Non-Statutory Practices in Regional Spatial Planning
A comparative study of three Swedish regions

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Abstract

Regional spatial planning is on the rise. In a Swedish context, regions hold little mandate in spatial planning, but an ongoing trend of planning extending to the regional level can be seen. Aside from three regions with official planning responsibilities, many regions practise spatial planning through non-statutory practices. The aim of this thesis is to explore the types of logic that three carefully selected regions apply in practising non-statutory regional spatial planning. To that end, I analyse the prevailing understanding of the spatial-political arena of municipalities, regions and national authorities, and the challenges that these various types of logic may lead to when practising non-statutory planning. The thesis responds to two research questions: 1) the types of logic that guide non-statutory regional planning, and 2) the challenges such logics may face. The three selected regions, the Blekinge region, the Västra Götaland region, and the Östergötland region, were studied and compared through interviews, observations and document analysis. A thematic analysis is applied onto the material, from which dominating logics were identified. Findings show that these regions, even within the same national context, operate in diverse ways, and that challenges relate to the current fuzziness of the Swedish regional planning legislation, a perceived lack of guidance from the national level, and difficulties in collaborating with municipalities.

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1. Introduction

What types of logic guide regional spatial planning in Sweden? Sweden is divided into 21 regions which are responsible for several major societal services, with regional development being one of the regions’ major tasks. Recently, there have been signs of regions shifting the way they approach the spatial dimension of regional development. What happens in a Swedish context, when a politically elected authority like the region, which is primarily occupied with growth and competition, ventures into the land of spatial planning? Due to the emergence of new forms of territorial governance, regional planning is evolving despite the reluctance of many stakeholders across the European scale (Mattiuzzi & Chapple, 2020; Allmendinger et al 2015), and especially so in Sweden (Smas & Schmitt, 2022). The current rescaling of territorial governance structures is poorly understood in a Swedish context, and regional spatial planning, especially its non-statutory practices, leads to questions of by whom and how space is actually governed. Thus, it is key to understand how regions understand the practice of spatial planning.

Although the regions in Sweden are tasked to provide health care, public transport and regional development, planning has not always been a focal point for regions. This is unique in European regional policy context where planning has long been a natural part of the regional administrative geography, and the concepts of regional development and spatial planning are understood as interconnected (Smas & Schmitt, 2022). In Sweden, planning has typically been the responsibility of municipalities, while development has been assigned to regional institutions (Grundel et al, 2022; Smas & Schmitt, 2022). The regional development responsibility, though undeniably spatial in nature, has only recently led to attempts by regions to expand their spatial planning competence and take spatial profiles. This is, with the exception of three urban regions (Stockholm, Skåne, Halland), mostly performed through non-statutory activities. Planning in the 18 regions not guided by statutory planning mandates is therefore contingent on the ambitions of the regional councils. The non-statutory practices of regional spatial planning in Sweden have received relatively little attention in regional studies, partly because they have remained obscured and because regional planning is a contested field in planning theory (Harmann & Geertman, 2016).

Interest aimed towards the regional spatial planning practices of Swedish regions were also a central point during my internship at the Division of Regional Development and Rural Development at the Ministry for Rural Matters and Infrastructure during the fall of 2022. During my internship I was tasked with a project on assignment as part of my education. The division asked me to conduct an interview survey of all 21 regions (Bergkvist Andersson, 2023) concerning their current practices and ambitions in regional spatial planning. The Division for Regional Development and Rural Development requested this project because it perceived a lack of an overview of the contemporary state of regional spatial planning practices in Sweden. The pilot study concludes that regions within Sweden make use of the non-statutory system to a varying and diverse degree, but the study does not delve deeper into the various types of what I refer to as “logics” in this thesis (Bergkvist Andersson, 2023). The study functions as a “pilot study” for this thesis, as it inspired me to continue to explore the evolving nature of regional spatial planning on the regional level.

Thus, the question remains of how regions understand and approach planning outside of the statutory system. In this thesis, I explore the unique aspects of Swedish regional spatial planning through three separate cases. To begin with, regional planning in Sweden is defined
as any planning issue that affects more than one municipality (Boverket, 2023). Or, it can be part of a planning system influenced by new regionalism, where regions compete with one another in an entrepreneurial manner on a global scale (Grundel, 2021). Three regions, Stockholm, Skåne and Halland, have a legal mandate to produce regional master plans. In all other regions in Sweden, planning is optional, informal and contingent on the ambitions of each region.

Despite the countless times regional planning has been deemed “dead” or obsolete in both academia and politics (Harrison et al, 2021), it continues to re-emerge in various forms and contexts across the globe. The power, discourse and context of regional planning needs further study. The concept of non-statutory planning that is observed in this thesis refers to elements of “soft” planning practices. The opposite of statutory planning, which refers to planning done under the law, such as the Planning and Building Act (2010:900) 7 ch. 1 § (e.g., regions Skåne, Halland and Stockholm), non-statutory planning entails practices without legislation to support it (Kaczmarek, 2021). Therefore, non-statutory planning can take many forms. It is related to concepts such as strategic planning and the creation of informal, non-binding plans. Little is known about how Swedish regions strategically interact with space, and what kind of power they execute (Grundel, 2021). This thesis aims to contribute to literature on the logics of non-statutory regional planning from a Swedish context through the example of three regions, all considering themselves non-statutory planning institutions.

This thesis is oriented towards the planning and spatial development practices that reach beyond the region’s formal responsibilities in spatial governance. It raises questions of territorial governance logic and challenges within the non-statutory planning practices that many regions now venture into. It also puts into light the divergent-convergent nature of non-statutory regional spatial planning in Swedish regions.

2. Aim and rationale

The regional institution is an evolving governance system in Sweden, whose practices are sometimes obscure. To contribute to a better overview of how territorial, and more specifically, regional governance is understood in the Swedish planning system, I aim to uncover some of the non-statutory planning logics that have emerged in the evolving landscape of regions.

The aim of this thesis is to find what logic three regions use in their regional geographies through the understanding of the political-spatial arena of municipalities, regions and national authorities, and the challenges that these types of logics may lead to in the non-statutory planning system. The non-statutory approach regions take in planning leads to regions interpreting their role in various ways, leading to heterogeneous styles of planning approaches. The conglomeration of these ideas is referred to as logics. This aim is realised by exploring three regions serving as examples of different logics of non-statutory regional planning. The case regions are the Blekinge region, the Västra Götaland region, and the Östergötland region. The study is performed through a combination of multi-level interviews with experts from the regions, informants from municipalities within the regions, and representatives from the national scale. Additional data that correspond with my conceptual framework will be added from document analysis, focusing on regional development strategies. To the data derived from interviews and document analysis, the thesis adds a thematic analysis to define the main logics.
that are applied by those working for regional planning. Using theories of territorial and regional governance and the academic discussion of “new realities” of planning and new regionalism I intend to map out some of the current trends in Swedish regional planning – compulsory as well as optional.

The research questions that will guide my aim are as follows:
- What logics define the types of non-statutory regional planning in Sweden?
- To what extent do those different underlying logics lead to challenges in practising non-statutory regional planning?

By answering the above questions, the thesis aims to contribute to the currently scarce body of literature by providing an in-depth analysis of the logics used by regions entering spatial planning.

3. Theoretical framework

Viewing the non-statutory planning practices of regions through the lens of planning theory may encounter some difficulties. While there is a general consensus that some regions are dealing with planning-oriented practices (Fredriksson et al, 2023), not all members of the planning nexus (e.g. municipalities, County Administrative Boards, etc.) are convinced that they should. In a theoretical sense, regions might not be considered as planning authorities, or as planning institutions, even though they practise planning. The theory-practice gap that has prevailed traditionally in planning research (Hartmann and Geertman, 2016) is particularly strong when investigating Swedish regional spatial planning. As is suggested in Allmendinger (2017), the theory-practice gap may even benefit professionals who wish to preserve power and elite expertise in an increasingly complex world. Below, I will explore some of the concepts and theoretical frameworks that guide the questions of this thesis.

3.1. Current state of European regional planning

Regional planning has been variably deemed obsolete or “dead” within planning theory, but also as a practice that sometimes resurrects between long periods of dormancy. There is, however, also an understanding of regional planning as an evolving process that is never truly defunct, with divergent practices across national planning systems that take regional planning into different directions (Purkharthofer et al, 2021, Harrison et al, 2021).

Regions as institutional entities were developed into their current form during the latter half of the 20th century (Friedman & Weaver, 1979; Healey, 2006; Grundel et al, 2022). In some countries, regions emerged as a pragmatic response to issues observed in practice, while other states began operating on the regional scale due to academic discourse (Friedman & Weaver, 1979). Healey (2006) describes how reforms of the late 20th century ‘re-scaled’ the governance of space. The transformation of space governance began much earlier; Harvey (1989) describes how urban governing elites were shifting from managers of space to entrepreneurs. Spaces, and the governing bodies controlling them, thus become competing actors (Harvey, 1989). In Europe, the concepts of territorial cohesion promoted by the EU have been especially influential (Healey 2006: Grundel et al, 2022). The cohesion policy promotes regional
development and aims to lessen the limits posed by national borders. By doing so, the policy aims for a cohesive system of European regions with less significance placed on the national states. It also enhances competing rationales, and reinforces the “spatial fetishism” of today’s political rhetoric of regions.

In Europe, convergent as well as divergent tendencies exist among the planning practices of countries. The national strategies that guide various scales of planning appear to converge. Strategic concepts that are similar across countries are adopted into strategies (Reimer et al, 2014). This tendency of policy convergence is especially prevalent within countries of the EU, that follow the territorial cohesion concept. Territorial cohesion relates to multi-level governance, where regions hold a strong position as suitable levels of territorial government (Reimer et al, 2014). These tendencies are strategically oriented and informal, relying on voluntary participation by the many actors involved.

Policies on planning tend to move towards a consensus-oriented governance style, from the command and control styles that mark out the earlier managerial forms of planning (Zimmermann, 2009). The styles are contingent on the political cultures of individual countries and subnational political levels, but there is a general trend in planning policy of the EU to the regional policy level (Reimer et al, 2014). The slow pace of planning policy reforms makes it likely that various levels of national, regional and local planning systems exhibit a heterogeneous style, albeit moving towards a somewhat unified understanding of regional planning (Hermelin & Persson, 2021).

Regions are changing and constantly “becoming”. What this administrative level means, and its influence on spatial planning has varied throughout historical, cultural and social contexts. Regions can be understood through several frameworks that connect to the idea of “new regionalisation”. This regionalisation relates to the shift in European politics and governance from a managerial logic to a competitive one, as well as Europeanisation and the informal strategies presented by the EU, and relates to a concurrent rescaling of territorial governance systems (Hermelin & Persson, 2021). Coincidentally, the increasingly rapid multifaceted societal landscape is also what some researchers and policymakers use as a reason for invigorating regional planning mandates. Regional planning agencies are tasked with contentious matters such as international goals or agendas, creating spatially unique contexts for these goals to be fulfilled (Harrison et al, 2021).

Today’s European regions operate with several logics drawn from several waves of “regional renaissance”. Grundel (2021) divides regionalism into two eras: old regionalism of the early 20th century, represented by state-centred actions to redistribute economic resources, and new regionalism, brought forth in the state of globalisation and decentralisation of the latter half of the 20th century. The “old” etno-regional logic stems from an understanding of regions as united through cultural identities. These regional processes may exist as political reflections today, or may be the result of cultural identities among people within the region. The “new” region-building process draws on growth-oriented logics of competition and entrepreneurialism, and a multi-level approach to regional governance (Mattiuzi & Chapple, 2020). During the late 20th century, the regional scale emerged as the state’s main tool to promote growth and development (Grundel, 2021; Pike et al, 2017). Why regions change relates to the ongoing redefinitions of territorial scales. Legal instruments make up only one side of the redefinition process; strategic planning approaches on various levels of society make up the other (Galland & Einbaum, 2015). The redefining of territorial scales is also part of the change from hierarchical government to “network governance” that has been observed in the
last three decades (Purkhartöfer & Granqvist, 2021). Statutory, formal systems like the planning system have parallels in the soft spaces that emerge in this process. Administrative borders become vague and functional in the soft planning system (Purkhartöfer & Granqvist, 2021; Grundel, 2021).

The change of territorial scales marks a departure from the traditional Euclidean sense of space. Understanding space as an evolutionary process with sociopolitical factors has given rise to so-called “experimental regionalism”. Institutions of spatial planning, which in Sweden are made up of municipalities, regions and the state, simultaneously undergo processes of decentralisation and re-centralisation, where new spatial and institutional rationales can emerge on a sub-national level (Reimer et al., 2014). The rescaling processes connect to the “soft space” trends (Allmendinger et al. 2015; Fredriksson, 2011), and allow functional, strategic and governance-oriented rationales to become the prevailing logic in spatial planning.

As Swedish regions move away from the earlier managerial forms of planning and governance into experimental phases, they search for proper approaches and rationales within a planning system where dichotomies of public-private, formal-informal and statutory-non-statutory governance are softening (Reimer et al., 2014). The shift may not be painless for actors involved in every case. Interests of varying complexity and scale are now discussed in an arena with many actors involved, and the ability to act is contingent on the capability of the planning system to generate effective, collective ways of decision-making through networks. The call for, and the establishing of networks, marks out a typical sign of governance discourse, as network cooperation and coordination between actors can give the illusion of dropping old-fashioned, managerial ideas of hierarchy (Reimer et al., 2014).

