Research Article

Territories that refuse to fade away: Insights from the Províncias of Northern Portugal and the Comarcas of Galicia (Spain)

🆔 ✖ **Inês Gusman[1*]** & 🆔 ✖ **Alejandro Otero-Varela[2]**

[1] Department of Geography, University of Santiago de Compostela, Santiago de Compostela, Spain, and Social Sciences Institute, University of Lisbon, Lisboa, Portugal

[2] Department of Geography, University of Santiago de Compostela, Santiago de Compostela, Spain

˙ Correspondence: ines.gusman@gmail.com

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Abstract: In this article we explore the interaction between the spatialities of the state and the spatial imaginaries by investigating the manifestation of territories beyond institutional practices. We want to understand the relevance of territories that, despite not being integrated into the political-administrative structure of the state, refuse to fade away. We examine deactivated supra-municipal divisions of two neighborhood states: the províncias of the Northern Portugal and the comarcas of Galicia (Spain). Both cases are examined through a combination of geohistorical analysis of the administrative organization of the states, alongside a revision of tangible and intangible practices of local stakeholders in which these territories persist. The exploration of geographical naming is a significant aspect of the analysis. The results indicate that both províncias and comarcas are currently mobilized by stakeholders with many purposes and assumed varied shapes to assert their existence from the bottom up. These are claimed as the suitable divisions of territory and used to contest the spatialities imposed by the state. The inclusion of the imaginaries associated with these territories on formal regional planning practices would lead to a future where the territorial diversity of the countries is acknowledged, and the endogenous characteristics embraced.

Keywords: institutionalization of territories, spatial imaginaries, Northern Portugal, Galicia, territorialities

Highlights:

- Social relevance of deactivated territories and the reasons why they remain significant
- Diverse material and immaterial practices that shape the existence of non-institutionalized territories
- Acknowledgement of their socio-spatial value for enhancing planning and cooperation in governance

1. Introduction

Despite the dominant position that nation states have over space, the shaping of territories is not solely under these structures' power. In line with what several authors have claimed over the past decades (Paasi, 2008; Storey, 2001), to understand territory outside state-defined limits is the most appropriate way to analyze territoriality in its material and symbolic dimensions and to avoid the "territorial trap" identified by Agnew (1994). This framework is influenced by the constructivist perspectives of space, which consider territories as political and social constructions. They have allowed new geographical readings of space and have become particularly relevant in the study of regions, conceiving them as not just products of the political-administrative organization of the state, but as realities which are lived and perceived by society. Often having a more unstable nature than nation states, both in form and content, there are subnational territorial entities being created and transformed throughout Europe to meet different ends. When deactivated they can become territories that refuse to fade away, remaining alive in the spatial imaginaries of society and producing impacts in different types of spatialities.

In this study, we aim to analyze territories that have resisted the spatial practices of states, specifically the way supra-municipal or regional scales are managed, using as case studies two different territorial entities that, although being geographically and culturally close, are part of two distinct states: Galicia (an autonomous community of Spain) and Northern Portugal (a region of Portugal designated for planning purposes). Spain and Portugal have distinct political-administrative systems, and we believe this is what makes them interesting for a comparative analysis. In Spain, autonomous communities have both administrative and political autonomy, whereas Portugal operates as a unitary and highly centralized state, with no intermediate level between municipalities and the central government. Regardless of the level of decentralization of political and administrative power, inconsistencies between the institutional and symbolic structure of territories can be identified. Given this context, the main objective of this research is to understand the relevance of territories that, despite not being part of the political-administrative structure of the State, remain alive in certain socio-spatial practices, and play significant roles in shaping the territorial imaginaries. This objective raises the following research questions: how do spatialities of the states interact with spatial imaginaries of territories? How do territories exist and function even when they lack institutional recognition? Why are there territories which remain over time even without institutional support? Should these territories be integrated into territorial planning practices? If yes, why? To achieve the main objective and answer these research questions, this research is focused on the Galician comarcas and the províncias of Northern Portugal. These can be considered deactivated territories because

they lost the institutional role they once had and have no formal representation inside their respective countries' administrative and political structures.

This research begins with a review of the main theoretical contributions on the material and immaterial construction of territories, the role of nation states and other powers in these constructions, and the definition of the central concepts for the development of this study. After presenting the methodological framework adopted, we share the results obtained from the analysis of the two case studies. The contrast between them and the comparison with the results of analyses made in other geographical contexts, allow us to contribute to relevant debates such as: the reasons that lead to the emergence of certain spatial imaginaries, their solidification, the rationalities that legitimize them, their relationship with territorial institutionalization, and their implications for the functioning of democracy (Zimmerbauer & Paasi, 2013; Keating, 2014; Davoudi, 2019). In the conclusion of the text we present a description of what we consider to be the main contributions of this study, its limitations, and a reflection on the implications of the results for future territorial planning practices.

2. Literature Review

A territory arises from the individualization of a certain portion of space. The processes through which this individualization takes place are translated, on the one hand, into the production of its territorial limits, the most evident expressions of which are the borders, and, on the other hand, into the creation of content, arising from the spatial representations carried out by different agents and institutions. In this context, a as Storey (2001) stated that territory can be considered: "a portion of geographic space which is claimed or occupied by a person or group of persons or by an institution. It is, therefore, an area of bounded space, sometimes quite literally surrounded by a wall, fence or barrier of some sort" (p. 1). Also, Delaney (2005) defines territory as "a bounded social space that inscribes a certain kind of meaning onto defined segments of the material world" (p. 14). The physical and/or symbolic processes through which humans occupy the space are considered territorialization. This concept was introduced in geography by Sack (1983), who defined it as a way of "affecting, influencing, and controlling" the space, being, therefore, linked to the notions of territorial demarcation. According to these perspectives, territoriality has a strongly instrumental character since it enables the control of space to claim a sort of political, economic, or social power.

Several authors have suggested over the last decades, abandoning the conceptualization of territories as units well delimited in space, homogeneous and fixed in time. The insights provided by influential authors such as Lefebvre (1974), Massey (1995), and Thrift (1996) among many others, have played a crucial role in shaping our understanding of territorial space as being relational, dynamic and socially constructed. Their contributions have substantially reshaped geographic thinking by questioning the conventional belief of territories as static, pre-existing entities, while highlighting the influential role of social, economic, political, and cultural forces in shaping space. In contemporary times, it is widely recognized that territories should be understood as social constructs arising from a complex interplay of dynamic geohistorical and socio-spatial processes. Consequently, territories are subject to constant contestation and negotiation (Paasi, 2022).

