2020a).

It is no coincidence that so many of these initiatives originate from part of the same *Sistema Ibérico* mountain range in North-eastern Spain, coterminous with the so-called *Serranía Celtibérica*, or 'Southern Siberia'. Their shared low density, low endogenous territorial capital cuts across regional boundaries. This is problematic in a political system that is very party-politicised with is reluctant to transboundary solutions (de la Peña Varona and Mondragon Ruíz de Lezana, 2021; Vila Lage et al; 2020). Cuenca, Teruel, and Soria belong to three different regions governed by each of the two major parties. As a reaction of their shared problem and the awareness that the regional boundaries often impede interregional cooperation within Spain (Vila Lage et al; 2020), these provinces have a degree of territorial mobilisation and inter-territorial cooperation that until recently had been unheard of elsewhere, including Ourense and Zamora (Pazos-Vidal, 2022). Only when these three provinces managed to bring their campaigning into the national agenda mirror initiatives sprang up elsewhere.

While this narrative will pivot around the above-mentioned campaigns, other national or EU organisations that operating autonomously from them provide have a supporting, enabling, or hampering role.

At national level, *El Hueco*, also from Soria, stands out: half NGO (originally an international development charity), half social enterprise and coworking is the most cross-party and intersectional organisation, to the point that is able to bring together (May 2021) the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition and all parties to a seminar in Soria on Rural Proofing. It holds annually Spain's largest trade fair on initiatives against depopulation (Vernis, 2021).

From academia, Spain's first-ever Chair on Depopulation, in Zaragoza University (Professors Sáenz and Pinilla) and *Universidad Complutense* Geography Chair Mercedes Molina (2019) have contributed to highlight the issues of "problem-territories" and, sometimes involving themselves in the SSPA and Soria campaigning, respectively.

Actors are not unitary and this is even truer than in the case of FEMP and the Spanish rural development network (REDR). The former had its own campaign and Demographic Commission that operated separately from the 'Soria','Zamora' and 'Ourense' campaigns, despite various attempts to link up with FEMP, in whose board the political leaders of Soria and Ourense sat. Following the logic of collective action (Olson, 1971) FEMP seeks to exercise and maintain its own privileged link with and rent-see from the Spanish Government and Parliament. REDR, working in tandem with the Agriculture Ministry, tried to influence the EU agenda solely around the EU Common Agricultural Policy and its local development strand (LEADER), instead of towards EU Cohesion Policy.

Widely at EU level, related pan-European networks Euromontana and *Ruralité-Environnement-Développement* (RED) are firmly part of the CAP policy community and the Conference of Peripheral and Maritime Regions (CPMR) is centred around peripheral regions -depopulated or not- and squarely focuses on the EU Regional Policy community and benefits for their membership (Euromontana, CPMR, NSPA, 2020; Pazos-Vidal, 2019b). In other words, the Spanish campaigns could count on some sympathy but not active support.

Lastly, EU Institutions (Commission, Council of the EU and Parliament) the Spanish Government and in particular its *Commissioner* and later Secretary General against the Demographic challenge (together with the 17 autonomous governments, which amount to half

of Spain's public expenditure and with vast law-making powers in economic development and social services) are not -and contrary to the pluralist paradigm of [Dahl \(1961\)](#)- mere black boxes that aggregate or mediate between interests. They have their own institutional agendas, path dependencies and silos. For brevity's sake their actions and priorities will be discussed as part of the narrative that will now follow.

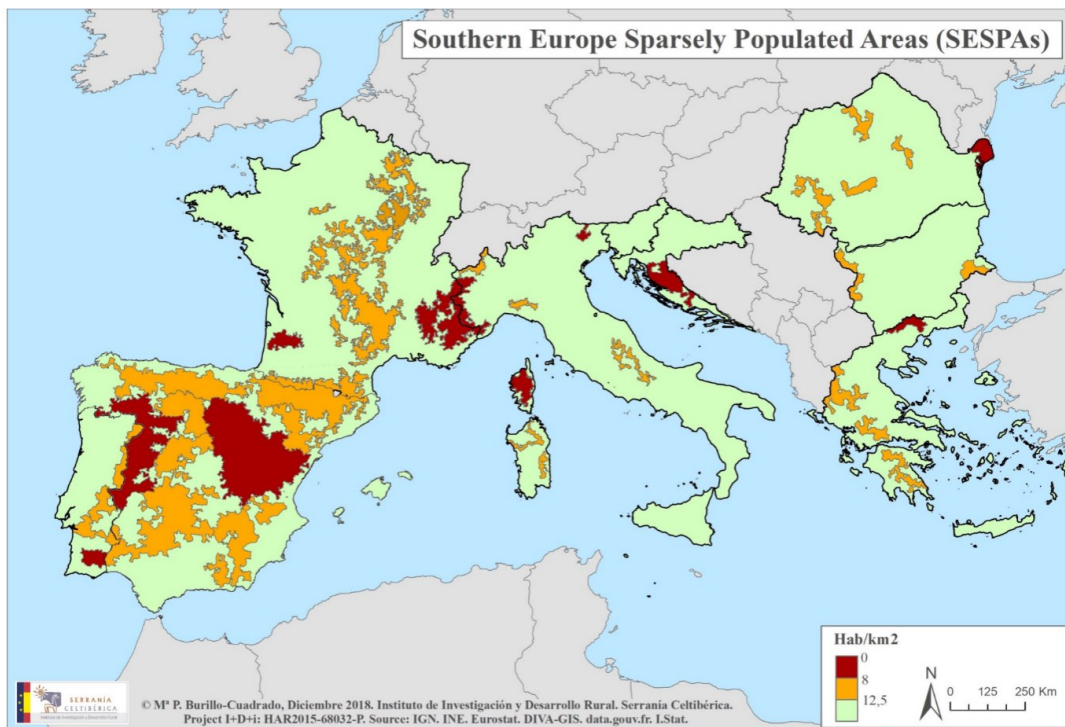
5. SPATIAL TARGETING

[Del Molino's \(2016\)](#) "Empty Spain" (inadvertently) launched a whole political movement as it morphed into "Emptied Spain" in 2019 as Provincial campaign groups started linking up to organised a large -still by then cross-party- demonstration in Madrid ([Pazos-Vidal, 2019b](#)). Competing definitions and mapping soon sprang up sprang up. Soon, following the template of *Teruel Existe* and *Soria Ya* a national platform and kernel of federation of local parties emerged ([España Vacuada, 2021](#)).

