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The trajectories of regional governance for spatial planning – a case study from Sweden

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ABSTRACT

Regional spatial planning depends on collaboration between governments with different mandates, interests, and resources. Understanding how such collaboration develops over time is essential for explaining how regional planning capacity consolidates.

This article investigates the trajectories of regional governance in Sweden, using the three-cycle model of collaborative governance as an interpretative lens. It traces how institutional arrangements for regional spatial planning have evolved over time and how they shape contemporary patterns of governance. In Sweden, where regional spatial planning is still largely non-statutory, this consolidation relies on soft steering, mutual trust, and municipalities' willingness to engage. Our study shows that regional spatial planning is not introduced through formal regulation but is gradually institutionalised through evolving regional–municipal relations.

The article draws on a qualitative, interview-based case study built on two rounds of commissioned research in 2017 and 2025. In total, the material includes interviews with municipal and regional planners as well as municipal politicians.

We found that collaboration moved from early scepticism, ambiguity, and weak legitimacy toward more relational, routinised, and institutionally supported cooperation. Over time, trust, shared understanding, and practical coordination improved, especially where the Region recognised local conditions and municipalities experienced tangible value. At the same time, the process remains fragile, shaped by tensions around municipal autonomy, uneven resources, and cautious regional leadership.

1. Introduction

The scholarly debate on Europeanization has explored how EU policies influence national planning systems and drive institutional adjustments in multilevel governance (Benz and Eberlein, 1999; Benz, 2024). In this article, we argue that, in Sweden, the consolidation of regional spatial planning is not primarily a matter of formal regulation, but a gradual governance process in which regional capacity is built through changing relations between regional bodies and municipalities. These relations are shaped by Europeanization, by the non-statutory character of regional spatial planning, and by the extent to which regional actors can mobilise local participation around a shared agenda. Through Europeanisation, regions in the EU are assigned responsibilities for regional policy, including various planning initiatives for regional development and regional spatial planning (Corvers, 2019; Cotella and Janin Rivolin, 2025; Paasi and Metzger, 2018; Willi et al., 2023). The EU principle of subsidiarity, driving the consolidation of sub-national planning levels to implement the EU cohesion policy, is, in general, lacking precision about the role of regions in this context (Moodie et al., 2022), which challenges the institutionalisation of regions and, hence, their ability to implement an effective regional policy. Also, variations in national multi-level systems mean that the challenges of coordinating actors and arenas for regional policy and planning vary across member states (Benz and Eberlein, 1999).

EU cohesion policy is entangled with the expectation that regions should take leadership roles for territorial governance, which drives Europeanisation and the formation of regions. This leadership includes (i) coordinating actors and institutions; (ii) integrating policy sectors; and (iii) mobilising stakeholder participation (Schmitt and van Well, 2015), referring to an actor who takes on the role of inviting, organising, and steering agenda-setting (Purkarthofer et al., 2021). Within the scholarly debate, the concept of territorial governance is applied to what

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can be considered two streams of regional policy: regional spatial planning and regional strategic development planning (Cotella and Janin Rivolin, 2025; Moodie et al., 2022). These different focuses of the literature mean exploring different governance relations and planning processes. The empirical investigation in this paper focuses on regional spatial planning, which, in balance with regional development planning, has received less attention in scholarly work in regional studies (Smas and Schmitt, 2021).

More specifically, this paper focuses on how the planning mandate for regional spatial planning is consolidated within a region in Sweden. A comparative study of several EU countries shows that regional spatial planning is, in most cases, characterised by formal regulatory planning instruments, with Sweden as a notable exception (Smas and Schmitt, 2021). In Sweden, regional spatial planning has developed in recent times through soft steering, representing a non-statutory planning process (Bergkvist Andersson and Schmitt, 2024). This means that the ability of the regions to mobilise for regional governance depends on how the non-statutory status of regional spatial planning can navigate through diverging interests in interplay with fuzziness and unclarity (Bergkvist Andersson and Schmitt, 2024).

This underscores the importance of understanding how the consolidation of regional planning bodies for regional policy evolves through governance processes, which is the theme of this paper. Against this background, the aim of this paper is to analyse how regional planning capacity is institutionalised as a process over time, in a context where the regional level lacks a statutory mandate for land-use planning. Two research questions are guiding the discussion. What are the elements driving or hindering the ability of the regional government to coordinate and mobilise for territorial governance? What feedback effects of the territorial governance process are impacting the consolidation of the governance capacity for spatial planning over time?

2. Literature background – territorial governance for spatial planning

Policy and scholarly debate on territorial governance capture key elements of regional governance for spatial planning. However, territorial governance is a broader concept that encompasses the governance of places and territories across different scales, whereas this paper focuses specifically on regional spatial planning within the political-administrative territories governed by regional political bodies. Against this backdrop, territorial governance for regional spatial planning concerns strategies for land use that steer the transformation of places (Nadin et al., 2024). It generally involves networks and relations among diverse actors to coordinate spatial development (van Popering-Verkerk et al., 2022; Purkarthofer et al., 2021; Stead, 2014). Here, maps represent important tools and outcomes; they can illustrate functional structures represented through urban centres and transport infrastructure (Bergkvist Andersson and Schmitt, 2024). Within the EU, regional spatial plans serve as a planning instrument with distinct aims and formal regulations (Smas and Schmitt, 2021). In Sweden, being the empirical context of this paper, there are even variations across the different regions pertaining to whether regional spatial planning is statutory or not (Bergkvist Andersson and Schmitt, 2024). Nevertheless, the embedding of regional spatial planning within territorial governance, marked by networks and relations, points to the importance of organising collaboration, coordination, sectoral integration, and cross-sector partnerships (Broto, 2017). Hence, we have chosen to apply a model of collaborative governance to guide our exploration of our empirical material and to analyse how regional policy and planning capacity are institutionalised. The focus of this paper's case study on the consolidation of the regional planning mandate for spatial planning in Sweden means that collaboration with municipalities holding local spatial planning mandates becomes a key condition.