Paasi (2009) contends that territory represents the intersection of various elements. It encompasses material components like land, functional aspects such as the mechanisms employed to control and demarcate space and its borders, as well as symbolic elements like anthems, flags, and artistic expressions, among other elements. Considering territory in its formal dimension, it can take different forms such as nation states, regions, municipalities, localities, and even other configurations that extend beyond institutional frameworks.

The conventional conceptualization of territory rooted in the spatiality of the state has faced criticism from numerous authors. Agnew's (1994) contribution, which centered around what he termed the "territorial trap", played a significant role in shaping this standpoint. Through this concept the author critiques geopolitical thinking which is based on three assumptions: first, that the territories of the nation states are stable and bounded spaces of sovereignty; second, that these territories mark an unequivocal difference between what is inside and what is outside; and, finally, that nation states precede societies and are containers of them. This conception has had a strong influence on territorial analysis, setting the study of territories free from what boundaries drawn by the administrative organization of the state (Paül & Trillo-Santamaría, 2015).

In the context of globalization of socio-economic relations, the way we perceive and understand spatial dynamics has undergone significant transformation. Brenner (1999) asserts that the wave of globalization that emerged after the 1970s had a substantial impact on diminishing the significance of the national scale as a self-contained entity for socio-economic relations. In fact, in today's globalized world territories are considered "networks" shaped by social interactions and discourses (Allen et al., 1998). Over the last several years, many studies have demonstrated that territory is not an exclusive phenomenon of the state, and different territorialities can co-exist in the same space (Paasi et al., 2022). This same idea is followed by Painter (2010) who argues that territory "should be examined not as an actual State space, but as the powerful, metaphysical effect of practices that make such spaces appear to exist" (p. 1116). However, the strong impact that States have on shaping space and the territories that form within them, both through their institutional power and symbolic influence, cannot be ignored.

The acknowledgment of the social and historical dimension of territories has generated significant academic interest, aiming to explore the interplay between formal and symbolic elements that contribute to the emergence of territorial entities, particularly regions (Šerý & Daňková, 2021; Zimmerbauer et al., 2017; Zimmerbauer & Paasi, 2019). When examining regional spaces in different countries, it becomes evident that these spaces can emerge and vanish over time. Several studies have revealed that the dismantling of institutional elements, such as representative entities and borders, does not necessarily result in the disappearance of symbolic components and social behaviors (Kolosov, 2020). Territorial imaginaries possess the capacity to persist and reproduce themselves over time, even in the absence of institutional support. This understanding should not be overlooked in planning practices (Šerý & Daňková, 2021).

According to Said's pioneering work on Orientalism, spatial imaginaries can be defined as "socially held stories, ways of representing and talking about places and spaces" (as cited in Watkins, 2015, p. 509) and reflect power structures. Watkins (2015) believes that spatial imaginaries "are stories and ways of talking about places and spaces that transcend language as embodied performances by people in the material world" (p. 509). For Boudreau (2007) these imaginaries are "mental maps representing a space to which people relate and with which they identify" (p. 2596). According to Davoudi (2019) they are fundamental for the existence of territories, as they foster a sense of shared identity. Thus, although spatial imaginaries are performative, they have an impact on material geographies, since they help to legitimize certain spatial practices such as the development of projects, infrastructure, or collaboration platforms. In fact, a territory's continuous existence relies on its enduring presence in people's consciousness (Marek, 2022).

Originally rooted in human geography, the concept of spatial imaginaries has progressively infiltrated the lexicon of territorial planning, firmly establishing its presence within the culture of regional planning and becoming institutionalized within the plans and strategies of territorial entities (O'Brien, 2019). Authors such as Walsh (2014), recognize the importance of socio-spatial imaginaries in framing and legitimizing political

action and their relevance to the application of strategic territorial planning. While considerable attention has been devoted to discussing the significance of the state as a formal political-administrative entity governing territories and fostering a shared national identity (Anderson, 1983; Smith, 1991; Taylor, 1994), comparatively less progress has been made in understanding the relationship between these two dimensions of territoriality at the sub-national level. However, it is widely recognized that the symbolic aspect of territories holds significance in the process of institutionalizing regions, in addition to their territorial and institutional structure (Paasi, 1986). Numerous studies have underscored the importance of the symbolic aspects and identity context within which territorial entities operate, as they serve as catalysts for strategic territorial development (Raagmaa, 2002; Tewdwr-Jones & Allmendinger, 2006).

3. Materials and Methods

To understand the relevance of territories that, despite not being integrated in the political-administrative structure of the state, do not disappear from socio-spatial practices, we carried out a comparative analysis of two case studies (Yin, 2003). We focus the analysis on the autonomous community of Galicia (Spain) and the Nortern Region (Portugal) and their internal supra-municipal configurations. Table 1 shows some of the key data about these two territories. Galicia occupies a territory of 29,575 km2 and it has its own government, the Xunta de Galicia, with jurisdiction and autonomy in different spheres, including spatial planning. The most disaggregated level of territorial administration is the municipality, with a total of 313. The Northern of Portugal has 21,278 km² and is a planning region of Portugal to which corresponds a Regional Development Coordination Commission (CCDR-Norte), a decentralized service of the central state, endowed with administrative and financial autonomy, but without political autonomy or democratic legitimacy. As in entire Portuguese territory, the most disaggregated level of territorial administration in the North are the parishes, followed by municipalities, a total of 86. Comparing both case studies, although they have a similar area, the Northern Portugal has more population and consequently presents a higher population density. However, Galicia exhibits a higher GDP per capita, albeit with a lower activity rate and a higher unemployment rate, suggesting variations in the economic dynamics between these neighboring regions. Both Galicia and the Northern Portugal are experiencing negative natural growth rates, indicating that their populations are declining due to factors such as low birth rates and an aging population. However, the aging index reveals that the Northern Portugal has a relatively older population compared to Galicia.

Table 1. Some important socio-demographic data for the two case studies. Source: Authors with data by the Portuguese Instituto Nacional de Estatística (INE), and the Spanish Instituto Nacional de Estadística (INE) and Galician Instituto Galego de Estatística (IGE).