That terminological transformation is not innocent as neither is the attempt by the *Serranía* group to brand what is colloquially known in Spain as "depopulation" as *demonastasia* instead ([Burillo Cuadrado, 2019](#)): both politically loaded neologisms aiming to depict the abandonment of large swathes of Spain as a conscious act by political and economic operators.

Likewise, the use of maps is key to articulate a definition of the problem and provide a visually powerful campaigning tool. The first of such competing maps was that of *Serranía* in 2017 ([Burillo Mozota, 2020, Figure 2](#)). Using population decline at municipal level it reveals a geography hidden under the boundaries between Spanish regions and provinces. Cutting across them their map aims to define a new macrorregion to craft (for policy planning and rent-seeking purposes) a new, shared *Serranía Celtibérica* identity. This map, as visual expression of the campaign, had great success in mobilising public opinion and is frequently used by media.

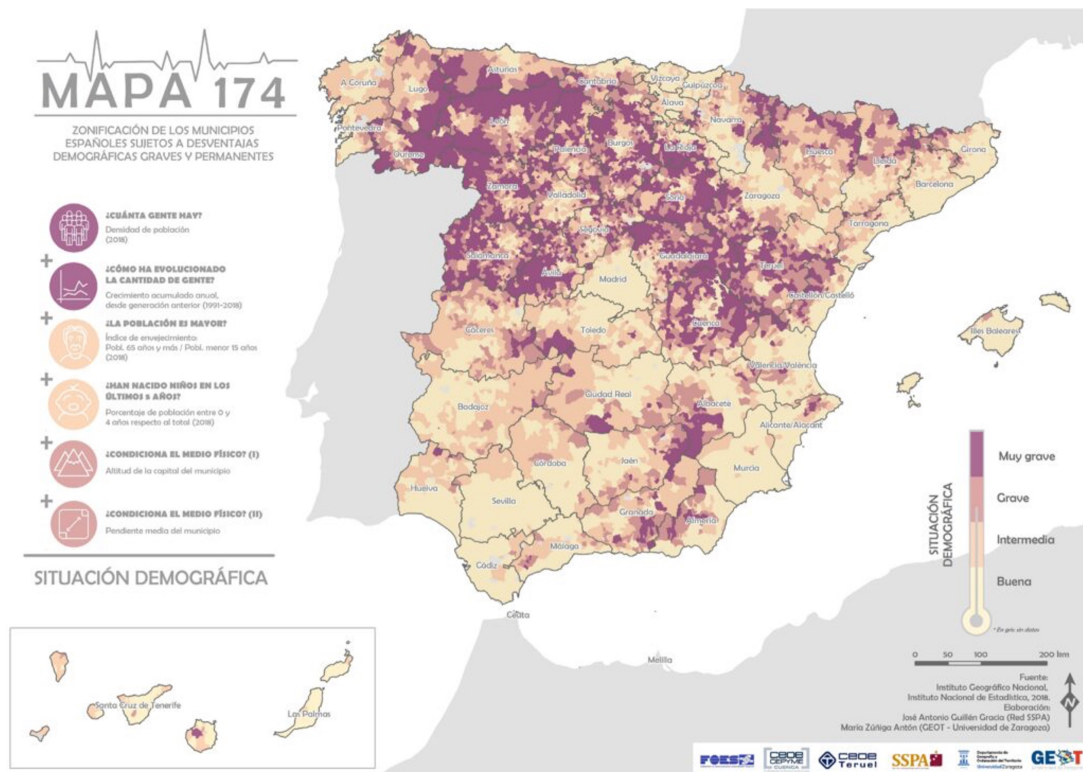
Figure 2. Serranía Celtibérica and other Southern Europe Sparsely Populated Areas.



Burillo Mozota (2020)

Tellingly, *SSPA (2020a)*, instead of building upon the *Serranía* map, decided to create a new one the “Mapa 174” in 2020 (*Figure 3*) -Article 174 TFEU being the one that seeks to support depopulating areas. This is another telling example of how EU legal and policy frameworks are utilised to frame domestic policy problems in Spain. Both are composite maps (they choose and combine a set of variables and weightings) and are politically motivated: they seek wider recognition of the problem both at Spanish and EU scale – but, crucially, highlighting their respective sponsored territories.

Figure 3. SSPA 174 Map (SSPA, 2020b). Drafted by María Zúñiga and José Antonio Guillén (SSPA)



The same spatial targeting, rent-seeking gerrymandering calculation operated in producing by the ‘Soria’ group first-ever definition of demographically declining areas in the ERDF - (Figure 4), whose genesis will be discussed below, first crafted in June 2018 as an amendment to the draft ERDF Regulation. Its vast scope -much larger than the other two- is due to the fact that given that the multilevel and disperse nature of EU decision-making its promoters believed that the only chance of seeing it included into the ERDF Regulation 2021/1058 -which sets ERDF fund eligibility for the 2021-2027 period (Pazos-Vidal, 2021b)- was to obtain the maximum distributive effect across the EU (vid. map in Figure 6) in order to gather a sufficiently wide advocacy coalition.