3.1.1 Regional development and planning

Closely tied with planning, at least on the European scale, is regional development. Regional development is a complex concept that is blurry both in terms of what it entails and what it is trying to achieve (Pike et al., 2017). Like spatial planning, regional development is inevitably normative since it is concerned with the future (Gunder et al., 2019). Pike et al. (2017) describe a history of understanding regional development through economic dimensions of growth, employment, income and productivity. For peripheral regions, the ageing population and depopulation is a major threat to fulfilling their regional development strategies (Blom et al., 2022). On a national or supra-national scale, regional development is about reducing disparities between regions, relating to the territorial cohesion policy of the EU (Reimer et al., 2014).

Regional development in its current form emerged in the past few decades of acceleration of trade, finance, and people exchange, or what is sometimes known as the onset of “globalisation”. The global shift of the late 20th century resulted in a new need for global systems to maintain markets. This conceptualisation would lead to thoughts of regional and local governments as redundant, offering the view of the world as increasingly borderless, or a “flat” (Pike et al. 2017; Friedman 2005). However, Pike et al. (2017) argue that the increasing urbanisation and space of flows did not lead to a flat world, but rather a “spiky world”, with an uneven structure of economical power centres in various states or regions. For Sweden, the spikiness might be more modest than on an international scale, but there are disparities between the northern and southern parts of the country, between regions, and also within regions. Swedish regions lack formal influence in spatial planning matters to a higher degree than many comparable countries of the EU (Reimer et al., 2014; Boverket, 2022). Territorial cohesion may
be a concept that unites the spatial properties of the region with the formal regional responsibility of growth and competition.

3.2 Governance of regional planning

The governance discourse has gained momentum within planning research and practice for the last two or three decades (Hartmann & Geertman, 2016). Spatial planning can be conceived as the governance of place, a form of territorial governance (Schmitt & Weichmann 2018). Territorial governance thus refers to the territorial and spatial dimension of governance. Governance can be described as the dissolution of traditional elements of the government, such as strict hierarchies and bureaucracy. The establishment of complex actor relationships overlap sectors such as the public and private, and crosses hierarchical levels of the political arena. It is a way for the political arena to act when and where traditional hierarchical state power is insufficient (Van Well & Schmitt, 2015). In public management studies, governance refers to the transition from public administrations acting as sole actors in decision making to the endorsement of civil society and private actors to interact with public stakeholders in a fuzzy, layered network. Starting in the late 20th century, public administrations that previously worked for and with public interest through passive regulation shifted to facilitate functional relationships on the globalising market (Mäntysalo & Bäcklund, 2018).

Territorial governance can be understood as the spatial dimension of governance, but if defined as the governance of territories, it refers to how territories are governed, and policies implemented, through various levels of government, including regions, and the related process of negotiation and consensus that is built into the governance system (Van Well & Schmitt, 2015). In the EU, territorial governance is simultaneously a national and supranational matter, with several EU policies, functioning as guiding policies for the regional institutions of countries in the EU (Hermelin & Persson, 2021). While the governance of territories may refer to any scale, like continents or mega-regions, this thesis uses the concept to understand the power and control of the Swedish administrative unit known as the region. The region is considered a suitable level for territorial governance in a European context, where the aim to diminish the influence of national borders and instead focus on functional regions is a major element in the territorial cohesion policy.

Mattiuzzi and Chapple (2020) describes the challenges of the new waves of regional planning within the territorial governance systems. Localist forces tend to oppose attempts to create unified regions. Uneven structures of urban and rural areas within a region and access to resources and funding are also proposed as challenges (Mattiuzzi & Chapple, 2020). The consensus-based approach of multi-level territorial governance systems as well as the embedded in regional planning systems, requires continuous dialogue and cooperation between actors (Grundel, 2021). Within specific planning projects, dialogue and networks built between actors can improve regional governance and blur the antagonism otherwise connected to new regionalism and region-building processes (Grundel, 2021; Mattiuzzi & Chapple, 2020).

3.3 Statutory and non-statutory planning

Planning, at national, regional and local levels, can be statutory or venture into the non-statutory field. The statutory planning regime is simply planning based on the law. It follows strict limits and responsibilities set in the corresponding legislative frameworks. Informal
planning done by regions outside of the statutory planning system ventures outside of these limitations. Informal planning integrates long-term spatial logics that can attend to a variety of visionary goals and strategies, such as sustainable development. The statutory planning regime is challenged and criticised by the informal approach for its inadequacy to follow economic, political, cultural and social change; non-statutory planning approaches offer strategic visions whose motivations may vary in time and context, that venture outside of the rigid master plans and land use regulations of statutory planning (Albrechts, 2018).

With statutory planning instruments losing relevance in the current turmoil of globalised challenges and functional geographies, other forms of planning are rising as fashionable alternatives to adapt to the entrepreneurial idea of space. Territorial governance can be understood through the concept of strategic planning. As opposed to the use of master plans and traditional regulatory systems, strategic planning is not a process limited to any one expertise or resource. Already in 2004, Healey (2004) described strategic planning as “self-conscious collective efforts to re-imagine a city, urban region or wider territory and to translate the results into priorities for area investment, conservation measures, strategic infrastructure investments and principles of land use regulation” (see Healey 2004, p. 46). As opposed to traditional statutory planning instruments, strategic planning is a process of negotiation, which in turn allows for actors and governments to place emphasis on certain interests or spaces. Space and scale, within strategic planning, is fluid and dynamic. Strategic planning conceives planning as a process beyond simple control and management, and is used to implement a multi-level, multi-actor type of space governance.

The distinction between the formal and legislative “hard spaces” and the neo-liberal governance logic of rather informal “soft spaces” is not constant, neither is it fixed or even opposite one another (Mäntysalo & Bäcklund 2018; Allmendinger et al 2015). Elements of governance theory have been integrated into planning theory and how we think about planning practice from an institutionalist point of view (Hartmann & Geertman 2016). For European regions, the “hard spaces” of administrative borders and institutional governance are faced with difficulties when dealing with the “soft spaces” of, for example, flows of labour forces crossing borders, housing, business establishments and so on (Smas & Schmitt, 2022). This issue remains, but through the multi-level governance approach taken in contemporary regional planning across many European regions, there are attempts to unite these spaces within a single governance system.

Much of earlier research of strategic and spatial research focused on the formal conditions of statutory planning, leading to some questions whether nuances within planning systems have been missed. Spatial planning research has also focused on national policies and scales. This type of research is disputed by Reimer et al (2014), who call for research to be guided by a multi-scalar, relational approach that takes into consideration the various scales of planning practices. Even when institutional limitations and legal boundaries are considered, the “intrinsic logic of space” (Reimer et al, 2014, p. 3) may change between scales such as local, urban, regional and cross-border planning. Therefore, studying the informal elements of planning through specific actor constellations may help contributing to a theoretical understanding of planning as a whole (Reimer et al, 2014).

Planning systems of Europe have always been the responsibility of individual countries and which have given rise to an array of variable and diverse systems. However, there are signs of a current Europeanisation process in Europe, especially in the countries within the EU, where the supranational policies trickle down into the national, regional and local levels of planning
systems. Europeanisation in various schools of research can be considered as converging practices of governance, discourses and institutionalisation (Reimer et al, 2014), and has led to new modes of governance placing emphasis on negotiations, new hierarchies and cooperation. Individual countries of Europe adapt to Europeanisation, but the question remains of whether this leads to converging or diverging planning systems converging or diverging between countries.

The EU has introduced an array of strategic documents addressing spatial development and planning, such as the Territorial Agenda of the European Union (TAEU) and the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP). These strategies are informal and not legally binding, and might best be described as representing meta-narratives of European spatial planning and development. As meta-narratives, they offer a story about the story of European planning, constructing a scene of logic and rationale. It does not necessarily mean all nations abide by the same planning process and reinventions, but rather, they are called to position themselves in one way or another. This may lead to national systems converging with others, or they might reinvent their systems in a divergent direction.

The role of Europeanisation in Swedish planning systems, especially spatial planning on the regional level, cannot be understated. According to Boverket, regions held little to no agency in spatial governance prior to Sweden’s admittance in the European Union (Boverket informant, personal communication, 19-04-2023), and building the diverse knowledge and practices currently coexisting in Swedish regions took decades. The convergence-divergence discussion by Reimer et al (2014) in which national planning systems can take different approaches within the context of Europeanisation might thus also be applicable to the regional planning systems. Insofar the great variability of how Swedish regions approach and direct their planning agency shows that divergent planning systems exist even on the regional level within a country.

4. Regions and regional planning in a Swedish context

Regional planning has been a somewhat neglected topic in the literature on Swedish planning, partly because the expansion of regional planning is relatively recent (Smas & Schmitt, 2022). Research on regional governance and territorial governance by regions has gained new interest in recent years (Hermelin & Persson, 2021; Blom et al, 2022). In the late 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century, Swedish regions have remained in a state of perpetual change, with processes of rescaling of territorial governance and the emergence of non-statutory planning practices (Smas & Lidmo, 2018; Grundel, 2021). The National Agency for Housing and Planning (Boverket) has published several recent investigations and reports on the state of regional planning, addressing both the statutory and non-statutory planning systems of regions. The general consensus from these reports relate to the necessity for a strengthened collaboration between the many actors involved in the planning system, and the acknowledgement of non-statutory regional planning practice as diverse and flexible (Boverket, 2017; Boverket, 2014; Boverket, 2013; Boverket, 2011). The most recent report, published in 2023 (Fredriksson et al, 2023), also acknowledges the transformative, experimental nature of regional planning. The gradual institutional changes throughout the last decade have led to an evolving consensus and understanding of what regional planning entails,
and the possible roles and logics for regions (Fredriksson et al, 2023). Still, difficulties remain, especially relating to the diversity in regional economies, the differences in resources and capabilities of the regional institutions, and the political ambitions of the regional councils. Another important note that can be discerned in the collected material is the absence of national guidelines, forcing Swedish regions to adopt highly individual and the sometimes inefficient logics to navigate within their specific territorial, economic and institutional conditions (Boverket, 2023).

The Swedish region as an administrative concept has existed since the 1800s, but the exact geographical dimensions of regions and the duties that should or should not be ascribed to regions have been a historically controversial issue (Smas & Schmitt, 2022). Regional governance institutions in Sweden are divided into two organisations that correspond to the same geographical areas: the County Administrative Board, and the Region (Smas & Lidmo, 2018). Following Sweden’s admission to the EU in the 1990s, the region as it appears today began to take its current form. Subsequently, regional policy shifted from the traditional managerial redistributive logic to a neo-liberal logic, entailing a decentralised territorial governance (Smas & Schmitt, 2022). The region began to function as a competitive governing body using its territorial conditions to attract business, labour forces, and enable growth. Its current unified form was finalised in 2019 after a lengthy process of rescaling, reforming, and merging regional offices like the county council (in charge of healthcare and transport) and the regional development offices into a single unit (Hermelin & Persson, 2021). For some regions the merge that led to their current form took place earlier, but the recent restructuring process means some regions refer to themselves as “new” or “immature”, while other regions made the shift earlier and consider themselves “experienced” (Bergkvist Andersson, 2023). A heavier emphasis on the planning aspects and spatial development potentials of this administrative level came into action through new European concepts and policies, such as the Territorial Agenda (TAEU) and other strategies.

At the European level, regional planning and regional development has been considered merged and interconnected. The understanding of planning and development in a Swedish context, however, is relatively recent. The division of planning and development has evolved into two different communities of regional governance, and in Swedish institutions, they have been assigned two different divisions, often with very little cooperation (Emmelin & Nilsson, 2016). Regions in Sweden have a strict division of planning and development, not seen in many other comparable countries. The idea of planning at a regional level is contested, and while attempts have been made since Sweden’s admission to the EU, the process is slow. Already in 2006, regional planning was the theme of an enquiry of the Government Offices in Sweden, meant to investigate the planning monopoly of municipalities and suggest new legislation on the division of responsibilities between national, subnational and local levels (Blücher & Graninger, 2006). These attempts to alleviate planning responsibilities to the regional level did not lead to any legislative changes but may be part of an ongoing evolutionary process of region-building (Grundel et al, 2021).

The coexistence of municipalities and regions have remained a focal point in Swedish regional studies across disciplines, including planning research (Hermelin & Persson, 2021). Hermelin & Persson (2021) provide examples of how regional centres cooperate, collaborate and coordinate across municipal borders, especially within isolated projects. Additionally, regional governance is part of an institutional change of regional policy intervention, involving both upscaling and down-scaling. In the years leading up to the contemporary form of regions, various responsibilities and duties have been moved from the national level to the regional level, from
the national to the EU, and from the municipal to the regional (Hermelin & Persson, 2021). While these rescaling processes are related to regional development, the understanding of planning and regional development as interconnected fields of practice has led to a spatial profile emerging at the regional level. In studies on regional geographies and regional governance, top-down attempts to reform the territorial divisions or the division of responsibilities have generally been received as controversial and unwelcome by both municipalities and regions (Blom et al, 2022; Hermelin & Persson, 2021). Meanwhile, the emerging understanding of soft spaces, e.g. functional connections of socioeconomic and collaborative exchange across administrative borders, as more important than the traditional hard spaces may give municipalities reason to welcome coordination with regions (Fredriksson, 2011).