	Year	Galicia	Northern Portugal
Area (km²)	2023	29 577	21 284
Municipalities (no.)	2023	313	86
Average area of municipalities (km²)	2023	94.5	247.5
Population (inhab.)	2021	2 695 645	3 609 978
Population density (inhab./km²)	2021	91.1	169.6
Natural growth rate (%)	2021	-0.67	-0.34
Aging index	2021	163.6	185
GDP/capita (thousands of €)	2021	23 499	18 166
Activity rate (%)	2021	52.5	59.9
Unemployment rate (%)	2021	11.7	8.4

The methodology and steps employed in this research are illustrated in Figure 1. Considering that territories and their identities are social constructions generated from historically contingent processes (Pred, 1984), to achieve the main objective of this study, a geo-historical analysis of the territories was carried out (García-Álvarez, 2003). This approach enables a critical reflection of the interaction between the symbolic and formal components of space. Thus, employing a constructivist perspective of the territory, the analysis of the case studies took in consideration two different data sources: supra-municipal scale management practices and naming practices. Consequently, a longitudinal investigation was conducted on the supra-municipal administrative divisions implemented by both states in Galicia and Northern Portugal, positioning the Galician comarcas and the Portuguese províncias within this context. The analysis has as its temporal starting point the emergence of the liberal State in both cases and draws on published literature on this topic to survey the political-administrative options that affected the supra-municipal divisions of the territories under study. In order to avoid a simple analysis of the historical evolution of the supra-municipal divisions, we contextualize the political circumstances that led to the adoption of the different supra-municipal territorial configurations, integrating historical and geographical perspectives (Terlouw & Weststrate, 2013). In parallel and considering the relevance of the narratives in the construction of territories (Haughton & Allmendinger, 2015; Metzger, 2013) we identify the current manifestations of Galician comarcas and Portuguese provincias through their naming practices in scientific papers, institutional documents, media, political discourses and also territorial signs. Considering geographical names as a relevant expression of the existence of a territory (Semian, 2016; Simon et al., 2010), to identify the persistence of these territories we

relied on the present-day references to their denominations. In accordance with the scope and objectives of this study, it is important to clarify that the perceptions of local residents regarding the províncias and comarcas were not included as part of our investigation.
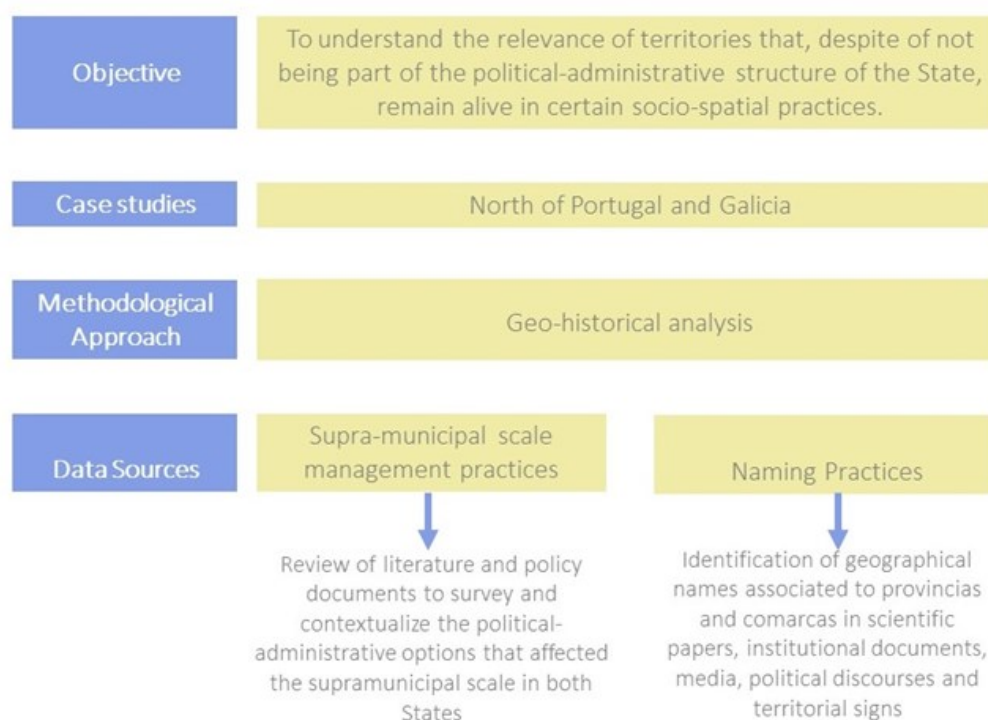

Figure 1. Methodological diagram

4. Results

4.1. The supra-municipal organization of Portugal and Spain

During the early 19th century, coinciding with the rise of the liberal State, Portugal and Spain witnessed the establishment of their initial formalized territorial organizational systems. The first liberal constitutions of both countries, the Spanish of 1812 and the Portuguese of 1822, mention the existence of a homogeneous organization of the whole territory, inspired by the French liberal model. Both Iberian countries embraced a territorial framework that drew inspiration from the départements and communes of France, known as distritos in Portugal and provincias in Spain.

In 1832, with Mouzinho da Silveira's reforms, the Portuguese territory was divided into municípios (municipalities), comarcas, and províncias. However, both their centralizing content and the adopted territorial delineation for the entities raised significant criticisms and a new division was adopted a few years later. In 1835, the famous Passos Manuel decree established distritos that replaced the províncias and the comarcas. These were subdivided into municipalities with greatly increased surface area, which in turn were divided into freguesias (parishes). The territorial delineation of distritos lay between that of províncias and comarcas, and their capitals were chosen based on their urban significance. In the case of Spain, in 1833-34, the entire territory was divided into municipios, partidos judiciales, and provincias. The provincias were established through decree based on the work of Javier de Burgos (Burgueño, 2011). In Portugal, 17 distritos were established (one new district would be created in 1926 in Setubal), while in Spain, which is approximately 5.5 times larger than Portugal, 49 províncias were created (Burgueño, 2011). What is now considered the Northern Portugal was than divided into the five distritos of Braga, Bragança, Porto, Viana do Castelo, and Vila Real, while Galicia was divided into the four provincias of A Coruña, Lugo, Ourense, and Pontevedra.

It is possible to identify many similarities between the Spanish provincias of 1833 and the Portuguese distritos of 1836. Firstly, both have a similar scale, which followed the logic of dividing the entire territory based on structures of homogeneous dimension (Claudino, 2006). Secondly, their purpose is also analogous, as they were both conceived to enhance the administrative efficiency of the state apparatus and serve as subordinate extensions of central authority. Both States installed their representatives, the civil governors, at the head of these structures. Furthermore, both divisions drew substantial criticism for being seen as imposed by central authorities and for their perceived disregard of pre-existing local realities. Similar criticisms are raised by contemporary authors, such as Oliveira (1996) in Portugal and García-Álvarez (2002) in Spain, who consider the creation of these new structures as an autarchic invention without roots or tradition, which only came to reinforce State control over the territories. Nevertheless, the supra-municipal entities created turned out to be durable, as the Spanish provincias of 1833 and the Portuguese distritos of 1836 have persisted to the present day (Burgueño, 2011; Freitas do Amaral & Pereira da Silva, 2018).