Figure 4. ERDF definition of demographically declining areas

(Recital 45) The ERDF should address the problems of disadvantaged areas, **in particular rural areas and areas which suffer from severe and permanent natural or demographic handicaps**, including demographic decline, in accessing basic services, including digital services, enhancing attractiveness for investment, including through business investments and connectivity to large markets. In doing so, the ERDF should pay attention to specific development challenges encountered by certain island, border or mountain regions. Furthermore, the ERDF should pay particular attention to the specific difficulties of areas at NUTS level 3 and **local administrative unit level, as referred to in Regulation (EC) No 1059/2003 of the European Parliament and of the Council (20), that are sparsely populated, in accordance with the criteria set out in point 161 of the Guidelines on Regional State Aid 2014-2020, namely those that have a population density of less than 12,5 inhabitants per square kilometre, or areas that have suffered from an average annual population decrease of at least 1 % of inhabitants over the 2007-2017 period.** Member States should consider developing specific **voluntary** action plans at local level for such areas to counter these population challenges.

Article 10

Support for disadvantaged areas

In accordance with Article 174 TFEU, the ERDF shall pay special attention to addressing the challenges of disadvantaged regions and areas, in particular rural areas and areas which suffer from severe and permanent natural or demographic handicaps. Member States shall, where appropriate, set out an integrated approach to addressing demographic challenges or specific needs of such regions and areas in their partnership agreements **in accordance with point (i) of the first subparagraph of Article 11 of Regulation (EU) 2021/1060.** Such an integrated approach may include a commitment on dedicated funding for that purpose.

(Pazos-Vidal, 2021b)

6. GOVERNMENTAL AND EU RESPONSES

Naming is not innocent. Contrary to rent-seeking campaign groups, rent-giving institutions have to balance competing demands from many other interest groups. Thus, the Commission and Spanish Government needed to highlight that in addition to depopulation there are wider societal trends (ageing, metropolisation, etc.) at play. The Spanish Government prefers to speak of “Demographic Challenge” and the EU about “demography” or “demographic change”: since 2019 there is a Vice-presidency on Democracy and Demography. The latter term gained wider currency under the landmark 2018 MEP Report by Iratxe Garcia ([European Parliament, 2017](#)), despite Garcia being very loosely part of the ‘Soria’ coalition.

Likewise, neither Spain nor the EU were actively seeking a narrower definition to that of EU Treaties’ Article 174 TFEU. This does not mean, however, that they were merely reacting to campaign groups: both exercised considerable degree of policy entrepreneurialism.

In the case of the Spanish Government, its focus on “demographic challenge” was initially a reactive one as the Conference of Presidents the 17 regional premiers requested this to become a nationwide priority and the Conservative Prime Minister Rajoy duly followed suit in January 2017 by appointing by Royal Decree 40/2017 a Commissioner within its Office, reflecting the emerging strong headwinds in public opinion. The demand was also as a by-product of the still unresolved review of the financial settlement for the regions. This is a very sensitive agenda where demographic decline and geographical dispersion are key bones

of contention. Unusually for the heavy partisanship of Spanish territorial politics (Fernández Albertos and Lago, 2015), ‘depopulation’ cuts across party-political allegiances.

However, once the new left-wing minority coalition was assembled in early 2018 the Government’s posture moved from reactive to proactive. The new Commissioner put together from scratch what became the first National Guidelines against the Demographic Challenge, approved by the Cabinet just before that year early elections of April 2019 (Spanish Government, 2019a). These Guidelines were *noted* more than endorsed, (thus implicitly not accepting it as a national *strategy*) by the regional premiers in the 24th Conference of Presidents in Salamanca in July 2021, the non-statutory gathering of regional premiers chaired by the Prime Minister. The Guidelines are to be delivered through the 130 Measures Plan (Spanish Government, 2021c) put together a year later the back of the COVID-19 crisis to be financed by the EU extraordinary funding package Next Generation EU (NGEU), committing up to 10 billion euro to depopulation projects across Spain. Tellingly, there is not as such as a single definition of ‘depopulation’ in these governmental documents.

Having said that, the crafting of the various maps and definitions were separate but symbiotic processes: the *Serranía* map was the inspiration for the ‘Soria’ group’s attempt to define demographically declining areas in the ERDF Regulation. Conversely, the ‘Soria’ campaign was in close contact with the Spanish Demographic Commissioner’s office as it was drafting the national guidelines. Two maps included in the Spanish Government Guidelines are based in the *Soria* definition, as by then there was growing expectation that the ‘Soria’ definition would be indeed included in the ERDF Regulation to spatially target EU regional development funds. By contrast and despite widespread media exposure of the *Serranía* campaign, it was never acknowledged by the Government, judging it as being promoted by a non-representative enough campaign, a map whose boundaries were too wide and outwith existing administrative boundaries for it to be operational. The same can be said of the SSPA 174 Map (SSPA, 2020a), crafted in October 2020 when EU fund negotiations were about to conclude, hence more than influencing EU policy and legislative formulation it aimed at increasing the visibility of SSPA’s campaign in Spain to influence national delivery of EU funds.