In this article, we distinguish between regional spatial planning as the substantive object of study, territorial governance as the broader governance context in which this planning takes place, and collaborative governance as the analytical lens used to examine how regional spatial planning is organised and institutionalised.

For the purpose of this study, we adopt the collaborative governance model as defined in a highly cited paper by Emerson et al. (2012). This model is derived from a burgeoning scholarly debate on collaboration, with a focus on the public sector, making it relevant to this paper, which focuses on interactions between municipalities and regions for regional planning. The model by Emerson et al. (2012) is widely adopted for studies on various thematic foci. While studies on sustainable development have been dominant (e.g., Hermelin and Gustafsson, 2024), this model is also an important framework for exploring themes closely related to this paper's study. This refers, for instance, to studies of city-regions (Axinte et al. 2019), municipal reforms (Fernández-Martínez et al. 2023) and planning for transport infrastructure (den Bakker et al. 2026). The model of collaborative governance highlights how the interplay of multiple elements affects governance capacity (Kiessling and Pütz, 2020).

In addition, the model for collaborative governance is described from the embeddedness within a wider societal context named “collaborative governance regime” (Emerson and Nabatchi, 2015; Emerson et al., 2012). This makes the model suitable for analysing the case examined in this paper as an expression of EU cohesion policy, characterised by expectations that regions will assume leadership in territorial governance through various relations and networks. Table 1 summarises how the model defines the three interconnected cycles of collaborative governance (Emerson et al., 2012).

Each of these cycles, principled engagement, shared motivation and capacity for joint action, depends on a particular set of interconnected elements (Emerson et al., 2012). In this way, the model of collaborative governance represents a cyclical process in which the relationships among partners are considered both output and input (Emerson et al., 2012). This encompasses a time perspective that is helpful for understanding the consolidation of planning mandates and the institutionalisation of regions.

To start with, the first cycle of principled engagement unfolds through four interrelated elements that describe how a collaborative process begins (Emerson and Nabatchi, 2015; Emerson et al., 2012). *Discovery* refers to the process of identifying together shared and differing interests, concerns, values, and relevant knowledge. Participants begin to understand what is at stake and what perspectives need to be considered. *Definition* concerns the work of constructing shared meaning by agreeing on the purpose of the collaboration, the concepts used, the roles of the actors, and the expectations attached to the process. It helps create a more stable basis for cooperation by reducing ambiguity about what the process is meant to achieve. *Deliberation* refers to open, reasoned, and inclusive exchange across organisational and jurisdictional boundaries, where participants discuss alternatives, contest assumptions, and negotiate meaning while still engaging respectfully with one another’s perspectives. It is essential because principled engagement depends not only on communication, but on communication that allows different viewpoints to be heard and examined. *Determination* concerns the joint making of procedural and

Table 1
Analytical framework for collaborative governance.

	First cycle principled engagement	Second cycle shared motivation	Third cycle capacity for joint action
Elements	Discovery	Mutual trust	Institutional arrangement
	Definition	Mutual understanding	Leadership
	Deliberation	Internal legitimacy	Knowledge
	Determination	Shared commitment	Resources

Adapted from Emerson and Nabatchi (2015).

substantive decisions, such as setting the agenda, deciding on work forms, and agreeing on concrete steps or outputs. It is the point at which discussion is translated into collective direction and action. Together, these four elements describe how a collaborative process begins and support the conditions that drive shared motivation for a joint initiative, which constitutes the second cycle in the model. In relation to regional spatial planning, principled engagement concerns more than the willingness to attend meetings. It involves the gradual recognition that certain spatial relations and development challenges go beyond municipal boundaries and require a regional perspective.

Moving to the second cycle of the model for collaborative governance, *mutual trust* is a key element (Emerson and Nabatchi, 2015; Emerson et al., 2012). Trust building is found to require long-term commitment and develops over time (den Bakker et al., 2026), as the participating organizations get to know each other, and is supported further as experience gained demonstrates that other partners are predictable and reliable. This second cycle also includes the factor of *mutual understanding*, which concerns the ability to respect each other's positions and interests, even though one may not agree with them. This factor is important given research showing that intermunicipal collaboration for spatial planning is challenged by various conflicts (Kosow and Wassermann, 2024). Mutual understanding should not be confused with shared understanding (Emerson et al., 2012). It is important to clarify that partners' motives for participating in a collaboration may be diverse. This is entangled with *internal legitimacy*, which depends on actors' perceptions of whether their participation aligns with their core values and objectives. In this paper, legitimacy refers to how the actors involved in regional spatial planning (i.e., the regions and the municipalities) consider themselves justified in being involved. From the municipalities' perspectives, justification dilemmas can arise when regional projects are perceived as lacking alignment with, or even in conflict with, local spatial planning managed through local mandates for spatial planning. Willi et al. (2023), making it difficult to establish a *shared commitment* across all participants. For municipalities, regional spatial planning demands strategies to monitor their involvement in regional spatial planning and to manage internal processes for local spatial planning (Bovaird and Löffler, 2015). In all, this second cycle of the model for collaborative governance describes the establishment of social capital (Pihkala et al., 2007) facilitating that collaboration can become more formalised through which shared commitments may be formulated in written agreements. Overall, the progression through this second cycle enables participants to build the capacity to work together, which becomes an important input for the third cycle. The development of shared motivation is important for regional spatial planning because it determines whether municipalities regard regional spatial planning as a useful complement to, rather than a threat to, municipal planning.