As the 20th century dawned, both countries embarked on distinct paths in their political evolution, although similarities can also be noted here. Both countries underwent a shift in governance as the dictatorships of Oliveira Salazar of the Estado Novo (1928-74) in Portugal and Franco (1939-75) in Spain took power, replacing the previous republican regimes. In Portugal, a new provincial delimitation was approved in 1936 as a

response to the regionalist movement which advocated for the creation of províncias (Santos, 1985). These províncias, serving as supra-municipal authorities, were granted powers as executive and deliberative bodies. The delineation of their boundaries and the nomenclature employed derived from the work of the distinguished Portuguese geographer, Amorim Girão. A new administrative map divided the country into 11 províncias, while maintaining the division into distritos that were, in turn, disaggregated into municipalities and divided into parishes. These entities would exist until the constitutional revision of 1959, when distritos were defined as the primary actors in the supra-municipal governance of the Portuguese territory (Fernandes, 2016). A few years later, still under dictatorship, the Planning Regions were created through the aggregation of distritos, which aimed to mitigate regional asymmetries (Santos, 1985). In Spain, the dictatorship resulted in the suppression of regions that had either been established or were in the process of being established during the republican era, forcing their governments into exile. During Franco's dictatorship, the territorial organization remained unchanged from the one established by the liberal State a century earlier. It was structured around provincias, judicial distritos, and municipalities (García-Álvarez, 2002; Burgueño, 2011). In both States, all the territorial levels were subordinate areas of central power, which served to strengthen the centralization of the State.

The arrival of democracy in both countries at very close dates, 1974 in Portugal and 1975 in Spain, implied new changes to the territorial organization. In Portugal, the most significant change was the creation of the autonomous regions of the Azores and Madeira archipelagos, and the granting of a new democratic legitimacy and autonomy to municipalities and parishes (Santos, 1985). Moreover, the 1976 Constitution recognized the administrative regions as local authorities, and decreed that the district division would remain in force until their institution. The creation of administrative regions of mainland Portugal has been never materialized and the distritos remain alive to this day, serving as a territorial basis for the regional organization of different governmental services. In Spain, an almost federal model was established in which the regions (called comunidades autónomas), assume abundant powers in relevant areas such as education, health, culture, or housing. The Spanish Constitution of 1978 also protects the existence of províncias and municipalities, although each autonomous community is granted the power to manage their internal territorial organization (García-Álvarez, 2002).

The Spanish provincias have their own governing bodies, known as Provincial Councils (called Deputaciones Provinciales) (Burgueño, 2011). The jurisdiction of the provincias is established in the Law of Local Regime Bases of 1985, among which assistance to municipalities (with special attention to municipalities with less economic capacity), in areas such as economic promotion, culture, sports, social welfare, and environment are outlined. Despite the constitutional safeguards in place for provincias and municipalities, certain autonomous communities have managed to move forward with the establishment of their own administrative divisions. For instance, in Aragon and Catalonia, their respective regional governments have successfully introduced comarcas, complete with independent governing bodies that assume jurisdiction and responsibilities similar to those which the Provincial Councils traditionally possessed.

 In the case of Galicia, its Statute of Autonomy (1981) introduces a novelty by establishing the comarcas and the parroquias (parishes) as local entities that can be endowed with legal status and a framework of jurisdiction through an autonomous law that regulates them. In this sense, the comarca, understood as the territorial scope between the province and the municipality, was promoted in the 1990s by the Galician government, which established a division into 53 entities, but avoided giving them their own jurisdiction and governing bodies (Lois-González, 2004). Instead, the Galician government only established some comarcas with a primary focus on bolstering local development, enhancing territorial planning, and fostering efficient administrative coordination (Precedo, 1994).

In Portugal, the political-administrative changes were highly influenced by the country's entry into the European Community in 1986 regional scale was valued within the European project. Specifically, the Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics (NUTS) system map was instituted by the European authorities as a way of facilitating the generation of regional statistics and ensuring the equitable distribution of cohesion funds. In Portugal, the afore mentioned Planning Regions created in 1969 were assumed as regional spaces represented by the Regional Coordination and Development Commissions (CCDR) with functions associated with coordination and support of municipalities' activities and strengthening their role as local authorities as representatives of NUTS 2 regions. These structures have played a relevant role in managing national and European financial programs. In parallel, smaller units, the NUTS 3, were created and used as the basis for the constitution of Metropolitan Areas and Intermunicipal Communities. Over the first decades of the 21st century, several reforms were carried out and distritos lost their relevance as administrative subdivisions as the decentralized administration of the state started to be aligned with a division corresponding to the NUTS 2. In 2011, the distritos lose their representative bodies, the civil governments, but remained active in other areas. The most relevant role of the 18 distritos is that they are used as voting districts for the election of the 230 members of the National Assembly of the Republic and, consequently, subsist as a reference for the territorial organization of the political parties. The district division is also used by state services such as social security, civil protection, and road administration.