The reason as to why municipalities resist the introduction of regional planning concepts may relate to the localist understandings of spatial-economic challenges of municipal institutions (Mattiuzzi & Chapple, 2020; Johansson et al, 2014) also informs the empirical research of this study. The uneven structure of many regions, and the sharp contrasts of the urban and rural landscapes that remain an important notion in Sweden, may lead to municipalities seeing the need to protect local democratic interests against a political institution such as the region that covers larger geographical areas. The region’s prevalent role as a consensus-driven, collaborative actor is considered unable to take into account the local interests of municipalities (Johansson et al, 2021). Despite controversies surrounding the rescaling of territorial governance, institutional shifts are occurring both inside and outside of statutory institutional governance (Hermelin & Persson, 2021).

Aside from the massive changes to the Swedish political system following Sweden’s admission to the EU and the increasingly socioeconomic complexity and neoliberal thought that has painted the early 21st century, new challenges arise in the present-day state of national security and the aftermath of the covid-19 pandemic (Blom et al, 2022). There are signs that these combined challenges may provide another argument to merge the territories of smaller municipalities or even create new municipalities out of a single region, such as a poorly received attempt in Blekinge (Blom et al, 2022). Planning is only one of the responsibilities that has been raised as a potential regional matter (Smas & Schmitt, 2022).

Regional planning, as defined by Boverket (2023), deals with larger territories than traditional municipal planning. In short it can be described as any spatial development taking place across one or more municipal borders. It does not necessarily include the official institution of the region (Hermelin & Persson, 2021). Regional planning exists both within the Planning and Building Act (2010:900) legislation, and outside of any statutory limits. The territorial differences between various areas of Sweden means regional planning can take many forms; densely populated areas need different approaches compared to areas with less population density (Boverket, 2023). The need for flexibility in the planning system also depends on growth rates and land use pressures such as a high rate of business establishments, housing projects, or the opposite.

Statutory regional spatial planning is regulated by the Planning and Building Act (2010:900), which today applies to the urban regions Stockholm, Halland and Skåne. Stockholm has had formal regional planning responsibilities since the latter half of the 20th century, while Skåne and Halland gained their regional planning mandates in 2019 and 2023 respectively (Boverket, 2023). For all other 19 regions of Sweden, regional planning is a voluntary activity that is largely controlled through the Regional Development Responsibilities Act (2010:630) and the
Regional Growth Ordinance (2017:583). The law and ordinance dictate that regions should work across sectors and cooperate with actors on the international, national, regional, and local levels. According to the law, the region is also responsible for producing and publishing the regional development strategy (RUS) and integrating environmental, social and economic sustainability in its work, and taking territorial considerations into account (Boverket, 2023). The regional development strategy is the most important strategic document in regional development practice. It is supposed to contain writings on long-term priorities for the region, with economic, social and environmental sustainability integrated in all analyses, strategies, programs and works conducted by the region. As for regions assigned as regional planning institutions in accordance with the Planning and Building Act (2010:900), regional development strategies can be produced alongside the regional master plan, or they may be merged into a single strategic policy document.

In addition to the Regional Development Responsibilities Act (2010:630) and the Regional Growth Ordinance (2017:583), regions are guided by the National Strategy for Sustainable Regional Development 2021-2030 (Nationell strategi för hållbar regional utveckling i hela landet 2021-2030, Skr. 2020/21:133). The national strategy published in 2021 contains, for the first time, chapters on the importance of spatial planning. The strategy places emphasis on the spatial and territorial conditions of regional development to a higher degree than previous national strategies, and can be viewed as one of several ways to increase regional mandate in spatial planning. While the strategy is not legally binding, it guides the priorities of new regional development strategies (Regeringskansliet, 2023). The strategy paints out the three main challenges, as conceived by the national level, of regional development: environmental problems and climate change, demographic change, and increasing inequality in Sweden and the EU. The strategic areas presented as solutions to these challenges include: equal opportunities to living, working and welfare in the entire country; recruiting, retaining and developing competence and professional growth; innovation, renewal and entrepreneurship in the entire country; and accessibility across the country through digital communication and transport systems.

Swedish regions in recent years are also endorsing the idea of “sustainability”, much like other regions of the world (Pike 2017), and the sustainability element is also evident in the Regional Growth Ordinance (2017:583). The combination of social, environmental and economic development offers a different rationale than the previously prevailing economic development goal, and it offers an explanation as to why spatial elements have become to matter more in recent regional development strategies.

According to Boverket, the spatial planning perspective aims to “clarify how geography influences regional growth, and to use planning tools to coordinate different levels of decision-making and political areas” (Boverket, 2023, own translation). Regions are also responsible for transport infrastructure issues in their respective territory. Transport matters include roads, public transport, and spatial development. Regions and municipalities share responsibility on regional public transport (Boverket, 2023). Outside of the Stockholm region, and some attempts in other urban regions like the Gothenburg region, spatial planning has not been an accepted issue for regions on a wider basis until very recently (Boverket, 2022).
Table 1. Formal and informal division of responsibilities in the Swedish planning system.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Formal responsibilities</th>
<th>Informal/voluntary responsibilities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Municipality</strong></td>
<td>Plan and building issues, housing</td>
<td>Cooperation and coordination with other municipalities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Planning and Building Act (2010:900)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Master plan, zoning plans</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Region</strong> (Regional development offices)</td>
<td><em>Regions Halland, Skåne and Stockholm are regional planning institutions according to the Planning and Building Act (2010:900)</em></td>
<td>Structural maps. Regional planning in coordination and cooperation with municipalities. Sometimes in cooperation with other regions, or in mega-regional projects.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Public transport planning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Transport infrastructure programs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>National level:</strong></td>
<td><em>Areas of national interest</em></td>
<td>Knowledge production and support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Board of Building and Housing</td>
<td>National transport planning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government Offices</td>
<td>Exercise of public authorities through government agencies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The question of the existence of regional spatial planning has emerged in certain forums. The study *International Pilot Study of National Claims in Spatial Planning* commissioned by the National Board of Housing and Planning (2020) raises the complexities embedded in the Swedish planning system, and compares the tasks and functions of various European regions with the Swedish regions (Boverket, 2020). Compared to other similar countries, Swedish regions hold little mandate in the area of spatial planning, and the Swedish region is almost entirely a unit devoted to promoting regional development.

4.1 Non-statutory practices in regional spatial planning

Non-statutory planning means planning practices without laws to support them. Practices in this area of planning can take many forms. While practice differs across regions, some approaches are more or less ubiquitous. One major activity that falls within the general definition of “regional spatial planning” is the use of structure images (Swedish: *strukturbild*), e.g. strategic maps, analytic images of the region describing functional connections, important nodes, and flows of various categories such as commute or transport flows (Boverket, 2023). Structure images, where and if they occur, are often incorporated as illustrative maps into the regional development strategies of regions. They can be described as both future-oriented, normative, visionary goal analyses of what a region should look like, but many regions that make use of structure images have opted for a contemporary analysis (Boverket, 2023). Using a contemporary structure image can be interpreted as a way for regions to avoid conflict with municipalities, since a visionary image incorporated into a regional development strategy
inevitably illuminates prioritised areas. By default, strategic priorities illustrated in maps also illuminate areas not considered important or competitive, leading to conflict with municipal representatives (Berkgvist, 2023). The structure image can be considered a controversial instrument used by regions. How they are used depends on the context of individual regions. In the survey Kartläggning rumslig regional planering (Fredriksson et al, 2023), it is suggested by the authors that structure images have the potential to create a common understanding among regions of what regional planning is or should be, but the tool may not always be the preferred approach regions take to develop their regional planning competence.

Other non-statutory approaches that return in regional practice of spatial planning is the formation of, or discussion of building, a model for cross-sectoral collaboration. Regions in the process of developing their planning competence aim to construct networks with different actors, such as municipalities, the County Administrative Board, agency representatives, and other nearby regions.

4.2 Statutory practices in regional spatial planning

The statutory planning capabilities of Swedish regions are famously limited as compared to other Nordic and European countries. There are no national documents guiding regional planning practices aside from areas of national interest (Smas & Lidmo, 2018). Statutory regional planning is in many ways similar to the planning legislation of traditional municipal planning and is engrained in the same section of the law, the Planning and Building Act (2010:600) 7 ch. 1 §. It requires producing a (regional) master plan, alongside or instead of the regional development strategy, which is to guide planning and land use practice across the region. The regional master plan is not legally binding and is to be viewed as guidelines. Regions within the statutory planning system are called regional planning institutions (Swedish: regionplaneorgan).

While the Stockholm region has had regional spatial planning responsibilities since the 1980s, the two regions Halland and Skåne are relatively new actors within the statutory system. The Skåne region was given the task of regional planning in 2017. In 2022, their first regional plan was adopted. In the report Lärdomar från regionplaneprocessen (2022), the Skåne region describes some of the issues and successes related to producing the plan. The region argues that the need for regional planning is connected to the region’s many municipalities and functional connection. In the early parts of the planning process, the region and the actors involved in producing the plan experienced frustration, a sense of misdirection, and difficulties conveying the usefulness for regional planning (Region Skåne, 2022).

Notably, this means that Swedish regions today operate on two different levels of legislative, practical and strategic arenas. Three regions work as regional planning institutions according to the Planning and Building Act, meaning they either have or are in the process of creating regional master plans, while the other 18 Swedish regions only have responsibilities for regional development. Importantly, even the scope of statutory regional planning is rather limited, as the main statutory planning instruments of regions Halland, Skåne and Stockholm simply include producing a regional master plan. Regional planning institutions therefore practise informal planning in regard to preparation and application of the regional master plan (Smas & Schmitt, 2022). For regions that are not officially planning institutions, planning or at least “spatiality”, varies in importance and scale. The regional planning still taking place in regions outside of the three planning institutions is therefore non-statutory, informal, and
despite some common approaches that is shared by more than one region, invisible in regional development strategies and other policies.

Two paths can therefore be discerned for the future of Swedish regional planning: regional spatial planning in accordance with the Planning and Building Act, or regional spatial planning as embedded in the regional development strategies (Boverket, 2020). As of the time of writing, only three regions are regional planning institutions, the Skåne region, the Stockholm region, and the Halland region. The other nineteen regions work with regional planning in a non-statutory style (Boverket, 2023). The spatial planning perspective in regional development has, in recent years, gained new interest (Smas & Schmitt, 2022). Institutional reforms at the national level, such as the possibility for regions to voluntarily apply to become statutory regional planning institutions, show a national expectation and encouragement for regions to continue to expand their spatial planning competence. Interest among regions to follow the statutory route and logic appears to be lower than at the national level, with the majority of regions either choosing to develop their regional development strategies to contain clear territorial dimensions, or to produce additional strategic documents that address the territorial conditions of the region (Bergkvist, 2023). This shows a general preference for regions to work with non-statutory means, often invisible in the official guiding documents, and adds to the complex and indistinct nature of Swedish regional planning logics (Smas & Schmitt, 2022). Regions in Sweden thus practise regional governance in spatial planning through both statutory and non-statutory means.

4.3 Swedish regions

While often neglected in research, regional planning in Sweden has gained new momentum in recent years (Boverket, 2023). The Division of Regional Development and Rural Development conducted a brief interview survey that was finished in 2023 (Bergkvist Andersson, 2023).

The study “Kartläggning regional rumslig planering” (Survey of regional spatial planning) (Fredriksson et al, 2023) by the consulting firm WSP for Boverket also investigates the regional practice of structural images. The study presents a table of chronological “phases” in which regions can be divided, ranging from phase one to phase five. Phase one contains the regions interpreted as not producing or having the ambition to produce structural images, while phase five contains regions considered as “finished” with their structural images. In regard to the three regions that are further investigated here, the study comes to the following conclusions:

The Västra Götaland region is considered a “phase 1” region in the study of regional structural image processes. It means the region is struggling to find its role in relation to municipalities and municipal coalitions (Fredriksson et al, 2023). The region has a history of an ambitious approach to regional planning (Smas & Schmitt, 2022). The region has faced setbacks in developing its regional spatial planning activity, especially by municipalities. The region contains 49 municipalities. Uniquely among Swedish regions, municipalities are organised in four municipality coalitions, kommunalförbund. The region has a formalised partnership with these municipality coalitions (Bergkvist, 2023). Its regional development strategy lacks visual maps, structure images, and deeper territorial descriptions.

The Blekinge region is considered as a “phase 5” region, or a finished region in terms of its structural image processes, even though the region’s own definition of what a structural image is differs from the definition used by Fredriksson et al, 2023. In Bergkvist Andersson (2023)
the region expresses the view that its regional spatial planning activities are successful, though issues with terminology and framing exist. The region has five municipalities.

The Östergötland region falls within the “phase 4” category in Fredriksson et al (2023), meaning it has ambition, political support to expand its structural image competence. The region has started the process of producing a collective structural image (Fredriksson et al, 2023), and is in the process of developing a spatial strategy in addition to its regional development strategy. The region has 13 municipalities.

These regions were chosen as case regions in this study partly to draw attention to the vast territorial differences between regions, but also because the three regions exhibit large differences in practice that represent larger themes of dominating logics and role-searching approaches.

5. Methodology and methods

The research questions of this thesis are centred around the rationales, ambitions and roles that regions have. This means I am primarily, in the words of Bryman (2012) concerned with words rather than numbers. To answer these questions, I will rely on a qualitative method. Throughout the research process, I have applied an inductive approach, meaning I move back and forth between data, theory and analysis, allowing theory to be generated through my research (Bryman, 2012). I will not apply or test a priori theoretical hypotheses on my empirical material, but rather interact with my theoretical framework as concepts of relevance to my findings, inspired by grounded theory (Bryman, 2016). I let my data and context guide my analysis to reach the potential generation of theory. However, the inductive-deductive approach is not clearly defined. Many studies blend the two approaches either intentionally or by accident (Bryman 2012). Since I have theoretical considerations and limitations put in place, I will rather view the inductive-deductive debate as tendencies rather than fully formed distinctions. My methodological approach is qualitative and exploratory. My research strategy is based on a small number of cases that cannot be generalised in a positivist manner, but rather contribute to the theoretical understanding of informal regional planning.