The third cycle, capacity for joint action, concerns the practical conditions that enable collaboration to be possible and sustainable over time (Emerson and Nabatchi, 2015; Emerson et al., 2012). *Institutional arrangements* refer to the formal and informal rules, procedures, and organisational structures that organise cooperation and coordinate repeated interaction. They shape how collaboration is structured and maintained across organisations and levels. *Leadership* concerns the agency needed to initiate, maintain, and steer the collaborative process, including the ability to pool actors, align interests, and support collective action (Sotarauta et al., 2021). The model for collaborative governance stresses the importance of leadership that is assumed to be an initial driver for initiating a collaborative governance process as well as an element for its continuation and outcomes. *Knowledge* refers to the information and expertise needed to make regional planning meaningful and actionable. It matters because collaboration depends not only on the willingness to work together, but also on a common basis for interpreting problems and choosing directions. *Resources* include not only funding, but also time, staff, meeting spaces, administrative support, and other practical capacities that enable collaboration. Without sufficient resources, even well-designed collaborative arrangements may remain fragile or difficult to sustain. In the context of regional spatial planning, capacity for joint actions refers specifically to the ability to develop and use regional spatial planning instruments. This includes producing spatial knowledge, interpreting spatial structures and maintaining the institutional arrangements required to carry the process forward.

Overall, the ways in which we apply this analytical framework for collaborative governance in our study focuses on how governance processes rely on deliberate and persistent agency, with implications for how participants' motivation can be sustained and, in turn, how region-level planning mandates can be consolidated. This analytical framework fleshes out the multifaceted processes of governance, as well as its vulnerability to disruption if the dynamic interplay among agency, governance processes, and institutions comes to a halt for any reason. Finding that the combination of political motivation and administrative capacity is an important factor to consider when assessing the feasibility of governance initiatives (Hawkins et al., 2018; Patterson et al., 2017) illustrates how the second and third cycles are interrelated. The ways in which territorial governance for regional spatial planning drives the establishment and/or revision of institutions are shaped by governance feedback loops (Emerson et al., 2012).

3. Empirical context and research design

Europeanisation, with implications for planning structures in Sweden, has been evident in the gradual establishment of regions, which are political and planning bodies. This reform of the multi-level political structure directed the responsibility for regional policy and planning to be a concern of the regions. It involved a formal decentralisation, through which the regulated tasks for regional development were transferred from the state to the regions, as well as the need to rearrange the collaborative relations between local and regional governments. Formally, regions and local governments represent municipalities. Nevertheless, they are distinguished by different geographical scopes and planning mandates, indicating that these two tiers apply different overall strategic approaches to policy and operational implementation (Wänström and Persson, 2023). In practice, local–regional collaboration for regional planning is between governments on the same steering level. That means the expectations that regions take a leadership role in regional territorial governance can be challenging and depend on municipalities' motivations to participate. An important contextual factor in how municipalities become involved in territorial governance for spatial planning in Sweden is the powerful position of local governments (i.e., municipalities) in land-use planning. The right of the Swedish municipalities to levy income taxes on local residents reinforces the strong municipal position. This fiscal autonomy gives municipalities a direct interest in shaping where new tax-paying households locate, since such decisions affect their revenue base and capacity to provide services. Through their control over local land-use planning, municipalities can steer the location of housing, and other functions in ways that influence their future tax income. In regions with pronounced growth disparities, this can generate competitive dynamics between neighbouring municipalities, particularly around larger urban centres. Consequently, the regions' role in leading regional spatial planning and regional collaboration becomes quite complex.

Formal regulations for regional spatial planning in Sweden apply only to a few regions in Sweden. This has been the case for some time in the capital region of Stockholm. In more recent years, regulation for regional spatial planning also applies to two regions in South Sweden. Recent research on regional spatial planning in Sweden concludes that the planning process in regions where this is a non-statutory task is characterised by various approaches: negotiated logic, supporting logic, and distant logic (Bergkvist Andersson and Schmitt, 2024). One of these regions, the case of this paper Östergötland, was found to take the supporting logic. About this case, it was concluded that the governance for regional spatial planning depends on the willingness of the

municipalities to be involved (Bergkvist Andersson and Schmitt, 2024).

The region Östergötland was inaugurated in 2015. The political territory of Östergötland comprises 13 municipalities with a total population of around 470′000. The population size of the municipalities varies from 3′600 to 160′000 with quite different geographical structures of urban and rural areas and presence of industries and public institutions including university campuses. The development pathways of the two urban centres have been quite diverse in recent decades, with dynamic growth in industry and the university in Linköping, compared with more moderate population growth and industrial development in Norrköping.

3.1. Data collection

The empirical material for this paper derives from two rounds of commissioned research conducted in collaboration with Region Östergötland (Fredin et al., 2025; Olofsson and Hermelin, 2017). The time periods for these research projects were 2017 and 2025. These investigations focus on the leadership of the regional body for territorial governance and, more specifically, on the management of regional-municipal governance for regional spatial planning, which took place from 2014 to 2016 and from 2021 to 2024, respectively. Östergötland is a region in Sweden that has chosen to implement regional spatial planning, even though it is not formally regulated.

Throughout the various rounds of commissioned research, the authors of this paper engaged in dialogues with the region and the municipalities involved in territorial governance. Through this paper, the results of these two investigations are compared and synthesised. The study adopts a qualitative, interview-based research design to examine evolving regional planning practices in Region Östergötland and its municipalities. The purpose was to understand how regional and municipal planners perceive and enact spatial strategies within a changing planning context evolving through the consolidation of regions and regional planning. Qualitative, semi-structured interviews were selected as the main method due to their capacity to explore professional reasoning, institutional conditions, and local interpretations beyond what can be captured in documents.

Interviews were conducted in two major rounds. Although the investigations shared the theme of regional spatial planning, they had distinct characteristics and labels in the different rounds. The first round, conducted in 2017, was a process for developing the region's spatial planning framework (in Swedish: strukturbild). This involved establishing a common understanding of the motivations behind regional spatial planning, the forms of regional-municipal cooperation for this planning and calibrating the expectations for its outcomes. The second round of regional spatial planning, investigated in 2025, focused on the development of spatial planning, and the planning document was labelled the spatial strategy (in Swedish: rumslig strategi; RUM). Together, the two rounds provided a rich basis for exploring the trajectory of territorial governance and the consolidation of regional planning. Table 2 shows the number of interviews per round and the interviewees' occupations.

Table 2
Number of interviewees and identifiers, per round and occupation.