7. EU LEVEL CAMPAIGNING

In its 7th Cohesion Report, the European Commission (2017) did introduce demographic decline as a potentially significant theme for the 2021-2020 ESIF programming period. In order to secure regional governments mobilisation in support of EU Cohesion Policy, particularly those from large or net contributing MS, at the start of a new policy cycle it is a recurrent tactic of DG REGIO to put forward a new topic that can act as a rallying cry for the continuation of the Cohesion funding: phasing-out regions affected by the 2004 enlargement, transition regions in 2014, etc. (Pazos-Vidal, 2019a; Wobben, 2021). Demographic decline was going to be one of such topics.

However, in the end the draft ESIF Regulations 2021-2027 tabled by the Commission in May 2018 failed to include neither demography as a thematic priority let alone a definition in the Regulation.

The fact that depopulation was not tackled in ESIF was what prompted the ‘Soria’ campaign from moving to general EU advocacy to targeted lobbying. Using the above-mentioned institutional memberships and access at its disposal namely CoR (2018) through its Rijsberman Opinion), and the access of key (Spanish) MEPs close to the ESIF legislative negotiations it managed to formally introduce the above-mentioned definition in the interinstitutional EU negotiations.

While this policy scoping process is described in detail in Pazos-Vidal (2021b) what is relevant for this article is to highlight the conflicting multilevel dynamics and campaigns that shaped that process.

The 'Soria' definition was ultimately successful and (if only pyrrhically so) because it was wide enough to achieve distributional effects EU-wide *and*, crucially, because some of its promoters enjoyed a level of institutional access to the decision making that was simply not available to the other campaign studied here.

The key move was placing the 'Soria'-drafted definition in the official CoR position on ERDF 2021-2027. Literature shows that Cohesion policy is one of the few dossiers where CoR has clear influence in the EU decision-making process (Wasseberg, 2020). Because its Rijsberman Opinion had strong cross-parry support at CoR it was politically palatable that the same Pan-European groups could incorporate it in the European Parliament's negotiating position. Again, the Spanish connection played to the 'Soria' campaign's advantage: MEPs Iratxe García (Socialist, Castilla y León) and Conservative Ramon Luis Valcárcel recent Murcia region's and CoR President and, crucially post 2019 elections, liberal MEP Susana Solís (Asturian and ERDF 2021-2027 shadow rapporteur) were instrumental in achieving it.

It was thus Valcárcel and García who inserted the 'Soria'/CoR definition in the draft parliamentary report (European Parliament, 2019). It helped that the Rapporteur was Italian Socialist MEP Andrea Cozzolino, Italy being a country that already has a national strategy for what they call Internal Areas (Mantino and Lucatelli, 2016), which inspired the emerging Spanish demographic strategy.

However, while the Spanish connection was a strong asset throughout the entire 'Soria' campaign it was also a drawback: MEPs were equally available to competing Spanish campaigns. Both *Serranía* and 'Ourense'/Partenalia very publicly sought in September 2018 -via Mr Valcárcel- to influence the 'Soria' definition by way of widening it in order to better include their respectively sponsored territories.

While this multiple territorial lobbying was never carried out in open hostility it almost led to these three campaigns cancelling each other out. If this was not the case was mainly due to the relaxed stance taken by MEPs accepting voter-pleasing proposals ahead of their 2019 elections, in full knowledge that it would be up to a new set of MEPs to negotiate the final deal with the 27 MS sitting at the Council of the EU.

Thus, MEPs accepted the 'Ourense'/*Serranía* version amending the narrower 'Soria' definition by going down from the Eurostat's Nomenclature of Territorial Statistical Units (NUTS) NUTS3 level (provinces, counties) to Local Authority Units or LAU (municipalities or groups of them) adding a supplementary and lower population density criterion (Figure. 3).

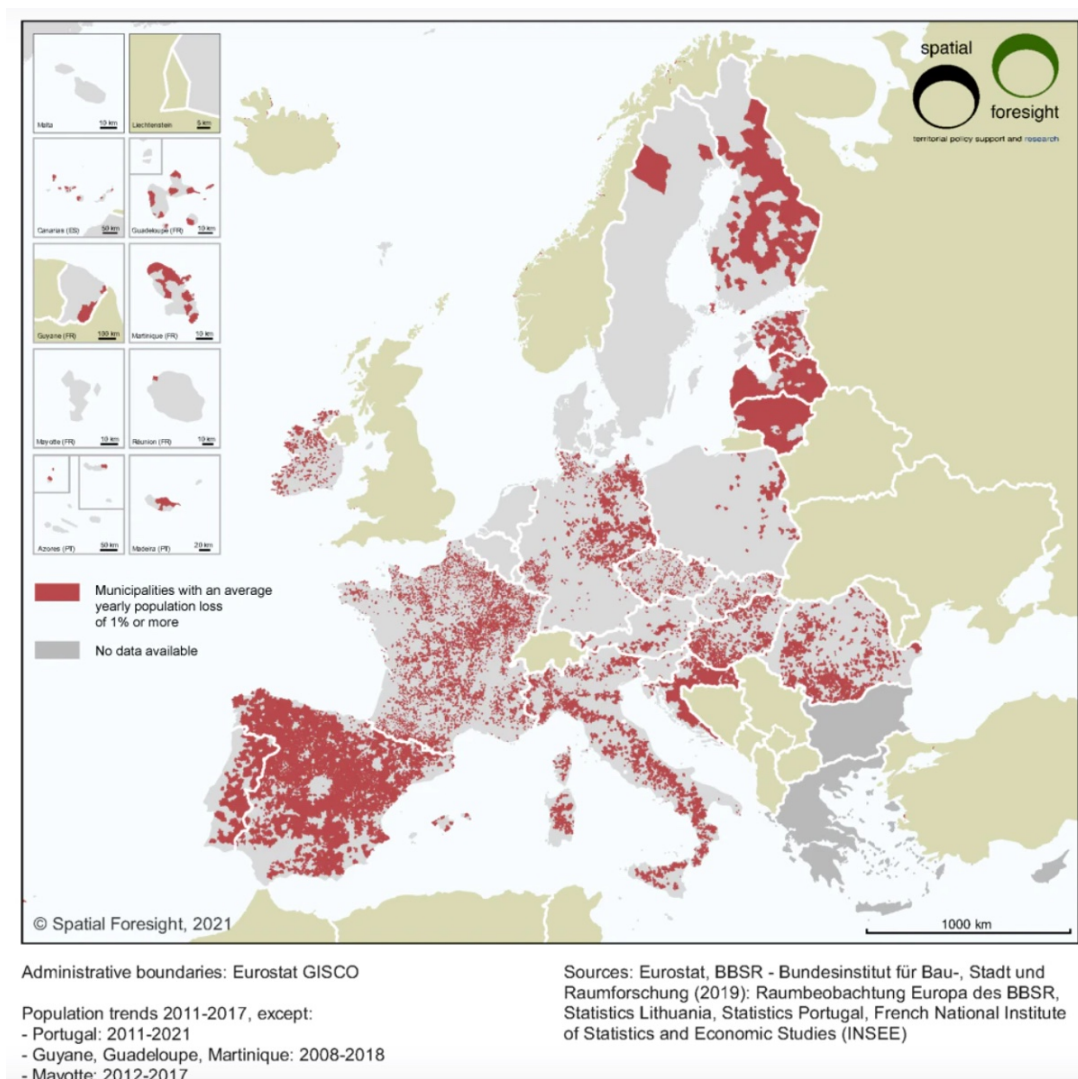
Furthermore, in addition to agreeing such a composite and much looser definition, in this pre-election mood MEPs also made its official negotiating position to earmark 5% of national ERDF allocations (€12bn EU-wide) to the territories covered by this definition, mirroring the same earmark that has long existed in the EU Rural Development fund (EAFRD) to support so-called LEADER local development projects.