While not strictly adhering to any specific epistemological position, my epistemological approach is most akin to an interpretivist approach. My intention in this thesis is not to explain how regions behave in planning policy, nor to provide new and better policy suggestions. Rather, I try to understand the logic behind the emerging of diverse regional spatial planning practices in Sweden. By using an interpretivist approach, I hope to be able to find the reasoning behind the vast vocabulary of concepts and rationales that can be found in regional planning, by various actors. This approach falls well in line with my inductive research design because it allows me to uncover unexpected or important findings that may have otherwise gone unnoticed.

The main aim in this thesis is the understanding of regional planning logics and rationales by investigating the experiences and conceptions of several actors of various scales of government and state. The essence of my thesis is therefore reliant on the assumption of reality as a social construct in a constant state of change. I am a feminist at heart which shapes my ontological position as a social constructivist.
My constructionist position guides my understanding of space. It is not the flat surface on which things happen, but rather the “geographical context for the mediation of economic, social and political processes” (Agnew 2011:3-4). Space and place are therefore interactive surfaces part of, and constructed, through social processes. Regions are in a constant state of “becoming”, with no end result that can be studied as an object. Following Massey’s (2007a) relational understanding of space, I consider regions as constructed through processes of power, people, places and historical contexts (Grundel, 2021). In policy discourse, regions are sometimes referred to as individual entities and as actors with a real agency. It is therefore important to point out that when I write about regions, I write about regions as social processes embedded in the context of space. This also means that I am sensitive about whose agency is articulated or supposed to be enacted.

5.1 Analytical framework

The findings are then analysed through a thematic analysis approach where I strive to find evidence of existing, absent or conflicting rationales in the multi-level political-spatial arena of regional planning. The overarching themes found in my raw data are then coded in accordance with key concepts found after reading and rereading and interpreting the material many times. The codes roughly correspond to concepts from my theoretical framework.

My thesis has two tasks. The first is to describe the rationale and role that my chosen regions take in the Swedish planning system. In my first task I used the framework below. The themes of the framework emerged partly from the gathered material, but also my preunderstanding of regional planning as well as my theoretical framework. My second task is to answer my second
research question, which deals with the problems and issues that may arise within the rationales regions take in the planning system. To complete this task, I use the analytical framework in table 2 below and also take into consideration signs and themes of hindrances and challenges that appear in my data.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research questions</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Analytical questions</th>
<th>Operationalizing questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What logics define the types of non-statutory regional planning in Sweden?</td>
<td>Understanding of logic</td>
<td>How do the actors describe their roles?</td>
<td>What role does the region take in your territorial context?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Understanding of task regional planning</td>
<td>How do the actors depict their task?</td>
<td>Is it clear to you what regional planning is? Is the legislation clear to follow? Routines etc?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Understanding of practice</td>
<td>How do the interviewees/actors depict their understanding of practice?</td>
<td>What is that that you do that falls within the category of regional planning?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To what extent do those underlying logics lead to challenges in practising non-statutory regional spatial planning?</td>
<td>Challenges</td>
<td>How do actors understand hindrances or difficulties in the process of planning?</td>
<td>What are the main challenges your region faces in regional planning projects?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.2 Cases

In this section I will go over the case regions and the comparative elements of this study. This thesis relies on a small selection of cases that may provide theoretical relevance to the field of non-statutory regional planning. Regions Blekinge, Västra Götaland and Östergötland were selected as examples of regions that practise informal regional planning, based on the outcomes of the pilot study by Bergkvist Andersson (2023), as well as the study commissioned by Boverket by Fredriksson et al (2023). They were selected for their analytic relevance, as I was hoping that the regions could function as exemplifying cases for larger tendencies within the Swedish regional non-statutory system. I acknowledge that the exemplifying capability of these cases is limited. Nonetheless I consider the analytic framework and the coding tables used in the thematic analysis as a useful analytic tool to review non-statutory practices in Swedish
regions. My theoretical framework of strategic planning, planning systems and new regionalism, as well as some theories of territorial governance, have also informed my selection of other actors that are involved in the informal regional planning nexus. The structure of my cases and the actors I interpret as entangled within the practice and the logics of non-statutory regional spatial planning practice.

Fig. 2 below depicts the levels of governing structures from where I have chosen to find informants. There are, of course, other actors concerning the governance of regions/territorial planning and development that could be investigated here. Both Länsstyrelsen (County Administrative Board) and Trafikverket (the Swedish Transport Administration) are national authorities of great importance to statutory regional land use governance. In this thesis, the main subject of investigation is non-statutory regional planning. I interpret that the actors in fig. 2 are better suited as additional informants that can help contextualise the case regions. By using the informants from various levels of non-statutory planning institutions in Sweden, I was hoping to assume a view of regions from multiple angles and therefore capture their logic and role to a more nuanced degree.

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Department of Rural Matters and Infrastructure, Government Offices of Sweden

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Figure 2. Depiction of selection of representatives within the informal-strategic planning system. By Hilda Bergkvist Andersson (2023).

The regions are as follows:

**Blekinge** is a region that uses maps in its regional development strategy, and is a self-titled strategic planning region.

**Västra Götaland** is a relatively new region formalised in 2019. The region’s four Municipal Cooperation Councils are a unique feature. One of these Municipal Cooperation Councils, called the Göteborg Region, had spatial planning responsibilities until the Västra Götaland region was formalised, after which its spatial planning mandate in accordance with the Planning and Building Act ended. Discussions on whether the new Västra Götaland region should join the other three regions and become a regional planning institution in accordance with the Planning and Building Act were held in 2021. However, the region ultimately abandoned its ambitions to become a regional planning institution.

**Östergötland** is a region that is in the process of developing its spatial competence. The region is working on additional strategic documents that address the spatial structures of the region.
The relatively small set of cases in this study falls in line with my qualitative choice. The regions were selected from a previous pilot study (Bergkvist Andersson, 2023) in which I had the opportunity to generate a general picture of the regional planning regimes in Sweden. Importantly, there are also regions that express no ambition to develop their regional planning systems and have had little historic involvement in planning. The cases are also delimited to regions outside of the statutory planning system, such as planning regions. Such regions are of importance to studies in regional planning, but they are not the subject of this study.

Comparative research might concern itself with cross-national levels, but the logic of comparative research applies to many other areas. For qualitative studies, such as this thesis, comparative studies can also be called multiple-case studies (Bryman, 2012). The opportunities of a multiple-case study include the usefulness for theory-building, a central element in qualitative, inductive studies. While there are some concerns that need to be addressed, such as the risk of a researcher constructing false causality, or losing track of the main objective in search of contrasting elements (Bryman, 2012), I still consider the comparative study as a useful tool for theoretical reflections on contrasting findings between the cases.

5.3 Semi-structured interviews

Since I follow a constructivist approach, I consider the information that I receive during the interview as contingent on the situational and social process that me and the interview participant create in tandem (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014). Since I follow an interpretivist design, the empirical material I collect from the interviews are to be considered my own interpretation of this process.

The informants in this thesis range from professionals within regional organisations, municipalities and national agencies and the government office. I have made strategic decisions to contact persons with suitable expertise. The information that they provide reflects their professional position and the views of their organisation. A majority of the participants can be called elites or experts, meaning they hold both a long experience and expertise in their field, have influence in the field, and that they are experienced at being interviewed (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014). The power relationships often addressed in literature on the interview as a method is further complicated by this fact. Expert interviews can be very demanding on the researcher, since it is more likely that experts can redirect the interview away from the original aim, or control the narrative to a high degree (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014). The “traditional” power relationship between interviewer and interview participant can thus be thwarted.

The regions chosen in this study are based on an initial pilot study conducted during my internship at the Division of Regional Development and Rural Development at the Ministry for Enterprise and Innovation. The pilot study consisted of structured interviews with representatives from all 21 regions in Sweden (Bergkvist Andersson, 2023). I chose the regions of Blekinge, Östergötland and Västra Götaland as examples of regions due to their ambition to work with strategic and informal regional spatial planning in a non-statutory setting. The informants from these regions were professionals with long experience in regional development or regional planning, chosen from departments dealing with either of these matters. Since the regions vary in organisational size and resources, some professionals are the sole experts on the interplay between regional development and planning in their regions, or have the sole responsibility for planning projects. For this reason, I opted to interview only one representative from each region. Additional interviews with others within the same
organisation were sometimes not possible for the reasons mentioned above and would most presumably not add any additional relevant data.

The next step was to find relevant informants in municipalities within these regions. This was done by the snowballing method - I asked my regional informants about municipalities in the region known to be particularly outspoken, and then contacted suitable candidates by searching on the municipalities' websites. In some instances, my initial respondents referred me to others within the same organisation. Informants from the Government Offices of Sweden were selected by association. A full illustration of informants and institutions can be found in chapter 5.1, fig. 1. A total of eight informants were interviewed through a video conference tool of their choosing. Interviews lasted between 15 - 30 minutes and were recorded and transcribed.

In a few instances, I was asked to pause the recording device so that informants would feel safe telling me their own personal views. When this occurred, I let the informants decide whether they would allow me to include their “off the record” remarks in my thesis. In all cases informants strongly encouraged me to include the findings, on the condition that I would make sure these personal views could not be traced back to them. This situation gave rise to some ethical implications and complications. The personal views sometimes went against the official view of the region or revealed internal struggles and organisational pitfalls. I had to ensure that the integrity and anonymity of the informants were preserved. A more extensive discussion of ethical implications can be found in chapter 5.6.

5.4 Micro-participatory observation

In addition to the three cases discussed above, I am also using data through a micro-participatory observation session from a national conference with directors from all regions. I was invited to sit in on the Forum for sustainable regional development, a conference arranged twice each year by the Division for Regional and Rural Development in the Ministry of Rural Affairs and Infrastructure. Regional development directors from all 21 regions in Sweden gather together with representatives from the government and other national authorities to discuss contemporary issues and new legislation. There is also a similar Forum for political leaders of regions, also taking place two times every year. The conferences have a strict agenda. My invitation relied on the fact that I had previously produced a pilot study including an interview survey about regional spatial planning (Bergkvist Andersson, 2023) for the Division for Regional and Rural Development, and I was asked to be present to provide practical information about the survey, should the need arise.

Bryman (2012) brings up the problem of referring to this method as “observation”, since it implies that the researcher is detached from the space observed. This is seldom the case, since the presence of a researcher in any room most likely changes the context of what is being said or done (Bryman, 2012). Ethnography might be a more suitable term for situations and contexts where the researcher is an active participant. Observations on video links, in a digital meeting room, might complicate this view. Due to the meeting being held over a video conference link with dozens of participants, my presence in the “room” is not likely to have affected the content of debate and presentation. Therefore, I consider my method to fall within the category of micro-participatory observation.

Participatory observations (or ethnography) often means that the researcher must be exposed to a certain context or situation for a long period of time. But there are cases where even a short
amount of time can be useful for research (Bryman, 2012). In my case, I had only an hour, the
time devoted to the subject of regional planning in the agenda. While I was prepared to answer
questions about the study that was being presented, I was not expected to actually partake in
the discussions. Nonetheless I viewed the conference and my impressions from the subsequent
debate among the regional development directors as relevant empirical material. For a short
amount of time, I had national and regional representatives gathered in one room, discussing
and debating the issues of regional planning, and I chose to include the experiences I gathered
from this session in my thesis to provide some insights from a national forum. The theoretical
applications of this session might be limited, but I still hold that the data gathered is of use
and have informed my reflections on some of the issues under consideration.

5.5 Regional development strategies

In addition to the raw material allocated through interviews and observations, I am also using
regional development strategies. These documents describe the aims and goals by the regions
within their regional development responsibilities. In cases where no regional master plan
exists (e.g. in all cases except Stockholm, Skåne and Halland), the regional strategies would be
the place where regions would rely possible descriptions of planning ambitions. In this
particular thesis, the undertaken document analysis of regional development strategies should
be viewed as complementary to my main method, the semi-structured interviews.

5.6. Ethical statement

I have thought about and designed the ethical implications of this study in accordance with the
guidelines by Vetenskapsrådet, as well as ethical considerations provided by Mason (2002)
regarding informed consent. A longer discussion about the ethical issues of semi-structured
interviews and participatory observations may be found in their respective chapters.

The informants were informed about the framework of the thesis, both by a written statement
sent out by me prior to the interviews, and a verbal repeat of this information before interviews
were conducted. They were also made aware that, as I am using a semi-structured interview, I
may ask questions that were not originally in the interview guide. Informants were also
informed that they were interviewed as representatives of their respective institutions or
organisations and that anonymity would be maintained throughout the thesis.

My informants were interviewed as professionals and represented their employer. For this
reason, it was important that I offered them full anonymity in case they would express
information or opinions that could appear disloyal to their employer. However, I also
acknowledge that semi-structured interviews and participatory observations can lead to
situations where the legitimacy of informed consent needs to be re-negotiated (Mason, 2002).
There was a risk that my informants expressed things that could potentially be harmful to their
employer or jeopardise their position. The risk also included informants giving out information
not meant for the public. In these cases, I have followed the recommendations on re-informed
consent by Fisher and Anushko (2008), by alerting my informants, or have them alert me, after
which we have re-negotiated the information revealed. I have not received any gifts or
monetary compensation during the writing of this thesis, neither have I performed it in
collaboration with any organisation.
6. Practising non-statutory spatial planning in Swedish regions

6.1 Thematic frame of the regional planning debate

Before entering a discussion about the specific themes of my analytical framework, I will provide some insights into the current debate that affects the context of the three cases in this thesis.

