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An analysis of ‘global closures’ and ‘national openings’ in the politics of urbanization

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I analyze the politics of urbanization and competitiveness-led state spatial transformations through political narratives. By analyzing empirical material, I search for ways of reasoning and rationalities that disclose the dynamics of the depoliticization and politicization of different spatial transformations of urbanization. Based on extensive interviews, I argue that a general understanding of urbanization as an external, global inevitability and as a force prevails among political elites. This key rationality and other sedimented knowledge duly opens up new political debates on the proper political management of urbanization and national adaptation. The order of reasoning is clear: the political elites argue that the perceived inevitability, common good and state of crisis necessitate national spatial transformations in order to secure the competitiveness of the state. As a result, new spatial hierarchies are forming as an adaptive strategy.

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Introduction

In this article, I analyze what I name as the politics of urbanization through national political narratives. By politics of urbanization, I refer to various economic, spatial and social political struggles that one way or another concern the process of urbanization within a given state. In this paper, I analyze how the related political struggles are narrated and framed in general, and search for different strategies of depoliticization and politicization in these narratives in particular. The reason for applying such a perspective is to reveal the rationalities underlying these depoliticizing and politicizing arguments, and to analyze the essential dynamics of the politics of urbanization.

The article aims to contribute to discussions on the variegated capitalisms and competitiveness-led state spatial restructurings and rescalings (e.g. Marston 2000; Peck 2001, 2004; Brenner and Theodore 2002; Peck and Tickell 2002; Brenner 2003; Bristow 2005; Fougner 2006; Peck and Theodore 2007; Brenner, Peck, and Theodore 2010; Fricke and Gualini 2018), by utilizing empirical material from Finland. As such, this article also contributes to the list of publications (e.g. Ahlqvist and Moisio 2014; Adkins and Ylöstalo 2018; Jonas and Moisio 2018; Luukkonen and Sirviö 2019) utilizing Finland as a case study on depoliticization and neoliberalization of space. Finnish political debates on urbanization are revolving around such issues as (allegedly) rapid spatial transformations, economic fate of the nation-state, competitiveness and spatial equity. Through extensive interviews on Finnish political elites, I aim to describe how different reasonings and rationalities

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considering competitiveness and state spaces, for example, are manifested in the politics of urbanization and related political narratives. I depict how local/national and global/competitive spaces become politicized and depoliticized in these narratives, and how these strategies work in creating new spaces and in restructuring state spaces through depicting inevitabilities and the common good on one hand, and constant crisis (see Hay 1999) and the problematization of national spatial political practices on the other. I describe how these narratives frame the emergent spatial hierarchies based on (e.g.) spatial competitiveness, labor markets and higher education (see Addie 2020).

The transformation and rescaling of space as a part of urbanization has been the focus of many analytical discussions. In his book *Cities in Global Capitalism* (2017), Rossi shows how the city/capitalism nexus and the imperative of urbanization can be seen as the main platform for contemporary capitalism. Urbanization frames the national political discourses on the global economic competitiveness of states (Jonas and Moiso 2018). The geoeconomic competition is taken for granted and is seen as a necessity (see e.g. Miettinen 2002) and as something that cities and nation-states cannot drop out of without running the risk of losing importance and economic prowess (Brenner and Wachsmuth 2012). Brenner and Schmid (2015) argue how neoliberal and market-oriented, transnational rule regimes, among other deregulating tendencies, push for creating differentiating and polarized modes of spatial transformations. Adkins and Ylöstalo (2018) write how experiment as a key mode of policymaking can be seen as a frontier of neoliberal reform processes. In similar vein, the depoliticization and politicization considering urbanization and related political issues can be attributed to economization and neoliberalization of politics and the political (see Adkins et al. 2019) and to neoliberalization of space (Peck and Tickell 2002).

The narratives on inevitabilities and refocusing the political discourse on urbanization are therefore crucial tactics for various political aspirations. For example, Grossi and Pianezzi (2017) write how certain contemporary narratives on urbanization, in their case smart cities, can be interpreted as sprung from neoliberal ideology. Moreover, Rossi (2020) writes how the crisis of neoliberalism has affected only the surface of contemporary urbanism and its narratives. Rossi and Vanolo (2011) argue that the urban growth machine (Molotch 1976) has in a way turned into a national property, and the material growth of cities is serving to create unique alliances between different actors. The narratives on inevitabilities on one hand, and politicization on the other, are key strategies on forming these alliances and delimiting the political.

This article creates a place-specific contribution to these discussions. It contributes to this vast literature by analyzing the political narratives that aim at restructuring the national space in the name of competition and adaptation. The thematic of spatial transformations and narratives on urbanization are approached by focusing on depoliticization and politicization of space. In other words, this article interprets the common narratives and describes how the politics of urbanization are narrowed and broadened at the level of argumentation.

The article consists of the following sections. To begin with, I briefly outline the key elements and developments in the politics of urbanization in Finland to explain the context of these narratives. After that, I describe the empirical material and the methods of the study. In the third section, I lay out an analytical framework for the paper, and conceptualize the narratives within the politics of urbanization as an interplay between depoliticization and politicization. In the fourth section, I describe the key arguments and rationalizations of depoliticization in the politics of urbanization in Finland and provide an overview of depoliticization in this area. In the fifth section, I turn my attention to the acts and patterns of politicization, before pointing to linkages between the two opposing forces. The last section is dedicated to a brief discussion and the conclusions.

Context of the politics of urbanization in Finland

In this section, I briefly review the basic features of, and some explanatory literature on, Finnish urbanization and the related political processes. The brief summary is aimed at helping the reader to grasp the essence of the political narratives on urbanization in Finland that will subsequently be

analyzed. Moreover, it creates an argument on why Finland as a case study is relevant for studying de/politicization within politics of urbanization.