	2017 (identifier)	2025
Number of interviewees	10	17
Municipal planners	7 (MunPlan 1–7, 2017)	12 (MunPlan A-L, 2025)
Regional planners	–	5 RegPlan A-E, 2025
Municipal politicians	3 MunPol 1–3, 2017)	–

3.2. Data analysis

All interviews were recorded and transcribed. The analytical process combined inductive and interpretive thematic analysis. Each researcher identified key citations: statements that strongly illustrated participants' understandings of prior expectations, the development of the process, and expectations after the process was completed. These citations were first coded into provisional categories and then collaboratively reviewed to ensure coherence and shared interpretation.

The codes were subsequently grouped into emergent themes that captured underlying patterns in the material, such as evolving regional–municipal relations and the role of the Region and the municipalities during the two processes. Themes were refined through iterative reading, testing consistency across interviews, and between the two time periods. The comparison between 2017 and 2025 enabled the identification of both enduring institutional logics and change linked to the region's updated strategic framing.

As a next step in the analytical process, the emerging themes from the interviews were subsequently interpreted in relation to Emerson et al.'s (2012) collaborative governance framework and its three cycles: *principled engagement*, *shared motivation*, and *joint capacity for action*. In practice, this meant that each theme from the coding phase was examined to determine how it illustrated one or more of Emerson et al.'s (2012) cycles and the dimensions they encompass. For instance, themes in the interviews concerning the initiation of the spatial planning processes were mainly associated with the cycle for principled engagement, focusing on how actors articulated shared problems and established arenas for dialogue. Themes revolving around trust-building, legitimacy, and mutual understanding were aligned with the cycle of shared motivation. Finally, accounts describing concrete joint planning activities and coordination mechanisms were assessed through the lens of joint capacity.

4. Collaborative governance on the regional level – results and analysis

This section examines collaborative governance processes in regional spatial planning through the lens of Emerson et al.'s (2012) three-cycle model: principled engagement, shared motivation, and capacity for joint action. It traces the evolution of regional-municipal relations from initial scepticism and procedural uncertainty to more consolidated trust, relational practices, and institutional routines. The analysis highlights feedback effects that strengthen regional spatial planning capacity over time despite persistent tensions around local autonomy. The results are presented in three sections for each cycle of this mode.

4.1. Principled engagement: making regional spatial planning meaningful

To start with, the cycle of principled engagement concerns the values and motivations that shaped municipalities' willingness to participate in collaborative governance for regional spatial planning. In 2017, several municipal actors were not particularly enthusiastic about the region's invitation to participate. It was questioned whether a regional level was relevant for spatial planning, viewing it as too abstract and insufficiently connected to their local realities. Without established procedural routines or normative legitimacy, regional coordination efforts for regional spatial planning depended heavily on municipalities' perceived usefulness of collaboration in this regard. Because many municipalities did not recognise their own interests and priorities in such planning endeavours, they struggled to perceive value in participating. As one respondent explained:

> *"[…] because the conditions differ so much across the region, it becomes a problem. No one really sees the benefit, because it becomes so abstract, so minimal, so intangible."* (MunPlan 7, 2017)

This quote illustrates how the lack of perceived local relevance and

tangible outcomes weakens motivation to become engaged. For many municipalities, the abstract regional perspective conflicted with their own regulated and strongly institutionalised mandates for local spatial planning. When municipal actors felt that regional work did not connect to their own planning realities, their willingness to contribute declined. The process risked being perceived as an externally driven exercise rather than a shared endeavour with local resonance.

In 2017, the interviews revealed that neither municipalities nor regional representatives shared a clear picture of how the work should actually be carried out. This illustrates a basic challenge to establishing common procedural ideas when actors enter a collaboration with divergent assumptions about goals, methods, and roles. Without mutual clarity on how the work should be conducted, the Region's agenda risked being interpreted as externally imposed rather than co-constituted, thereby weakening municipal ownership and commitment. The absence of a jointly recognised starting point was manifested in fragmented engagement and unilateral actions. Interviewees also witnessed contrasting procedural preferences: smaller municipalities sought clearer, more directive frameworks to support their limited capacity, while larger municipalities preferred flexible arrangements that protected local autonomy. As one respondent put it:

> *"We on the periphery want to get more out of the spatial planning framework; we want it to be more detailed and directive, because we believe it can serve as a lever for us, while the larger municipalities fear it may interfere with their development."* (MunPlan 3, 2017)

Overall, the 2017 interviews demonstrate that both motivational and procedural clarity were missing during the development of the regional spatial planning framework. Municipal actors struggled to see meaningful value in participating and lacked confidence in how the collaboration would work in practice.

It is important to recognise that this lack of clarity was intentional in the region's approach to its leadership role in regional spatial planning. The region planned the process in several steps, the first of which invited a broad discussion of expectations for regional spatial planning. This reflects how, at that time, regional spatial planning represented a new planning scheme yet to be defined.

By 2025, several accounts suggest that efforts to build meaningful relations between the Region and municipalities have become more concrete and relationally grounded than before. Before the start of the process, the Region compiled a series of knowledge bases that gradually enabled the participants to converge towards a more unified understanding of values that can be derived from a collaborative process for regional spatial planning. Furthermore, the interviewees spoke about the Region's willingness to act on the municipalities' terms, signifying a rebalancing of power and legitimising regional spatial planning as a joint rather than imposed endeavour. A small-municipality planner reflected:

> *"They [the Region] visited me at the municipality, and I found that very rewarding. We talked about our localities and their respective roles, and it really felt like we had a very good dialogue about that. It was a good way to engage with a smaller municipality—going out to visit all the municipalities and seeing what conditions and opportunities exist in each of them."* (MunPlan G, 2025)

Being visited in one's own institutional and territorial setting has symbolic weight: it affirms that local knowledge, conditions, and constraints matter and are worth understanding on their own terms. This sense of being seen and taken seriously nurtures a sense of community and fellowship, transforming a sense of duty into something that feels justified. In this way, the visit itself becomes a motivational resource in principled engagement. At the same time, this dependence on interpersonal exchange reveals that engagement remains contingent on relational gestures rather than on fully institutionalised routines. This reflects the immature status of regional spatial planning in Sweden.