That there is a need for regional spatial planning was the general consensus among the directors gathered at the Forum for sustainable regional development in spring 2023. The national conference provides several accounts from multiple regions regarding the need for regional planning. The discussions focus on the complexity of the current socio-economic spatial arena. An expansion of regional planning activities is considered as a strategic approach to these complexities. The theme of so-called “larger geographies” coined the discussion. Regions refer to longer travel patterns among workers and patients in health care, for instance. The complexity of these larger geographies is also a major theme. Regions attempting to expand their competence in planning matters tend to feel challenged by municipalities and unsupported by the government and authorities. However, boundaries and cooperative limits have also been resolved. Capacities and competence have increased. The overall tendency is that regions are slowly expanding their regional planning competence albeit many still struggle to find the right level and format. In this sense the framing debate acknowledges the process of regions as in a constant state of “becoming”, and they are conceived as entrepreneurial entities following a competitive idea (Grundel, 2021).

The region with the dominating logic of being active and focusing on negotiation is represented here by the Blekinge region. The framing of the regional planning debate at the national level describes the need for regions to increase their planning competence, and the “larger geographies” relate to the rescaling of some responsibilities from municipalities to regions (Hermelin & Persson, 2021). The region dominated by the distant logic instead follows a stricter, statutory approach that considers the controversy of regional planning and focuses on maintaining good cooperative relationships with municipalities and does not stray far outside of their formal duties. In this thesis, these regions are exemplified by the Västra Götaland region. The supportive region, here represented by the Östergötland region, follows a logic largely similar to that of the active/negotiating regions, but territorial conditions and institutional differences lead to other identifications of themes of need and solutions.

During the Forum for sustainable regional development (2023), several attendants raised the current national and international state of security, energy crisis and the aftermath of the covid-19 pandemic as examples of recent events that may act as arguments to expand regional planning competence.

Table 3 below describes the data from my first task, processed through my analytic framework. Importantly, the three dominating lines of logic do not necessarily correspond to my three regional cases, but rather define the dominating themes found throughout interviews with all informants. One region may adhere to one or more of these logics. It is therefore important to put a distinction between types of informal regional planning logic and the various roles that define the types that appear in the municipality-region-state nexus. These logics were found
through my abductive process. While all three logics can be expressed throughout the case regions, the themes, descriptions and solutions appear to follow a fairly similar path and process.

Table 3. What logics define the types of non-statutory regional planning in Sweden?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dominating logic</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Need for regional planning</th>
<th>Solution to need for regional planning</th>
<th>Logic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Negotiation</td>
<td>Region unsustainable in terms of growth and population, municipalities unable to cope</td>
<td>Strategic cooperation, knowledge production, networking</td>
<td>Region should be a negotiator and active planner to increase competitiveness in the region</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supportive Östergötland</td>
<td>Larger geographies require larger scales of planning, municipalities insufficient</td>
<td>Development of strategic documents to guide municipalities</td>
<td>Regions should provide and expand support and guidance to help coordinate municipal planning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distant Västra Götaland</td>
<td>Larger geographies require larger scales of planning</td>
<td>Framing arena</td>
<td>Region should leave planning to already existing formal networks and focus on maintaining regional development</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6.2 Logics

The rationales that are expanded below through the lens of my three cases relate to the theory-practice gap explored in Hartmann & Geertman (2016). Regions throughout this thesis have referred very little to any theoretical or policy-oriented approaches reaching beyond their territories: they work within the view of planning as a practical necessity that requires “common sense” (Allmendinger et al 2017), and even the main guiding documents, the regional development strategies, do not properly capture the priorities and ambitions of the regions’ civil servants. Spatial planning, viewed as an extension of regional development, is an arena of practical solutions and limitations. The statutory “hard” planning system of regions only makes up half of the region’s activities in planning and spatial development practice, and there is evidence that the soft planning system as employed by regions (Purkhartofer & Granqvist,
2021) is increasing in significance and necessity. Which logic is considered the most successful is difficult to determine by all informants, as seen in the quote below:

“Planning and development are interconnected. But there are so many different interpretations of how to work with this (...) Should we only focus on the Planning and Building Act and the formal part of the planning system? What happens outside of the Planning and Building Act is also an important part of the planning process. It’s far from clear.”
(Informant, Boverket, personal communication, 19-04-2023)

The understanding expressed by the informant from Boverket (2023) above, relates to a relatively recent understanding of regional spatial planning and regional development as inevitably connected and relates to the non-statutory approach the majority of Swedish regions have taken to regional spatial planning, or the spatial dimension overall (Smas & Schmitt, 2022). According to the informant from the Government Offices, the division can be seen already in the education of future professionals. “Historically, it has been two different professional roles”, the informant from the Government Offices states, “either you were educated as planner, an architect of some kind, and worked with planning, or you were a human geographer or a social scientist working with development” (Informant, Government Offices, personal communication, 31-03-2023). The professional and educational division of planners and regional developers is suggested to be one of the reasons as to why regions have lacked historical competence in spatial planning, and why change is slow in the reforming and rescaling of regions as institutions.

Spatial planning became relevant to regions after Sweden joined the EU. Terminology in the EU programs, like “spatial development”, shed light on a European tradition of uniting the practices of economic development and regional spatial planning (Informant, Boverket, personal communication, 19-04-2023).

“It has been natural to try and unite these practices. But it has always been difficult, because planning and development are separate units within the regional offices. People either work with spatial planning, or they work with development, the regional development strategies.”
(Informant, Government Offices, personal communication, 31-03-2023)

There are many factors that contribute to the larger pressure on regions to engage in spatial planning. The fading of administrative borders as influential in the daily life of citizens, in terms of commute, work opportunities, housing, and the infrastructural changes that follows, is described as one such factor. Functional borders, and larger geographies, remain the focal point in the work that is being done to increase regional planning competence, regardless of whether statutory or non-statutory practices are being discussed. “A single municipality can no longer decide how the best planning is done”, the informant from the Government Offices states (personal communication, 31-03-2023).

That observation that non-statutory regional spatial planning is contingent on territorial factors is well-known at the national level. Combining regional development and spatial planning is considered crucial to achieve what my informants consider good planning. The territorial differences between regions may also act as an argument as to why it is difficult to produce a uniform statutory planning policy for regions on the national level.
“Different parts of Sweden face different challenges (...) For example, we have northern Sweden with many industrial investments. And they are seeing signs of skills and labour shortage. Then it’s very important that those regions work to attract that skill and labour (...) Planning is very important if you want to have good regional development.”

(Informant, Government Offices, personal communication, 31-03-2023)

However, even though the territorial conditions may differ, the current versatility of regional informal planning is not encouraged, and the general consensus among national agencies and the government offices is that regional informal planning is developing in a chronological order - regions can be conceived as being in different stages, reaching towards the end goal of becoming an official planning region (Fredriksson et al, 2023). The acknowledgement of territorial and socioeconomic factors within each region suggest that there is a general acceptance of regions choosing to adopt largely divergent logics within their regional governance systems.

6.2.1 Logic of the negotiation region

The Blekinge region actively works with planning through the regional development strategy and has done so for the past eight years. The region underlines that the work they do is according to their own interpretation of what regional planning is. For example, the region does not produce visionary maps, like most other regions. The Blekinge region’s map material is always descriptive of the contemporary state of the region’s municipalities. The Blekinge region is comfortable working outside of the Planning and Building Act and expresses no wish to become a regional planning institution. The region uses the idea of three “tasks” to fulfil their ambition in planning. The first task is to establish a lasting and permanent dialogue with public actors like municipalities and the County Administrative Board. The second task is to identify areas in the region where regional planning is necessary. The third task is to establish common strategies that the region and the municipalities can agree upon in the regional development strategy as well as in the municipalities’ master plans.

The region’s latest regional development strategy was adopted in February 2022. For the first time, the strategy contained the strategic area of “sustainable societal planning”. The region’s informant tells me that this term is much less controversial to the municipalities than “regional spatial planning. The region’s main task in cooperating with municipalities is to keep a lasting dialogue, actively point out areas where municipalities can cooperate across borders, and offer opportunities for municipalities to co-plan, especially in terms of housing and business establishments.

The reason for the region’s choice not to use visionary maps relates to the “new reality” (Fredriksson, 2011) of the public sector, and the new gravity placed within strategic planning (Hartmann & Geertman 2016), with actors having to place emphasis on negotiations and cooperation to larger degree than within the traditional statutory planning paradigm.

The logic of the negotiator means that the need for non-statutory regional planning is identified in terms of sustainability, development and stability of the region. It follows an understanding of geographies as “growing” or “expanding” in an increasingly complex world, which requires a higher activity by regions to aid municipalities (Fredriksson, 2011) As argued by Pike et al
the idea of expanding geographies has been observed on many levels. In the case of the Blekinge region, this issue has been addressed by the region taking a more active role in planning, especially through informal networks, the production of structure images, and by taking the role of a negotiator in planning matters crossing municipality borders.

Municipalities are not challenged as rulers of planning. Instead, the many actors involved in planning must be coordinated, which is something the region considers a possible area for deepened responsibilities and activities. The region of Blekinge expresses the negotiator rationale when referring to the territorial properties of the municipalities:

“We have pretty special circumstances. We are a small region, only five municipalities, and that has been good, because it has been easy to cooperate since there are pretty few actors in urban planning. So that is easier than for example Skåne with thirty-three municipalities (...) We have no core city but many small cores.”

(Informant, Blekinge region, personal communication, 03-03-2023)

The understanding of the region as a “manager” of various small cores might be the reason for this type of rationale, as well as the type of prognosis or solution that the regions take. While some regions have a major city region that acts as a growth motor, the region of Blekinge does not have to address uneven municipal structures in the ways some other regions have to. Instead, the multi-core structure of the region appears to give rise to intra-regional competitions that the region sees a need to address. “We have tried to blur the lines between municipalities (...) There is always something of a contest between municipalities, intraregional antagonisms and so on” (Informant, Blekinge region, personal communication, 03-03-2023).

Both Västra Götaland and Östergötland regions have other types of municipality structures, often with one or two larger cores with many small surrounding municipalities. According to the Östergötland region, a large municipality does not necessarily correlate with it exercising more influence, competence and power than others. In dialogues and networks, the inequality between municipalities is more dependent on current political structures or persons attending. (Informant, Östergötland region, 02-03-2023).

The need for regional strategic planning is also observed in interviews with municipal levels. Above all, the informal frame offered by the negotiating rationale is raised as an important role for the region to take.

“The region is invaluable for us to discuss freely. With the region, we can discuss different things in a freer way compared to the more formal County Administrative Board.”

(Informant, Ronneby municipality, personal communication 03-20-2023)

When asked about the planning monopoly conflict that is sometimes raised as one of the major obstacles towards increased regional presence in planning issues, the municipal informant from Ronneby, Blekinge, argues that such conflicts no longer exist. They mean that the Blekinge region holds a special function, depending on the specific territorial qualities of the region. This function relates to the idea of an “existential crisis” proposed by Friedman (2005). The Blekinge region searches for innovation and flexibility in the formal system by adopting new strategic approaches to the needs found in the accelerated contemporary (Fredriksson, 2011; Albrechts et al 2018).
Other regions also incorporate elements of the negotiator logic. The Östergötland region has started a process to develop a “spatial strategy”, an extension of the preexisting regional development strategy, which includes a number of dialogue sessions with the municipalities. When asked about the aim for Östergötland’s new projects on the informal regional planning arena, the informant clarifies:

“It is about expanding the place-relations of the region. To build relationships between places and relations (...) How can we get our activities like health care, infrastructure, public transport, and our support capabilities, heed municipality plans and find common interests?

(Informant, Östergötland region, personal communication 02-03-2023)

This logic connects to the innovative processes of Reimer et al (2014). The idea of a complex system with informal and formal actors that require coordination and cooperation singles the region out as an institution with suitable capabilities. The region can become an informal discussion partner that offers support and creates arenas for other agencies and municipalities to discuss spatial development.

One way for regions to construct such a framework arena is through the production of so-called structure images. These maps are more than just descriptive images of the region and its municipalities, and contains analyses of functional connections, singles out core points of the region, and describes important priorities connected to the region’s regional development strategies. The map, while often understood as one of the most important ways a region can get involved in spatial development (micro-participatory observation, 17-02-2023), is generally described as a controversial artefact for municipalities. Given that regions and municipalities are institutions following a competitive rationale (Grundel et al; Reimer et al 2014), prioritising between various core points can create conflicts and protests among municipalities left out of the priorities. However, if the region is a successful negotiator, they can instead become arenas for deepened cooperation between regions. The region can also work to de-dramatize regional planning, as was suggested as one way forward during the Forum for Sustainable Regional Development (micro-participatory observation, 17-02-2023). One informant from the Blekinge region describes a meeting with municipal politicians where she brought the structure image as an aide in discussions. While initially reluctant, municipalities began to view the map as a useful tool in coordinating projects of housing, industrial establishments and so on. Before this, municipalities had no networks in place for coordinating projects, and were rather competing between one another to attract businesses and industries. The informant from the Blekinge region (personal communication, 03-03-2023) recalls the negotiating aspects of the structure image work: “when we began our structure image work in 2014, we had to find the lowest hanging fruits, to find areas where we could actually collaborate.”

