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ABSTRACT
The importance of visionary planning has increased in urban and regional contexts as the production of visions has become a central tool in, for example, the management of city-regional growth through future-oriented governance. Thus, visions have become important terrains of political struggle and influence. This article analyses visionary planning from the perspective of depoliticization. Depoliticization is interpreted not as the foreclosure of the political in planning, but as a forceful mode of pursuit of a specific economized city-regional politics. These dynamics are scrutinized empirically through a case study of the Oulu City Centre Vision 2040 project, and they are connected methodologically to the construction of a spatial–political imaginary.

KEYWORDS
visionary planning; depoliticization; political imaginary; city-regionalism

INTRODUCTION
The future is on the agenda in multiple spheres of life, at individual and collective levels. Businesses, non-governmental organizations and governments ‘anticipate’ futures by conducting various predictions, models and scenarios, thereby rendering the future actionable through ‘techniques of futuring’ (Oomen et al., 2021, p. 3). Visionary planning has gained prevalence as one such technique of futuring in the context of urban and regional planning (e.g., Daffara, 2011; De Laurentis et al., 2017; Inayatullah, 2011; Rogers, 2017; Tewdwr-Jones & Goddard, 2014). Scenarios for visionary planning can range from the formulation of desirable urban futures (Mukhtar-Landgren, 2016, p. 19) to the fostering of competitiveness through the production of economic expectations (Beckert, 2016). Thus, alongside more utopian impulses, visions also exist as methods of governance, and they often reproduce dominant ideologies (Gunder, 2005). This is not to say that all visions are necessarily captured by dominant ideologies, but to recognize future-making and the production of visions as central terrains of political struggle and the ‘politics of the future’ (Oomen et al., 2021, p. 2) in which interest groups seek to influence future developments.

The concepts of depoliticization and post-politics have gained importance in the study of contemporary politics and political governance (Buller et al., 2019; Burnham, 2014; Dönmez, 2019; Flinders & Wood, 2014; Foster et al., 2014; Hay, 2014; Wood, 2016). These concepts have also been increasingly applied in the contexts of urban planning and urban politics (Beveridge & Koch, 2017a, 2017b; Davidson & Iveson, 2015; Marcuse, 2015; Swyngedouw, 2017) and city-regionalism (Deas, 2014; Etherington & Jones, 2018; Luukkonen & Sirviö, 2019; Sirviö & Luukkonen, 2020). In this article, the concept of depoliticization does not refer to the foreclosure of urban and city-regional politics, but rather to a forceful mode of economizing politics. A case study of visionary urban planning in the northern Finnish city of Oulu demonstrates how the political imaginary of an urban growth model is pursued through visionary planning. The political imaginary that guides visionary planning in this case is premised on a few political, geopolitical, and economic axioms that make it coherent. The city centre’s global competitiveness and economic success are framed as vital for both the city and the city-region as a whole. From this point of view, the city centre becomes a strategic space of future-making and governance in global city-regional competition. One impetus for this specifically urban focus is the (supposedly) fragmentary nature of Oulu’s urban structure compared with other city-regions, which is perceived as not sufficiently facilitating urban growth. A concrete manifestation of this political
framework is the planned relocation of the main university campus to the city centre.

Oulu City Centre Vision 2040 (CCV2040) provides a case study through which depoliticization and the political imaginaries of city centre development can be interrogated. The CCV2040 project lasted from December 2015 to February 2017, during which time the vision that would guide the city centre’s development was formulated. The research material consists of an array of policy documents from the project (research reports, public event summaries, online questionnaires, transcripts and visionary documents) and observational conclusions preceding and following the project. Methodologically, the visionary project will be interpreted as the construction, or reproduction, of a spatial–political imaginary (Davoudi et al., 2018; Luukkonen & Sirviö, 2019) that provides specific interpretative lenses through which to make sense of the complexities of urban and regional development. The participatory process of CCV2040 engaged a variety of political actors with varying agenda-setting powers, and in this sense the vision reflects a visionary consensus among economic actors and the city’s managerial fraction. Thus, this article contributes to an understanding of visions and visionary projects as modes of political governance and terrains of political struggle by engaging with and combining depoliticization perspectives and the notion of visionary planning.