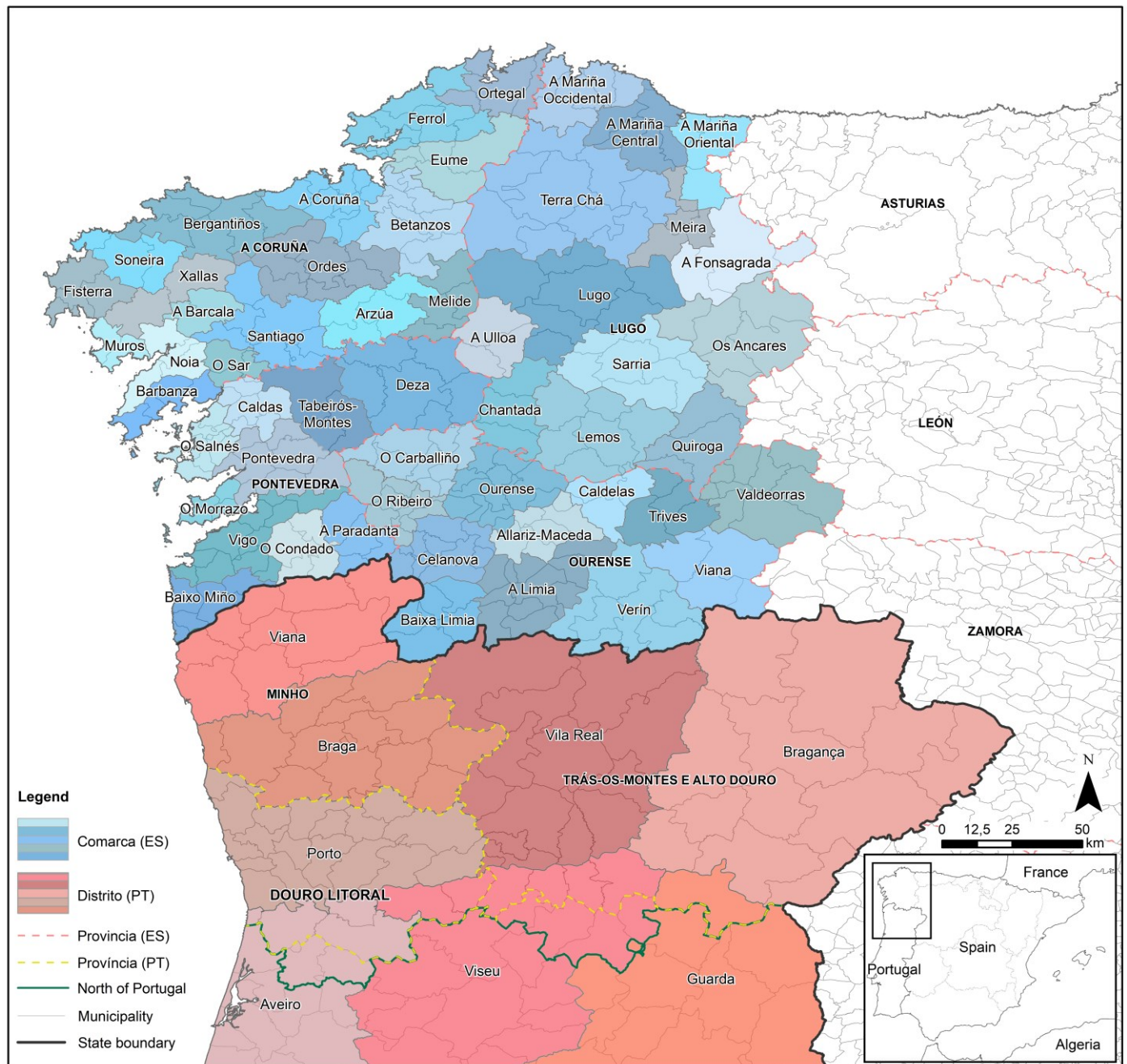## 4.2 The províncias of Northern Portugal and the comarcas of Galicia

Despite the scarce consideration by central power throughout history and even though they never played an effective institutional role, the provincias in Portugal and the comarcas in Galicia constitute territorial realities that have managed to reach the present day. The current denomination, shape and content of the províncias in Portugal, although having origins in the first regional division of Portugal in the 15th century (Ribeiro, 1987), are strongly associated with their institutionalization during the dictatorship of the Estado Novo (1936). The provincial map of Portugal was extensively employed by the regime's cultural apparatus to reinforce and promote nationalist narratives within the country. This is a relevant fact if we consider the relevant of maps throughout history and geographies as powerful tools for propaganda, persuasion, and political indoctrination (Medzini, 2012).

In the context of Galicia, the concept of comarcas traces back to ancient roots. However, their formal recognition emerged as part of the Galician nationalist ideologies of the Spanish Republic (1931-1939). Despite facing systematic disregard during the subsequent dictatorship, comarcas found their place within various segments of society, enabling them to endure and persist until the present day. The enduring existence of both territorial categories can be attributed to the recognition by certain sectors of society that they represent the most effective supra-municipal expression of the historical, territorial, and human characteristics of territories. It could be argued that they possess a phantom existence (Kolosov, 2020): despite lacking official recognition, there persists a perception of their existence as they continue to be reproduced in certain contexts.

In contrast, Portuguese distritos and Spanish provincias are regarded as purely administrative divisions imposed by reforms under strong central government control. Their longevity can be attributed to the influential impacts that their institutional nature has had on various aspects of society. Despite the similarities between the ways these circumscriptions have been managed in both States, it is important to say that the

Portuguese distritos and Spanish provincias assume different functions in the territory today. Also, the províncias in the Northern Portugal and the Galician comarcas are associated to distinct manifestations through different mechanisms, as we will explore in the following paragraphs. Figure 2 shows these four circumscriptions.

Figure 2. The províncias and distritos of the Northern Portugal and the Galician comarcas and provincias. Source: Authors with data from the Portuguese Sistema Nacional de Informação Territorial (SNIT) and the Spanish Instituto Geográfico Nacional (IGN).

Staring by analyzing the Portuguese case, the historical evolution of supra-municipal administration since the arrival of the modern state in the 19th century shows that distritos and províncias have been the main protagonists of regional governance logics. Although from a formal standpoint the territorial organization at the regional scale in Portugal is marked by an overlapping divisions, the symbolic relevance of the províncias is recognized by several authors (Ferrão, 2016; Freitas do Amaral, 2018; Bandeira, 2009). Despite their limited practical significance even during the Estado Novo dictatorship, these administrative divisions have left an indelible mark on the collective spatial imaginations of the population across generations. Something that could have contributed to this is the fact that even after their abolition, províncias have continued to be represented in maps on school walls over decades (Gaspar, 1993). Also, as it is suggested by Medeiros (2005), the representations of Portuguese folk art such as music, dances, and costumes associated with these províncias remained steadfast even in the post-dictatorial era.

The existence of these territories is particularly relevant in cultural contexts. Províncias are used, for example, in the regional division presented in the Ethno-Musical Map published by Instituto Camões in 2007, a characterization of traditional Portuguese music and its respective

instruments. The map itself clarifies: "the criterion of geographical division using outdated *províncias*, although debatable (like everything...), seemed to us the most appropriate and effective, taking into account the geographical and social particularities of each region and the permanence of their names in our memory" (Instituto Camões, 2007). Moreover, references to *províncias* can be found in other areas. An example of this is the official website of the Portuguese Institute for the Sea and Atmosphere (Instituto Português do Mar e da Atmosfera, IPMA), a public institute integrated into the indirect administration of the State. Although the IPMA uses the designation of *distritos* in its official map, the names of the *províncias* are still used today for territorial classifications. The educational section of the website, in the characterization of the climate of mainland Portugal reads: "based on the same data, it is shown that the average annual precipitation is highest in Minho and Douro Litoral and lowest in the interior of Baixo Alentejo" (Instituto Português do Mar e da Atmosfera, 2022). The terms Minho and Douro Litoral specifically refer to the former *províncias*, as there are no current territorial divisions using these names.