The Blekinge region was successful in creating a space for informal collaboration and cooperation, and used the structure image process to gather municipalities and allow them to discuss planning matters. For many municipalities, this was the first time cooperation took place across administrative borders (Informant, Blekinge region, personal communication, 03-03-2023). In this sense, the Blekinge region is not an active part of the planning process, but functions as the framework in which other actors can discuss common challenges and ambitions. To achieve the construction of this framework, the Blekinge region had to redefine what a structure image means. The earlier definition of a structure image relates to its visionary qualities - the map is a normative analysis tool that depicts the region’s future in accordance with timeframes and priorities in the regional development strategy. The Blekinge region
knowingly departed from this definition, since the future-oriented structure image was identified as an artefact too controversial for municipalities to collaborate around. It would illustrate regional strategies in a spatial context and show differences in priorities between municipalities, and in the “negative spaces” not considered priorities, would illuminate neglected municipalities or cities. The Blekinge region opted for a contemporary analysis instead. The region wanted to show a contemporary picture that municipalities could use as a departure point for collaboration within the regional geography (Informant, Blekinge region, personal communication, 03-03-2023). The region’s negotiating capacity and framework ambitions in regional planning is illustrated in this example.

The negotiator logic also acknowledges the functional connections to other regions to a higher degree than the other logics. The informant from the Blekinge region (personal communication, 03-03-2023) reasons that administrative borders, even at a regional level, is not necessarily important to ensure a good regional development, although it complicates coordination on the regional planning arena.

6.2.2 Logic of the supportive region

The dominating logic of the supportive/unifying region is exemplified here through the Östergötland region. The Östergötland region is a region in the central south of Sweden with close ties to the Stockholm region. The region’s largest municipalities are Linköping and Norrköping, both having more than a hundred thousand residents. The third largest municipality is Motala, with only half of that population, and there are several smaller municipalities. By the Östergötland region’s informant’s own admission, the region experiences large geographical differences (informant from the Östergötland region, personal communication, 01-03-2023).

The informal regional planning approach in the Östergötland region began in 2016, with the first production of a regional map in the regional development strategy. However, according to the informants (personal communication, 01-03-2023), the regional development strategy does not properly cover or define the spatial element of the region, and the work conducted by the region’s civil servants differ from what is being described in the regional development strategy. The region describes its own spatial development work as “explorative”.

The region has observed that administrative borders play less and less part of ordinary life. Municipalities are conceived as unable to handle spatial planning on their own (Informant, Östergötland region, personal communication, 01-03-2023), which relates to the previous trends as described in Hermelin and Persson (2021). However, not only regions are part of the institutional change that constitutes new regional governance. In the Östergötland region, municipalities Linköping and Norrköping have developed a joint master plan (Informant, Linköping municipality, personal communication, 28-03-2023). Importantly, the unifying logic is not necessarily aiming to create the best results for the municipalities. Instead, the logic means the region raises regional perspectives in relation to the municipalities, and it marks an understanding of the region as a uniting actor. The region supports municipalities and conditions the support by aiming for a united region. The Östergötland region largely follows this logic, and deliberately acts within the informal planning arena. The regional development strategy is in the process of being extended with a specific document called the “spatial strategy”, where the region clarifies its spatial profile.
The idea of a united region is a concept accepted by other levels of territorial governance, such as the municipality level. Linköping municipality, as the regional centre of the Östergötland region, expresses the need to “develop for the entire Östergötland region” (Informant, Linköping municipality, personal communication, 28-03-2023). The region’s aims to influence municipality planning to adapt to a regional strategy are accepted. “The next update of our joint master plan [Linköping and Norrköping] is to develop our role as node cities, because we are such important motors in the regional development of Östergötland.” (Informant from Linköping municipality, personal communication, 28-03-2023).

The unifying logic strives to unite and coordinate actors in the region to follow similar goals and aims. A larger emphasis is put on functional connections with other regions, relations, and “tying the region together”.

“The spatial strategy is a way to clarify our regional position in anything that has a geographical or spatial connection, for municipalities, through the soft space that isn’t legislated. It is to have this dialogue about a common picture on the contemporary state, which is a challenge in itself, and also to clarify a future picture of 2040 so that everyone can work towards that.” (Informant from the Östergötland region, personal communication, 01-03-2023)

The regional informant acknowledges that soft spaces formed by functional connections to other regions are important to work with, especially to develop relations with the Stockholm region and other neighbouring regions. The regional development strategy is not considered an adequate document for this type of spatial development, although the two are closely intertwined according to the region’s informant (personal communication, 01-03-2023). The spatial strategy addition to the regional development strategy can be interpreted as an attempt to put the invisible spatial planning endeavours of the region into light. In this sense, the region tries to bridge the gap between statutory planning practices and invisible, non-statutory soft planning practices (Smas & Lidmo, 2018).

The logic also relates to the region’s own interpretation of its role as an institution, and the approach that follows. “We are a type of arena or forum. We become a sort of proactive partner that is different from the reactive role of the County Administrative Board”, the informant from the Östergötland region states (personal communication, 01-03-2023), again relating to the territorial governance that constructs the region as a non-statutory collaboration partner in planning (Smas & Lidmo, 2018).

The Östergötland region, much like the Blekinge region, aims to differentiate itself from the more formal role of the County Administrative Board. The region searches for its place in the regional planning system in relation to municipalities, and appears to have found a suitable role as a matter-of-fact, practical knowledge-producer.

“We are a more reasoning part when it comes to questions of spatial planning, even if the County Administrative Board officially handles them. Then we produce a lot of analytic material and knowledge that municipalities can use.” (Informant from the Östergötland region, personal communication, 01-03-2023)
The supportive logic acknowledges the complexity of planning and the fuzzy, soft space governance that prevails in the Swedish planning system (Mäntysalo & Bäcklund 2018; Reimer et al 2014). “It is broader than just traffic and transport. It is to take a wider perspective from a place- and relational perspective”, the informant from the Östergötland region states (01-03-2023), which relates to the current trend of Swedish regional development: the understanding of spatial development and regional development as interconnected mentioned by the Boverket informant (19-04-2023).

The question of the best practice to achieve an interconnected regional development and spatial planning has remained a focal point for the region. The Östergötland region’s spatial planning practices can be summarised as follows:

“To coordinate spatial planning in Östergötland, or the municipal spatial planning, so that each municipality’s planning aims for a direction that benefits the region as a whole (...) We are trying to formalise this deal with the municipalities that we are actually working with spatial development”

(Informant from the Östergötland region, personal communication, 01-03-2023)

The Östergötland region’s logic is therefore a largely soft-space type of planning (Smas & Lidmo, 2018), relating to unifying and creating an understanding of the region as one unit.

There is a general consensus that the Regional Development Strategy is first and foremost a visionary document that has little impact on the day-to-day work of regions. Instead, the spatial strategy developed by the Östergötland region is considered a way to clarify the region’s position in spatial planning and development. The spatial planning strategy is also an effort to put into writing the necessity for regional planning as well as the solutions offered to the region’s actors.

Overall, the spatial planning position taken by the region is to generate additional value on top of the work already done in the formal area of regional development. The additional value is considered achievable only by supporting the pre-existing arenas. The regional development perspective of the Östergötland region is considered as a “service” to the municipality planning within the region. “The region has a service perspective (...) and the regional development goals might only be a goal to reach other goals.” says the informant from Linköping municipality (personal communication, 28-03-2023), and explains that the various goals of municipalities, such as population growth goals, can only be achieved through the regional development activities of the Östergötland region. The understanding of the Östergötland region as an important actor in spatial planning, as well as development, is universal among municipality networks (Informant, Linköping municipality, personal communication, 28-03-2023).

6.2.3 Logic of the distant region

The distant logic is practised by the Västra Götaland region. The Västra Götaland region has 49 municipalities, organised into four Municipal Cooperation Councils (kommunförbund), that have remained even after the official inauguration of the region as a political institution. The Västra Götaland region describes its regional planning activities as “wave-like”; meaning, in various sessions there have been attempts to develop analytic maps and take a more spatial profile in the regional development strategy. At the moment, the region’s spatial planning work is more or less dormant. There is no current political support to develop the region’s planning
competence. Following the region’s formalisation in 2019, the region’s attempts to become a regional planning institution in accordance with the Planning and Building Act were turned down by the municipalities. The importance of cooperation and collaboration was raised as important by municipalities, but not to the degree that the region was considered a necessary statutory partner in spatial planning. The region is involved in commitments that cover spatial development and planning, but avoids using the “regional spatial planning label”. When the region approaches this label, they experience resistance from municipalities. The region’s development strategy lacks any maps that describe the state of the region, a conscious decision based on resistance from the Municipal Cooperation Councils.

“The municipalities are afraid that our maps will influence their goals.”
(Informant, Västra Götaland region, personal communication, 20-03-2023)

For the Västra Götaland region, planning is a political matter that has actively been removed from the region’s table. Uniquely among Swedish regions, Västra Götaland is divided into municipality coalitions, kommunförbund, that exist alongside the administrative regional level and are involved in regional decision making. These coalitions regularly overrule any regional attempts to take a spatial profile.

“I don’t think that other regions have that political twist. In truth, it means other politicians are involved in our decision-making mandate than our regional politicians. Our regional council has never gone against the views of the municipalities.”
(Informant, Västra Götaland region, personal communication, 20-03-2023)

The system used by the Västra Götaland region thus weakens the regional influence on regional planning even more than other regions. The municipal coalitions are allowed to produce structure images and negotiate on spatial planning and spatial development issues, while the Västra Götaland region is only focused on fulfilling its legal duties. The logic is grounded in the

“Our politicians have been very clear to us that we are not to strive to become a regional planning institution (...) Västra Götaland calls itself the ‘region for municipalities’. The politicians are very adamant that we do not appear as some kind of authoritative figure over the municipalities.”
(Informant, Västra Götaland region, personal communication, 20-03-2023)

The understanding of planning, in this logic, is limited to the land and water use planning, which is the responsibility of municipalities in the first place, as well as public transport and traffic programs that make out the statutory responsibility of regions. Strategic or non-statutory regional planning takes place within pre-existing formal networks and arenas. However, networks between the region and Municipal Cooperation Councils that relate strictly to spatial planning are dormant at the time of writing (informant from the Västra Götaland region, 30-03-2023).

The regional development strategy of the Västra Götaland region lacks maps, structure images and spatial descriptions, as opposed to the regional development strategies of the Östergötland and Blekinge regions (Västra Götaland, 2021). The reason for this is that the region has no political assignment to produce a structure image, and has no support among municipalities to do so. Its capabilities in spatial planning lies strictly within its statutory assignment and it largely avoids the soft, non-statutory planning practices suggested in Smas & Lidmo (2018).
Structure images and so on are instead produced by Municipal Cooperation Councils (Informant, Västra Götaland region, personal communication, 20-03-2023).

Themes of spatial planning found in the regional development strategy of the Västra Götaland region, such as suggestions of challenges and solutions, are oriented towards the complexity of current societal processes. The sustainability goals that guide regional development are acknowledged as important areas where spatial planning needs to be coordinated between actors (Västra Götaland, 2021). The region’s own priorities of spatial planning are limited to the statutory planning responsibilities of the region, such as suggestions to improve transport infrastructure, mobile broadband, as well as calls for cooperation on the national and international level.

The dominating logic of the Västra Götaland region is to a higher degree than other regions relating to a “hands-off” policy and understanding of planning as outside of the region’s tasks. The political landscape of the various regional institutions in the Västra Götaland region appears to have assigned planning ambitions to other entities considered more suited for the task. Therefore, regional planning by the region Västra Götaland follows the limits of legislation, in accordance with a political resistance to any development of spatial elements within the formal responsibilities of the regions. The informal arena is considered as a “dangerous and controversial” territory (informant, Västra Götaland region, personal communication, 30-03-2023). What spatial planning the region concerns itself with falls within its statutory responsibilities. The region therefore differs from the understanding of regional spatial planning of other regions in this thesis and general understanding of regional planning on the national level. There is a lack of the regional experimentalism that can be seen in other regions (Reimer et al, 2014), and possible non-statutory planning ambitions are assigned to other organisations, e.g. the Municipal Cooperation Councils. The Västra Götaland region is part of a rescaling process of territorial governance where planning is rescaled from municipal to “larger” units (Hermelin & Persson, 2021). However, non-statutory planning is still practiced below the institutional level of the region.

6.3. Challenges

The previous chapter presents the results and analysis of some different logics found in regional planning in Sweden. These logics relate to processes and structures of the political culture of the local planning system, but despite the heterogeneous processes of regional planning policies, an overall trend that acknowledges the necessity of regional planning can be seen. In this way, the regional planning systems of Sweden are both divergent and convergent in their evolution, in accordance with the discussion of Reimer et al (2014) and Zimmerman (2009). In this chapter, I will cover some of the challenges connected to the different underlying logics of non-statutory planning. Below, table 4 describes the thematic analysis and the model created to convey the challenges that these logics face.