In this article, I define visionary planning as the process through which planning organizations seek to formulate comprehensive and strategic long-term visions that aim to make the future more governable by setting it within politically shared parameters. Because the formulation of overarching visions happens here and now, visions are affected by the ideological currents of the present. The concept of the political imaginary (Davoudi et al., 2018; Luukkonen & Sirviö, 2019) denotes the sedimented ideological framework that attempts to make sense of social, political and economic complexities. The political imaginary of city–regionalism is the framework within which CCV2040 operates. I contrast visionary planning with utopian planning. Utopian planning contains an impulse to overcome or revolutionize the social, economic and/or political organization of the present, whereas visionary planning projects the continuation of present conditions into the future.

THE POLITICS OF VISIONARY PLANNING

The importance of different forms of visionary planning, foresight and future-oriented governance has increased immensely in recent decades (Bell, 2017; De Laurentis et al., 2017; Dufva & Ahlqvist, 2015; Rogers, 2017). Fernández Güell and Redondo (2012, pp. 318–319) recognize five essential elements of territorial foresight: anticipation, vision, action, participation and networking. By properly implementing these elements, methods of foresight and visionary planning can work in conjunction with traditional planning, providing a more integrated vision to guide long-term strategic planning.

Visionary planning has also brought new elements into planning through different temporal dimensions, the diversification of participants and the broadening of planning expertise. However, visionary urban planning faces several problems. One of these is the functional complexity of city planning (Fernández Güell & González López, 2016, p. 455), which makes even short-term planning convoluted, with manifold different social, economic, and political processes unfolding at the same time. Thus, long-term predictions in urban planning become rather complex. Indeed, the CCV2040 project has its own set of implicit and explicit predictions, on which some of the vision’s contents are predicated. The increased political prestige of urban visions has also made them an avenue of politicking and a way of reproducing hegemonic ideologies of urban and regional development.

Visionary planning is not politically neutral, and visions as objects of political governance are terrains of political contestation between different interests as political actors seek to gain leverage and influence future developments. Although visions are not legally binding documents, they reflect the political dynamics of each context, and they illuminate certain developmental tendencies and ideologies that affect planning. It should be noted, however, that visions have to go through official zoning processes and be translated into the language of zoning. There are multiple steps in the process from visions to concrete zoning decisions, and each new development goes through the legal and political process of zoning. Thus, because of its nonbinding legal role, visionary planning is still in a somewhat emergent or developmental state in Finland.

Visionary planning needs to be contextualized within prevailing material and political conditions. Molotch (1976) noted as early as the 1970s that in the urban planning context, these conditions often manifest themselves as dominant economic growth narratives and ‘growth machine’ politics (see also MacLeod, 2011). The process of elevating growth concerns and economic rationalities to a dominant position has been increasingly conceptualized as the post-politics (or depoliticization) of planning (Metzger, 2017; Walton, 2018). Throgmorton (2003) has analysed planning as a form of persuasive storytelling about the future, and the narrativization of economic growth and economic expectations is a key factor in the planning process. Thus, the persuasive stories that planning tells about the future do not emerge and gain political appeal haphazardly; rather, these stories are already enmeshed in the structural conditions and political coalitions of each context.

In recent years, visionary planning has proliferated in Finnish city planning and also in regional planning (Granqvist et al., 2020). In particular, city centres in major urban areas have been strategic sites for visionary planning, and the ‘city centre vision’ has become an essential part of urban planning. Through policy diffusion and transfer (Marsh & Sharman, 2009), smaller regional towns and centres have also adopted visionary planning.
into their arsenal, thereby following core urban areas. The increased importance of visionary planning and its effects on urban planning have stemmed from several different sources.

One major factor is the economic growth imperative and the growth models or accumulation regimes (Berry & Lavery, 2017; Jessop, 2016) that have to be established and legitimized in the public sphere. Rajaniemi (2006, pp. 167–168) has analysed the ‘Oulu growth deal’ of 2002 as a public–private coalition between business interests, the university, and city officials. Growth coalitions are able to replace the public interest with economic growth as the centrepiece of development; they thus frame economic growth as ‘indisputable’ (Rajaniemi, 2006, p. 170) – a perspective that is a nascent depoliticization, although Rajaniemi does not use the term. Here, I would note that rather than replacing the public interest, the process of centring economic growth works by ‘economizing’ the language of public interest. Visionary planning can also become a tool in this process of economization by capturing future development within the parameters of long-term economic growth concerns and building public legitimacy for this vision.