The usual notion in the Finnish political debates is that Finland is urbanizing rapidly. Between 2000 and 2018, Finnish urban regions (here understood as municipalities with over 15,000 inhabitants; on the classification, see Helminen et al. 2014) gained over half a million inhabitants, whereas rural regions (regions not identified as urban) have lost almost 190,000 inhabitants (OSF 2020). In 1990, three out of 19 Finnish regions (NUTS 3) were losing population, while in 2018, only five of them had positive population growth (OSF 2019). In recent decades, the population has grown, especially in the Helsinki region and around other university cities in Finland. Moreover, Statistics Finland has forecast that by 2040, there may only be 21 municipalities out of 295 in mainland Finland with a positive population growth (OSF 2019). While these forecasts are contested, they play an important part in the narratives on Finnish urbanization, and are used as evidence of rapid urbanization and a national crisis of the traditional municipal structure.

The current differentiating development is in stark contrast to what could be called the traditional regional policy. Moisio (2012) calls the period from the 1950s in Finland a period of a decentralized welfare state, during which the state apparatus focused on developing or sustaining existing conditions throughout the state territory. The current Finnish municipal system was created in the 1970s, when former rural municipalities, boroughs and urban municipalities were scrapped, and all municipalities were given equal competencies and responsibilities in service production. This transformation represented a certain equalizing principle, which called for addressing all regions and citizens equally throughout the state territory. Moisio depicts the gradual eradication of these principles and their replacement by market-oriented ones as a period of decentralized competition state in the 1980s, followed by a more centralized spatial development system from the 1990s onwards. Ahlqvist and Moisio (2014) have described this process as a shift in the welfare state model from cartel polity to corporate polity.

Luukkonen and Sirviö (2019) have argued that city regionalism has formed as a dominant spatial-political imaginary in Finland, and also describe a particular metropolitanizing tendency and the subsequent state restructurings (Sirviö and Luukkonen 2020). Moreover, urbanization frames the political narrative on the state's global economic competitiveness in Finland (Jonas and Moisio 2018), and Moisio (2018) has argued that urbanization is understood as an inevitable and a positive 'megatrend' across the Finnish political spectrum. The current politics of urbanization in Finland could be described as a struggle between neoliberal city-regional (or metropolitan) rationalities in which the importance of the growth of the Helsinki metropolitan region and other major cities is emphasized, and more traditional welfare-state rationalities of equal regional development and urban growth across the state territory (see Ahlqvist and Moisio, 2014).

Therefore, in my view, the current Finnish political debates on urbanization revolve around two major issues. One is the growth and competitiveness of major cities in a global setting, and the other is the economic, productive and demographic crisis of the rural municipalities and minor cities. Successive Finnish governments have tried to alleviate these economic problems by replacing existing regional councils that have minor competencies with more robust and autonomous provinces. These new provinces would be responsible for social services and healthcare, alleviating the municipal burden of service production. Thus far, these efforts have been marred by consecutive policy failures.

Relatively fast development of urbanization in Finland is sometimes described as 'delayed' related to other Western-European states. Finnish agrarian political traditions and combination of current pace of urbanization has sprung up interesting political discussions in which the spatial transformation is posited as a key mechanism determining the 'fate of the nation-state'. These processes and political debates make Finland an interesting target of more robust analysis what it comes to neoliberalization and economization of space and strengthens the argument on utilizing Finland as a case-study in making more general arguments.

Materials and methods

The primary research material consists of 36 semi-structured interviews performed from May to October 2019. The interviewees represent various high-level actors in Finnish politics and civil society who are well placed when it comes to forming national political narratives on urbanization, and determining national political guidelines and outcomes regarding urbanization. The interviewees were chosen according to four categories. The first group of subjects hold managerial positions in various state apparatuses, such as chiefs of staffs and leading experts in key ministries and other governmental branches, such as the Finnish Transport Infrastructure Agency and regional Centers for Economic Development, Transport and the Environment. The second group comprise mayors of some major Finnish cities, as well as individual regional mayors. The third group consist of members of the Finnish parliament, representing major political parties. The fourth group represent various third-sector organizations, such as environmental and civic organizations (such as the Family Federation of Finland), banks and other private enterprises, such as major construction companies, labour organizations and interest groups, such as the Confederation of Finnish Industries. The interviewees were chosen in order to highlight various sides of the political narratives, as well as the conflicting arguments and interests, and to analyze different levels and contexts of political processes.

The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format with individual interviews lasting from 45 min to 1.5 h. The topics discussed consisted of five themes. First, we discussed the interviewees' general thoughts and views on urbanization, related discourses and political practices. Second, we focused on the interviewees' opinions on future developments, and their misgivings and hopes concerning urbanization and related regional developments. The third theme was related to national economic aspects of urbanization, and the fourth to environmental aspects of urbanization and related politics. The last theme considered questions regarding metropolitan development, and the power relations of the state and municipalities, which have been determined as key questions in relation to Finnish urbanization. Throughout the article, I include excerpts from the interviews to make certain arguments and narrative strategies visible, and to clarify my analysis.

Moreover, I have analyzed 10 governmental policy documents in order to extend the analysis of narratives from individual political actors to broader political developments and in-practice decision-making. The analysis of these documents is performed to show that certain depoliticizing and politicizing arguments and rationalities are not only rhetorical tactics or remain at the level of argumentation. Instead, they also have material effects on state spatial restructuring, and the prevailing rationalities and arguments structure policymaking. These documents were chosen by using a limited number of search words (e.g. urbanization, domestic migration) in the government's joint publication archive (julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi). These general search words were used in order to get comprehensive search results from a variety of related themes from different governmental publishers (ministries and steering groups). These documents (Table 1) represent recent and somewhat diverse range of voices and themes within the government of Finland. As such, the analysis of selected documents reveals how particular elements of political narratives seem overarching across varying thematic issues, and how certain narratives have thus become normalized.

I have analyzed the empirical material, both the policy documents and transcribed interviews, by searching for different ways of reasoning on urbanization. I have applied an analytical method of analyzing narratives on depoliticization and politicization found within these materials. I understand these narratives as both spoken/written stories and schemes within which the qualitative arguments are performed (Polkinghorne 1988). That is, these narratives disclose the standpoints, arguments and rationalizations on the subject issue. The arguments are understood as statement-strategies oriented on justifying or discrediting an opinion and aimed at gaining acceptability for a point of view (Van Eemeren 2015, 202).