Once *trilogue* negotiations (Commission, Parliament, and Council of the EU) properly started in late 2020 (after a long pandemic-induced impasse) it was clear that MS did not support the Parliament's proposal of a (or any) definition let alone the 5% earmark. There were several reasons for that: the MS representatives at Council in charge of ESIF come mainly from the national Ministries of Finance. Unlike territorial development ministries, many of their officials are auditors by training with an actuarial approach of *juste retour*; all EU funding programmes negotiations play always second fiddle to the separate intergovernmental negotiations on the EU Multiannual Financial Framework, where MS operate only through a

utility maximization mode. Understandably, MS never like to be imposed an EU definition let alone an EU-imposed earmark that would limit their financial and policy discretion.

Even the Spanish government position in the negotiations was ambiguous despite public support for the above-described definition. Though the newly created Secretariat General under the new Vice Presidency for the Demographic Challenge was privately sympathetic, the Finance ministry, a much more senior department, was no different in its approach that any of its 26 other counterparts. Furthermore, unlike in Spain where depopulation is seen as a *territorial* problem in other MS this is seen mainly through the prism of brain drain or at most a problem of *nationwide* (as opposed to local or regional) loss of population. This was evident in the 2019 CoR's Boc Opinion (Romanian rapporteur) and Karácsony Opinion (Hungarian) as well as the 2019 Buda MEP report (also Romanian) (Pazos-Vidal, 2021b).

Figure 5. Share of population living in municipalities with a population decline above 1% per year between 2011 and 2017, by Member State (as per ERDF definition).



Gloeksen and Böhme (2022)

The Commission, after failing to make any proposal on the population in its draft ERDF Regulation, felt compelled to defend its proposal as originally tabled. It went as far as publicly showing its scepticism over the 'Soria'/CoR/MEP position in July 2019, arguing it was too

open-ended and non-operational definition, clearly siding with the MS whose support it needed for other parts of the negotiations that judged far more critical for the survival of EU Cohesion Policy.¹

Quite unsurprisingly, the 5% earmark was quickly abandoned in the *trilogues* by September 2020. However, the definition *did* survive into the final deal, reached in December 2020, but was further tweaked and moved to a Recital 45 to narrow its scope and limit its legal compulsion over MS. If it was approved at all was because the 'Soria' campaign, now fronted almost exclusively by Ms Solis MEP, was able to rely throughout the *trilogues* on a small technical structure advising her. Using Commission's own data and maps plus those of the European Spatial Planning Observation Network (ESPON) throughout the November to December 2020 *trilogues* it was possible to counter repeated attempts by MS, Commission, and the rest of the MEP negotiators to discard it and move on. Thus, the 'Soria' campaign was successful by its privileged access to the negotiations and a rather robust use of [Olson's \(1971\)](#) logic of collective action.

However, once again the Spanish connection of 'Soria' coalition was a drawback, for once the deal was reached in December 2020, the other two Spanish campaigns (SSPA and *Serranía*) tried to unpick the deal or, rather, tweak it more closely towards their own position. Their very public argument was that it was far too wide a definition – precisely the very reason that after a very uneven struggle it was eventually accepted by MS and Commission- is quite revealing of the insular when simply non-cooperative nature of Spanish territorial advocacy, even if it by then it was by then very unlikely that the definition would be renegotiated.

That this topic of depopulation-as-territorial problem let alone the proposed definition did not have further traction at the European level can be attributed to a number of reasons:

Firstly, the different notions of demographic decline as a policy problem - what in Spain is seen as a territorial issue in other MS is seen as a by-product of wider socio-economic problems.

