

# Report on the 6th Masterclass on EU Cohesion Policy



*By Chris Dimos (University of Bath, UK) and Samira Barzin (University of Groningen, the Netherlands)*

From October 8<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> 2018, the 6th Masterclass on EU Cohesion Policy was held as part of the 16<sup>th</sup> European Week of Regions and Cities in Brussels. The Masterclass was a joint event led by the European Commission's DG Regio, the European Committee of the Regions (CoR), the Regional Studies Association (RSA Europe), the European Regional Science Association (ERSA), the Association of European Schools of Planning (AESOP) and the European Parliament's Research Service (EPRS). Overall, the Masterclass was attended by 30 outstanding PhD students and early stage researchers from 13 EU member and two non-member states.



## Highlights and Key Discussions

What makes Masterclass such a unique event is its capacity to connect policymakers, EU officials, senior academics and prospective researchers under the overarching aim of collaboratively working towards a more prosperous Europe. The 6<sup>th</sup> Masterclass consisted of various events, from informal sight-seeing trips to formal paper presentations, there was a little bit for everyone! To get to know one another, the week started with a walking trip around Brussels with Wolfgang Petzold (EU-CoR) as the brilliant local insider. On the following days, each attendant had the opportunity to present his/her research in a short presentation which was accompanied with an insightful discussion by a designated senior academic or EU official. In addition, participants had the opportunity to join interactive discussion rounds on EU regional policy making and sessions of their choice in the wider EWRC conference. Despite all the hard work, participants also had the chance to attend the official opening of the wider EWRC conference, addressed by the EU Commission's president Jean-Claude Juncker, and the RegioStars Awards Ceremony.

The 6<sup>th</sup> Masterclass offered attendants ample in-depth discussions around EU

policies and enabled them to familiarise themselves with ongoing research conducted at the various institutions of Europe.

The 6<sup>th</sup> Masterclass highlighted the importance of the EU Cohesion Policy in rendering regions and cities across the EU more cohesive therefore facilitating further integration of the EU. In a session chaired by Sally Hardy (CEO of the Regional Studies Association), research presented by Prof. Andrés Rodríguez-Pose (London School of Economics) and Lewis Dijkstra (European Commission, DG REGIO) suggested that the population of “neglected” areas across the EU, which experienced a long period of low economic performance, tend to “radicalise” and eventually vote for Eurosceptic political parties rendering further EU integration at stake. However, the event also emphasised that the allocation of EU funds to regions and cities is far from optimal and susceptible to short-term regional interests that tend to undermine the very rationale of EU funds. For example, it was discussed that in affluent regions cohesion policy funds may be used to finance luxurious facilities, which may be misrepresented to attract such funds, such as the renovation of the concert theatre in Luxembourg, whereas in other cases EU funds may be used to finance activities with low productivity gains such as an Irish bar in a tourist resort of Spain, the justification of which was that it does ‘promote cultural exchange and cooperation between the people of the two nations’.

The event’s workshop provided an excellent opportunity to discuss and contemplate upon cohesion policy challenges revolving around the EU Multi-annual Financial Framework, such as the co-financing rates, the eligibility of funded activities and alternative indicators to GDP. The early-career researchers were able to criticise current practices and criteria of allocating funds, such as using the GDP criterion alone, and suggested alternative measures to capture the dynamics of regions. With respect to co-financing, some early career researchers objected the Commission’s proposal to reduce rates, claiming that in less developed regions the absorption rate of EU funds would fall further; whereas others argued that reduced rates would mean that high value-added projects would be more likely to be selected for funding.

One of the highlights of the event was the debate between representatives of EU Commission, Council of the EU and EU Parliament. In this event, challenges posed to the future EU Cohesion Policy (2021-2027) were discussed. This

interview, hosted by Prof. John Bachtler (European Policies Research Centre), was an excellent simulation of the actual dynamics and negotiations that take place between the three institutions in shaping and eventually determining EU policies. It became evident that different perspectives are at work when determining policies; whereas the EU Parliament is more connected to the regional societies and often takes a political stance into matters, the EU Commission and the Council of the EU may take a more technocratic approach. All three representatives from the three institutions emphasised the important challenges and concerns raised on the imminent post-2020 reform of Cohesion Policy especially in a post-Brexit era. Even though it was argued that the UK is a “net” contributor in EU funds, the latter will remain unchanged.

Contrary to criticisms that EU officials and EU policies are detached from the real challenges of the European societies, this event was an absolute manifestation of the opposite. It was obvious that EU officials were not only driven by evidence-based policies, but they were also committed to a mission of serving an upper aim: working collectively for a strong and prosperous Europe. This vision was diffused to the participants of the event, especially to early-career researchers whose future research we are certain will be even more inspired and better aligned with serving a better and stronger Europe.

### **Personal views**

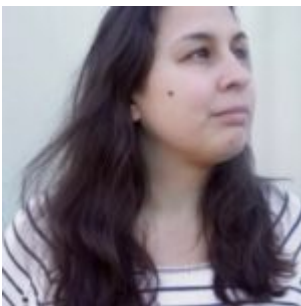
For Chris, the 6<sup>th</sup> Masterclass was by far the best research event he has ever attended; the opportunity does not happen every day to meet so many high-level policymakers, EU officials, senior academics and prospective researchers in such a short period of time. It was a unique experience and he really doubts that he will ever attend such a great event in the future.

For Samira, the masterclass was a great event to get excited about research, connect with other early stage researchers and gain insight and connections within the EU; Samira would highly recommend this masterclass to anyone who is passionate about research and policy making!

### **About the authors**



Chris Dimos is currently a doctoral student at the School of Management, University of Bath (UK). His research is funded by the UK Economics and Social Research Council (ESRC) and focuses predominantly on innovation policy, where he has published in leading academic journals. Specifically, his current work focuses on how public R&D support for firms affects the (innovation) behaviour of firms and their productivity. Chris' research has also a regional angle and investigates the role of regions in shaping innovation and productivity. In the 6<sup>th</sup> Masterclass, Chris presented a study (co-authored by Phil Tomlinson and Felicia Fai, both based at the University of Bath) on how a planned public investment in the South West region of England may give rise to a new technology cluster in the region.



Samira Barzin has recently completed her PhD at Imperial College London (UK); subsequently she has joined the University of Groningen (NL) as Assistant Professor. Samira is predominantly interested in the role of (transportation) infrastructure and the development and dynamics of the private sector for developing countries. She further focuses on topics in international trade, environmental and regional economics. In the 6<sup>th</sup> Masterclass, Samira presented her recent PhD work on the role of transportation investments for firm productivity growth and regional economic cohesion. Using disaggregate data for Germany and relying on complex firm analyses methods, she found that while highway networks can aide firms' productivity growth, access to a skilled workforce has a significantly larger effect, suggesting that transportation and

labour market policies can generate better targeted results when designed in conjunction.