In terms of the case study in this paper, the question arises: how does a city centre planning project relate to city-regions and city-regionalism? In the case of CCV2040, the answer is relatively straightforward. The project frames Oulu city centre as a strategically privileged site of development for the city-region as a commercial and logistic hub where global interlinkages converge. City-regionalism’s dominant urban growth agendas (Deas, 2014; Etherington & Jones, 2009; Moisio, 2018b) also centre the urban core as the economic powerhouse of the larger city-region. Thus, the visionary planning and future orientation related to the city centre also concern the larger city-region’s functional relations to its urban core. The regional hinterland becomes dependent on the urban core’s economic success (Granqvist et al., 2020, p. 6), which entails an elevated importance for strategic and visionary planning in the city centre. The urbanization of economic growth models and political dynamics can also happen in relatively rural/peripheral regions (Bee et al., 2020) as the paradigms of spatial governance travel between different scales and regional contexts. The Oulu city-region can be characterized as one such peripheral urban centre where these dynamics are in play. One material manifestation of this process since CCV2040 is the planned relocation of the university campus to the city centre (UO, 2020a, 2020b). The current campus is located 5 km north of the city centre in one sprawling complex; its relocation is advocated on the basis of inner-city vitality and competitiveness.

DEPOLITICIZATION, URBAN POLITICS AND CITY-REGIONALISM

Depoliticization has emerged as a crucial concept for the scrutiny of changing forms of contemporary political governance (Burnham, 2014; Flinders & Wood, 2014; Foster et al., 2014; Hay, 2014; Wood & Flinders, 2014). It generally refers to political processes and political action that seek to foreclose or reduce the political character of decision-making. Depoliticization emerges through privatization and arm’s-length policies (Flinders & Buller, 2006) as well as ideological and discursive practices that rely on asceptival captivity. Building on Owen’s (2002, p. 216) formulation, Jenkins (2011, p. 164) describes asceptival captivity as:

a condition of being inhibited or held captive by a picture or perspective of which we are either unaware, accept unswervingly without the recognition of alternatives or are so (morally and politically) committed to that we cannot envisage traversing.

The concept’s use in different contexts and fields has necessarily produced divergences in the depoliticization literature, which Buller et al. (2019, p. 3) conceptualize in terms of (1) post-politicization as a systemic condition that encompasses the whole of society and (2) depoliticization as a specific governing strategy. The concept of post–politics tends to be used interchangeably with depoliticization, but it is important to recognize the different ontological lenses onto politics that these concepts offer (Beveridge, 2017). The concept of post-politics tends to rely on post-Marxist and post-foundationalist political theory, while depoliticization is more closely linked to perspectives from political economy, statecraft, and state theory (on categorization, see Wood, 2016). While recognizing the usefulness of post-political perspectives, this paper approaches depoliticization from a governance perspective. Depoliticization is interpreted as the pursuit of politics in which ‘depoliticization does not mark the “end” or “a pause” of politics but rather the removal of politics to other arenas and the re-definition or delimitation of the scope of participants, relevant topics and vocabulary of politics’ (Luukkonen & Sirvio, 2019, p. 21).