Secondly, the Spanish campaigns were not able to mobilise other pan-European territorial interest because of EU path-dependencies and silos. The Scandinavian NSPA group, while sympathetic, was reluctant to openly engage in this issue given that they already have Treaty provision protecting their status and were not particularly keen for any other group to overshadow their own campaigning.

Other established groups for rural areas such as the European Network of Local Action Groups (ELARD), Euromontana and RED were tied to the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) community around the Commission's DG AGRI, and to the European Parliament via the Rural, Mountainous and Remote Areas (RUMRA) cross-party intergroup. Their priority for the post 2020 period was promoting the *Cork Declaration* -rural proofing, smart villages- a territorial agenda for rural areas ([Visvizi et al., 2019](#); [Pazos-Vidal, 2019b](#)) which was promoted as an alternative to DG REGIO-led EU Urban Agenda. These territorial networks are heavily influenced by French territorial actors, focused on influencing CAP. Despite France being affected by relative depopulation -the "*diagonale du vide*" as a hotspot of the "*gilets jaunes*" movement ([Pannier-Runacher, 2019](#)) their territorial actors remain firmly centred on CAP. Thus, these networks did not have an incentive to support alternative agendas sponsored by

¹ Moray Gilland to this author on 2 July 2019. DG REGIO Seminar "The Commission's cohesion policy proposals for 2021-2027 & state of negotiations".

rather new (Spanish) bodies: for instance, SSPA was a latecomer into EU lobbying scene and, though a quick learner, only belatedly joined the RUMRA intergroup in 2021.

For the horizontal territorial networks (CPMR, Eurocities and others) depopulation was not a priority in the narrow terms defended from the Spanish promoters. Even CEMR branding of the ‘Soria’ campaign was clearly a fig leaf exercise to endorse what was an exclusively a Spanish advocacy effort. It could be said that considering the narrow support and various coalitions it was an achievement that some definition was agreed at all.

8. FROM EU FUNDING POLICYMAKING TO NATIONAL DELIVERY

EU policy priorities have shifted since 2018. In 2014-2020 DG AGRI’s Rural Development fund EAFRD was part of ESIF Common Strategic Framework and all ESIF interventions including EAFRD was to be aligned by way of Partnership Agreement at national level. At delivery level it was possible to deliver ERDF, European Social Fund and EAFRD jointly by way of integrated territorial instruments ITI, CLLD etc. However, in 2018 DG AGRI proposed to move EAFRD from the ESIF architecture and embedded it with CAP Pillar I (agricultural support) through a single EU Regulation (Regulation 2021/2115) and at national delivery level via the new national CAP Strategic Plans (Pazos-Vidal 2019b; Bachtler et al; 2019). AGRI built from the so-called *Cork 2.0 Declaration* a new “Rural Pact” launched in December 2021 (European Commission, 2021a) as alternative to, complementary but separate from, DG REGIO’s Cohesion Policy’s “Partnership Agreement” and “place-based” paradigm that underpins the EU Structural Funds.

The ground shifted more widely with the new Von der Leyen Commission, in office since November 2019. Demography unexpectedly became not only a REGIO or AGRI advocacy issue but to concern the whole Commission (Von der Leyen, 2019). The first-ever Commission Vice President for Democracy and Demography was appointed. This paradigm shift was previously sponsored by the European People’s Party from which Ms Von der Leyen hails (demographic decline as a threat to Europe’s social fabric) and is quite similar to the vision of the demographic crisis espoused from Eastern Europe and, to an extent, to the above-mentioned “geographies of discontent” vision: hence the link between demography and democracy. With initially mainly the support of AGRI –later joined more actively by REGIO-, Vice-President Šuica launched in June 2020 a Demographic report -i.e., not a Strategy- (European Commission, 2020) and in June 2021 a Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas (European Commission, 2021b).

Against this new background, the new definition of demographically declining areas in ERDF Regulation only marginally benefited. While it was now possible to have a clear demographic priority to spatially target EU funds in the national Partnership Agreements (setting out the broad investment priorities) and at regional level via Operational Programmes, DG REGIO was in two minds about it: at officer level, its policy entrepreneurs belatedly sought to capitalise on the definition by drafting some EU-wide “Good practices to address demographic decline” for ERDF 2021-2027 programmes that were commissioned and finalised by October 2021 (Gloeksen and Böhme, 2022). They remain unpublished. However, REGIO’s senior political level remained lukewarm on explicitly calling MS to invest significant amounts of ERDF in demographic programmes. It did, however, include demography in the new 8th Cohesion Report (European Commission, 2022a).

Hence it is hardly surprising that in Spain, given the dominance of the Ministry of Finance of the ESIF programming, with the same path dependency (focus on ESIF absorption and aversion to risk when tackling open-ended territorial problems such as depopulation) being

replicated in the 17 Autonomous governments, it is not expected that any ESIF Operational Programme (to be submitted to the Commission in mid-2022) will have a demographic priority and spatial targeting based on the ERDF definition: the Spanish Government's Partnership Agreement with the Commission on the 2021-2027 ESIF funds allocation only foresees demographic decline as a cross-cutting, optional possibility entirely left to each regions' discretion (Gobierno de España, 2022, pp. 201-202).

Furthermore, despite the Spanish Government setting depopulation as a policy priority worthy of a Vice Presidency (also responsible for Ecological Transition/Climate Change) with coordinating role of demographic policies of the Spanish Government its outcomes are so far limited. This is despite having a new Cabinet subcommittee and a Sectoral Conference with the 17 Autonomous Communities, in turn supported by a new Secretariat General for Demographic Challenge that replaced the Commissioner and which has an enhanced policy entrepreneurial role (and a budget of €55 million).

