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Performing a neoliberal city-regional imaginary: the case of Tampere tramway project

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ABSTRACT

Sub-national statecraft and scalecraft is touted as consequential antidote to the crisis of uneven development and democratic deficit. Interrogating this supposition with reference to city-regionalization in Finland, this paper explores how a neoliberal imaginary of city-regions has been institutionalized through entanglement of discursive practices of contractual planning and materiality of tramway construction in Tampere. We argue that Finland’s ‘city regionalism’ is best understood in terms of rescaling of power from local municipalities to upper tiers of governance, lubricating of entrepreneurial development projects, and shrinking of democratic spaces of political contestations. We conclude by calling for geographically sensitive theorisations of city-regionalization.

Introduction

On 7 November 2016, Tampere City Council made a decision on a majority vote to build a modern tramway system in two phases. The first phase would connect the city centre to the University Hospital area as well as the three Tampere University campuses in the centre, east and south of the city. The second phase would link these to an existing business area and new housing development in western Tampere (Raitiotieallianssi, 2017). As with many other railway-based urban development projects, both of these phases align with plans to concentrate new housing, retail and business development, as well as public services along tramway lines.

The Tampere tramway project, and the developments which have been planned around it, is being promoted as a sound, sustainable urban development initiative justified on the basis of the need for carbon-reduction, urban densification, and improved mobility for a growing urban population (e.g. Tampereen kaupunkiseutu, 2014). Our aim in this paper is not to dwell on the potential benefits of the tramway in providing a sustainable mode of transport for those who can access it, but rather to...
examine the role of the tramway in consolidating what we refer to as state-engineered city-regionalization. We argue that the materiality of the tramway along with the discursive practices of knowledge production and ‘contractual planning’ which have surrounded its development, has consolidated a neoliberal imaginary of Tampere city-region which privileges the city and the economy (Davoudi & Brooks, 2021; Luukkonen & Sirvio, 2019). We further argue that this ‘scalar fixing’, which is also happening elsewhere in Finland, has not only compounded the neoliberalisation of spatial planning – characterized variously as ‘project-led’, ‘market-driven’ or ‘public-private’ (Baeten, 2012; Lauermann, 2016; Olesen, 2014; Roy, 2015). It has also led to upward rescaling of governance from directly elected municipalities to a patchwork of city-regional coalitions of public and private actors. As such, city-regionalization in Finland has tended to shrink spaces of citizen participation and democratic politics.

The paper consists of six sections. Section two presents our theoretical framing and centres on relationships between neoliberalism, scalar fixing and city-regional imaginaries. Section three provides a brief history of sub-national governance rescaling in Finland in the 1990s, focusing specifically on recent state-led policies and initiatives aimed at the institutionalization of city-regional imaginaries through contractual agreements with municipalities. We situate this history in the context of the broader regionalization and city-regionalization processes that have been taking place in many western countries since the 1960s. Section four presents the Tampere tramway case and provides a detailed account of how this infrastructure project came about and the role it played in articulating and embedding a Tampere city-regional imaginary. Here, we draw on the research undertaken for a multidisciplinary project on the Finnish city-regional development (BEMINE) for which data was collected between 2016 and 2019 from multiple sources including: 25 interviews with key actors at the national and local levels (ministries, other state bodies, and municipalities in Tampere city-region), key official documents (including Tampere City Government minutes, tramway planning documents, and city-regional plans and agreements), and media coverage of the Tampere tramway project. In analysing these materials, we make use of the method of theoretically informed critical interpretation. Section five discusses the politics of scalar fixing and its ramifications for legitimacy and democratic accountability. In section six, we summarize our findings and highlight some of the key political consequences of rescaling.

Scalar fixing and city-regional imaginaries

More than seventy years have passed since Robert Dickinson, a British Geographer, coined the term ‘city-region’ in 1947 to refer not to a bounded geographical entity, but to a concept which ‘like all concepts, is a mental construct’ (Dickinson, 1964, p. 227). Since then numerous scholars have advanced Dickinson’s early insights; many have drawn further inspiration from Henri Lefebvre’s claim that scales (such as ‘city-regions’) are socially produced, and their production involves contested political processes with uncertain and contingent outcomes (Jonas & Ward, 2007; Keating, 1998; Metzger, 2013; Wu, 2016). A significant contribution has been made by structural, political economic accounts of scale with a focus on theorizing the reasons for successive rescaling of governance powers and responsibilities. Expanding on David Harvey’s notion of ‘spatial fix’ (2000, p. 54), these suggest that the state’s rescaling projects are
motivated by the attempt to temporarily resolve post-Fordist, post-Keynesian crises of capitalist accumulation (Brenner, 2003). It is argued that reconfiguring scales of governance is a systemic response to these crises aimed at injecting a new lease of life into capitalist production and reproduction. Whilst these analyses help us understand the pervasiveness of post-1960s’ state-orchestrated regionalization and city-regionalization across different contexts, they do not account for the role of non-economic factors such as institutional inertia, cultural history, discourses, and narratives, in these processes. That contribution has come from the cultural turn in political economy (González, 2006; Häkli, 1997, 2013; Paasi, 2004, 2010; Sum & Jessop, 2013). Meanwhile, post-structuralists have challenged the ontological assumptions of structuralist and social constructivist accounts, arguing that hidden beneath their emphases on fluidity and contingency lie implicit assumptions about scale being a real entity whilst, according to them, it is a ‘fundamentally epistemological construct’ (Moore, 2008, p. 204). They, therefore, call for a ‘flat ontology’ and the obliteration of the word ‘scale’ from our lexicons (Marston, 2000).