Another account points to how the interplay between local autonomy and shared regional purpose continues to shape motivational dynamics:

> *"The municipal leadership I was working with when this [RUM; the spatial strategy] was developed between 2021 and 2024 thought it was a matter of municipal planning monopoly and questioned why we were doing this. However, from the planners' perspective, we considered it very positive that it was being developed."* (MunPlan B, 2025)

Here, divergent value orientations within a municipality, between the highest leadership and those involved in planning tasks, expose enduring ambivalence toward regional initiatives. Political leaders' emphasis on local sovereignty, anchored in the principle of the municipal planning monopoly, conflicts with planners' professional valuation of collaboration and strategic coherence. This tension underscores that motivations to engage are shaped not only by perceived benefits but also by normative commitments to autonomy, identity, and control. The strong attachment to municipal planning autonomy among municipal politicians has to be understood in light of the political incentives embedded in the Swedish system. The municipality remains the key political sphere for many local politicians. Municipal politicians' prospects for re-election and their political legitimacy depend largely on how they are perceived by local voters, whose concerns typically focus on service provision, employment opportunities and other place-specific matters. Within such an institutional setting, championing regional priorities can entail political risks if support for regional priorities is interpreted as competing with or undermining local interests. This setting helps to clarify why municipal politicians strongly emphasise local planning, even when professional planners within the same administration recognise the benefit of regional coordination.

The 2025 interviews reflect the development of a mature and networked understanding of regional collaboration in spatial planning. The following reflection captures how municipal actors have begun to coordinate their contributions collectively:

> *"We prepared the statements together. If there was an issue in RUM that we felt affected all of us, then all municipalities in our sub-regional network would bring it up, and that meant we gained a very strong influence in RUM."* (MunPlan B, 2025)

This quote illustrates a procedural shift toward collective articulation of municipal positions. Rather than acting in isolation, municipalities within sub-regional networks have developed routines to synchronise their inputs. Such joint preparation suggests a move from reactive participation to proactive co-determination, expanding the procedural imagination of what regional planning can look like in practice.

A similar procedural sensibility is reflected in the acknowledgement of how regional development depends on reciprocal relationships where large and small municipalities rely on one another's capacities and perspectives:

> *"I think it was clear that Linköping [*i.e. *the largest city in the region] in particular has shown a very strong understanding that these issues are very important for a small municipality, and that it can be important. […] That has been clearly expressed by Linköping, and I think that is very sympathetic in a way."* (MunPlan L, 2025)

This view underlines a normative understanding of fairness and procedural solidarity in regional work. When large municipalities intentionally downplay their own agendas to make space for smaller counterparts, they help create procedural equity—an important condition for principled engagement. It shows how procedural norms evolve not only through joint frameworks but also through acts of acknowledgement and restraint.

Together, the 2017 and 2025 accounts illustrate a clear evolution in the cycle of principled engagement. In 2017, motivation to participate was undermined by a perceived lack of local relevance and collective purpose, while procedural uncertainty limited municipalities' sense of

ownership. Engagement was fragmented, reactive, and shaped by scepticism toward regional coordination.

By 2025, however, the tone had shifted toward a more relational and co-constituted form of collaboration. Motivation now derives from being recognised, listened to, and engaged with in one's own context. Acts of attentiveness by both the Region and larger municipalities further reinforced fairness and solidarity as procedural norms. In terms of principled engagement, the interviews indicate an emerging understanding that regional spatial planning cannot simply reproduce municipal preferences. As one respondent put it: "What is regional, really? It cannot be the sum of the municipalities; it has to be the Region's." This suggests that participants are beginning to construct a shared definition of the regional level as responsible for articulating a spatial perspective that goes beyond the mere aggregation of local positions. Table 3 synthesises these changes between 2017 and 2025.

4.2. Shared motivation: legitimising a regional spatial perspective

The second cycle in the model for collaborative governance, being *shared motivation*, focuses on the relational and affective conditions underpinning collaboration. While *principled engagement* concerns how participants make sense of why and how to work together, *shared motivation* concerns whether there is trust, mutual understanding, and normative commitment to sustain collective action over time.

In 2017, the interviews revealed that such foundations for shared motivations were fragile. Collaboration across municipalities and the region was still developing, and mutual confidence in each other's intentions could not be taken for granted. A respondent described a process that demanded both negotiation and accommodation:

> *"But I think this has created a good sense of trust, where we give and take. It doesn't mean that we always applaud each other, or that we never have comments — we must have those… We must fight for our position a little. Build alliances and collaborations at the same time."* (MunPlan 3, 2017)

This reflection illustrates mutual understanding as a relational practice rather than a static state; something actors do together and continuously maintain their relationship with one another. In this sense, mutual understanding is less about consensus and more about cultivating legitimacy for others' viewpoints within the joint process. The respondent portrays trust as something actively maintained through negotiation and reciprocal recognition, rather than through avoidance of conflict.

At the same time, the empirical material indicates that many municipal actors still viewed the regional level as somewhat distant, and the region's intended role in planning was not yet fully understood, particularly regarding what strengthened regional spatial planning might mean for the municipalities' established responsibilities and their planning monopoly. Several accounts reveal that trust was unevenly distributed and often inhibited by local scepticism. As another interviewee explained,

> *"In our municipality, people are a bit sceptical; they think they might be tricked somehow, so they are always on guard and try to protect what they have today, for example 'don't cancel that bus route as well.'"* (MunPlan 7, 2017)

Table 3
Changes in principled engagement.

Dimension	2017	2025
Motivation to participate	Regional planning is perceived as abstract and disconnected from local realities. Unclear collective purpose weakens engagement.	Relational, place-based engagement strengthens motivation. Tension between autonomy and collaboration persists.
Procedural ideas	Absence of clear procedural norms reflecting fragmentary procedures. Divergent procedural preferences.	Emergence of collective procedural practices. Procedural fairness and solidarity strengthen legitimacy.