Table 1. List of analyzed governmental policy documents and their thematic orientation.

Publication	Publisher	Date of publication	Theme
Regional Cities Programme – Independent development and multilateral partnerships	Ministry of Finance	19 June 2018	Regional cities development initiatives
Final report of the parliamentary working group on sparsely populated areas	Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry	11 October 2019	Rural development
Pioneering towards sustainable growth: Urban Programme 2018–2022	Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment	6 November 2018	Urban development
From transformation to new growth: Futures Review of the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment	Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment	4 June 2018	Futures review
Agenda for sustainable growth	Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment	13 September 2018	Sustainable growth
Innovation policy to renew the economy and society	Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment	28 February 2019	Innovations and economy
Outlook of the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment on the Finnish labour market	Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment	26 February 2019	Labour market
Regional Economic Prospects in Autumn 2019	Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment	8 October 2019	Regional economics
Building sustainable living environments 2030: Futures review by the Ministry of the Environment	Ministry of the Environment	4 June 2018	Futures review
Municipalities at a turning point? Information on the situation of municipalities in 2020	Ministry of Finance	13 February 2020	Local government and economic development

To this end, the analysis discloses the dynamic between depoliticization and politicization in the politics of urbanization in Finland. I understand urbanization broadly as socio-spatial transformations yielding uneven spatial outcomes. By considering politics of urbanization, I aim at describing the political within these specific spatial and social processes. I understand the dynamic between depoliticization and politicization as something that delimits but also describes the condition of the political within urbanization. In other words, depoliticization is here understood as speech-acts and narratives narrowing or closing down the political in urbanization. This is done by pushing issues and topics towards the realm of necessity, or rendering them apolitical. In similar vein, politicizing strategies aim at opening up new issues and broadening the political (see Palonen 2003).

Therefore, my aim is to assess how the political inevitabilities on one hand and arenas of political struggle on the other are formed at the level of narratives vis-à-vis space and spatial transformations. I depict how these national political narratives and arguments on urbanization are rationalized, and how they manifest in policymaking processes. I suggest that depoliticization can be seen as both delimiting the perceived possibilities of policymaking, as well as consolidating and justifying certain rationalities and ways of reasoning. In other words, these narratives not only delimit policy-crafting but can also be seen as a competition between modes of knowledge production and different ways of reasoning.

I examine the spatial and scalar aspects of political argumentation in particular, and analyze certain political acts inherent in it. In essence, I consider how the (de)politicizing narratives affect state-crafting and state spatial transformations, and how such politics taps into and restructures urbanization as a national strategic transformation through complex political action. I argue that these narratives paint a picture of changing rationalizations of regional development, of competitive geoeconomic pursuits of the state, and of changing roles of political leadership.

I have thematized the empirical analysis in hierarchical order. To begin with, I have outlined the key (de)politicizing arguments and prevailing rationalizations in these narratives. After that, I have outlined and thematized certain subordinate rationalizations and argumentation that further frame the politics of urbanization in Finland.

Subsequently, I have produced an overview of how the narratives construct what I call the closures and the openings. In outlining what I refer to as the *closures* in these political narratives, I

search for certain sedimented (see Jessop 2010) patterns of depoliticization, where existing rationalizations and arguments have become shared and the political debate has been ‘closed off’. That is, whereas the depoliticization refers here to the patterns, strategies and action of depoliticizing argumentation, the closure refers to the subsequent mode or condition of the political. The closure indicates thematic issues and potential struggles that have been successfully rendered apolitical or pushed to the realm of inevitability. On the other hand, I outline what I call the *openings*, the politicized struggles that frame the current political discourse, accumulated by the ongoing acts of politicization. These sedimented understandings are interlinked and simultaneous. Both the closures and the openings as conditions created by ongoing depoliticizing and politicizing actions structure the topics of political debates in Finland, as well as narratives on urbanization in general.

My intention is not to argue the patterns of depoliticization and politicization to be directly consecutive. On the contrary, they are concurrent political strategies with similar and reciprocal rationalities. For example, the politicization of the management of urbanization can also be understood as something that reinforces the depoliticization of the urbanization as a megatrend. However, I find it explanatory and revealing to analyze these as a gradual rationalization, in which the common (depoliticized) understanding gives a way the contradictory (politicized) understandings and political conflicts.

The politics of urbanization as an interplay between depoliticization and politicization

Jacques Rancière has argued that depoliticization is the oldest task of politics (1995, 19), and that politics is inherently a competition between two fundamental and opposing forces: depoliticizing and politicizing (see e.g. Flinders and Buller 2006). Palonen (2003) has described politicization as denoting something opening up as political, or ‘playable’. In this sense, Palonen effectively depicts politicization (and depoliticization) as functioning in such a way as to delimit the field of polity, and as opening up specific possibilities and placing limits on political action. The activity concept of politics that Palonen describes supports the notion of politicization and the performative actions of politicking as ‘verbal figures’ that constitute politics.

In the same vein, I see politics consisting of ongoing and constant narratives and speech acts. Moreover, I focus on the distinct acts of depoliticization and politicization as forming the core of the political narrative in delimiting the substance of decision-making based on certain reasonings and rationalities. I consider depoliticizing and politicizing arguments as political strategies (see Luukkonen and Sirviö 2019) and acts demarcating the significance of political issues and delimiting political possibilities (see Flinders and Wood 2014), but also as constant struggles of certain ways of reasoning over others. In other words, I approach politics as a constant discursive struggle over what is seen as inevitable, important or generally possible in the field of political action, as well as what kind of reasonings and knowledge are considered rational and acceptable. For example, a depoliticizing argument might rationalize certain political actions as inevitable, but also justify certain ways of reasoning as rational and neutral. In short, I conceptualize politics as a constant struggle between different depoliticizing and politicizing speech acts that try to affect policy crafting and acceptable ways of reasoning. In this article, I do not engage in analyzing the different types or modes of depoliticization (see e.g. Hay 2014), but focus on the mere narratives performed within spoken and written empirical materials that disclose the depoliticizing or politicizing sentiments.