Moving beyond the dispute over modernist binaries such as real and illusive, we adopt a conceptualization of ‘scale not as an entity, or just as an episteme, but as a performative imaginary’ (Davoudi & Brooks, 2021, p. 52). We see scalar imaginaries not as static linguistic representations of actually existing scales, but rather as ‘performative acts’ which ‘through a nexus of power, knowledge and geography’ call certain scales into being, and ‘legitimize certain political goals’ (Davoudi & Brooks, 2021, p. 54). This resonates with Edward Said’s (1978) analyses of ‘Orientalism’ in which imaginaries are understood as ‘profoundly ideological landscapes whose representations of space are entangled with relations of power’ (Gregory, 1995, p. 474). Building on this insight, our understanding of scalar imaginaries differs from those put forward by, for example, Haughton et al. (2016). While they rightly see ‘markets as social formations that exist only in relation to the social worlds they inhabit and help shape’, they nevertheless state that ‘new state spaces […] invoke new spatial imaginaries’ (p. 358), thus implying a distinction between the real and the imaginary. Instead, we posit that spatial and scalar imaginaries are inescapably entangled with, and constitutive of, the politics of rescaling. Indeed, the remarkable performativity of imaginaries lies in their ability to blur the boundaries between ideal and material, real and illusive, fixities and fluidities, and territoriality and relationality. The latter refers to the ongoing tensions between city-regions’ ontological fluidity and the político-administrative ‘tendencies to rigidify them into bounded territories’ (Davoudi & Brooks, 2021, p. 54). Analytically, imaginaries help to: account for differences in the pace, rhythm, dynamics and impacts of state scalar strategies in different social, cultural and institutional contexts; better understand change and continuity and the ways in which certain rescaling projects endure while others break down; and account for why and how a particular scale (such as ‘city-region’) of political intervention emerges, becomes naturalized and travels across time and space to become hegemonic (Jasanoff & Sang-Hyun, 2015).

While the concept of imaginary requires paying attention to the enmeshing of discursive and material practices through which scales are produced, circulated and institutionalized, much of the literature on spatial and scalar imaginaries has tended to focus either on discursive (such as policy narratives, media representations, epistemic discourses, and images) or the material (such as infrastructure, road and rail buildings) practices. By
drawing on our case study of Tampere tramway construction and Finnish ‘contractual planning’, we aim to forge a productive link between both analytic cuts and show how the imbrication of the material and the discursive has brought into being a city-region that is primarily imagined as a Tampere-centric, economic space. Unlike Moore (2008, p. 204) who suggests that ‘there is no necessary correspondence between material conditions and scale representation’, we argue that material conditions mediate the ways in which imaginaries are produced and circulated; that, they make a difference in how imaginaries are enacted and become socially embedded (Davoudi et al., forthcoming). In the context of tramways, this resonates with Addie’s (2015, p. 188) suggestion that, ‘transportation infrastructures – both technical systems of highways, rail lines and airports and social institutions and informal practices – provide a provocative lens to uncover how city-regions are produced, rendered visible, and governed’. While we take materiality seriously in this regard, we concur with Häkli (2018) in not subscribing to the material determinism of structuralist accounts or the vital materialism of post-humanism scholarship which downplays the role of goal-oriented agency in achieving political outcomes.

**Rescaling of sub-national governance in Finland**

Finland is a newcomer to the state-crafted reconfiguration of sub-national governance. When the country became an independent nation state in 1917, the formal sub-national government at the local level consisted of several hundred relatively autonomous municipalities responsible for many aspects of public policy in their jurisdictions (Kettunen, 2014). Finland also has a strong tradition of spatial planning which until the late 1980s had aimed at primarily achieving balanced development across the country (Moisio & Leppänen, 2007). The first major move towards regional rescaling of governance took place in 1993 when 19 Regional Councils were established in preparation for Finland’s membership of the European Union (EU) in 1995. This was motivated by the perceived need to adopt a more competitive regional policy and the desire to maximize access to the EU’s regionally distributed Structural Funds (Kettunen, 2014).