Such statements expose the vulnerability of trust when past experiences shape expectations of future interactions. The quote underscores that trust in this early phase was not yet a structural feature of regional collaboration. Suspicion of regional initiatives limited willingness to share information or take collective risks, reinforcing boundaries between municipalities and the regional level.

In 2025, shared motivation appears more consolidated, but it remains negotiated and contingent. The interviews indicate that trust, mutual understanding, and internal legitimacy have developed over time, yet unevenly and through ongoing work rather than through stable institutional guarantees. Shared motivation is thus less a background condition and more an achievement that must be reproduced through each new phase of the regional–municipal collaboration.

A quote from 2025 points to how concerns about regional ambitions continue to shape trust in the process:

> *"I think that when we first approached this from the municipal side, there was a great deal of concern about how this would influence the region's future processes. Would this lead to them making a regional plan eventually? [Name of regional planner] was very clear that 'this is not a regional plan,' but the concern still existed at both administrative and political levels."* (MunPlan I, 2025)

This quote shows that trust in 2025 is more developed than in 2017, but still fragile. On one hand, the regional planner's insistence that "this is not a regional plan" represents an explicit attempt to reassure municipalities and limit fears of encroachment on the municipal planning monopoly. On the other hand, the persistence of concern indicates how memories of past processes and the association with legal regional planning continue to shape how municipalities interpret the Region's intentions. Trust here hinges on whether municipal actors can be convinced that collaboration will not entail a loss of the extensive local mandate for spatial planning, a fundamental cornerstone of municipal planning. The municipality acknowledges the regional planner's clarity but cannot fully rule out the possibility that today's soft coordination might evolve into harder regional steering tomorrow. The persistent concern among some municipal actors that regional spatial planning might eventually evolve into more formal regional steering reflects the ambiguous position of regions in many European multi-level systems. Across the EU, there is an ongoing debate over which responsibilities for spatial planning and territorial development should be assigned to regional, local, or other levels of governance. EU cohesion policy and national reforms encourage regions to take on greater responsibilities for territorial governance, yet this expectation often meets established competencies and political claims at the municipal level. The negotiated trust observed in our case exemplifies how regional spatial planning is advanced through soft steering, rather than through hierarchical authority, in contexts where the division of responsibilities across levels remains contested.

A second 2025 reflection points to how the dialogical quality of interaction between the Region and municipalities has changed:

> *"I also get the sense that there has perhaps been a better dialogue between the municipalities and the Region in this, that things have kind of been raised up… it feels like there is relatively much room to speak freely in these forums."* (MunPlan J, 2025)

The respondent emphasises that participants experience the forums as spaces where different perspectives can be voiced without immediate sanction or dismissal. Mutual understanding is thus enacted through open exchanges where municipal and regional representatives learn more about one another's constraints, priorities, and rationales. Rather than assuming bad faith or hidden agendas, they increasingly interpret each other's positions as legitimate starting points for negotiation.

At the same time, this improved mutual understanding interacts with

internal legitimacy within municipalities. As highlighted in an earlier 2025 quote, which we already use under principled engagement, where political leaders view RUM through the lens of municipal planning monopoly while planners welcome it as an opportunity, motivations to participate are not homogeneous. Internal legitimacy here refers to the extent to which participation in regional collaboration is supported by the municipality's own value structures, professional norms, and political priorities. When planners experience the regional dialogue as open, respectful, and substantively useful, they can justify their involvement to themselves and their organisation. This bolsters internal legitimacy for collaboration, even when parts of the political leadership remain sceptical. Table 4 summarises our discussion on shared motivation.

4.3. Capacity for joint actions: developing regional spatial planning instruments and routines

The third cycle, capacity for joint action, concerns whether actors actually have the practical means to collaborate: resources, knowledge, leadership, and institutional structures that enable collective work to be possible and sustainable over time. While shared motivation addresses whether actors want to collaborate, capacity for joint action asks whether they can do so in an organised, competent and coordinated way.

The first quote highlights how meetings were understood as arenas for building knowledge capacity in 2017:

> *"But otherwise, I know that we viewed the meetings as knowledge-providing, and we therefore selected participants based on who we thought should absorb the kind of knowledge we expected would be conveyed at the meeting. Knowledge can be seen as a* cost*, so we valued the meetings highly."* (MunPlan 5, 2017)

Here, capacity for joint action is strengthened by a deliberate strategy to internalise regional expertise into the municipal organisation. The municipality uses the regional arena as a learning infrastructure to equip key staff with concepts, data and perspectives that can later be applied in local planning practice. Seeing knowledge as a "cost" underlines that participation requires time and attention, but also that this cost is justified when the regionally mediated knowledge can be reused internally. Capacity for joint action thus becomes cumulative: each meeting upgrades the municipality's ability to engage in future regional processes on more equal, informed terms.

Some interviewees criticise the Region for providing a product without sufficient guidance on how it should be used and point to leadership as a contested dimension of capacity for joint action:

> *"We haven't been told how we're supposed to use it—whether generally or in our comprehensive planning. The region more or less finalised it, released it, and then it's like they've mostly hoped that the municipalities would take it up on their own and move it forward."* (MunPlan 7, 2017)

This implies a lack of process leadership and follow-through, which weakens capacity for joint action because there is no shared strategy for implementation, while another quote clearly defends municipal sovereignty:

> *"We don't want anyone else to tell us how our municipality should develop; that's something the municipality itself should decide."* (MunPlan 5, 2017)

Together, these results show a narrow corridor for legitimate regional leadership: municipalities want clearer support on *how* to work with regional outputs, but not directive leadership on *what* their local development should be. Capacity for joint action thus requires carefully calibrated leadership that coordinates, clarifies and enables, without challenging the municipal mandates for spatial planning. The 2025 material suggests that the capacity for joint action has grown but remains vulnerable. Many interviewees underscore how regional networks function as both a knowledge infrastructure and a resource burden for especially smaller municipalities:

> *"I think the municipalities' stance has shifted toward an understanding that it is indeed important to participate. There has been some initial resistance, particularly among the smaller municipalities. Given the many demands on their time, there was perhaps a sense of questioning the value of participation and whether it should really be prioritized. However, over the years, there has been great acceptance."* (MunPlan A, 2025)

Here, networks are described as valuable because they keep municipalities continuously informed and connected, thereby strengthening their knowledge capacity regarding regional issues. At the same time, this informational gain comes at a high cost, weighing more heavily on small municipalities with limited staff and administrative resources. Capacity for joint action thus becomes asymmetrical: those with more resources can participate more fully and gain more of the knowledge benefits, while smaller municipalities face sharper trade-offs between daily operational tasks and regional engagement. This asymmetry in capacity for joint action may also reinforce regional polarisation. Smaller municipalities that struggle to prioritise regional engagement risk being marginalised in the emerging spatial structure, while better-resourced municipalities can more easily secure their interests. The perceived need to participate despite resource constraints can thus be understood not only as a matter of influence, but also as a strategy to avoid being left behind in a region increasingly oriented around its strongest growth centres.

In 2025, the interviewees seem to be more appreciative of a firmer regional leadership, compared to the approach on this from the earlier study:

> *"As the Region takes on this greater responsibility for regional planning in Östergötland, it creates an opportunity for the municipalities. […] Then perhaps you can focus more on your own planning, and the municipalities can work on their own important issues together with other municipalities. You might be spared from having to take on the larger regional perspective. […] You can focus more on your own issues than on the bigger ones."* (MunPlan G, 2025)

When the Region takes greater responsibility for the regional perspective, municipalities experience this as a relief and an opportunity. They can then focus more on their own planning issues, while still knowing that the larger, cross-municipal questions are being addressed. This expresses gratitude for a stronger regional role, provided it supports rather than overrides local priorities.

Table 4
Changes in shared motivation.

Dimension	2017	2025
Trust	Uneven and vulnerable; fears of being "tricked" and losing routes show defensive, protective orientations.	More developed but layered; reassurances ("this is not a regional plan") coexist with persistent concerns about future regional steering.
Mutual understanding	Emerging as a relational practice; "give and take" and "fight for our position" show respect for differing positions within ongoing negotiation.	Enacted through "better dialogue" and "relatively much room to speak freely," where disagreement is more acceptable and others' positions are treated as legitimate.
Internal legitimacy	Weakly articulated; collaboration not strongly anchored in municipalities' own value structures or routines.	More differentiated: planners can justify engagement as professionally valuable and substantively useful, even when political leaders remain sceptical.

Municipalities sense that the produced regional spatial strategy matters, yet are left to interpret how and where it should be integrated into their own procedures:

> *"Yes, but I mean, you can feel that it has an impact, that it isn't just a paper product lying around. But then again, it's perhaps been difficult to know which subsequent processes this document is supposed to influence. Maybe the region itself didn't quite have a full grasp of that either."* (MunPlan G, 2025)

This can be read less as criticism and more as a symptom of cautious leadership. The Region appears reluctant to define the document's use too clearly, for fear of being perceived as infringing on municipal spatial planning mandates. In combination, the quotes suggest an emerging yet somewhat hesitant regional leadership once the plan is ratified and the planning process moves into implementation. Some municipalities want the Region to take responsibility and provide clearer guidance, while the Region holds back, out of concern for maintaining trust and avoiding municipal resistance by appearing overly directive or prescriptive.

The institutional arrangements for regular dialogues between the region and the municipalities contribute a crucial backbone of joint capacity, particularly stressed by interviewees from the municipalities:

> *"It's mainly the consultation structure. For me, that's just natural—but I've heard from some colleagues in other counties that it's not something that can be taken for granted. It's not given that the region takes on precisely that role. So that's something one can be grateful for."* (MunPlan H, 2025)

This institutional arrangement for regional–municipal interaction secures recurring procedures rather than ad hoc contacts and creates predictable arenas for dialogues. This is a resource to consolidate the capacity for joint action by making collaboration less dependent on individual personalities and more on stable, shared routines and, more generally, on the consolidation of regional planning. At the same time, the expression that this cannot be "taken for granted" hints at its potential fragility: if such structures are not maintained, the collaborative capacity they support could quickly erode. Hence, the region's capacity to invite and manage these arrangements is crucial. Even without formal land-use planning powers, the Region builds capacity to coordinate spatial planning, produce spatial knowledge and convene inter-municipal dialogue. The capacities are central to the type of territorial governance that EU policies anticipate, and they help explain how regional spatial planning can become institutionalised in practice before it is fully codified in law. Table 5 summarises our discussion on the capacity for joint actions.

Table 5
Changes in capacity for joint actions.

Dimension	2017	2025
Knowledge Resources	Meetings as learning arenas. Due to few meetings, resource does not come up as a big issue.	Meetings as learning arenas. Explicit trade-offs for small municipalities: rewarding connections vs. high time demands, exacerbating resource disparities.
Leadership	Contested; criticism of insufficient process guidance contrasted with strong defense of municipal sovereignty indicating a narrow corridor for regional role.	Municipalities more appreciative of regional responsibility as relief; cautious/hesitant style of the Region avoids over-directiveness to prevent resistance, leaving implementation ambiguous.
Institutional arrangements	Largely absent; ad hoc reliance on meetings.	Consultation structures as "natural" backbone, providing predictable input arenas; valued but fragile.

5. Conclusions

This paper sets out to contribute to understanding how Europeanization through the implementation of EU cohesion policy drives the consolidation of the regional planning scales. This paper has explored this aspect through analysing qualitative empirical material from one region in Sweden comprising interviews with municipalities that has been involved in two rounds of regional planning processes to develop regional spatial planning. The study has illustrated how consolidation of regional planning capacity in this region has developed over time. We have applied a model for collaborative governance to be able to identify the interplay of factors impacting the ways in which collaboration is managed with impacts on how the regional planning mandate is consolidated, and the regional planning scale is institutionalised.