The depoliticization/post-politicization framework has also found its way into the urban politics and planning literature (Beveridge & Koch, 2017a, 2017b; Davidson & Iveson, 2015; Marcuse, 2015; Swyngedouw, 2017) as well as analyses of city-regionalism (Deas, 2014; Etherington & Jones, 2018; Luukkonen & Sirvio, 2019; Sirvio & Luukkonen, 2020). The processes and strategies of depoliticization have often been linked to the dominant neoliberalization of governance structures and the enclosure of popular engagement away from political decision-making. Thus, depoliticization appears as a specific mode of governance of the capitalist economy and capitalist social relations (Dönmez, 2019). In urban and city-regional politics, depoliticization manifests itself through market actors’ increased influence on planning processes (Hytönen, 2019) and through political imaginaries of economic competitiveness, flexibility, and growth that become uncontestable doctrines of development (Luukkonen & Sirvio, 2017). Certain actors and interests are excluded from political processes outright, or their inputs are
defused or relegated to the margins. Even with participatory elements, the scope and terms of public influence are often limited to specific cases and areas within a predetermined political framework. From a materialist perspective, the tendency toward depoliticization is rooted in the political economy and capitalist social relations that condition planning processes (Holgersen, 2020). The illusory separation of ‘economic’ and ‘political’ spheres under capitalism provides the avenue for arena-shifting (Flinders & Buller, 2006) and a reshuffling of the boundaries of legitimate political contestation. Meiksins-Wood (2016, p. 20) argues that ‘this structural separation may, indeed, be the most effective defence mechanism available to capital.’

I conceptualize depoliticization in this paper as a mode of political action and a way of pursuing politics through which political actors seek to strategically limit the scope of the topics, participants, and possible outcomes of decision-making processes in order to guard their own interests. Depoliticization, however, leads not to ‘post-politicization’ as the total foreclosure of the political sphere from public demands and articulations, but to a shift of political arenas and the continuation of politics through other means. This can include, for example, the limitation of discourses through the economization of planning language, the strict confinement of topics to technical minutiae, or the strategic privileging of the interests of certain actors. I will trace the (de)politicization of visionary planning through the reproduction of a specific political imaginary geared toward the establishment of an urban growth model.

CASE STUDY, METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH MATERIAL

The CCV2040 project between December 2015 and April 2017 functions as the empirical reference for this study. I will scrutinize this visionary planning project as a case study that is situated in the larger city–regionalist developments of state spatial transformation in Finland. Visionary urban planning has been studied extensively from the case study perspective (Daffara, 2011; Eames et al., 2013; Inayatullah, 2011; Ratcliffe & Krawczyk, 2011; Tewdwr-Jones & Goddard, 2014), which helps to ground the analysis in local issues but also contrasts it with the larger national- and global-scale developments that affect city–region and city centre development. Case study methodology (Flyvbjerg, 2001, 2006) also provides an on-the-ground perspective on the depoliticization strategies employed in visionary planning processes, which are inherently political in nature because they encompass a wide arrangement of political actors that coalesce behind a specific strategic vision. Thus, the utilization of depoliticization as a form of political action and a specific way of pursuing politics becomes a valuable tool to influence visionary planning and build hegemonies.

I will study the visionary planning process and the convergence of different political actors around CCV2040 from the perspective of depoliticization, grounding the analysis in different policy documents, reports, and public events. I will rely on the general framework of critical semiotic analysis (Jessop, 2004; Sum & Jessop, 2013) to scrutinize the research material in this case study. This approach avoids the pitfalls of voluntaristic discourse analysis, and it embeds the processes of sense- and meaning-making (Sum & Jessop, 2013, p. 3) in visionary planning in their proper economic–material contexts. Thus, particular attention should be directed toward deciphering the dialectical nature of materiality and discursivity (Jessop, 2004, p. 164). This can be achieved by interpreting forms of visionary planning and strategic visions as spatial–political imaginaries (Davoudi et al., 2018) that seek to establish social hegemonies but also shape the material aspects of city centre or city-region development. In turn, these imaginaries are always situated in a specific historical setting and conditioned by the material factors in play. Hence, politically constructed and mediated imaginaries offer specific interpretative ‘lenses’ (Luukkonen & Sirviö, 2019, p. 18; Sum & Jessop, 2013) through which the current complexities of different economic, cultural, and spatial issues are made sense of. Political imaginaries are imbued with selectivities (Jessop, 2016) that identify ‘certain spatial configurations and relationships over others and turns them into privileged objects of calculation, public interest and governance’ (Luukkonen & Sirviö, 2019, p. 18).

