

**Macro-regional and mega-regional
cooperation:**

**New forms of soft planning and spatial
governance in Europe and the United
States**

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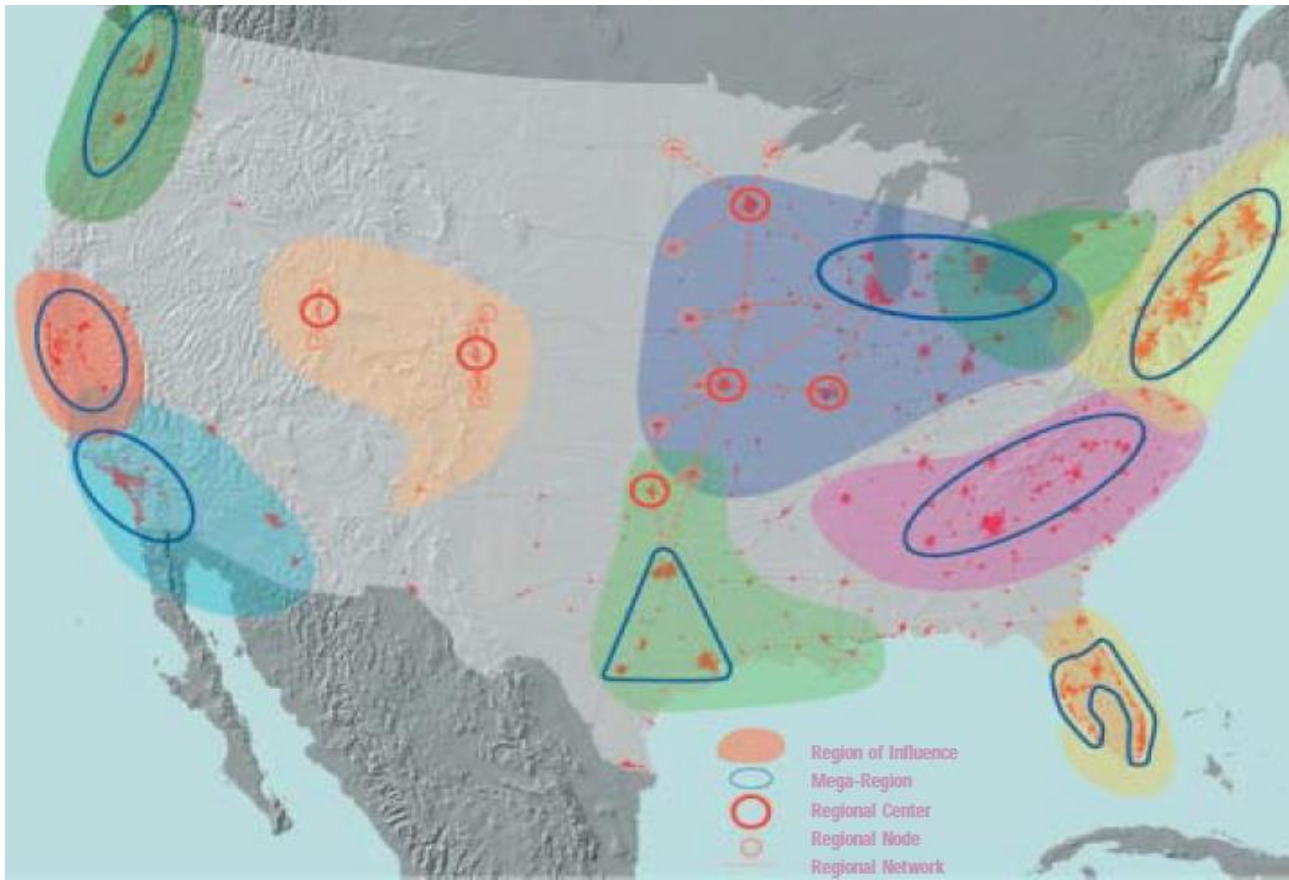
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Context