In the specific case of the Northern Portugal, the *províncias* have not disappeared from territorial imaginaries, as they remain alive as forms of spatial categorization. It can be said that among the three *províncias* that once existed (Figure 2), Douro Litoral is probably the one that has faded the most over time. This may be associated with the fact that in the territory that once comprised this province, the classification of Greater Porto or the Porto Metropolitan Area has been asserting itself due to the social, economic, and institutional prominence that the city of Porto holds in the country (Direção-Geral do Território, 2018). The Turismo do Porto e Norte de Portugal entity, responsible for enhancing and developing the tourism potential of the territories of Northern Portugal territories, divides the region into four sub-destinations to structure the offering of touristic goods and serives. Although they do not precisely correspond to the configuration and denomination of the former *províncias*, they share similarities in terms of denomination, configuration, and also in content used for promotion.

The denomination of the *províncias* is still present in the names of two out of the three public universities in this region, founded after the abolition of the *províncias*: the University of Minho (with campuses in Braga and Guimarães), founded in 1973, and the University of Trás-os-Montes e Alto Douro (in Vila Real), founded in 1979. The latter is also the name given to the public hospital center located in Vila Real, which opened its doors in 2007 and provides healthcare services to 300,000 inhabitants. In scientific research, the *províncias* are still used as territorial units of analysis as well (Bandeira, 2009; Pereiro, 2018).

References to the former *províncias* can easily be found in articles on various topics published in the most widely read newspapers in Portugal. These names are used to frame a geographic space as is indicated by the following titles: "Trás-os-Montes e Alto Douro: a reflection of an increasingly modern yet depopulated country" (Público, 2019); "Irregularities detected in the polling stations of Minho" (Jornal de Notícias, 2022); "Emigrant community brings life to Trás-os-Montes e Alto Douro" (Expresso, 2012). Moreover, *províncias'* names are also commonly used by social media for characterizing both companies and sports teams with titles such as "Owner of the Transmontanan dams suspends support to the municipality of Miranda do Douro. (TSF, 2022). In fact, there are newspapers representing both Minho (Diário do Minho, Correio do Minho, Minho) and Trás-os-Montes e Alto Douro (Diário de Trás-os-Montes).

Furthermore, institutional representatives evoke these deactivated territories. Recently, during the celebrations of Portugal Day on June 10, 2022, which took place in Braga, the President of the Republic repeatedly referred to the Minho province in his speech. From the city that was considered the former provincial capital, Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa gave shape to this deactivated territorial entity: "Here, in this Minho where we find ourselves, the collective adventure of separating ourselves from the Kingdom of León, distancing ourselves from our Galician brothers, and breaking away from Galician-Portuguese to our language of the future erupted…". There are also interest groups which take the name and the territory of both Minho and Trás-os-Montes e Alto Douro, like the Associação Empresarial do Minho and the Associação dos Empresários Turísticos do Douro e Trás-os-Montes. The presence of these ancient *províncias* in Northern Portugal is also noted in territorial signs referring to the names of companies and infrastructures such as shopping malls and professional schools, as it is displayed in the images of Figure 3.
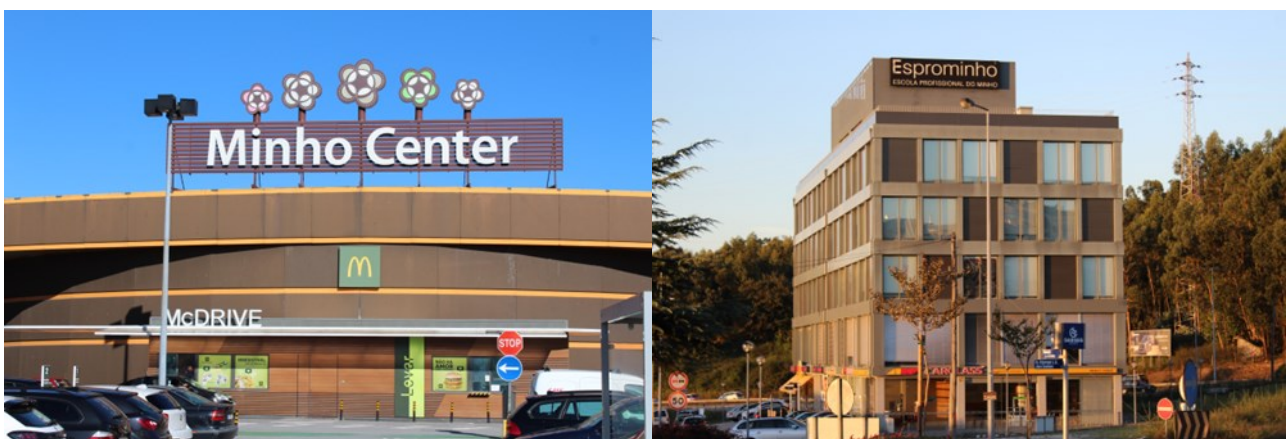
Figure 3. The presence of *Minho* in the municipality of Braga (September 2023). Source: Authors.

In Galicia, the *comarca* constitutes a territorial division with deep historical roots. However, the demand for *comarcas* as territorial entities emerged in the early 20th century when Galician nationalism sought to establish them as the most suitable form for organizing the territory (González-Mariñas, 1994). The main objective was to replace a provincial structure that was considered imposed, artificial, and disconnected from Galicia's territorial organization. Despite this demand, Galician nationalism was unable to generate a map of the *comarcas*, at least with defined boundaries (Precedo, 1987; Lois-González, 2015). The Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) and Franco's subsequent dictatorship hindered progress in implementing the *comarcas*, although the work already carried out helped reinforce the sense of *comarcal* identity among the population. Following the dictatorship, the advent of democracy in Spain gave new impetus to these entities. In 1990, the Galician government began working on implementing these entities, but without questioning the existing political-administrative levels (municipalities and provincias). However, the

pressure from the Provincial Councils led the Galician government to refrain from granting jurisdiction and independent legal capacity to the comarcas (Burgueño, 2001; Lois-González, 2004).