I will analyse the CCV2040 project through a set of policy documents (n=15) and participant observation at planning–related public events after the city centre vision’s ratification on 3 April 2017. For CCV2040, the policy documentation consists of a wide array of research reports ranging from housing and land use to megatrends (AMAL, 2016; DEMOS, 2016; MALI, 2001; SITO, 2016; WSP, 2016a, 2016b), documentation of public participation events (TPT, 2016a, 2016b; TS, 2016), online questionnaires (MSOK, 2017; UOK, 2016), city council transcripts (OUKA, 2015, 2017), and the final visionary documents (CCV2040; CCVD2040).

A set of qualitative indicators of depoliticization is used to analyse the CCV2040 project. If we look at the illusory separation of the economic and political spheres under capitalism discussed in the previous section, depoliticization is denoted by a process of arena-shifting through which the political questions of city centre development are framed as economic questions. Following Luukkonen and Sirviö (2019), and connecting the Oulu case to the larger state spatial transformation in Finland, we can trace depoliticization through the perpetuation of a city–regionalist accumulation strategy as the self-evidently shared interest of a political community. Thus, CCV2040 contains a set of political, geopolitical, and economic axioms on which the vision relies for its economic geographical reasoning in order to make itself internally coherent and to support its policy conclusions and practical actions. These axioms are compiled in Table 1 in the empirical section, and they function as qualitative indicators of depoliticization. At the same time, however, it should be kept in mind that depoliticization is processual and that the existence of these axioms amounts not to a ‘post-politics,’ but...
rather to a subtle way of managing the political conflicts of city centre development through arena-shifting.

Oulu City Centre Vision 2040

Political and economic contexts

The city of Oulu navigated several major shifts during the 2010s. After the harsh monetary and economic crisis of the 1990s, Nokia became a leading company in the information and communications technology (ICT) sector globally. Nokia’s strong presence in Oulu meant that the city’s regional economy was defined by its specialization in high-tech and ICT industries. At the height of the growth cycle in the early 2000s, Oulu was an exemplar of the potential of regional competitiveness and innovation, and a model for other regional cities to imitate. However, the city’s high-tech industry suffered a period of decline between 2011 and 2012 because of Nokia’s demise (Herala et al., 2017). This was a major structural and economic change for the city and the region. In 2012, the city of Oulu and its surrounding region was defined by the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment (2018) as an area of ‘abrupt structural change’ (aktillinen rakennemuutos) because of the numerous layoffs in the ICT sector, which affected 3750 employees in total. Oulu had been at the forefront of the knowledge-based economization (Moisio, 2018a, pp. 28–30) of the Finnish economy, and the crisis revealed an overreliance on one large conglomerate and its supply and production chains in the regional economy.

In the larger framework of the spatial transformation of the Finnish state, the political imaginary of city–regionalism as a model of spatial governance was further solidified during the 2010s (Ahlvist & Sirviö, 2019; Luukkonen & Sirviö, 2019; Sirviö & Luukkonen, 2020). The initial push toward city–regionalism followed the crisis of the 1990s, which the political–economic elite interpreted as the failure of strong state intervention in the economy, and which thus marked the end of the welfare state era (Kantola, 2006). The goal was to establish a new growth model by connecting Finnish city-regions to global markets through regional competitiveness, innovation, and the knowledge economy (Moisio, 2012). These processes continued throughout the 2010s, with special attention directed toward the Helsinki capital region as the primus motor of economic growth in Finland (Luukkonen & Sirviö, 2019; Sirviö & Luukkonen, 2020). As a result, the political language of regional development became highly economized, and ‘the urban’ has become the strategically relevant framework and epistemology (Brenner & Schmid, 2015) through which the spatial–political economy is interpreted. This process can be characterized as a depoliticization of economic geographical reasoning and economic knowledge claims that are used to present certain political visions of urban growth as economic necessities (Luukkonen & Sirviö, 2019, p. 19). Consequently, the spatial transformation processes have also polarized regional politics by heightening the political divide between core and periphery. Oulu has been a central city–region in this spatial configuration, but its future position is not given; rather, it is something that needs to be reproduced in the public sphere.