In table 4, the thematic framework shows the challenges that appear throughout the empirical material. As in the first table of logics, the challenges are overlapping between logics, but the process of role, prognosis and diagnosis still follow clear patterns. Interestingly, negotiating roles and distant roles face similar challenges from the municipal level. This appears to have led to different political and institutional determinations: the region can become a negotiating actor that innovates regional informal planning in accordance with Reimer et al (2014), or it leaves planning to institutions determined by legal and administrative limits.
Table 4. To what extent do those underlying logics lead to challenges in practising non-statutory regional spatial planning?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Dominating logic</th>
<th>Supportive Östergötland</th>
<th>Distant Västra Götaland</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Role</strong></td>
<td><strong>Negotiation</strong> Blekinge</td>
<td>Region should provide support and guidance to help coordinate municipal planning projects</td>
<td>Region should leave planning to formal networks and focus on regional development and statutory duties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>... entails these challenges</td>
<td>Municipalities strongly object attempts to expand informal regional planning projects</td>
<td>Unclear division of formal and informal responsibilities</td>
<td>Resources Political ambition Stagnation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Terminology</td>
<td>Fuzziness</td>
<td>Municipalities strongly object attempts to expand informal regional planning projects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Resources</td>
<td></td>
<td>Terminology Conflict</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conflict</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Solution</strong></td>
<td>Education, negotiation on usage of terms like &quot;spatial planning&quot;</td>
<td>Support and guidance from government and agencies</td>
<td>Stronger legislation to clarify or increase regional planning mandate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Themes of challenges presented to regions in informal regional planning were overbearingly connected to descriptions of two major aspects - conflict in the municipality-region relationship and fuzziness. Regional representatives, especially during the micro-participatory observation session, used vivid words descriptions as “war in the trenches” and “playing battleships blind” to convey the difficulties in uncertain legislation and tension with other actors in the arena (micro-participatory observation, 17-02-2023). They also described the need to “de-dramatise” regional planning, referring to the many words and concepts used interchangeably by regions to avoid unnecessary conflict. Terms and concepts such as regional planning, spatial development, place development, place building, regional strategic planning, strategic co-planning, strategic spatial planning have been used as synonyms throughout the empirical material.

The regional representatives thus painted a picture somewhat different from the conclusions from Boverket’s (2023) presentation of their study of regional structural images at the same meeting. Regional planning and spatial development were described as one of the main conflict...
surfaces of regions, where division and responsibilities was not clear, and that municipalities often sensed that their agency within the otherwise manifested municipal planning monopoly was threatened. The mandate of regions in spatial planning and spatial development is unclear. The only trend that can be found throughout all data is that regional spatial planning is becoming more relevant. The how’s and why’s of regional planning, however, is contingent on the systems of local planning systems, including the national level. Even the “detached planning policy” of the Västra Götaland region advocates for regional planning, but not on the regional level. Instead, smaller units within the region, the Municipal Cooperation Councils, hold the formalised non-statutory responsibility for planning matters (Boverket informant, Västra Götaland informant). Overall, the challenges found in the logics we covered in the previous chapter relate to the challenges of non-statutory planning, the informalities of regional governance, and the resources that such non-statutory planning requires. With planning taking place outside of the law with unofficial and invisible planning projects, regions cannot properly budget for regional planning practice, and there are no formal funding structures. The Blekinge region (personal communication, 03-03-2023) is the only region that mentions that it applies for project funding from The Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth in relation to planning projects, such as the analytical process leading up to the region’s structure image.

Voices calling for a definite and “hard” statutory regional planning reform have also been raised by informants throughout the empirical data. There is a growing frustration among some professionals forced to navigate the fuzzy, conflict-ridden, inefficient and underfunded spatial development projects of regions, as seen in Bergkvist (2023) and during the Forum for sustainable regional development (2023). Turning every region into a regional planning organ in accordance with the Planning and Building Act would mean all regions could produce regional master plans combining spatial planning and regional development goals. A radical reform of this calibre would put an end to the conflict and terminology difficulties of regions, and would give regions a mandate and a clear role in the planning nexus of Sweden. Calls for such an universal reform are not processed at the national level.

The general antagonism from municipalities against regional expansions of planning competence and mandate (Hermelin & Persson, 2021; Johansson et al, 2014) is a widely accepted theme that recurs throughout the data, especially in my observations of the Forum for sustainable regional development (2023). Municipal resistance is considered a major challenge to regional planning, even the non-statutory practices that remain the focus of this thesis. In the data, there are signs of a past antagonism now largely overcome by the collaborative systems employed through the logic of each region. In the theme of municipal resistance, regions and municipalities have established a form of coexistence. My analysis shows that a single region can experience challenges in cooperation with municipalities in some instances, such as in role-searching and larger policy changes, but cooperation is generally well-functioning in isolated projects. My findings therefore correspond to the findings of Hermelin & Persson (2021): isolated projects lead to clearer roles. The slower, less tangible shift of rescaling territorial governance that otherwise marks out the regional planning evolution, and the emergence of regional logics, is still an arena of controversy and fuzziness.

6.3.1 Challenges of the negotiation logic

The small region of Blekinge considers its small size as both an advantage and a challenge. While it is easy to cooperate with the small number of municipalities, the region faces resource challenges and a tight budget. The region’s activities in planning matters were faced with
resistance from municipalities in earlier years, but the process has been allowed to mature and the region is comfortable in its current role.

The importance of the region to stay within its lane, even when working and agreeing upon the word spatial planning during interviews, is apparent when they were asked about potential challenges in their work.

“I remember one time, when we were starting with this work, I said the words regional spatial planning. And I will never say that again. It is very controversial. I will never say it again because then it becomes regional spatial planning within PBL and that is only Stockholm, Skåne and Halland. We have no responsibility connected to regional spatial planning. I usually call it strategic community planning or co-planning.”

(Informant, Blekinge region, personal communication, 03-03-2023)

The theme terminology is a central element in the negotiation logic. To reach consensus and collaboration with actors in the regional planning system (Hermin & Persson, 2021), the Blekinge region opts for other words and concepts that can be applied to what they consider regional spatial planning. The complexity of the non-statutory territorial governance of the Swedish regional planning system requires regions to navigate tensions with the help of innovative solutions (Reimer et al, 2014). Wording and phrasing is thus a very important part of what is being called “regional non-statutory planning” in this study. What it means, or can refer to, also varies greatly. When asked about regional planning, informants in this thesis and other studies have a clear conception of what it means in their individual region. In the case of the Blekinge region, innovative and practical solutions such as simply rephrasing the region’s intentions, a pattern also discernible in many other regions (Bergkvist, 2023; Fredriksson et al, 2023) is part of the logic.

The theme of municipalities objecting to the evolution of regional spatial planning also relates to the terminological issues the negotiating region logic faces. Municipalities used to object to the upscaling of the planning mandate (Hermin & Persson, 2021; Mattiuozzi & Chapple, 2020). The theme fuzziness relates to the uncertainties of whether regions should operate within the Planning and Building Act, or follow non-statutory logics; the fuzziness has created wariness throughout planning processes, and has made the division of responsibilities and roles of various actors unclear (Informant, Blekinge region, personal communication, 03-03-2023). This fuzziness is not only viewed as a challenge. In some instances, regions claim to have overcome these differences and made it their strength. The fuzziness that appears to exist within the Swedish planning system also offers opportunities for regions to take more prominent roles as informal negotiators and/or supporters. The Blekinge region’s success in producing a structure image relates to the importance of dialogue and collaboration in similar specific planning projects (Mattiuozzi & Chapple, 2020). In these projects, such as the process of structure image production, the division of responsibilities and roles are clear, and the finished structure image can function as a useful overview for municipalities in the region.

In the case of the Blekinge region, its long history of acting as a negotiator has improved relations with actors in the local planning system, and it considers itself as having overcome most of the challenges connected to the earlier processes (Informant, Blekinge region, personal communication, 03-03-2023).
6.3.2 Challenges of the supportive logic

A challenge for supporting regions often relates to the uneven structure of municipalities. However, the “size” of a municipality in terms of economic strength does not necessarily determine its political influence in regional matters.

The Östergötland region experiences resistance and ambivalence from municipalities fearing the inhibitions to the municipal planning monopoly. The relevance for regional planning is a challenge for the region, in which its role is difficult to find in the nexus of national and local governance systems like the County Administrative Board and the Agency for Housing and Planning. The region means that these challenges of relevance and division of responsibilities also apply to the national level (Informant, Östergötland region, personal communication, 01-03-2023).

The Östergötland region has identified the regional development strategy (Region Östergötland, 2021) as a policy document as a useful but inadequate starting point for non-statutory regional spatial planning. The regional development strategy is viewed as a visionary document with little impact on the practice of the region. “Everything is possible in the regional development strategy”, the informant jokes, referring to the policy-practice gap between guidelines and necessary practice approaches (Informant, Östergötland region, personal communication, 01-03-2023). The regional development strategy of the Östergötland region is therefore considered inadequate for the intrinsic logic of the region’s planning practice, relating to the idea of planning as a somewhat hidden activity within policy (Reimer et al, 2014).

The region’s logic offers the role of the region as a supportive region that provides municipalities with knowledge bases and acts as an informal arena for dialogue and discussion. This role is not necessarily where the region wants to be. The tension of territorial governance, and the fuzziness of non-statutory regional planning, leads to frustration and inefficiency in the region’s current planning practice (Informant, Östergötland region, personal communication, 01-03-2023). The new process of producing a spatial strategy as a clarification of the region’s spatial profile functions as a way to face these challenges. The non-statutory approach to regional planning is raised as a flexible approach, and the region’s spatial strategy can be interpreted as a formalisation of its non-statutory practices.

The challenges embedded in this type of logic relates to an unclear division of responsibilities, where the region is struggling to find a suitable level and role for it to operate on. The region tries to tackle this challenge by clarifying its spatial profile in the additional spatial strategy. The region suggests further support from the national level to justify regional spatial planning policy. The challenges also relate to the fluctuating interest levels and capacities of municipalities, owing to the uneven structure of municipalities. Resources to work with regional spatial planning varies between municipalities. Some municipalities must place other priorities above the regional spatial planning collaborations, leading to challenges to maintain the network- and consensus-oriented logic of the region.

6.3.3 Challenges of the distant logic

The distant logic offers some challenges for the region to expand its informal regional planning mandate. In short, the distant logic is contingent on the political culture of the region. In Västra Götaland, which in this thesis symbolises the distant regional spatial planning logic, the nature
of the region’s planning culture can be understood as remaining strictly within the legislative system.

The regional informant finds that regional spatial planning is a controversial subject. While once considered to be an example of good regional informal planning, the region has now abandoned its ambitions to request to become a regional planning body. All municipalities voted no to the region’s referral, but the importance of cross-municipal cooperation was still raised as an issue. The region’s informal networks with the Municipal Cooperation Councils dealing with mapping projects and knowledge bases have been dissolved, creating difficulties for the region to improve its regional governance (Mattiuzzi & Chapple, 2020). The region asks for signals from the national level that can clarify the need and importance of regional spatial planning.

Raised in 2014 as a successful example of a region practising non-statutory planning through formalised cooperation with the Municipal Cooperation Councils (Boverket, 2014), the Västra Götaland region has changed its approach since. The region failed to reach acceptance and consensus on the regional planning mandate. Often mentioned as a precursor in informal strategic regional planning, the region’s far-reaching efforts and plans to become a regional planning institution eventually came to a halt in 2021 (Västra Götaland region, 2023)

As seen in chapter 6.2.2, the Västra Götaland region’s distant logic is based on the lack of political ambition to expand regional planning practices, and to the unique structure of political and spatial influences of the region. Challenges for this kind of logic therefore means regional planning and regional development is still strictly divided, and regional planning projects are assigned the Municipal Cooperation Councils. Like the informant of the Västra Götaland informant states, political influence and regional governance is therefore exercised by other political ambitions and policies than the region as an institution (Informant, Västra Götaland region, personal communication, 20-03-2023). The municipal perspective towards the Municipal Cooperation Councils is generally positive. “The Municipal Cooperation Councils have that role in this region. They act as the middle-man between municipalities and the region”, says the Vänersborg municipality informant (personal communication, 21-03-2023). In the Västra Götaland region, the non-statutory regional planning is therefore taking place at another institutional level.

“The municipalities in Västra Götaland don’t want us to work with maps of any kind. They are afraid that our maps would influence their planning goals. The Municipal Cooperation Councils are allowed to produce maps. But we (the region) can’t sit here and do stuff the municipalities don’t like.”
(Informant, Västra Götaland region, personal communication, 20-03-2023)

The difficulties for the region to take a spatial profile even in its statutory responsibilities, like projects relating to electrification and transport infrastructure, are also apparent. The region cannot produce maps on where power lines should be drawn as part of a regional spatial planning theme, but works around this issue by calling it a theme of “regional development” (Informant, Västra Götaland region, personal communication, 20-03-2023). “With electrification we started at the other end”, the informant states. “We produced knowledge bases, in the end the maps only became a consequence of that knowledge base.” (Informant, Västra Götaland region, personal communication, 20-03-2023).
As seen above, the terminology is a strong theme in the challenges of the region’s logic. “We do not call it regional planning”, the informant says. “If we do, municipalities protest.” (Informant, Västra Götaland region, personal communication, 20-03-2023). In this sense, the distant logic is also innovative and makes use of exploratory methods to face the needs for regional planning that still exist within the region.