I suggest that depoliticizing or politicizing acts become disclosed in different ways of reasoning, and withhold different rationalities. I see rationalities as mindsets, individual and/or shared visions of truth and interlinked valuations of facts. Rationalization represents a process of making something rational, in this case arguments and political acts over space. These rationalities function by creating and manifesting in political arguments and advocacy. Different rationalities with distinct horizons of values and norms (see Jensen and Richardson 2001) frame the sort of knowledge that ‘counts’ as valid statements about what goes on, what matters, and what is irrelevant.

Luukkonen and Sirviö (2019, 20) have described how discursive depoliticization manifests in the ‘invocation of national common interest, inevitability and crisis situation’. I suggest that the politics of urbanization is a particular field of politics that manifests in political speech and narratives over spatial depoliticization and politicization, and spatial transformations and practices. These spatial depoliticizations, for example, utilize and craft the inevitabilities of spatial restructuring, and arguments pertaining to crises and common interests based on varying economic and spatial rationalities, whereas acts of politicization are manifested as challenging existing structures and widening the political field of possibilities. In other words, I consider depoliticizing arguments as something that drives the justification and neutralization of some geoeconomic or other inevitabilities (see Luukkonen and Sirviö 2019), and politicization as opposing political action and driving for recognizing the possibilities of political change (Wood and Flinders 2014).

Moreover, I analyze conditions in political narratives, in which the depoliticization seems thorough and successful, and certain rationalities have sedimented (see Jessop 2010) as shared agreements of truth. Rancière (2009) has described a post-political condition in which political deliberation and contestation have been displaced by consensus and a lack of adversaries (Mouffe 2005; see also Crouch 2004; Wilson 2013). Žižek (2008) describes how the intellectual climate and governance structures fetishize consensus that leads to the foreclosure of political debate. I use the phrase ‘closure’ to point out situations within the politics of urbanization in which the described non-political condition – a consensual narrative – applies, and shared rationalizations have been consolidated. The closure indicates that the existing state of affairs has become hegemonized, given rationalizations are seen as truthful and rational (see Laclau and Mouffe 1985), and certain political deductions are legitimized over others (Häikiö and Leino 2014, 21). In other words, certain political rationalizations of inevitability have become all-encompassing, and opposing rationalities and arguments are regarded as null. Likewise, I am looking for possible new openings of political debate on urbanization in relation to this closure. By focusing on this sedimented knowledge, perceived inevitabilities and new openings of the debate, it is possible to develop arguments on the political process of urbanization and its spatial contours. In this way, I suggest that the general structures of depoliticization and politicization in the politics of urbanization in Finland are not only delimiting possibilities in policy-crafting but are visibly demarcating certain spaces from others.

Urbanization rationalized as a global inevitability

In this section, I identify different ways of reasoning in the Finnish politics of urbanization and describe the kind of patterns of depoliticization they disclose. My aim is to offer an overview of the way in which certain aspects of urbanization are depoliticized, and the kind of rationalities that underlie these depoliticizing acts. Based on the key determinant of the depoliticization of urbanization in Finland, I will thematize two distinct argument structures, or themes, that are derived from this key depoliticization. After that, I will propose a depiction of a political and narrative closure in the politics of urbanization in Finland.

Despite the heated arguments over urbanization, some striking similarities were apparent in the majority of arguments put forward by the political elites, as well as in the analyzed policy documents. A particularly common depiction of urbanization by the interviewees was phrasing it as ‘a global megatrend’. This wording, or terms synonymous with it, can also be found, for example, in the *Futures Review* of the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment (2018a), as well as in its policy documents on innovation policy (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment 2019a) and labor markets (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment 2019b). In the *National agenda for sustainable growth* (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment 2018b), urbanization is described as being one of the ‘global forces of change’. Moreover, the sentiments behind this wording are apparent in other policy documents (e.g. Ministry of the Environment 2018; Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment 2018c) and in practically all elite argumentation on the nature of urbanization. As one respondent holding a managerial position in a governmental branch stated:

... Urbanization is a megatrend; it's a phenomenon, it will continue, and we have to react to it.

According to these arguments, urbanization is depicted as an external force, as an inevitable and natural global-level development that transforms Finnish society from the outside rather than being a result of internal politics. These depictions of urbanization as an inevitable development are rationalized by placing Finland as a spatial entity in the global setting. The inevitability of urbanization in Finland is argued as stemming from global economic institutions, and is justified by global examples. The respondents detached Finnish politics and political processes from the development, and represented the state spatial transformations as a natural outcome of Finland being a part of this global urbanizing society. Therefore, it is argued that Finland in particular, being a small nation, cannot escape or reverse this development. According to these rationalities, urbanization seems to enforce political macro-necessities (see Jessop, Peck, and Tickell 1999) on national political processes, whereby the national government is forced to take certain political actions.

While the connection between urbanization and global economic institutions is rather strong in these depoliticizing narratives, urbanization is also argued as being inevitable as a natural development of a modern globally oriented society. In other words, urbanization and domestic migration to major cities is seen as something that citizens choose, due to the growing appreciation of urban lifestyles. One respondent explained this cultural shift as follows:

Nowadays, go and try to find some literature (that promotes rural lifestyles) ... it is culturally mainstream that city life is the real life.

This, and similar arguments further emphasize that the government of Finland has no real means, nor legitimacy, to oppose the national development of urbanization. All such policy measures are argued to be futile, as well as a waste of resources. The somewhat loosely accepted notion seems to be that the state government can, and should, only mitigate the obvious regional drawbacks of the inevitable development. As one banker argued:

Of course it's not very smart to try to stop this process (urbanization). But we can see in the global context that without some "softening", these outcomes can be really tricky and societally negative.