In 1997, through a decree by the Galician government, Galicia was divided into 53 comarcas (Figure 2). However, the resulting map faced significant controversy due to challenges encountered in defining the boundaries of each comarca. It was claimed that certain areas were denied the opportunity to form their own comarca, while other municipalities were assigned to territories they did not strongly identify with or even had existing rivalries. Lois-González (1999) states that "the proposed comarcalization[1] plan changed at least half a dozen times, creating a scenario where Galicia became known as the land of 'mutating maps' (…) Municipalities were combined and divided based on various arguments" (p. 298). The acceptance of municipal demands, where municipalities sought to form comarcas based on political affinity rather than territorial coherence, contributed to the multiplication of the number of comarcas (Lois-González, 1999, 2004; Burgueño, 2001; Doval, 2009). Nowadays it can be said that the map of the comarcas approved in 1997 has contributed to the strengthening of identity in some areas, while in others, the established entities have not been fully embraced by the population.

Currently, the comarcas, despite their lack of political and institutional recognition, are still perceived as active territories. The comarcas defined in 1997 by the Galician government are used for statistical purposes by the Galician Institute of Statistics (Instituto Galego de Estatística, IGE). This official division is also reflected in textbooks for various educational levels, such as those provided by publishers like Edelvives, Santillana, or Vicens Vives for the third year of secondary education. The Galician government also uses this map for the provision of various services such as education and healthcare. In the field of education, secondary schools, especially in rural areas, define recruitment areas that coincide with the comarcas. In healthcare, hospitals and primary healthcare centers that provide emergency services (known as Puntos de Atención Continuada, PAC) also operate within comarcal areas (see Figure 4). Even COVID-19 vaccination centers have been established at the comarcal level. In terms of tourism, the Galician government also clearly supports the comarcas, as can be seen in the Xeodestinos map presented in 2011.

A clear Indication of the vitality of the comarcas is their presence in the Galician territory. Through signs, such as in the comarcas of O Deza, Terra de Trives, or A Ulloa (see Figure 4), both locals and visitors are welcomed. Regarding their materialization on the territory, it is also worth mentioning the identification of a significant number of comarcas through comarcal centers. These buildings were constructed by the Galician government in the 1990s and 2000s in 17 of the comarcas as part of their comarcal project, with the aim of working on tourism and local development (Doval, 2009) (see Figure 4). It is also worth noting the emergence of Local Action Groups (Grupos de Acción Local, GAL; later renamed Rural Development Groups, Grupos de Desenvolvemento Rural, GDR) that were created for the management of European funds for rural development and have operated at the comarcal level since the 1990s.

The mass media also makes use of the comarcas for the production of their content. Galician newspapers such as La Voz de Galicia or El Progreso have local editions at the comarcal scale, such as in Arousa, Barbanza, or A Mariña. The Public Television of Galicia (TVG) also has highly popular and longstanding programs that work with the comarcas, such as Luar (a music and comedy program that features a music section where different singers each representing a comarca compete against each other) or Come a Comarca (a gastronomy program where professional chefs travel to each of the Galician comarcas to discover their typical dishes and compete against local chefs).

Figure 4. The presence of the comarcas in Galicia (March 2021). Source: Authors.

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[1] "Comarcalization" derives from "comarca", similar to how "regionalization" stems from "region"

5. Discussion

The results of this study demonstrate the prevalence in certain socio-spatial practices of the províncias in Northern Portugal and the comarcas in Galicia and illustrate how they interact with the institutionalization of space carried out by the political-administrative organization of states. The analysis conducted here on the províncias of Northern Portugal and the comarcas of Galicia highlights the current social and political significance of these territories, which lack institutional recognition. In the case of the Portuguese províncias, despite being abolished by the central government over 50 years ago, they remain alive in various discourses and are integrated into the names of different institutions and infrastructures. They are used to shape territorial cooperation projects and serve as a characterization attribute for social groups (football clubs, artistic projects, etc.). Regarding the Galician comarcas, even though they have never received official recognition from the central government, they are present in various areas. They appear in textbooks, serve as a reference map for the organization of statistical and healthcare services at the regional scale, are used in road signage, and are frequently evoked in the media. We revisit the initial questions posed in the study's introduction to delve into the results obtained in both cases.

When considering the underlying causes for the presence and consolidation of these territories, along with the rationales that legitimize them, it is imperative to note that different conclusions may be posited for each of the case studies. In the Portuguese províncias case, we put forth two hypotheses. The first is related to the fact that, as previously mentioned, their creation in 1936 was based on an in-depth study by the geographer Amorim Girão, who used physical, social, and historical criteria to define the names and boundaries of these províncias. In fact, the study of landscapes in Northern Portugal today confirms the existence of distinct territorial units (Cancela d'Abreu et al., 2004) which in many cases corresponds to the boundaries defined in the provincial map. Additionally, the names given to the províncias in 1936 followed the previous denominations, with a special emphasis on words like Minho, Douro, and Trás-os-Montes, facilitating their social assimilation. The second hypothesis is that the fact that províncias were used as reference points in the cultural representations produced by the propaganda of the Estado Novo dictatorship contributed to their symbolic relevance. The continued presence of the províncias in contemporary social imaginaries can be attributed to the enduring significance of cultural propaganda from this regime in shaping the current symbolic notions of nationality (Sousa, 2017). Their representation and the associated imaginaries survived to their institutional extinction in 1959 and also to the end of the dictatorship, as evidenced by our results and observed in other studies (Gaspar, 1993; Gusman & Lois-González, 2021; Santos-Simões, 2016).

In the case of Galicia, the comarcas have persisted to this day without ever being institutionalized by the central government. The hypothesis we propose for this enduring persistence is that the comarcas reflected spaces that had been naturally functioning for a long time, consisting of population centers that provided certain services to the surrounding communities. The scales of the comarcas and their population centers were identified by the liberal state in the early 19th century when they established judicial distritos. Despite lacking political-administrative recognition, these distritos functioned as administrative units for the delivery of justice and reinforced the role of these population centers as service providers to the population. Their long existence (almost intact between 1834 and 1965) may have contributed to solidifying the comarcal scale in the population's imagination (López-Morán, 1994).