At policy level, despite many the Spanish regions committing to Laws and strategies against depopulation, Castilla la Mancha more notably but also Aragón, Galicia, Navarra, Castilla y León and Extremadura, regions refused to sign up and tie their plans and policies into a nationwide Depopulation Strategy – the Conference of Presidents held in Salamanca provided the opportunity but pointedly avoided to do it (Gobierno de España, 2021b). This fits the weak and party-politicised pattern of Spanish intergovernmental relations described by Colino (2020). The above-mentioned Guidelines, done at the request of the regional premiers, remain a Spanish Government orientation document only.

At investment level, neither the ESIF Operational Programmes programmes (mainly regional, some nationwide) nor the promised 10bn NGEU Investments for depopulation, managed by ministries centrally geared to depopulation use the agreed ERDF definition or the other alternative definitions cutting across territorial boundaries. Instead of NGEU funds for depopulation projects are allocated based on population of individual municipalities distributed by way of nationwide competitive bidding. In addition to disincentivising cooperative territorial approaches this is a clear sign that the priority is absorption of finite EU resources (as NGEU needs to be committed by 2023, spent by 2026) over efficiency-based spatial targeting (Pazos-Vidal, 2021a).

The best example of these weaknesses is provided by the Zamora Provincial Council which from October 2020 to January 2021 set up a so-called National Board that brought together EU and economic development managers from 22 Provincial Councils. Many had over two decades past experience in the management of domestic and EU funds and scoped how ERDF and NGEU, could finance investments to stem depopulation that were collaborative, scalable, transferable, and replicable across all participating provinces, as initially advocated by the Spanish Government. This was, however, not translated into the Spanish Government plans which prioritised absorption and maximum geographical coverage, fitting the pattern of previous territorial insensitivity and ineffectiveness of domestic policies against depopulation as described by Pinilla and Sáez (2021). This mirrors the ill-fated €8bn "Plan E" (Spanish Plan to stimulate the Economy and Employment) of the Zapatero Government to fight against the 2008 economic crisis. This lack of national cooperative incentives actively discouraged the provincial premiers to continue campaigning for interprovincial shared proposals drafted by their officers.. (Pazos-Vidal 2021a; Galán, 2021).

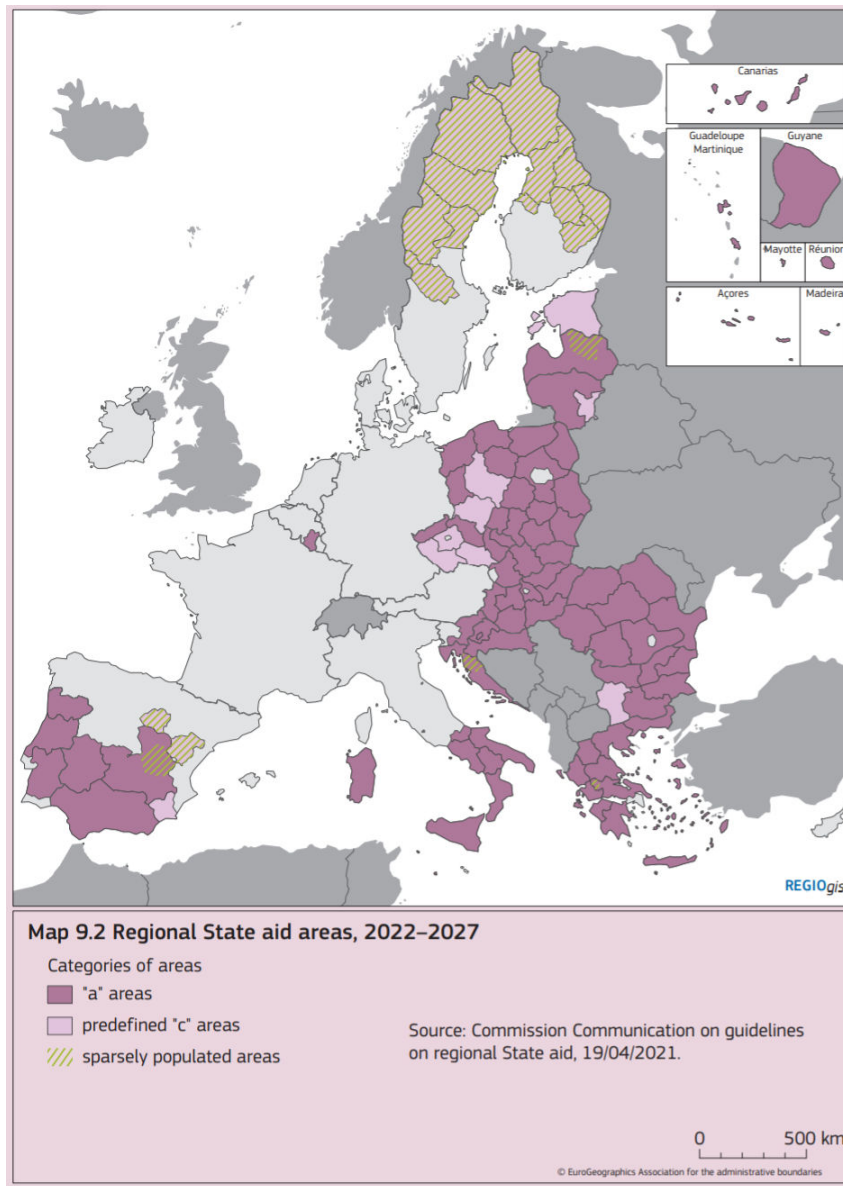
Lastly, these various Spanish territorial campaigns failed to properly translate their proposal to the electoral arena. In the February 2022 Castilla y León election only, *Soria Ya* actively sponsored the 'Soria' definition -despite not having been involved in that campaign, ironically started by its Socialist mayor-, whereas the ruling PP was non-committal on new EU

funded policies against depopulation while the Socialists (in opposition regionally, but presiding the Spanish government) did propose a wider package but no specific commitments were made on EU funds and the ERDF definition. Quite tellingly, the above-mentioned common proposal of *España Vacuada* (2021, pp. 87-88) did not even reference it either in the ambitious political platform that had set out ahead of the next Spanish General election (2023/2024). Further evidence of the disconnect between the various territorial campaigns and initiatives in different parts of Spain.