Hence, the overall prevailing narrative of urbanization in Finnish politics is that it is an inevitable global-level phenomenon that cannot be reversed and whose key economic mechanisms cannot be influenced. These rationalizations practically define all other political arguments on the matter, and they work as a 'backbone' or a starting point for all debates on urbanization in Finland. The narrative of inevitable global urbanization is so prevalent that opposing reasonings and criticisms of this narrative (that do exist) are not regarded as cogent. Following this key narrative, two distinct themes of further depoliticization can be observed.

Spatial and political adaptation and the positive promise of urbanization

First, despite arguing that the state is unable to alter the basic dynamism of urbanization, the elite interviewees suggested that urbanization is still a development that has to be controlled, and something that challenges national policymaking and regional development. The general conclusion among the interviewees was that while the state of Finland has only minor or trivial ways to affect this global development, there are numerous political measures and state interventions in place to fully adapt to and/or exploit the inevitable progress of urbanization. According to this rationalization, the government and political processes can, and must, manage and control some of the national and local outcomes of urbanization through distinct policies. This management and control of urbanization is described as a necessary adaptation to the changing requirements of global economic competition. Hence, it is argued that urbanization is not only a global inevitability, but a matter of distinct political necessity. One interviewee explained the role of the government in managing urbanization as follows:

The state (government) cannot accelerate or reverse ‘the bus’ (urbanization) but can sometimes steer it in certain directions.

This sentiment of adaptation is evident in multiple analyzed policy documents, such as *the Regional Cities Programme* (Ministry of Finance 2018), which states that urbanization is a ‘reality that has to be managed’. Similarly, *Outlook on the Finnish Labor market* (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment 2019b) argues that urbanization is altering national productive capabilities and therefore requires political responses. Moreover, in addition to municipal economic burdens and different development prospects, urbanization itself is said to necessitate provincial reform, which again points to the idea that urbanization requires national adaptation.

Interviewees stated that the Finnish government has no other options but to cope with the changing global requirements, in which urban regions and urban competitiveness and growth are placed on a pedestal. Moreover, the interviewees depicted the degree of urbanization as being a crucial determinant in the global economy, and said that without proper policies exploiting and nurturing this development, the national finances would be ‘doomed’. Even though there were competing arguments on proper urbanization policies, the competitiveness of major city regions was considered a necessity for the politics of urbanization in Finland. One ministerial chief of staff put it this way:

Well of course it (urbanization) is (positive for the economy). You don’t even have to think about it!

When examining these arguments, there do not seem to be clear visions or agreements concerning the kind of policies and spatial adaptation that is actually necessitated by urbanization, but some general similarities in argumentation can be noted. For example, urbanization is rationalized as being a global competition over the most appropriate urban development and a race to create state-of-the-art productive innovation capabilities to lure investments, skilled labor, and so forth. In the official policy documents, spatial centralization is regarded as something that fuels future economic growth, and the global significance of major Finnish cities is seen as being essential (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment 2018a, 2018c). Moreover, recognizing the strategic role of the Helsinki metropolitan region is seen as being part of the ‘desired future’ (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment 2018b).

Second, urbanization is not only regarded as creating a need for responses and management, but as something that can be an inherently positive development, if managed properly. It is argued that various positive prospects are associated with urbanization and its proper management. These arguments are manifold and mixed, but a positive undertone can be discerned even among criticisms leveled at the current state of affairs. For example, urbanization is seen as being essentially a paradigm of the modernization of society, and proper urbanization is therefore considered to be a largely positive development that enables more lively and diverse local communities, the proper functionality of labor markets, productive capabilities and so on. However, while most respondents agreed with the argument that urbanization is potentially a positive development for Finland, they often disagreed on what this means in practice. As one member of parliament claimed:

It is qualitatively negative, this urbanization at the moment ... (but) I believe that it could be steered in such a direction that it would be an unambiguously positive phenomenon.

For example, quite a few interviewees raised concerns that the current rapid urbanization and urban construction were a negative development for the environment and a problem in terms of reducing CO₂ emissions. However, their argument was that urbanization provides multiple mechanisms that would enable more environmentally friendly development, but Finnish national and local governments have thus far failed to produce the proper conditions for this.

While urbanization was seen as benefiting the common good, most respondents acknowledged that, regionally, urbanization could be an inescapably negative phenomenon in some instances.

This again was seen as reinforcing the need for proper political responses and state spatial adaptation. As one economist argued:

I believe there are other things behind this (urbanization) and politics has a limited ability to control it (degree of urbanization). Of course, there can be a lot of influence on how favorably this will eventually develop (considering the regions).

The closure: urbanization is inevitable and positive, but requires adaptation

Behind these arguments – which regard urbanization as a global inevitability, as having potentially positive prospects in various contexts, and as something that necessitates certain national policy responses – lie various rationalities. It is evident that neoliberal ideals, which emphasize competitiveness and global economic institutions, have a strong foothold in terms of determining the arguments on urbanization. The role of competition and competitiveness is seemingly determined by the global nature of urbanization. In these rationalizations, Finland is placed in the global competitive arena, and the state spaces are considered national tokens in geoeconomic pursuits. As a representative of a lobby organization argued:

In any case, we need these railroad projects so that we can leverage the metropolitan area's international significance ... We are actually able to gain a huge competitive edge with this 'triangle' (three major Finnish cities), compared to our rival European metropolises.

Competition was seen not only as a curiosity between nation-states on an international scale, but also as something that is inherent in urbanization itself. The same competitive setting applies to national and local growth patterns. The respondents argued that while competition is problematic for some regions, it is a natural part of societal development. The interviewees suggested that the role of the state in general is to be a mediator in this regional competition, to remove obstacles of growth, and to soften the negative regional outcomes. Therefore, despite the emphasis on competition, some sort of Keynesian welfare state ideals were apparent in these rationalities. Still, while most respondents were of the opinion that the state should ensure some level of spatial equality among Finnish regions, only a fraction of them seemed to regard this as more important than ensuring the strategic role and growth of major cities.