The process and political actors of CCV2040

The project of formulating a new city centre vision for Oulu was positioned structurally in the larger context of state spatial transformation, city–regionalist development, and the proliferation of visionary planning in Finland. In the earlier Oulu City Strategy 2020, ratified in 2013, the city council had recognized the need for a coherent vision that would guide the city centre’s long-term development. The CCV2040 project was initiated on 14 December 2015, with the aim of producing a strategic vision that would bolster the city centre’s economic vitality and diverseness by formulating future guiding principles for city centre development (OUKA, 2015). At the same time, the role of the city centre is also vital for the surrounding city-region, as it is the region’s commercial hub. The political background for the proliferation of visionary city centre planning in Finnish cities is connected to the dominant political imaginary of the ‘urbanization of economic growth,’ through which city centres become strategic sites of competitive advantage in global and national economic competition.

Thus, one of the goals of visionary planning is the recognition and the removal of ‘growth barriers’ (CCV2040, p. 2). The visionary map in Figure 1 identifies the central areas and corridors of expansion for the developing city centre in 2040. The map aims to visually represent the city centre’s growth potential. Areas south and east of the city centre (Heinäpää and Vaara) are designated as areas for complementary construction and development, while expansion into undeveloped land appears on the small islands of the river delta (Suistokaupunki) and in the railway yard (Tavararatapiha). Thus, the map portrays the key areas of potential expansion, and through the use of visual language (arrows, corridors, and nodes) it attempts to bring these within the planning regime.

In the introduction, the core contents and goals of CCV2040 are described as follows:

The City Centre Vision is a strategic plan that covers the grid plan area of the city centre. Its purpose is to formulate an outlook for a vital and unique Oulu city centre. The vision defines the pivotal policies and actions of city centre development. The principles of the plan will guide the development of land use in the city centre. However, the City Centre Vision is not legally binding. (CCV2040, p. 5)

The vision defines eight main goals and general focus areas through which the city centre will be developed. These include population growth in the city centre, walkability, park and service development, urban development alongside the river delta and riverbanks, the centre as a place of work and learning, and the centre as a lively meeting place (CCV2040, p. 9). In addition to the eight general focus areas, there are 21 concrete steps formulated for the city centre’s development in the four-year period 2017–21.
The project is divided into three phases: the analysis, the formulation of the main goals, and the draft phase (CCV2040, p. 6) (see also Figure 2 for a timeline). The analysis phase lasted between January and April 2016, during which research and reports regarding the city centre’s current developmental trends were produced. The key reports informing CCV2040 dealt with land use, housing and transport (AMAL, 2016), public transportation (SITO, 2016), commercial status (WSP, 2016a), key stakeholders (WSP, 2016b), and city centre megatrends (DEMOS, 2016). Parts of the analysis phase were outsourced to the consulting firms Sito Oy, WSP Finland Oy, and Demos Helsinki. The project also aimed to engage citizens and stakeholders in the process, and between April and May 2016 two ‘meet the planners’ events (TS, 2016) were organized, along with two workshops regarding services and city culture (TPT, 2016a, 2016b) and an online questionnaire (UOK, 2016). Based on all this analysis and participation, the city council ratified the strategic vision’s main goals in October 2016, and a draft vision was formulated for public feedback (CCVD2040). The draft was subjected to another round of public participation through questionnaires (MSOK, 2017) and events, which informed the final version of the city centre vision. Based on feedback, CCV2040 was finalized and published on 7 February 2017; it was ratified by the city council on 3 April 2017 (OUKA, 2017).

The visionary project involved, directly and indirectly, an array of different actors and stakeholders in the process, such as administrative officials, city councillors, associations, advocacy groups, and experts (Figure 2). The main responsibility lay with the city’s Urban and Environmental Services section, which formed a working group, a steering group, and a follow-up group for the project. The working and steering groups consisted of administrative officials from the section; the follow-up group comprised a range of representatives from the university, entrepreneurial associations, the regional council, the regional chamber of commerce, the city’s youth council, and others (CCV2040, p. 47). The work of the consulting firms was limited to the analysis phase of the reports regarding public transportation (SITO, 2016), commercial status, key stakeholders (WSP, 2016a, 2016b), and city centre megatrends (DEMOS, 2016). However, the consulting firms were able to affect the general agenda-setting of the vision. The report on key stakeholders in city centre development in Oulu and their views (WSP, 2016b) also gave a voice to property owners and developers, commercial actors, construction businesses, and event producers in the city. Public engagement was also encouraged through participatory methods, albeit within pregiven parameters defined by the process. Thus, CCV2040 can be characterized as a consolidation of key economic interests and the city’s managerial fraction behind a strategic vision.