The 1990s’ establishment of Regional Councils and Finland’s membership of the EU coincided with a renewed enthusiasm for regionalization in both the EU and many of its member states (Häkli, 1998). In the EU, this was marked by the mobilization of ‘a Europe of the Regions’ idea (Davoudi, 2019, p. 85). However, this enthusiasm was underpinned by a fundamentally different rationality from that of the 1960s’ regionalization when regions were invoked as the ‘natural’ scale of governance to deliver Keynesian-Fordist political and economic goals of providing social welfare and reducing spatial disparities. These principles were incorporated in the Treaty of Rome and the subsequent EU regional policies which aimed to ‘improve the harmony of regional structures in the Community’ (CEC, 1969). In Finland, similar egalitarian goals were at the heart of the Finnish political consensus between ‘the agrarian and the socialist parties’ which centred on the duty of the state to enhance ‘social and territorial cohesion’ (Luukkonen & Sirviö, 2019, p. 20). However, the sub-national governance for delivering these goals were municipalities which enjoyed taxation power, regulatory responsibility and democratic mandate. Their powers and responsibilities remained undisputed and intact.
(Kettunen, 2014), even after the creation of Regional Councils which consist of representatives from municipalities and operate on the basis of statutory inter-municipal cooperation on spatial planning, economic development and, crucially, management of the EU Structural Funds (the latter being their key raison d’être).

The 1990s witnessed a general shift of emphasis in the underpinning rationalities for scalar fixing away from Keynesian welfarism and balanced development, towards Hayekian neoliberalism and a growing emphasis on the economic competitiveness of large urban agglomerations. The ideological shift was reflected in the changing purpose of rescaling. While in the 1970s the sub-national scales were constructed to serve ‘primarily as transmission belts for national economic and social policies’ (Jessop, 2002, p. 71), in the 1990s they were created to act as the ‘trailblazers’ of national economic growth and international competition. Attention began to move away from nationally-balanced regions to globally competitive city-regions as the preferred scale of post-Fordist crisis management (Brenner, 2003), based on the idea that the benefits of agglomeration economies would ‘trickle down’ to other areas (Hoole & Hincks, 2020).

In Finland, the ‘city regionalist thinking indicates a discontinuity in […] state territoriality’. Luukkonen and Sirviö (2019, p. 20 original emphasis) because it marked a departure from four decades of a cohesion-oriented national territorial policy aimed at spatial equity, and a move towards a competitiveness-oriented policy based on concentrating resources in large urban agglomerations which were seen to yield higher returns. This change of direction was instituted through a number of policies and programmes in the 2000s such as the signing of Urban Growth Agreement between largest city-regions and the national government in 2011 (Luukkonen & Sirviö, 2019).

The economic bias towards spatial agglomeration (Lees, 2006) is premised on the ‘new regionalist’ epistemic reasoning (Keating, 1998), whose advocates include academics, think-tanks and consultants. This highly influential form of knowledge has essentialised city-regions as ‘engines of economic growth’ – a metaphor first popularized by the World Bank in 2009 (Wojan, 2017) – as the only credible players in the global competition race; and, as ‘the leading-edges of the contemporary post-Fordist economy’ (Scott, 2001, p. 818). Legitimated by the new regionalist economic logic, ‘a distinct imaginary of city-region as an economic and city-centric space’ (Davoudi & Brooks, 2021, p. 52) emerged across Europe and beyond (Beall et al., 2015; Moisio, 2018; Scott, 2019; Wu, 2016). Although its promoters were not the sole originators of the ‘city first’ and ‘economy first’ imaginary of city-regions (Coombes, 2014; Harrison & Heley, 2015), their discursive practices and perceived scientific authority played a major role in the circulation and legitimation of states’ city-regional rescaling strategies. New regionalist logic helped this particular imaginary of city-regions to stick and outcompete alternative imaginaries, albeit precariously and contingently (Davoudi & Brooks, 2021; Hoole & Hincks, 2020, p. 5).

As we mentioned above, Finland was late in embracing neoliberal scalar fixing practices, but it was quick to catch up and to subscribe to ‘the new regionalist orthodoxy in action’ (Jones, 2001, p. 1194 original emphasis). As the media analyses by Luukkonen and Sirviö (2019) show, numerous reports have since been commissioned and selectively used to support and legitimate the shift in the national territorial policy, from a consensus-oriented approach with a focus on welfare provision to a competitiveness-oriented approach with a focus on efficiency and growth (Ahlqvist & Moisio, 2014). The pervasiveness of the new regionalist orthodoxy is evident in the statement by a research director of the national
research institute ETLA claiming that, there is ‘an exceptionally wide consensus in mainstream economics’ in favour of urban agglomeration economies (quoted in Luukkonen & Sirviö, 2019, p. 24). Similar selective use of evidence has been observed in state-engineered city-regionalization projects in, for example, in the United Kingdom (UK) (see Haughton et al., 2016; Hoole & Hincks, 2020). In Finland, the assumed benefits of prioritizing large urban areas have gained the support of the leaders of large cities, notably Helsinki, a city which is often imagined as an economic locomotive pulling the rest of the country along, as reflected in the following statement by two public officials:

Cities should not compete with the rest of the country but with Europe and the metropolises of the rest of the world for businesses, know-how and new success stories. Growth centers and especially the Helsinki region work as catalysts of the country’s development and as sources of continuous creativity. (MPs Outi Mäkelä and Sari Sarkomaa, Helsingin Sanomat 24.9.2017; quoted in Luukkonen & Sirviö, 2019, p. 25)

This idealized imaginary of globally competitive cities is then used as a model for other cities to emulate irrespective of their different structural conditions. Notable candidates for this model have been Tampere and Turku, the two other corners of the Finnish ‘growth triangle’ along with Helsinki.

Complementing the new regionalists’ promotion of city-regions as the ideal scale of governance is the statistical delineation of city-regional space which is based on the so called Functional Urban Area (FUA) definition. This mapping technique both reflects and reinforces the economic and city-centric imaginary of city-regions (Davoudi, 2008; Hoole & Hincks, 2020). In Finland, it is advocated by the Finnish Environment Institute (SYKE, 2019) and frequently used to delineate the boundaries of city-regions. Together, new regionalism and FUA mapping have helped to essentialise the city-region as a naturalized scale of sub-national governance, capable of harnessing globalized capital flows. A contested outcome of the FUA mapping is the marginalization or exclusion of many rural and remote areas (Davoudi & Brooks, 2021; Harrison & Heley, 2015), which in Finland, as elsewhere, has led to contestations by the rural political elites and campaigners (Beel et al., 2018; Hytönen et al., 2016).

By the late 2000s, the city–and economic-centric imaginary of city-regions became firmly embedded in the Finnish elites’ imagination, leading to the creation of a series of state-funded urban programmes, urban centres of expertise, and several urban policy initiatives aimed at institutionalizing this scalar imaginary. The largest city-regions, such as Tampere, have increasingly become the focus of attention for these initiatives, two of which have been particularly effective in city-regionalization: the PARAS project and the MAL agreements (Purkarthofer & Humer, 2019), as discussed below, with the latter playing a critical role in producing and embedding the Tampere city-regional imaginary.

In 2007, the state introduced the PARAS project through which it offered funding to, first, municipalities facing economic challenges to merge together and, second, those in growing urban regions to produce joint city-regional plans for land use, housing and transportation (Hytönen et al., 2016). By 2013, this reduced the number of municipalities by 25 per cent and led to the production of 19 joint spatial plans for variously defined city-regional spaces (Meklin & Pekola-Sjöblom, 2013). While the city-regional plans produced through the PARAS project remained legally non-binding, the policy move boosted city-regional imaginaries among the Finnish urban elites.
To improve the effectiveness of joint planning in city regions, the MAL agreement was introduced in 2011 to incentivise inter-municipal cooperation on land use planning (M), housing (A) and transport (L) strategies. MAL represents a contractual arrangement between the state and municipalities through which the state agrees to part-fund major infrastructure projects, such as the Tampere tramway, but only if municipalities agree to create city-regional institutional frameworks and cooperation (Bäcklund et al., 2018; Häkli et al., 2020; Mäntysalo et al., 2015). As of early 2020, only the four largest city-regions have been offered the opportunity to sign a MAL agreement, of which Tampere city-region is among the fastest growing with an estimated population of 480,000 by 2040 (Tampereen kaupunkiseutu, 2014, p. 6). By signing the MAL agreement, Tampere city-region secured funding for the construction of a city-regional tramway to which we now turn.

**Tampere tramway**

To meet the needs of the growing city and urban area, a modern tramway system has been designed for Tampere. The key goals of the tramway system include making the everyday life and transportation easier in the municipality, supporting the growth and development of the urban area, and increasing the appeal of the city. (Raitiotieallianssi, 2017)

These words are the stated reasons for the construction of a city-regional tramway system in Tampere, approved and announced by the Tampere City Council in November 2016. They clearly indicate the primacy of economic rationales for its construction, echoing the broader project of city-led economic growth and competitiveness that has been reiterated in numerous official documents and politicians’ statements since the 1990s (Luukkonen & Sirviö, 2019). Accompanying these economic imperatives are the city-centric imaginaries of the Tampere city-region. Dubbed as ‘Manchester of the North’ – referring to its previous role in Nordic industrialization – Tampere is imagined as the engine of growth in the region in the same way that Manchester assumes a pre-eminent position in the north west region of England (Haughton et al., 2016). Tampere’s real and perceived economic power implicitly legitimizes its role in taking the lead in, and sometimes dominating the decision making over, the planning and construction of the state-subsidised transport system. We return to the democratic implications of this power grab in section five. Here, we focus on substantiating our core argument that the Tampere tramway is not simply a product of the state-led city-regionalization, it also plays a key role in socially embedding a distinct city-regional imaginary. Its materiality – entwined with the discursive practices of knowledge production in and through contractual planning – helps to bring the Tampere city-region into being. That is, the construction of the tramway is both the product of Finnish city-regionalization and its producer. Its materiality contingently helps to solidify the city-regional imaginary not only in the elites’ imaginations, but also in the everyday socio-spatial experiences of city-regional inhabitants (Addie, 2015; Addie & Keil, 2015). While the construction has been justified and financially facilitated by the MAL contract, the physical-material presence of the tramway, as well as its daily use, is cementing the scalar fix.