Taken together, our findings indicate that the development of regional spatial planning is not reducible to an improvement in regional-municipal collaboration. Rather, changing patterns of collaboration have enabled the Region and municipalities to construct a more widely accepted regional spatial perspective. The changes observed between 2017 and 2025 involved not only stronger trust and more routinised forms of interaction, but also shifts in the status of spatial knowledge and in expectations attached to regional responsibilities. Collaboration should therefore be understood as the institutional process through which regional spatial planning is made meaningful, accepted and operational in a non-statutory context.

Revisiting factors driving Europeanisation, the EU cohesion policy is the wider context for territorial governance and regional planning in this paper. Our case of regional spatial planning in a region in Sweden, where this is not statutory, reveals the influence of what can be soft steering through how the EU defines its policy, programs and societal aims (Cotella and Janin Rivolin, 2024). This also makes it clear that the analytical dimension of discovery, which drives the first cycle of the analytical model, is particularly challenging. This stems from vagueness about the shared understanding of regional spatial planning, and in particular, what values it can contribute to. This challenge is impacting the interconnected cycle for shared motivation. If the values seen as derived from regional spatial planning are abstract, this hampers shared motivation and commitment to involvement. Nevertheless, municipalities perceive that regional spatial planning may undermine their capacity for spatial planning and, consequently, reduce their ability to act. This dilemma, in turn, challenges the ways in which leadership can be acted through the region to manage its role for territorial governance. In this way, it can be seen that the cycles of the model are closely interconnected.

Nevertheless, and despite these challenges, the results prove that regional spatial planning has become more consolidated over time, although still in a fragile stage. How can this be explained? We would suggest three key factors behind this process of a movement towards the institutionalisation of regional planning.

The first factor is the effect of time through which institutions are becoming manifest. The institutions in this context are about arrangements as well as environments. The arrangements refer to the established structures for dialogues between the region and the municipalities that are becoming institutionalised through the ways in which politicians and planners conceive their routinised work tasks. When increasing number of regions in Sweden set up regional spatial plans such procedures become "normalised" and considered to belong to regional collaborative processes, that in turn impacts informal institutional environments. Time also has an impact through positive feedback effects. This can, for instance, mean that municipalities in general experience that regional spatial planning does not compete with or undermine the local planning mandates, in contrast to what has been a deep concern. Feedback effects are expressed differently across municipalities, and small municipalities (population-wise) report that regional spatial planning has provided them with an important knowledge base to support planning tasks.

The second factor that can explain the consolidation over time of regional spatial planning is the capacity for joint action, which represents the third cycle in the analytical model and for which the region's capacity to take leadership is quite crucial. This is derived from skills to manage the organisational settings for collaboration and to manage the dialogues through those arrangements. This is combined with access to resources in the form of staff work hours, resources to organise meetings, and resources to compile data for the production of maps that serve as the basis for forging the regional spatial plan. The capacity for leadership is key to upholding the municipalities' commitment to continuous involvement in the governance process, which in turn nurtures trust-building (den Bakker, 2026).

The third factor driving the consolidation of regional spatial planning in interplay with the institutionalisation of regional leadership for territorial governance can be induced more indirectly from the empirical material, and that is the effect of the so-called shadow of hierarchy (Nederhand et al., 2016). This concerns the ways in which municipalities become consent to be involved in regional governance from a shared understanding of gradual movements towards future regulations assigning the regions a stronger mandate (Levelt and Metze, 2014). This can be interpreted from the wider context of the collaborative regime derived from the EU's regional development policy, combined with the regulating power of the national state. At present, formal regulation for regional spatial planning applies only to a selection of three regions (out of 21 in total) in Sweden. The other regions are invited to apply to be involved in such formal regulations. Hence, the regions can choose different strategies for their leadership driving regional governance (den Bakker et al. 2026). Region Östergötland explicitly states that it has chosen to manage the regional spatial planning through what can be described to be the collaborative alternative. Nevertheless, in practice, it has been mandatory for municipalities to be involved in this regional planning process being implicitly a strategy to avert the pathway of regulation. In this way, it can be seen that the municipalities are exposed to a soft steering that is powerful in how it breaks through the quite stark resistance of local planning to be involved in governance relations for spatial planning.

This study shows the importance of acknowledging how the wider policy regime (Emerson et al., 2012) impacts the dynamics of regional governance. More concretely, this concerns how EU and the national state execute soft steering shaping the consolidation of planning mandates over time explaining how principled engagement is developing and initiating collaborative processes for regional spatial planning. In this way, this study has demonstrated the complex interconnection of the three cycles of the model and how these drive the regional government and condition the ways in which regions can take leadership in territorial governance for regional spatial planning. The longitudinal design of the study illustrates how the capacity of regional governance is shaped through feedback effects over time. In this way, regions can be considered to drive change agency that impacts the institutions of regional governance (Glückler, 2020).

Referring to the model of collaborative governance, this identifies how fragile conditions for principal engagement in regional spatial planning are compensated over time by feedback effects that strengthen the elements of the cycle of shared motivation. Overall, however, this study demonstrates the importance of elements in the third cycle, namely the capacity to act, which explains how the region manages to drive a planning procedure despite the lack of quite fundamental conditions. However, this study has refrained from investigating the functionality and the gains that come from consolidating a regional scale for spatial planning in a national setting where spatial planning is a local planning mandate. Hence, although the region examined in this paper has established regional spatial planning, it remains to be seen how the challenges identified in our study affect the implementation of these planning processes and, ultimately, their impact on societal development. Hopefully, this paper will inspire future research into the role of regional spatial plans in guiding planning interventions that impact regional development and structures.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the manuscript preparation process

During the preparation of this work, the authors used Grammarly to improve the language, grammar, and readability of the text written by the authors. The tool was not used to generate the manuscript's ideas, arguments, analysis, or any original content. The authors reviewed and edited the output as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the published article.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Sabrina Fredin: Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation. **Brita Hermelin:** Writing – original draft, Investigation, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Therese Aldinge:** Writing – original draft, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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