Figure 1. Visionary map of Oulu city centre.
The depoliticization of CCV2040

The first moment of depoliticization in the CCV2040 project stemmed from the assemblage of political actors, the roles they occupied, and the agenda-setting powers they had within the project. The consulting firms’ strong role during the analysis phase afforded them a privileged position from which to influence the visionary project’s direction and the specific topics and questions it should address. The outsourcing of political governance reflects governmental depoliticization (Flinders & Buller, 2006; Flinders & Wood, 2014), but in CCV2040 this was not so straightforward. Instead of pure outsourcing, depoliticization was manifested through the differential allocation of agenda-setting powers. Participatory planning was emphasized (CCV2040, p. 2) in the process, but the abilities of different actors to affect the vision’s core questions and contents differed greatly.

On the most principal level, the project’s general political framework and configuration were determined by the Urban and Environmental Services administrative section and the city council. At the level of determining the specific topics that the visionary project should address, the working group and consulting firms had the most leverage, while the general public’s participatory role was limited to predetermined topics and technical minutiae (MSOK, 2017; TPT, 2016a, 2016b; TS, 2016; UOK, 2016). Thus, no political actors were explicitly barred from ‘participating’ in the process, but their sphere of influence on the process differed greatly. From the viewpoint of democratic legitimacy, the allocation of agenda-setting powers was asymmetrical: the public was able to affect marginal and predetermined topics on the project, while the political framework of CCV2040 had already been set by the strategically privileged actors.

CCV2040s political framework relied on a rather conventional growth politics of economic competitiveness, which was seen to be fostered by efficiency and flexibility in urban planning and by the better utilization of city space and the built environment in the future (AMAL, 2016; CCV2040; WSP, 2016b):

It is topical to examine how the growing Oulu city centre will develop during the next decades and what should be done next in the city centre.

(CCV2040, p. 5)

Infill development in the city centre can be increased especially by diversifying land use, making street space more compact, and developing parking. … Land use efficiency can be increased through high-rises.

(AMAL, 2016, p. 15)

The public spaces, streets, plazas, markets, and parks of the urban environment will transform flexibly in response to different needs.

(CCV2040, p. 31)
The construction of the visionary political imaginary was therefore tied at the material level to market imperatives and the city centre’s development into a high-density commercial hub (DEMOS, 2016; WSP, 2016a):

To strengthen the attractiveness of the city centre, it is important to pursue urban space that attracts nationally and internationally strong commercial actors to Oulu. (WSP, 2016a, p. 32)

Urban compaction increases the vitality of the city centre. More efficient land use will increase the number of inhabitants and jobs, is a prerequisite for improving services, and enriches urban culture. (CCV2040, p. 15)

Thus, an economized form of geographical reasoning provided the lens through which to interpret the city centre’s future developmental pathways. This was the result of the aforementioned allocation of agenda-setting powers to a limited set of political actors, through which certain principles of visionary planning became depoliticized. In the case of CCV2040, the formulation of a coherent regime of accumulation (i.e., sustained economic and population growth in the centre) became the linchpin of the vision. This corresponded to a delimitation of the plan’s political content, as its goals were not subjected to public deliberation but were assumed as a shared framework. Accordingly, depoliticization directed questions of visionary planning toward the technical minutiae of how to properly manage and govern city centre growth – not toward whether that direction was politically legitimate or desirable per se.

However, the imaginary was not merely economic but also corresponded to certain political and geopolitical notions and shared assumptions that made it coherent. On the political level, these concerned the politics of public interest, political community, and consensus-building. On the geopolitical level, CCV2040 supported its political conclusions through megatrend analyses (DEMOS, 2016) and aspired to set itself in global competition with other city-regions. On the economic level, the city centre was constructed as a strategically relevant site of global economic flows and logistics (AMAL, 2016) where economic competitiveness was fostered through flexibility, compaction, and a knowledge-based economy. These categories were specific shared axioms in the construction of a political imaginary that produced depoliticizing effects. I have compiled the findings in Table 1. The table is based on an analysis of the shared ideological starting points of vision-making in CCV2040 and how these constituted a city-regionalist and urban growth-oriented imaginary. All vision-making has to start from somewhere and must inevitably begin from some shared assumptions about the world, but often these starting points also reveal the depoliticization of specific visions of development.