Tampere City’s aspiration to build a tramway can be traced back to as far as early 1900s; an urbanist idea that was revived in 2001 with a focus on the railroad network or so-called ‘tramtrain’ (pikaratikka). In 2004, attentions were turned to a modern
tramway, and in 2007 the City carried out a comparative analysis of alternative public transport solutions. This was followed by an updated transport plan programme and the launch of the planning process for a light rail system in 2010 (Tampereen kaupunkiseutu, 2010). In December 2011, the final plan was approved by the Tampere City Council (Tampereen kaupunki, 2014). As we mentioned earlier, we are not dwelling on the ‘trams versus roads’ sustainability debate but focus on the role of the tramway in the city-regionalization project. In this regard, the next steps in the process were essential for the enactment of the city-regional imaginary.

In February 2013, the first MAL agreement was signed by eight Tampere city-region municipalities, two government ministries, two state’s regional administrative offices, and the Finnish Transport Agency. As part of this agreement it was proposed to build a city-regional tramway of which 30 per cent was to be funded by the national government (Tampereen kaupunkiseutu, 2013). Although the contract was between the state and the eight municipalities, it was prepared by two city-regional bodies established in 2005 to facilitate collaboration between the eight municipalities: the city-regional board (seutuhallitus) and the Joint Authority of Tampere City Region (JATCR) called Tampereen kaupunkiseudun kuntayhtymä.

While the MAL agreement process fostered the discursive consolidation of the Tampere city-region, it was the construction of the tramway which gave the performative imaginary a tangible, material presence. However, important decisions about the tramway have been taking place in less formal and non-transparent arenas of which the Tramway Alliance is the most influential one. The Alliance was established in the summer of 2015 to carry out the planning and construction of the tramway. It is composed of a number of public and private sector actors, with the City of Tampere as the main client and three large commercial companies as the major service providers (Figure 1). The use of ‘public-private partnerships’ for the delivery of public services – which in many other Western countries, notably the UK, started in the 1990s – is widely seen as an indication of an emerging neoliberalised mode of governance (e.g. Goldstein & Mele, 2016; Haughton & McManus, 2012). Located in a corporate office building, the Alliance acts as the main negotiator and organizer of the tramway construction processes. The involvement of other actors and stakeholders, who are far from equal partners in decision-making processes, has been highly selective (Koskinen et al., 2015). The power imbalance at work is depicted in Figure 1 by identifying the positioning of various partners at either the core of decision making or the periphery. Crucially, apart from Tampere, none of the other signatory municipalities of the MAL agreement are represented in the Alliance. Their exclusion has been justified on the ground that the first stages of the tramway construction are located in Tampere, but as we discuss below, plans for the second and third stages stretch beyond its territory.

In May 2016, the MAL agreement was updated, extending the signatories to a new ministry and confirming the state’s subsidy of 71 million euros (Tampereen kaupunkiseutu, 2016). The construction of the tramway with a total estimated cost of 313 million euros began in 2018, starting from the Tampere city centre and moving towards east and south (Raitiotieallianssi, 2017). In November 2018, Tampere City Council announced its plan for the westbound extension of the tram to be built immediately after the completion of the first phase which was envisaged to be in 2021 (Tampereen kaupunki, 2018). In April 2019, the City Council announced another, southbound extension of
the tramway to include destinations in the three neighbouring municipalities of Pirkkala, Kangasala and Ylöjärvi (Tampereen kaupunki, 2019), which are signatories of MAL agreement and involved in JATCR which, as mentioned above, is a cooperative arrangement with Tampere.

The new extensions – all of which start from Tampere and move outwards – represent significant steps towards the materialization of the *city-centric* city-regional imaginary. Route planning for the latter extensions was carried out as part of the ‘Routenetwork2021’ (Linjast02021) project (Figure 2), with endorsement by the above-mentioned three municipalities.