These arguments and discursive tactics have replicated and reinforced each other, and the prevailing rationalities have been sedimented as 'basic knowledge' in political debates. Again, there are visible opposing arguments and critical rationalities, but they are seemingly unable to challenge these sedimented notions. As such, these shared notions of urbanization have become axiomatic, and the political debates on these issues have become non-existent. Critical arguments are not seen as tenable or rational, and critical debaters are forced to express their criticism considering these axioms. One member of parliament expressed a critical argument in this way:

It (Helsinki) is an extremely important city for the growth of the whole country! It is not a disadvantage for other regions if the capital is successful. However, its growth cannot be based on trying to force everybody to move here. Because then we create a lot of negative effects both for other regions and Helsinki itself.

The debate in Finland on the general features and mechanisms of urbanization has been 'closed off' as a distinct political issue that seemingly cannot be politicized and brought back onto political agendas. Hence, I refer to this shared narrative of urbanization, the three axioms and their subsequent causalities as *the closure* (Figure 1), in order to demarcate it as a distinct political section that has become successfully depoliticized. This closure of political debates is a key mechanism in the politics of urbanization in Finland. It dictates the other political narratives for considering urbanization accordingly, and works as the starting point for the actual heated debates on urbanization.

As suggested above, I analyze the politics of urbanization as an interplay between depoliticizing and politicizing. Quite often these acts are impossible to separate from each other, as they are in 'parasitic' interaction (see Flinders and Wood 2014). The closure, however, structures the

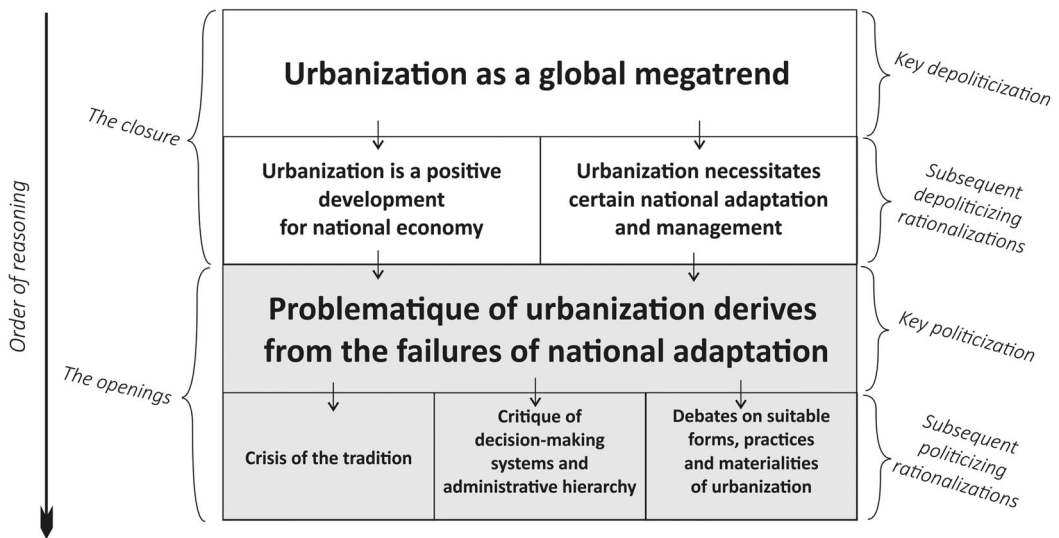


Figure 1. The dynamic of depoliticization and politicization in the politics of urbanization in Finland.

political discussions as an anomaly in this interaction by deflecting repoliticization, and structuring and spawning certain questions based on the shared, sedimented knowledge. In other words, the closure suggests sedimentation of rationalities and modes of knowledge production, and not necessarily the depoliticization of certain policies. As such, the political and narrative closure in the Finnish politics of urbanization is self-sustaining and discloses a hegemonic mode of reasoning.

The politicized management of urbanization

In this section, I present an overview of the key issues and themes that are politicized in Finnish political narratives on urbanization. This analysis is not a comprehensive mapping of politicizations, but rather attempts to understand the dynamics of the politics of urbanization by comparing the closure depicted above, and the distinct patterns of politicization. I analyze these narratives as consecutive, and show how the closure and the sedimented knowledge depicted above can be seen structuring the politicizations and political debates (see Figure 1). First, I describe the key politicizing argument, and then provide a thematic analysis of different politicized themes in Finnish narratives on urbanization. After this, I analyze the structures of politicization in general.

As explained above, since the key depoliticization of urbanization in Finland relies on it being a global-level megatrend, a kind of umbrella argument can also be found when structuring the patterns of politicization. As it is argued that the inevitable urbanization needs to be controlled and managed, the key determinant of practically all politicizations apparent in the interviews is that this control and leadership has somehow been lost, and that urbanization is being mismanaged or the management is spatially and topically disorganized (at least at some level).

While the Finnish political elites share the opinion that urbanization could theoretically yield positive developments for the national economy, competitiveness, sustainability and so forth, they are often critical toward the various existing developments and processes of urbanization in Finland. These criticisms and critical arguments are consistently leveled at the political leadership, existing policies and political strategy. Many respondents argued that Finland as a state has not been able to control urbanization properly, to mitigate its negative consequences, and nurture the positive effects well enough. A majority of the respondents depicted a crisis of leadership, and some saw this as a loss of strategic

national visions. Despite various acts of politicization and outright heated critique, the respondents still sometimes emphasized the positive effects of urbanization more than the negative aspects.

Further indications of the ‘failed’ management of urbanization

When delving more deeply into the issues and themes actually being politicized in the politics of urbanization in Finland, three loose and interlinked themes can be distinguished. These themes are not all-encompassing, but represent the most obvious issues and topics that are politicized. Moreover, they may be a somewhat clumsy and awkward representation of reality at times, in which all of the topics and arguments are more or less interlinked and complementary. However, I believe that this thematization and mapping of politicizations is in place in order to understand the political narratives on urbanization in Finland.