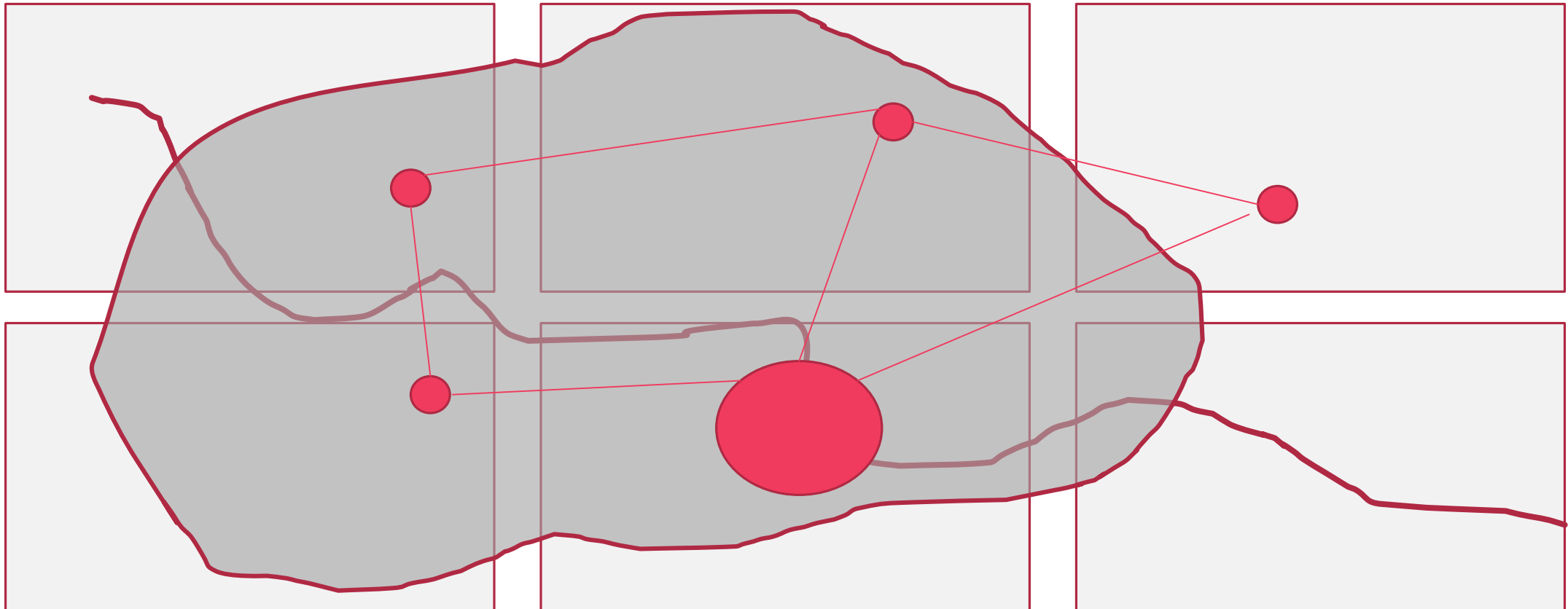
Global: Processes of rescaling, creation of new regional delineations and reshaping of governance practices

→ Soft spaces as analytical concept used in Europe



Soft spaces: network and territorial spaces

Conceptual contribution: Sharpen analytical lenses to explain spatial practices, and vice versa advance spatial governance through theoretical perspectives and comparison



Comparing macro- and mega-regions

Empirical contribution: Comparative perspective addressing large-scale transboundary cooperation

Research questions:

How do the drivers for creation, territorial and thematic coverage and implementation challenges differ between mega-regions and macro-regions?

What kind of planning and policy-making can occur at the macro-regional and mega-regional scale?

What can we learn by comparing the two approaches?