The materiality of the tramway, alongside the MAL discourse, enacted a distinct city-centric and economic-driven imaginary of Tampere city-region; an imaginary constituted by and constitutive of the ‘new regionalist’ agglomeration bias and competitiveness-driven city-regionalization in Finland. The leading role played by the state in Finnish scalar fixing is evident in: (a) its mobilization of the MAL agreements and (b) its subsidization of major infrastructures, namely the Tampere tramway. Together, this imbrication of discourse and materiality has essentialized the city-region as the ‘natural’ scale of planning and governance, leading to strong path dependencies (Moulaert et al., 2007; Puustinen et al., 2017). The performativity of this imaginary is evident in the following statement from the JATCR’s 2018 report:

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**Figure 1.** Groups of actors differently positioned in the Tampere tramway’s planning and construction process.
To be profitable, the Tramway requires a purposeful steering of growth-oriented land use alongside its routes [...] Its development can lean on the Tampere city-region’s structural models and traffic planning [...] as well as the state’s MAL agreement policies. (Tampereen kaupunkiseutu, 2018, p. 5)

The statement also shows the ways in which scalar imaginaries, such as Tampere city-region, become self-fulfilling prophecies that disseminate narratives of their own inevitability (Massey, 2007), as shown in the statement by the three aforementioned municipalities:

The regional planning of the tramway has begun, and the building of future extensions has become apparent. [...] Tampere, Pirkkala, Kangasala and Ylöjärvi have together published a call for offers in 29.3.2019, for creating a regional general plan for the tramway. [...] The aim is to define the area reservations for general and town planning that enable the extension of the Tampere tramway system in the future. (Tampereen kaupunki, 2019)

Five of the seven municipalities involved in the MAL agreement are in close proximity to Tampere (the above three plus Lempäälä and Nokia) and have a population size of between 20,000 and 30,000 inhabitants. Lempäälä and Nokia are connected to Tampere by rail and new commuter trains and are being supported with park-and-ride facilities that are being tried out concurrently with the tramway project. The park-and-ride project is part of a national pilot aimed at opening the railways to free market competition, signalling another step in the neoliberalisation of Finland’s transportation system (Reuters, 2019). More relevant to the focus of this paper is that the tramway and the local trains are further facilitating the commuting patterns that provide the very FUA definition of the city-region. By doing so their materiality

Figure 2. Tampere region transportation plan with the tramway shown as a solid green line and its extensions as dashed green line (Source: Tampereen kaupunkiseutu, 2040, 2019).
further embeds the Tampere-centric city-regional imaginary in the everyday lives of the inhabitants of all five municipalities as they travel to work, school, services and leisure facilities. In other words, the creation of new infrastructural connectivity helps to create a city-regional ‘imagined community’ (Anderson, 1991).

Orivesi and Vesilahti, the two smallest municipalities involved in the MAL agreement, are, however, located more than 30 km from Tampere, with only 10,000 and 4000 inhabitants respectively. As shown in Figure 2, Orivesi is seen as a satellite town connected to the rest of the city-region by road and a local train network. As such, it has benefitted from investment in road improvement, whereas Vesilahti, which is further away at the west of Lempäälä, is still waiting for investment in its transport infrastructure and its connectivity. Moreover, there are several other small municipalities within the 30–60 km distance from Tampere now appearing as part of the ‘rural region’. These are physically disconnected and discursively excluded from the imagined Tampere city-region. Thus, their prospect for receiving infrastructural investments is even slimmer. These are the areas left out of the FUA maps and hence excluded from Tampere city-region and its imagined community, with significant ramifications for their future development. Similar exclusionary processes have happened in other countries, notably the UK (Harrison & Heley, 2015).

To recap, what began as a Tampere City ‘tramtrain’ in 2001 has become a city-regional development project which has further consolidated a Tampere-centric city-regional imaginary. In doing so, it has pulled certain areas together through better and faster connection (notably the larger cities) while pushing other areas apart (notably the rural areas). The pulling and pushing has been enacted according to a city first and economy first imaginary of city-regions which provides the rationale for the state’s neoliberal scalar fixing. Enabled by the MAL agreement, the tramway has become the physical-material embodiment of the performative city-regional imaginary, helping to normalize a distinct view of the city-region as the right scale of sub-national governance in Finland.

**MAL-engineered city-regions and democratic deficit**

While we agree on the tramway’s potential to provide a sustainable mode of transport for those who can access it, we wish to draw attention to the gaps in democratic decision making that the institutionalization of a Tampere city-regional imaginary has opened. We argue that this is partly due to the adopted city first, economy first approach to city-regionalization, and partly because governance rescaling in Finland has been an upward rather than downward reconfiguration of powers and responsibilities. Unlike countries where rescaling has been framed as ‘localism’ and involved a degree of devolution of power from the state to city-regions, such as the UK, in Finland certain decision-making powers have been taken away from local municipalities – rather than from the central state – and given to city-regional institutional arrangements. Notwithstanding the democratic implications of this political act, which we discuss below, the upward territorial reconfiguration is an indication of the historically, socially and politically contingent projects of rescaling. In Finland municipalities are in charge of much of the local decision making, so attempts to concentrate politico-administrative power at a larger scale – in the name of efficiency – require a removal of certain powers from them.
The priority given to rescaling as a political project is evident in recent MAL arrangements with three new smaller cities which have been offered limited funding, yet ample guidance, on how to go about land use planning (HS, 2020; Vatilo, 2020, see also endnote 2).