The findings of this research offer valuable insights into the significance of spatial imaginaries in shaping the dynamics between local stakeholders and political-administrative authorities. Although with different origins and expressions, both Portuguese províncias and Galician comarcas are associated with a certain genesis of resistance to the divisions imposed by their respective states, the distritos in Portugal and the provincias in Spain, as referred to by Catroga (2005) and González-Mariñas (1994). Províncias and comarcas seem to be promoted by agents who typically operate at the local level and stand apart from dominant powers, in this specific case, the central state. This resistance appears to have a more structured political support on the Galician side, where Galician nationalism played a crucial role in advocating for the comarcas and their continued presence in the social sphere and political debate. In both cases, we observed that certain local interest groups were able to solidify these territories in discourses, institutions, infrastructures, and more or less formal representations in society, ensuring their persistence over time, albeit not always with clearly defined boundaries and contents. Despite it being possible to recognize parallels in the reasons for the current significance of the territories on both sides, their existence is manifested differently.

Reflecting on how political-administrative powers deal with these territories, we can observe that despite not recognizing them as formal parts of the territorial organization, they do not ignore the territories' existence and provide them with certain official manifestation. In the case of the províncias in Northern Portugal, this is evidenced by adopting their names for important institutions and mentioning them in political speeches, as demonstrated in the analysis presented here. Provincias serve various purposes, including conveying a traditional identity, to create tourist and commercial brands, to support national identity discourses, to promote intermunicipal cooperation and averting conflicts among municipalities, as observed in public universities; or challenging the existing supra-municipal administrative structure of the State by specific interest groups, as exemplified recently in Minho[2] (Diário do Minho, 2023).

On the Galician side, the arrival of the autonomy statute granted recognition to the comarcas as local entities with the potential for legal status and a framework of jurisdiction that was never fully realized. Nevertheless, the Xunta de Galicia provides them with a certain level of formality, using this scale as a reference for the organization of certain public services such as education and healthcare. In this way, we can talk about a different degree of abstraction, where the Portuguese províncias exist at a higher level of imagination than the Galician comarcas.

Although the territorial realities of our case studies are different in their evolutionary trajectory, manifestations, and even scale, the significance of analyzing them together lies in the observation of a shared phenomenon in different political-administrative contexts. Both Portuguese províncias in a highly centralized country and Galician comarcas in an almost federal state emerge as territories that, despite of not being formally integrated into the political-administrative structures of their respective states, endure and persist in the collective spatial imaginations of their societies. While different in nature, in both cases, these territorial divisions have been promoted by local interest groups through narratives and local practices, thus retaining their significance as territorial references in contrast to the supra-municipal divisions established, promoted, and institutionalized by their respective states (the distritos in Portugal and the provincias in Spain). The presence of territories that refuse to fade away and persist as symbolically relevant in society, despite the formal territorial organization transformations implemented by the central state, was also observed in other European contexts (Marek, 2020; Melnychuk & Gnatiuk, 2018; Zimmerbauer & Paasi, 2013).

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[2] In a meeting with the Portuguese Government the Minho Business Association (AEMinho) launched a proposal for the merger of the three Intermunicipal Communities in the Minho region (Diário do Minho, 2023).

6. Conclusion

The analysis of the logics that have shaped the political-administrative organization of Northern Portugal and Galicia, along with studying various discursive practices linked to supra-municipal spatial imaginaries, has enabled us to discern the societal significance of these territories, despite their lack of institutional recognition. As in other territorial contexts, it is evident that the províncias in Northern Portugal and the comarcas in Galicia are expressions of territories that, even without formal recognition from administrative powers, are able to remain socially relevant over time (Šerý & Daňková, 2021; Zimmerbauer et al., 2017; Zimmerbauer & Paasi, 2013). Although they exist outside the formal administrative organization of their respective states, these territories assume concrete form to assert their existence whether in the names of institutions, the organization of certain public services, the framing of the action of interest groups, or the structuring of territorial brands. This observation aligns with the idea that territoriality surpasses the logics of state organization and that certain territories are capable of sedimenting themselves in social imaginaries and enduring in the practices of certain sectors of society. However, as Valler et al. (2020) indicate, spatial imaginaries emerge as socially and politically contingent constructions, as we can see from the origins of the províncias in Northern Portugal and the comarcas in Galicia, which are associated with ancient territorial delineations. They did not appear in a vacuum.

The results of this study also allow us to observe that those territories that transcend the institutionalization of space do not always have a clearly defined content and shape. They do not depend on widespread recognition, and their existence can manifest through different material and immaterial practices. In the case of the províncias of Northern Portugal, their existence and social relevance are observed as they are used as territorial categories in various contexts, such as the media, political and academic discourses, cooperation projects between municipalities, and the structuring of territorial brands. In the case of Galicia, the comarcas are also used as territorial categories, but they are additionally referenced in the organization of public services, which, along with the signage that represents them, gives them a physical expression and manifestation.

Despite the joint study of these two disparate realities proving highly useful in discussing the limitations of administrative power in shaping territories and identifying mechanisms of resistance in non-institutionalized territories, this article has limitations. On one hand, by focusing on public naming practices, it does not fully consider the impact of these territories on the territoriality of populations. The way inhabitants perceive the territory and its organization at supra-municipal scales requires further study in both cases analyzed here. On the other hand, dealing with territories with diffuse forms and heterogeneous expressions complicates the development of a systematic analysis of contents and may introduce bias in material selection. We selected materials that referenced our objects of analysis, the Portuguese províncias and the Galician comarcas. It would be important for future studies to consider a broader range of materials.

To conclude, we would like to stress that we believe that the existence of these territories should not be ignored by political and administrative powers, and territorial planning instruments should be more sensitive to their correspondent spatial imaginaries. The imaginaries and the identities that support them can play a crucial role in the legitimization of territorial entities, the mechanisms of territorial governance, and the dynamics of cooperation among municipalities (O'Brien, 2019; Raagmaa, 2002). This leads us to reflect on the implications of the results of this analysis for the future of supra-municipal spatial planning in both case studies. Despite the Portuguese províncias and Galician comarcas are outside of the political administrative structure of their correspondent states, they are capable of producing tangible effects, the implications of which should not be disregarded by territorial management instruments. Their value should be acknowledged in planning practices and political-administrative organization, without necessarily institutionalizing them as territorial entities, but through the recognition of their socio-spatial significance. Their names and associated characteristics can find expression in the creation of territorial brands that enhance tourism attractiveness and valorize endogenous resources. Moreover, they can serve as references for the planning of certain public services, be acknowledged in regional strategic plans and sectoral policies, and should not be ignored in territorial representations at the regional and State levels. Institutional and financial conditions should be provided to facilitate cooperation among municipalities aiming to give a formal space to these territories. Lastly, owing to their resilience and deep territorial rooting, they could serve as effective means to overcome spatial disparities, such as those between rural and urban areas or between central and peripheral territories.

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