9. STATE AID

Further empirical evidence of the limits of Spanish territorial advocacy on depopulation is the related process and territorial campaign of defining Regional State Aid Guidelines. This is a complementary process to agreeing ESIF Operational Programmes which DG REGIO sets out every 7 years by establishing a maximum level of subsidies (ESIF or domestic) per region. REGIO recognised, for the first time, Soria, Teruel, and Cuenca as sparsely populated areas, automatically qualifying to higher aid ceilings (López, 2021). This was symbolically perceived in those provinces as giving them a similar status to the Scandinavian NSPA.

Figure 6. State aid in support of regional development.



European Commission (2022b, p.276)

In the preceding public consultation, the business-led SSPA network led a quite extensive mobilisation of its members (just as it did in 2018 consultation on the Commission initial ideas for ESIF 2021-2027 that were floated in the 7th Cohesion Report). That said, the regional aid guidelines and the national eligibility maps are the preserve of negotiation between the Ministries of Finance and DG REGIO. Thus, in achieving that outcome it was more instrumental the joint (and rare) cross-party campaigning of the regional premiers of Aragon, Castilla la Mancha and Castilla y León to the Spanish Government, in response to a strong public demand.

While this recognition was positive, what followed is quite symptomatic of the confusion of economic rationale, political expediency and public emotion: shortly after the Commission Guidelines were approved this recognition was construed by SSPA and *Soria Ya* (both had some longstanding links) that, instead being given a rather standard top-up of existing subsidy

limits, the EU had conferred them a “*fiscalidad diferenciada*”, a special tax regime status comparable with that of Navarre, Basque Country and the overseas territories of Ceuta, Melilla and Canary Islands.

This narrative led to public mobilisation in Soria and “differentiated taxation” was a key rallying cry of *Soria Ya* in the February 2022 elections, against the perceived hesitation of the Finance ministry – which could not publicly disown such a popular narrative but naturally feared a rent-seeking race across Spain. The reverse of the coin is Zamora, the province with the fastest loss of population (10%) during the preceding decade, thus making it fully eligible for the equivalent subsidy levels to Soria, Cuenca, and Teruel. But, lacking the territorial mobilisation of those provinces, ‘Zamora’ struggled to even get such recognition even publicly acknowledged by either by the regional and national governments.

The regional government of the Autonomous Community of Castilla y León, which Soria and Zamora are part of, did not make any commitment as regards its own aid state subsidies and ESIF investments – requesting the Spanish Government to do so instead. This is unlike Castilla la Mancha (where Cuenca sits) which approved a Law 2/2021 against depopulation that includes regional aid incentives, subdelegation to provinces of ESIF funds, rural proofing *and* the first legally binding map in Spain to identify depopulating areas to target public funds and ensuring minimum level of basic services. Tellingly, no other regions are openly planning to replicate the Castilla la Mancha template.

Ultimately, not only Soria, Teruel and Cuenca but also Zamora, and even other provinces such as neighbouring Salamanca, were recognised in the approved Spanish regional aid map ([European Commission, 2022b](#)). Considering the very different (from active to non-existent) degrees of territorial mobilisation on this issue, such an outcome (benefitting other areas elsewhere) signals the importance and the politicising of territorial demographic decline in Spain with central government cannot simply ignore. Indeed, much of this recognition could have been included in previous regional aid maps, but depopulation was not in the agenda as it is now.

10. CONCLUSIONS

It is quite challenging to achieve common definitions let alone provide public goods when in articulating them there is a clear rent-seeking rationale by different groups advocating different when not zero-sum outcomes. This is particularly challenging if it risks unpicking pre-existing path dependencies and policy communities in Spanish and EU territorial development.

Following the logic of collective action, these mainly Spanish territorial mobilisation campaigns can achieve partial success in seeing their demands recognised. However, the lack of sufficient distributive incentives, nationally and EU-wide, limits when not defeats any intended change of the situation of the ground, ending up in pyrrhic or symbolic wins.

Mixing the economic rationale with emotional/cultural identity motives and prioritising legal definitions over rational assessments of options, as in this case, is self-defeating in the long term. It is quite telling that throughout this narrative, actors have put more emphasis on achieving recognition (and funding) for a given territory to what will be done with it. Spain has a long tradition of territorial privileges and special status (royal charters granting local rights or benefits –*fueros*–, micromunicipalism inherited from the Middle Ages, regional Civil Laws) that survived and morphed into the Contemporary Era. This logic of obtaining and preserving a special status for a given territory over more rational, efficiency-, evidence- and

needs-based allocation of public resources can also be observed in this depopulation case study.

Last but not least, this narrative presents a sorry state of Spanish multilevel governance and horizontal cooperation (what has coined during the pandemic by in Spain by the rather redundant neologism of “cogobernanza”). The fact that so much effort by so many campaigns and initiatives, public and private, top-down and grassroots, has been put in for these meagre results in terms of public policy outcomes shows some ills of the Spanish political system. It is not collaborative and is geared towards short-term gain over collaborative long-term solutions for deep-seated structural problems, as no doubt demographic decline and the abandonment of large swathes of Spain’s territory is.

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