In the Tampere city-region, this upward rescaling has pulled some actors (notably private sector organizations) to centre stage and pushed others (notably citizens) to the periphery of decision making (see Figure 1). This parallels observations by Hytönen and Ahlqvist (2019), who show through several case studies how the neoliberalisation of the Finnish spatial planning regime has created opportunities ‘exploited by a variety of market actors who act on market-driven motivation’ in ways that constrict possibilities for democratic steering (p. 1352). Two aspects are critical in understanding how this process has unfolded in the context of city-regionalization in Tampere.

First, the practices of contractual planning have rescaled decision making upward to largely unaccountable city-regional governance bodies and thereby away from the direct democratic control of locally elected municipalities and their residents (Beel et al., 2018). Decisions related to tramway planning and building are carried out by public-private partnerships and driven largely by economic imperatives of growth and competiveness, albeit using a sustainable transportation mode, with little or no forms of representative or direct citizen participation (for city-regional citizen participation, see Häkli et al., 2020). This is evident, for instance, from decisions regarding the routeing of the tramway in the westbound areas of the project where the route largely caters for undeveloped land and skirts existing built up areas with high population density (Koivuniemi, 2013).

The upward rescaling from municipal to city-regional governance is also consequential in terms of the statutory public participation required by the Finnish Land Use and Building Act (132/1999) for major planning and infrastructure projects such as Tampere tramway and its related construction projects (Bäcklund et al., 2014). Whereas established procedures for public participation, with a clear system of rights and responsibilities, exists in municipal planning, these procedures are less evident in the planning machinery erected by weakly institutionalized city-regional governing institutions. In this regard, the relationship between municipal and city-regional planning is democratically problematic (see also Bäcklund et al., 2018; Puustinen et al., 2017). The rescaling means that city-regional governance can impose restrictions on municipal planning decisions without democratic scrutiny. In the case of Tampere tramway, the opportunities to influence planning decisions has been reduced for citizens and increased for commercial service providers who are seen as more important players in the market-oriented and opaque functioning of the Tramway Alliance.

Second, with the City of Tampere as the client in the Tramway Alliance, key steps in tramway planning and construction are being carried out under the control of Tampere which is now known as the ‘regional centre’. For example, Tampere city council oversaw the procurement of the preliminary planning (Tampereen kaupunki, 2011), drafted structural schemes for MAL agreements (Tampereen kaupunkiseutu, 2010, 2014, 2017), and acted as the driving force and leader in the general planning project group. While other municipalities of the city-region participated in negotiating the structural schemes and MAL agreements, they have not had explicit roles in designing the general tramway plan, nor have they been included in the Alliance (Tampereen kaupunki, 2014). At the early stages of this complicated inter-municipal process, it
became clear that the premises of the project had been set and steered by the Tampere-led planning and building scheme. As a result, a number of fundamental decisions have been taken by the City of Tampere alone, including not only the tramway routes, but also many practical choices related to, for example, the realization of the tracks, supplier of the tramcars, and the traffic operator. Such fundamental reconfiguration of powers and responsibilities has occurred without wider public discussions and explicit democratic processes at various levels of governance.

While the citizens in the seven other municipalities of Tampere city-region may eventually have the opportunity to participate in the land use planning stage of the tramway through municipal representative bodies, and perhaps by means of direct participation, such an opportunity comes at ‘the end of pipe’, and only after important strategic and practical decisions have already been made by the Tampere Alliance (Häkli et al., 2020). This underlines the fact that the Tampere-driven development project has solidified a city-regional rescaling with significant impacts on the whole Pirkanmaa region. Similarly, the majority of citizens living in the region have not had a say in the state-led MAL process which kick-started the city-regional rescaling project. Even the elected members of the seven municipalities were not consulted on the operative decisions regarding the tramway system. In terms of democratic legitimacy and accountability, this means that in deciding on the details of the tramway in individual jurisdictions, municipalities will find their hands tied by previously forged decisions, contracts and plans (see also Buser, 2014; Moulaert et al., 2007). Even less democratic has been the complete lack of engagement with the ‘rural-regional municipalities’ which have had no say in the process that is further marginalizing them in the region.

