Anchor firms in regional industrial transition processes in non-metropolitan areas

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European industrial regions experience stark changes in their development on their way to achieve twin transition goals. In non-metropolitan regions with anchor firms, governing transition policy is inherently intertwined with the outlook of these individual companies. As such the paper revisits the role of anchor firms and associated governance structures in these regional industrial transition processes. More precisely, the paper's objective is to advance an understanding of how the role of anchor firms shifts in light of the new challenges of contemporary industrial transitions.

In this era of manifold challenges and changed global landscape of competitiveness, a new conceptualisation of anchor firms is required. These companies act not only as catalysts being able to generate knowledge externalities as well as shape forms and dynamics of localised processes of innovation and production, but they can act as drivers to advance the transition. Simultaneously, priorities in the location requirements and needs of these core companies have shifted (towards e.g. affordable and clean energy, supply reliability, etc.). There is a complex and multifaceted interrelationship between anchor firms and their hosting regions. Bringing both perspectives together implies anchoring regional economies and (co-)navigating regional industrial transitions.

Building on a literature review of anchor firms complemented by theoretical insights from transitions studies and the field of new industrial policies, the paper develops an analytical framework operationalising the mechanisms and functioning of anchor companies to allow for an empirical analysis. The existing literature on anchor firms focusses on the shifts in the composition of local economic outcomes and anchor's embeddedness in innovation and production systems (considering e.g. scale and spillover effects, role in cluster emergence, in the evolution of regional innovation systems, or in entrepreneurial ecosystems, multi-scalar knowledge and business networks; see De Propris and Crevoisier, 2011, and for a recent review Nilsson et al., 2025), as well as industrial path creation processes (Gong et al., 2024; Binz et al., 2016). Only a few studies explicitly delve into the operationalisation of anchor firms, while the others rather explore the anchor mechanisms starting from prominent regional examples, which then lead to conceptualisations of what makes a firm an anchor. To revisit how these mechanisms change and what mechanisms gain importance during industrial transition processes, we then apply this analytical framework and its dimensions in two explorative empirical case studies. Drawing on the case study work conducted as part of the ESPON NoStaGeo project, focusing on regions in the process of industrial transition, the paper presents the operationalisation of the theoretical arguments in an analytical framework by comparing them with arguments stemming from the Norrbotten region, Sweden, and Carinthia, Austria.

The paper specifically addresses the changing understanding of anchor firms' role in regional industrial transition processes against the background of anchoring mechanisms and emerging governance configurations. We argue that, by including insights from transition studies and new industrial policies, further aspects of the strategic role anchor firms play in decision-making networks ultimately shaping regional developments can be explored. In contrast to the discourse on incumbent firms, which is prevalent in transition studies and brings to the fore their heterogenous roles and pluralistic transition responses, this work offers a more nuanced understanding by reinforcing the regional embeddedness of those companies that function as the backbone of their respective local economies. Recent research highlights the importance of regional development strategies that nurture regional anchor firms within industrial ecosystems (Wolf, 2025).

In this sense, regions with anchor companies become arenas where transformation processes, industrial policy, and territorial development unfold, entailing both opportunities and challenges. Consequently, the ongoing process of industrial transition coupled with potential strategic leveraging of regional anchor firms for regional development carries implications for policy.

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