The Västra Götaland region’s logic and challenges contrast the contextual frame of the regional planning debate (see ch. 6.1). While the rescaling mentioned in Hermelin and Persson (2021) is also observed here, the Municipal Cooperation Councils take the role that regions have found within their respective regional planning system. The theme of political resistance in this logic also means municipal politicians exercise regional territorial governance, as opposed to the regional politicians of the regional council. The Municipal Cooperation Councils overrule any attempts of the region to venture outside of its statutory planning duties. The reason for this may relate to the large number of municipalities within the region. At 49 municipalities, the four Municipal Cooperation Councils represent the many views and diverse municipality structures that exist within the region’s borders better than the Västra Götaland region (Informant, Vänersborg municipality, personal communication 21-03-2023). The region is still acknowledging the need for regional planning, even though its non-statutory regional planning practices are of a more modest nature than other regions.

In a sense, the detached logic of the Västra Götaland region in regional spatial planning also enables the region to avoid challenges. As a region working mostly within statutory limits, the challenges of non-statutory regional spatial planning are avoided, allowing the region to operate in a less conflict-ridden landscape.

7. Discussion

This thesis has studied three cases of non-statutory regional planning in Sweden. The three regions, the Blekinge, Västra Götaland and Östergötland regions, have been considered exemplifying regions that represent some of the logics that dominate non-statutory regional planning practices. As the material shows, these three regions, although were considered successful examples of informal regional planning organs in several studies (Fredriksson et al, 2023; Boverket, 2014), and operate within the same legal system, take substantially different approaches to the non-statutory aspect of regional planning.

The Swedish regions appear to be in a region-building process of a largely experimental or exploratory nature. The findings of this thesis largely correspond with the findings of Blom et al (2022) and Grundel et al (2021), as well as the conclusions in Smas & Lidmo (2018) that determine that regions operate within a territorial governance consisting of both statutory and non-statutory means. It is also evident that regions and other actors are still adapting to the recent rescaling changes (Hermelin & Persson, 2021). The consensus-based qualities of the multi-level territorial governance of the regional planning system is not fully developed, leading to tension (Well & Schmitt, 2015). This leads to regions interpreting their role and task in non-statutory regional planning in various ways, leading to heterogeneous styles of planning approaches. The conglomeration of these ideas is referred to as logics.
7.1 Dominating logics of non-statutory regional spatial planning

Overall, the case regions of this thesis showcased three different logics that guided their actions. Regions that follow the a) negotiating logic, acknowledge the strengths of informal regional planning, and tries to fill the “void” in the formal system by acting as negotiators between municipalities and the national level as well as other actors, produce maps that can be used as discussion material and provide informal arenas for actors within the planning system to interact. The negotiating logic considers the regional development strategy a suitable policy in which spatial planning can be incorporated. The b) supportive logic consists of a regional logic in which regions expand their spatial planning competence by acting as supporters of municipalities and other levels of government, offer analytical material and so on. The supportive logic also attempts to bridge the gaps between statutory and non-statutory “invisible” planning by producing additional documents clarifying its spatial strategy. The supportive logic, like the negotiating logic, strives to fill the empty spaces of the formal planning system. The c) distant logic, means the regions choose a “hands off” approach to planning and stay within the limits of the statutory planning system. The distant logic is politically motivated as opposed to the other logics, leaning on the plan monopoly discourse of municipalities, and the region’s possible role as an informal negotiating or supportive element in planning is assigned to other organisations.

7.2 Heterogeneous and invisible

Reimer et al (2014) offered the view of European planning systems as simultaneously converging and diverging. This appears to apply even to domestic planning systems like the Swedish regional governance level. The three regions that were chosen as cases in this thesis all operate on the same arena, but the behaviours of the organisations in informal planning appears to be contingent on a multitude of complex actors, territorial circumstances and political decisions. The “new reality” of planning requires innovative approaches administered by the professions involved in the process (Fredriksson, 2011; Allmendinger, 2018).

The diverging qualities of the Swedish regional planning system can be attributed to the relatively new arena on which regions act. The emergence of non-statutory regional planning is not only neglected in research of Swedish regions. It is also invisible in the regions’ own strategic documents. Spatial dimensions and incorporations of maps and spatial prioritisations, if they appear in the development strategies at all, have been put there after continuous “battles”, as one member of the Forum for Regional Development put it (2023). The dramatic language and push-pull of statutory and non-statutory planning, as well as the understanding of the socio-economic reality as increasingly too complex for any one single actor to handle, causes regions to depart from any chronological evolution that leads from a non-planning region to a planning region. Furthermore, organisational differences between regions, such as divisions between professional planners and development strategists, create unique and individual logics within regions (Smas & Schmitt, 2022).

The complexity and conflicts that appear to influence so much of this narrow planning arena does not necessarily mean regions are paralysed or inefficient. Instead, some regions appear to choose the freedom of interpretation, terminology and negotiation of the non-statutory planning to strive for the goals and aims in their visionary documents. Regions are potentially adapting to the “new reality” that favours innovative flexible, corporate-like governors of space (Pike et al, 2017; Zimmermann, 2009). The general disinterest among regions in becoming regional planning institutions relates to this view. Territorial, political, economic, and cultural
circumstances of regions are prioritised over homogenous legislation. With little institutionalised support from the national level, and fuzzy legislation that tears regional planning between the Plan and Building Act and the regional development ordinances, regions find solace and action in the informal system.

However, the many synonyms that refer to regional spatial planning and the informal system in which regions operate may contribute to the fuzziness of the regional planning system. The importance of territorial independence and the disregard of unitary legislation in some of the empirical data suggest that the freedom offered to regions in regional planning practice can make planning completely invisible. Since tension remains, little is known about what kind of regional spatial planning is actually being done. It is hidden behind innovative terminology, it lacks representation in official policies, and even when planning is acknowledged by informants they find it difficult to determine what regional planning means. There is a general consensus that regional planning should be done, and there is political support that argues in favour of regional planning on both the national, regional and local level, but how is still up to the interpretation of individual strategists and planners within the regional development offices. In this sense, non-statutory regional planning is a largely invisible system of territorial governance that requires further study. As opposed to Fredriksson et al (2023), describing regions as moving through “phases” from no planning ambition to a “finished” regional planning institution. I do not see any signs of regions converging in a chronological timeline. and the “phases” might rather be categories that can be used to describe new emerging logics.

Convergent tendencies still persist. Regions are not isolated within their administrative borders. The increasing will to network, exchange and build knowledge bases, promote cross-border coordination and cooperation, as well as the increasing acknowledgement of functional connections means regions certainly wish to follow the best practice possible. The emergence of strategic maps in the regional development strategies is a trend across many, but not all regions.

Political decision making also influences much of the regional planning system, although regional planning is largely within the duties of neutral civil servants. As in the case of the Västra Götaland region, political policies and the need to entertain municipal relations can lead to decisions that move the region away from earlier efforts to expand the regional planning competence. In other regions, such as the Östergötland and Blekinge region, political decisions instead enable the continuous expansion of spatial approaches on development. Territorial conditions, population, structures of urban centres and rural areas create the “spiky world” (Pike et al, 2017) that motivates the innovative methods regions use in order to find a role in the Swedish planning system.

Furthermore, regional planning appears to be one element of many in the continuous region-building processes that prevail throughout regions in Sweden. Regions as institutions are not fixed units, but evolving processes. In the last decades, regions have undergone major informal changes connected to the “new reality” of both planning and governance (Fredriksson, 2011), as well as formal restructurings that have redefined what a region is and what it can do. The relative freedom currently ruling much of informal regional planning and spatial development enables regions to shape their approaches to a higher degree than other institutions. While the freedom of the system is often raised as beneficial to regions’ territorial circumstances, it also leads to a fuzziness and unclarity, which may foster conflict, challenges and confusion, as well as lead to difficulties in providing proper financing. These types of logics show the diverse ways regions are exercising planning as governance of place outside of the statutory system.
7.3 Challenges of logics

We can see that regions are part of the experimental processes of decentralisation and rescaling that is underway in Swedish and European planning systems. Their role in the new reality is not yet fully clear, nor transparent. Challenges of the non-statutory regional spatial planning practices in Sweden, due to the diversity of logics and roles assumed, relate to the uncertainties of the system. The a) negotiating logic, which is exemplified by the Blekinge region, faces challenges of resource allocation, inability to use proper terminology due to tension in the municipality-region relationship, and the fuzziness of the current mixture of statutory and non-statutory planning system in Sweden. The b) supportive logic, exemplified by the Östergötland region, faces challenges that also relate to the fuzziness of the statutory and non-statutory qualities of Swedish planning. This leads to questions of how far the region’s qualifications reach, and where consensus ceases to exist. The Östergötland region faces these challenges by developing its spatial profile in an additional document to the regional development strategy. The c) distant logic, here represented by the Västra Götaland region, has gone from a forerunner in regional spatial planning to a strictly statutory planning institution. As shown in the empirical material, the region is limited in its ability to act, and restricted in how far it can venture into planning even when it is considered necessary by civil servants.

The call for networks that have arisen among the many actors that have contributed to the material of this thesis relates to typical governance discourse. Regions can do very little planning work unless they are part of proper multi-level networks, and the informal arena is considered very important. One of the major goals of networks and informal arenas appears to relate to the terminology of “regional spatial planning”. Several terms were presented or suggested to me during the interviewing phase of this thesis. While most regions have a clear understanding that what they do is regional spatial planning, they cannot say so out loud.

Aside from investigating the impact of official and unofficial policies to answer my research questions, I also found myself relating to the professionals interviewed in this thesis. They have expressed a certain degree of frustration in the empirical material, and though some work successfully with planning and enjoy the freedom of innovation in the current logic of their region, others represent a group of professionals largely neglected by political ambition. They are development strategists venturing into planning, or they are planners venturing into regional development. The policy-practice gap and the “invisibility” of planning practices may be the only way these professionals can approach the need for regional planning, despite the current lack of multi-level political support.

Even domestic systems like the regional planning system can lead to highly divergent planning approaches and policies. The regional planning development in Sweden will benefit from continuous studies, since the arena is ever-changing, and this thesis offers only a snapshot on the contemporary state of regional spatial development rationales and challenges.
8. Conclusions

My findings align with other writings on Swedish regional planning, showing that Swedish regions are part of a current rescaling region-building process. This process is part of a current European trend to rescale territorial governance, but on national and sub-national levels, regional differences are distinct and noticeable.

Swedish regions that operate outside of the statutory systems follow a diverse array of logics that define their non-statutory planning practices. They construct individual systems that depend on the territorial, economic and institutional qualities of the region. Regional spatial planning is a fuzzy term that is defined and interpreted in several ways by regions, which is especially seen in the invention of terminologies, the conflicts related to mentioning regional spatial planning in communication with municipalities, and the diverse examples regions raise as their interpretation of regional spatial planning. Some examples of practice include: master plan networks and consultations with municipalities; processes and negotiations around spatial profiles in regional development strategies; processes and negotiations around structure image production; and isolated projects in which regions and municipalities can assume clear roles of coordination and collaboration. The majority of non-statutory planning is “invisible” in policies, especially in cases of the Blekinge region and the Västra Götaland region. The Östergötland region is currently producing a clarification of its spatial planning competence.

Challenges of the various dominating logics of non-statutory spatial planning practice in regions are numerous. The different logics that dominate non-statutory planning by regions lead to different challenges in the regions’ attempts to expand regional planning and merge spatial and economic development. Themes of challenges mainly relate to tension in the municipality-region relationship, fuzziness of legislation leading to difficulties in allocating resources, uneven structures of regions, and a fluctuating political will and ambition of municipalities, regions, and the national level.

The various logics of non-statutory regional planning practices lead to innovative approaches by regions. Regions navigate through a system in which their necessity is underlined, but regions experience a lack of guidance and support from the national level. The most successful way to practise regional governance is still unknown due to the continuous change of region-building processes and the rescaling of territorial governance. The regions experiment, innovate, and negotiate themselves into the Swedish planning system, and there is reason to keep this process under close study. In the end, the invisibility of non-statutory regional planning means we have no proper overview of by whom, how and why our space is governed. There is potential in further research to explore the fuzziness of regional spatial planning, to increase efficiency and to aid understanding the role of regions and the logics in which they operate. The table models used in this thesis could potentially be of use in research studying logics of other regions within the non-statutory planning system.
9. References


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10. Appendix

Interview Guide Regions

- Hur ser regionen ut? Vilken slags struktur har regionen? Finns det viktiga regioncentrum?
- Hur arbetar ni med regional fysisk planering? Vilka slags projekt faller inom ramen för regional fysisk planering?
- Finns det en politisk ambition att utöka ett regionalt fysiskt planeringsarbete?
- Vilka anledningar finns det för att utöka planeringsarbetet i er region? Särskilda samhällsutmaningar?
- Är lagstiftningen tillräcklig?
- Är ni nöjda med att arbeta informellt? Vilka dokument är vägledande för er?
- Vilka utmaningar möter ni i det regionala planeringsarbetet?

Interview Guide Municipalities

- På vilket sätt samarbetar ni med regionen?
- Vad fyller regionen för roll i ert planeringsarbete? Hur skiljer regionens arbete sig från andra regionala organ, till exempel Länsstyrelsen?
- Ser ni ett behov av regionen i ert planeringsarbete?
- Är ni nöjda med regionens nuvarande roll?
- Upplever ni konflikter med regionen angående fysisk planering?

Interview Guide Boverket & Ministry of Rural Matters and Infrastructure

- Hur har den rumsliga aspekten i regionernas planeringsarbete utvecklats?
- Vad ska regionen ha för roll i regional fysisk planering?
- Hur kommer det sig att planeringsuppslaget placerades i PBL? Ses det som framgångsrikt?
- Vad är målsättningen för regional planering på regeringenivå? Ska alla ha samma system?
- Finns det utmaningar i att regionerna arbetar både formellt och informellt i fysisk planering?