The first and perhaps the most poignant politicized theme is the ostensible economic, political and demographic crisis of the rural regions and small cities in Finland (Ministry of Finance 2020). Based on the above-described rationalization, while respondents claimed that urbanization in general is positive/necessary for the national economy, they raised the subject of its effects on municipal economies as a major problem due to the failures of national adaptation. In this vein, the dire economic condition of these municipal economies was seen as a consequence of bad governmental leadership and a lack of proper reforms, such as the described provincial reform. It was argued that while urbanization as an external development alters the regional productive capabilities, and global economic institutions require more centralized labor markets and so forth, successive Finnish governments have failed in adapting the administrative and structural landscapes to cope with the new competitive requirements, leading to an economic crisis. While the major Finnish cities were considered to be performing well in terms of global competition, the other state spaces were deemed to be inadequately reformed. As the mayor of one major city stated:

They (municipal economic problems) show how incapable of solving these problems we have been, so it’s a complete taboo for the kind of situation small Finnish municipalities have drifted into. They’re in a terrible state! They no longer fulfill any preconditions for full-fledged municipalities.

This politicization indicates some sort of crisis of tradition, where traditional spatial-equalizing welfare policies and traditional regional development schemes are regarded as outdated or outright harmful. By ‘tradition’, I refer to the existing settings of the state territory and practices that date back to the period of the decentralized welfare state and beyond (see Moisio 2012). These spatial and policy traditions and their politicization were clearly an awkward topic for many interviewees. The idea of waning rural regions was often depicted as problematic and emotionally challenging, albeit a natural and an inevitable development.

Most interviewees described the municipal economic question as a crisis and as posing a threat to the whole national economy. Different actors tried to frame the nature of the crisis and depoliticize certain political solutions. This is what Boin, ‘t Hart, and McConnell (2009) call ‘framing contests’. There are a myriad different arguments over the right sort of policy, and a myriad explanations with regard to what proper spatial and administrative adaption actually means. Among these arguments, some of the key political fault lines are clear. Some argue that the state has not supported troubled regions enough to cope with the structural change, while others argue for changes and reductions in the supportive equalization policies altogether. As one investment banker argued:

In ten years about 100 billion euros (paid as regional subsidies)! Where has this money gone and what else could’ve been done with it? These are the questions we’re not allowed to raise; it’s seen as adversarial!

There were also conflicting arguments that emphasized more traditional welfare policies. As one member of parliament said:

The state (government) can’t legally decide (to support one region over another)! It has to take care of all citizens.

Moreover, mentions of a crisis or sentiments to that effect are hard to find in the official policy documents. They list policies for better rural support (Åström and Lukkari 2019), and sometimes note individual problem areas, such as skewed demographics, a decreasing number of jobs and other economic issues (Ministry of the Environment 2018; Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment 2019c). However, even though the crisis mentality is not transferred into these policy documents as such, the government acknowledges (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment 2019a) the alleged problems of decision-making and strategic leadership.

The second politicization theme considering urbanization pointed to various democratic decision-making systems, hierarchies and strategic leadership. Defunct and outdated democratic systems were deemed a major factor in failures of adaptation and management of urbanization. Many interviewees described the political culture in Finland regarding urbanization and regional development policies as being ‘adrift’, ‘confusing’ and without real leadership and structure. The interviewees often called for national cohesion and heavily criticized the current styles of political debates. As one respondent explained:

Last term (previous government) you couldn’t say this or that. It was taboo to question these (traditional) policies. But now we’ve gained the right to speak, also because Janne (the Mayor of Helsinki, Jan Vapaavuori) was elected and started to be so active.

Politicizations of democratic decision-making systems included interesting arguments about the roles that different actors and regional entities have in the politics of urbanization in Finland. In other words, the elite interviewees politicized the roles of different regions and communities in forming new spatial structures. The most obvious politicization was interlinked with the economic crisis of the rural regions and small cities, and considered the role of rural regions in the visions of urbanizing Finland and geoeconomic competition. Similarly, the roles of the major cities and the government was a major politicized question. For instance, the interviewees described how the role of the state in regional development has transformed into ‘a strategic partner’ in municipal, urban and regional development pursuits. In essence, these politicizations tried to frame how, and by whom, the major decisions are taken and the management of urbanization in Finland is performed. One ministerial chief of staff explained the new urban hierarchies as follows:

There are six (cities) at their own level, but other cities criticize this privileged position. Then there are, for example, the group of 20 that Vapaavuori (the Mayor of Helsinki) has gathered together. In the governmental programme, there’s a ‘blurb’ about expanding the big six into a big nine. So yes, there are multiple coalitions and conflicts, fighting for money and looking at which minister is from where and does what ... It’s a downright brutal business!

Some, especially representatives of various cities, argued over different urban hierarchies of importance, and politicized such things as different governmental support schemes:

Privileged cities are entitled in these MAL deals (special governmental investments) and the government funds their infrastructure projects. We are approximately the same size, without access to these deals and have to fund all of our own projects ourselves. I don’t see this as a smart urban policy.

Third, various interviewees politicized different material and structural developments, such as land use planning policies, transport policy, governmental infrastructure plans and urban transportation schemes, for example, as well as sustainable development policies. Behind these arguments lies the idea of the state as a facilitator, creating the best possible circumstances for growth, investments and labor markets. Overall, many interviewees argued that the growth of city regions should be managed more efficiently, or found qualitative faults of some sort in the existing structural policies. As one mayor argued:

We have problems, municipalities are competing for land use in the wrong way, which results in urban sprawl and doesn’t create anything smart. It prevents effective public transport development and other such things. So ... As we think that we have space to grow in Finland, it leads to unfavorable urban structures.

The openings: national strategies of adaptation to the perceived inevitability

The rationalities presented in these politicizing (and depoliticizing) arguments are manifold. As mentioned above, some kind of rationalities depicting the state as a facilitator of best possible outcomes, as well as a neoliberal emphasis on geoeconomic competition, are influential in these politicizations. There is clearly an ongoing struggle between some kind of traditional Keynesian welfare state rationalities and more liberal competitive and selective economic ideals. When it comes to the qualitative and managerial issues on urban growth and urban futures, various environmental rationalities are present, but these are often surprisingly weak compared to the structural and growth-related questions.