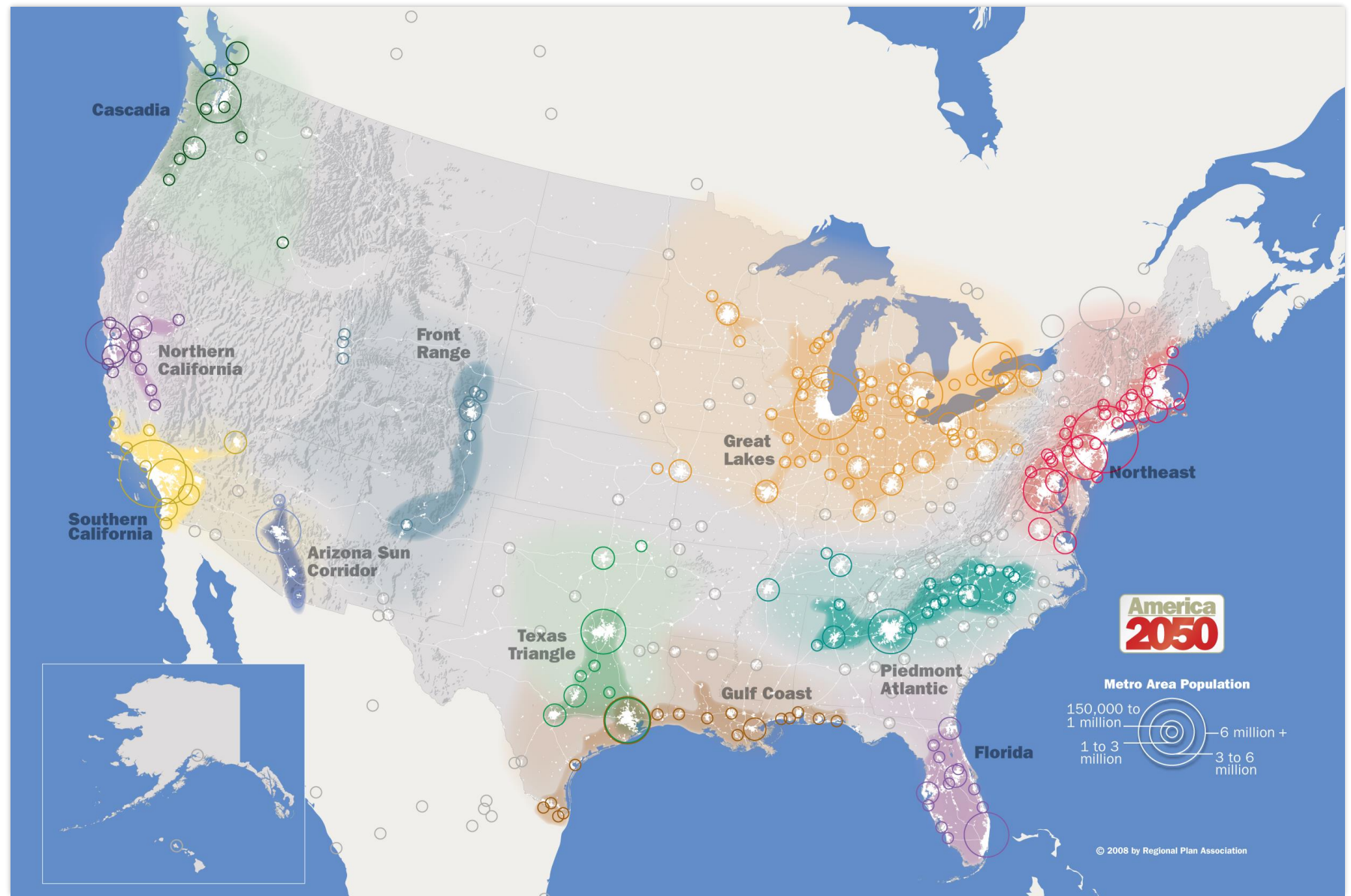
Macro-regions



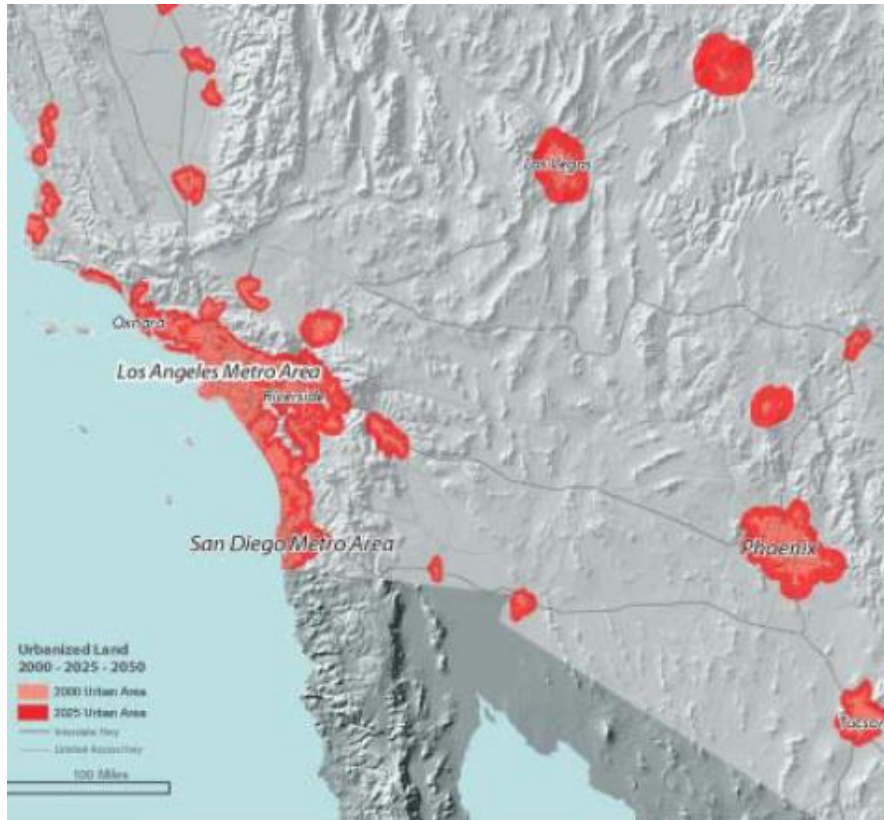
The EU Danube Region - territorial coverage