Overall, the market-oriented, Alliance-governed, and Tampere City-led process reveals the temporal non-synchrony embedded in the city-regional tramway planning where decisions are made prior to consultations with the public and without due considerations given to democratic processes. Moreover, state-driven rescaling is based on a city and economic centric imaginary of city-regions which is driven by, and reinforces, the new regionalist logic of agglomeration economies (Beel et al., 2018; Davoudi & Brooks, 2021; Haughton et al., 2016; Hoole & Hincks, 2020), and engenders new patterns of inclusions and exclusions. As our analysis shows, those municipalities considered as economically productive become included within the rigidified territorial boundaries of institutionalized city-regions, while those considered economically marginal become excluded. Through complex material and discursive practices, smaller settlements become dismissed as places that do not matter (Rodríguez-Pose, 2017; Zimmerbauer & Paasi, 2020). This implies that, contrary to the conceptualization of city-regions as fluid and relational spaces of multiple interactions, the political project of instituting the city-regional scale engenders a contingently solidified and bounded territory with rigid demarcation lines between who is in and who is out. This, however, does not suggest that city-regional rescaling is literally fixed. On the contrary, ongoing processes of contestations by multiple actors and interests, and their alternative imaginaries, remain, leading to a compromised geometry of city-regions along the lines of deep seated jurisdictional/administrative boundaries (Luukkonen & Sirviö, 2019; Scott, 2019), and far from the conceived geographies of functional areas (Davoudi & Brooks, 2021).
Conclusions

In this paper we have examined the envisioning, funding, planning and construction of a Tampere tramway project – with specific reference to contractual planning practices – as an example of state-engineered scalar fixing. We have shown that the project has been both a product and producer of a distinct imaginary of Tampere city-region as an economic and city centric space. Contributing to emerging literature on the politics of city-regional imaginaries, our geographically sensitive analysis shows how transport as a policy domain provides a useful lens to study the efficacy of material processes in the production, enactment, circulation, and social embedding of imaginaries. Transport infrastructure can be best understood as construct that effectively materializes spatial ideas of connectivity, radius and reach, as well as the planning system’s prospective aim of consolidating a seemingly natural and pre-existing city-region. Spatial imaginaries act as a self-fulfilling power that calls the city-region into being, helping us to move beyond the modernist binary between ‘real’ and ‘constructed’ – an impasse in the long lineage of thought about geographical imaginations and scalar fixing. We concur with Davoudi and Brooks (2021) who argue that city-regional imaginaries are not simply ideal or illusory imaginations of space, but rather performative processes that traverse the boundaries between discursive and material, real and illusive, and territorial and relational.

In analysing the Tampere tramway case, we further argue that the normalization of the city-region as the ‘right’ scale of governance has significantly reconfigured powers and responsibilities, transforming public decision-making powers from municipalities upward to weakly institutionalized city-regional governance arrangements. A compelling example of this are the planning and decision making processes about transport infrastructure projects such as the Tampere tramway. Our analysis shows how practices of contractual planning have pushed public decision making away from the direct democratic control of local governments and thus largely excluded citizens from the processes. On the other hand, city-regionalization projects can provide more opportunities for market-driven private actors to influence public decisions. Both of these trends raise critical questions about public accountability and democratic legitimacy. Moreover, elsewhere we have shown that transport, traffic and mobility are among the areas where city-regional developers identify potential for citizen participation (Häkli et al., 2020). Thus, the lack of such engagement in the case of Tampere tramway cannot be explained by the commonly used justification that city-regional projects are strategic and hence beyond the reach of citizens and their everyday concerns.

The Tampere tramway, along with MAL contractual planning, have played a key role in turning a distinct city-regional imaginary into an institutionally constituted scalar fix. Furthermore, the ongoing process of building the tramway as it unfolds in the streets of Tampere, together with numerous media portrayals, official reports and local stories, have helped to socially embed it into citizens’ day-to-day experiences, as they go about their journeys to work and leisure. This embedding, however, remains contingent and contested and the search for a new crisis-induced scalar fix is ongoing. The important point is that, far from being a value-free, neutral delineation of regional space in accordance with expert-led designations of a functional urban area, the case of Tampere tramway shows that scalar fixing always entails changes in power relations and creates new patterns of inclusions and exclusions. Particular histories, power geometries and political position-
taking play important roles in producing fragmented and uneven city-regional geographies. We, therefore, invite further scholarly work to interrogate the performative power of city-regional imaginaries, and particularly their capacity to mobilize, intensify and consolidate ongoing tensions and contradictions between the politics of scalar fixing and the democratic values of public accountability and transparency.

Notes

1. Such as the launch of national metropolitan policy in 2007, the signing of Urban Growth Agreements between central government and biggest city-regions in 2011, and the launch of Innovative Cities Programme (INKA) in 12 largest City-region in 2014.
2. During the production of this article, in September 2020, three other cities (Lahti, Jyväskylä, Kuopio) have been offered the opportunity to establish MAL agreements, which takes further the developments discussed in this paper.
3. Pirkkala, Kangasala, Ylöjärvi, Lempäälä, Nokia, Orivesi, Vesilahti, and Tampere.
4. The Ministry of Transport and Communications, and the Ministry of the Environment.
5. The Centre for Economic Development, Transport and the Environment, and the Housing Finance and Development Centre of Finland.
6. YIT construction company (service providers), VR Track PLC (part of a publically owned national railway company, now merged with the international NRC Group) and Pöyry Finland Ltd (planning consultant company).
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