I call these politicization themes *openings* in contrast to the sedimented knowledge of *closure*. Different political arguments try to frame and rationalize the meaning and impact of the sedimented axioms, but draw opposing conclusions. This is to say that while the political elites share the argument that urbanization necessitates adaptation and political responses, they disagree on the policy that is actually needed. Similarly, while the political elites agree that urbanization could be exploited for proper (usually centralizing) policies, they disagree on material solutions and best practices and depict different urban growth patterns and spatial hierarchies.

Importantly, as the axioms on urbanization disclose a global perspective, these politicizations or political openings have a local or national character. The depoliticization of the nature of urbanization has been successful, and the argued global inevitabilities and global conditions demarcate and dictate national political processes. In global terms, the Finnish macro-political developments are agreed upon in narratives, but at the national level, political struggles are waged over adaptation, best practices and democratic decision-making. In other words, the global closure dictates the national spatial transformation, and gives rise to only trivial questions of adaptation and policy.

Conclusions

The difficulty is the pace of transformation, in that some people perceive it as being an unmanageable situation in a small country, which relays a hopeless message that now we have to do something radical. (Mayor of a mid-sized city)

The above-cited interviewee represented a small minority of respondents, who dismissed the crisis mentality altogether. I believe that this citation also contains the key message of this article. The imperative of global processes is translated as national requirements over adaptation, which has led to a sustained crisis mentality when political processes have not been able to perform acceptable adaptive policies. The crisis and the perceived inevitability of change are argued as necessitating more thorough spatial transformations. In this way, the framing contest over the crisis (see Boin, 't Hart, and McConnell 2009) shapes the public perception and political consequence. The local and national space opens up as problematic, as a heated struggle between different political rationalizations.

On the other hand, there is calm agreement on and a depoliticized understanding of the global setting of urbanization. The debate on this half has been somewhat 'closed off'. The Helsinki metropolitan region, as well as the other major Finnish city regions, are depicted as connections from the Finnish state to the global economy (cf. Sirviö and Luukkonen 2020). These city regions and their special role are justified as a matter of national interest, and seen as pawns or key actors in global geoeconomic competition (cf. Jonas and Moisio 2018). The metropolitan space is depoliticized when it comes to its role as a national champion (see Jessop and Sum 2006, 292).

To this end, the Finnish state spaces are polarized into depoliticized and politicized spaces. This manifests as openings and closures of the political debate. Dichotomies such as global-local, competitive-crisis, solution-problem and natural-outdated frame the Finnish narratives on urbanization and dictate the state spatial restructuring. The global/metropolitan setting is argued to be essential and inevitable, and the national/contested setting as something problematic, which needs to be adapted and restructured.

However, the overall image of spatial restructuring is incomplete in these narratives. While the role of the metropolitan, and the problematique of the local/traditional are understood, the role of the state spaces that lie somewhere in between these opposites is vaguely articulated. What seems to ensue is a struggling formation of some kind of spatial hierarchy, where metropolitan regions sit at the very top, problematized localities at the bottom, and other spaces complete the continuum from important to less important to unimportant. Various interviewees described an interesting political process in which different mid-sized cities compete to justify their role in this hierarchy. Urban regions are pitted against each other to compete over governmental endorsement, and different urban coalitions are formed to lobby for the right kind of hierarchical and administrative structure.

This analysis provides interesting insights into urbanization and state spatial transformation. In my view, it also exposes a clear need for further research on neoliberal urbanization and political narratives on variegated spatial development. To this end, I have identified four themes that should arguably be the focus of future research.

First, the rationalizations and arguments analyzed in this article are not only (de)politicizing the spatial transformation of the state space, but also rely on a notion over a temporal shift in spatial governance. The elite argumentation reveals a clear separation between the 'old' or 'outdated' temporality of traditional welfare state structures and the 'new', competitive-led management of urbanization and adaptation (cf. Ahlqvist and Moisiö 2014). The need for spatial and administrative restructuring is justified in a temporal shift from the 'old' to the 'new' era, where old requirements and institutions no longer prevail. This narrative strategy is important in portraying the inevitability of change through demarcating the current political situation from tradition.

Second, this analysis discloses a partial polarization of state spaces into global/metropolitan and national/contested spaces. This polarizing dualism would inform future research to not only paying attention to the economic polarization of national territory, but also to the polarization of the means of and rationalities behind the depoliticization/politicization of space, and the creation of new types of spatial hierarchies. It seems that most Finnish political actors would favor a municipal structure that is reminiscent of the historical structure, where rural municipalities have fewer competencies than the urban municipalities. However, the current struggles over spatial hierarchies are more complex and mixed, and include pushes to create new scalar levels such as metropolitan regions and regional provinces (cf. Fricke and Gualini 2018; Sirviö and Luukkonen 2020). More profound research is needed to study the narratives and political strategies behind the formation of this new hierarchy and new spatial scales, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the ongoing state spatial restructuring.

The third important theme for future research would consider the changing role of the state. The political elites, especially state officials, depict the government and state branches as a mediator, or 'a strategic partner' of major cities in their 'autonomous' growth pursuits and competition. In other words, the state government is figuratively taking a step back and devolving power to the city regions themselves. The state takes part in these pursuits with growth deals and investment packages. On the other hand, the state is argued being responsible for local adaptation, in order to restructure and take care of the traditional spaces in one way or another. The role of the state and government is clearly differentiating when it comes to global/metropolitan and national/contested state spaces. The variegating spatial and political presence of the state is an important strand for future research.

Fourth, more attention still needs to be paid to studying the growth dogma and its various contours in state adaptation, and to the fight against climate change and environmental degradation. Even though the environment was one of the five themes of the elite interviews conducted for this study, the empirical material on the subject is rather vague. This thematic lies somewhere in between the closure and the opening, consisting both elements of depoliticization and politicization. The interviewees were either unable or unwilling to ponder environmental questions related to the growth and competitiveness of city regions, construction and production. Most interviewees acknowledged the environmental load of urbanization as a problem, but did not express any real paradox between growth and the environment. As a result, these depoliticizing narratives should also be studied in more detail when it comes to fighting climate change.

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