Mega-regions in the United States



The So-Cal mega-region



Comparison: Drivers

EU: Danube region

- Topography: Joint use of a common 'functional space'
- Geopolitics: Demand for cooperation across countries
- Financial aspects: Access to EU funding instruments

US: So-Cal

- Growth: Large-scale coordination of rapid urbanization
- Services: Coordination of public services, especially transport services
- Climate change: Reaching statewide climate goals

Comparison:

- Importance of political and environmental considerations in macro-regions, topographical issues as narrative
- Conceptual idea of megaregions to deal with planning challenges, political commitment very weak

Comparison: Thematic & territorial coverage

EU: Danube region

- Joint definition of themes:
Thematic coverage agreed upon in the initial phase (priority areas)
- Broad territorial coverage:
14 countries covered, territorial scope varies according to themes

US: So-Cal

- Ad-hoc definition of themes:
Thematic coverage is defined spontaneously based on cooperation interests
- Varying territorial delineations:
No agreed upon definition of megaregions

Comparison:

- Identification of key themes as process vs. ad-hoc cooperation
- Flexible spatial delineations in both cases, yet different logic:
Territorial inclusiveness in the EU vs. territorial ambiguity in the US

Comparison: Governance

EU: Danube region

- National coordinators: Linking EU and (sub-)national level; thematic steering
- Priority areas: Identification of key themes and creation of international steering groups for these priority areas
- Working groups: Involvement of public and private sector, cities, NGOs

US: So-Cal

- Metropolitan Planning Organisations (MPOs): Main drivers of coordination, differences in commitment and interest; action without mandate
- Individual projects: Public and private sector involved by need

Comparison:

- Involvement of national actors in the EU vs. regional actors in the US: difference regarding power and political weight
- Relative coherence in macro-regions vs. differences in megaregions

Comparison: Understanding of planning

EU: Danube region

- Multi-level governance: Planning as processes at different scales
- Strategic framing: Debate and coordination at the macro-regional scale, implementation through other mechanisms

US: So-Cal

- Trust in the local: Planning as local issue, skepticism towards regional planning and federal politics
- Strategic concerns: Coordination needed regarding climate change and transport, implementation unclear

Comparison:

- Planning perceived broadly in the EU vs. narrowly in the US
- In both cases planning is regarded as necessary to resolve big issues, in the EU macro-regional framing but other implementation mechanisms

Discussion and Conclusion I

What can we learn from comparing macro-regions and megaregions?

Despite differences, EU macro-regions and US megaregions are comparable:

- New large-scale and transboundary spatial imaginaries
- Voluntary cooperation in informal setting
- Fragmented responsibilities
- Scarce financial resources

Comparison highlights importance of soft governance:

Even if EU activities are non-binding, they have an impact: EU provides a framework for cooperation and supports the process; domestic “hard” actors are committed (especially nation states)

Discussion and Conclusion II

How can the concept of soft spaces and soft planning support our understanding of macro-regional and megaregional cooperation?

- Macro-regions/Megaregions do not claim to be the “right” level of planning or intend to replace “hard” planning
- Macro-regions/Megaregions represent an opportunity for coordination and integration across scales and sectors
- Effects of macro-regions/megaregion are highly dependent on the local, regional and national interpretations and applications
- Macro-regions/Megaregions provide an arena for debate and hold opportunities to make local, regional and national concerns heard

Discussion and Conclusion III

What kind of planning and policy-making can occur at the macro-regional and mega-regional scale?

- Not hard planning, i.e. land use planning and zoning
- Soft planning?
 - Debates about planning-related issues (e.g. infrastructure, environmental protection)
 - Coordination across levels and sectors of government
 - Political agenda setting

What does this mean for planning (macro/mega-)regional futures?

Macro- and mega-regional cooperation can have an added value, if it furthers horizontal and vertical coordination and gives political weight to planning issues at a large-scale

Thank you!

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