The visionary imaginary contains a reciprocal relationship between materiality and discursivity. For example, the fostering of an upward spiral of economic and population growth is recognized as a material prerequisite for city centre development (WSP, 2016a, 2016b); this need is incorporated into the vision and projected into the future as a central aim of development, thus further sedimenting growth as a discursive frame through which to interpret the future needs of city centre development. Visions can serve the function of political governance insofar as they

### Table 1. Constitution of the political imaginary in CCV2040.

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The vision-making process is thus characterized by a reciprocal relationship between materiality and discursivity. For example, the fostering of an upward spiral of economic and population growth is recognized as a material prerequisite for city centre development (WSP, 2016a, 2016b); this need is incorporated into the vision and projected into the future as a central aim of development, thus further sedimenting growth as a discursive frame through which to interpret the future needs of city centre development. Visions can serve the function of political governance insofar as they
aim to capture developmental paths and bring them within a planning regime. Thus, visionary planning appears not only as a neutral tool or exercise of projecting futures but also as producing certain futures in the hope of solidifying economic gains. The visionary content of CCV2040 is therefore quite strongly grounded in the present moment and its accompanying political problems. The discourse about megatrends is pivotal in framing the visionary content of CCV2040:

Megatrends produce significant pressure for change for businesses, public administration, and different populations. Change happens simultaneously through multiple avenues and makes old sociopolitical solutions and business models slowly more inefficient. (DEMOS, 2016, p. 1)

What can be deciphered from the CCV2040 project in terms of depoliticization is the sedimentation of a city-regionalist growth model as the political starting point of visionary planning. The combined result is a depoliticized visionary imaginary that delimits and defuses certain public inputs while still building public legitimacy through participatory methods. This does not, however, amount to a post-politicization of visionary planning in this case. Rather, it establishes a new mode in which to pursue the business-as-usual of the city centre’s commercial actors and reproduce the interpretative frame of economized city-regionalism. Thus, visionary planning’s innovative promises have been diluted in the case of CCV2040, as the results replicate already prevailing tendencies projected into the future. The project appears to be more of a consensus-building practice for the city’s managerial and economic fractions to establish a new urban ‘growth model’ (Berry & Lavery, 2017). This need for consensus-building is outlined in WSP’s (2016b) analysis phase document, in which 12 key stakeholders (property owners and developers, commercial actors, event producers) are interviewed:

The lack of unity is seen to stem from the lack of a shared big picture for the city. (WSP, 2016b, p. 9)

The city should form a shared vision of city centre development and communicate it clearly. (WSP, 2016b, p. 15)

The suboptimization of political decision makers and their inability to commit to the decisions of the last electoral term were seen as the root problems. … Interviewees brought up a typical problem of decision-making: active complainers whose particular interests collide with the public interest. (WSP, 2016b, p. 9)

For the key stakeholders, for example, visionary planning appears to be an exercise in forming an overarching vision but at the same time also a tool for defusing specific conflicts in land use and development by committing decision makers to a shared vision. Such stakeholder concerns might be justified, but they also denote the hope – keeping in mind the nonbinding nature of CCV2040 – of delimiting the ‘political sphere’ by positing CCV2040s political framework as pregiven.

CONCLUSIONS

Here then lie the limits to capitalist planning. Even when it takes the form of programming or establishment of broad production guidelines, it is not so much real planning as a projection into the future of the general tendencies prevailing at a given moment in time. (Poulantzas, 1978, p. 192, emphasis added)

The quote from Poulantzas aptly captures the tension between visionary planning and utopian planning. To what extent is visionary planning subject to economic imperatives, the creation of a stable and predictable market environment, and the creation of economic forecasts that generate expectations of future value creation (Beckert, 2016)? Here the term ‘utopian’ should be reserved for a mode of thought that is able to imagine a radical break between the present and the future instead of a continuation ‘of the general tendencies prevailing at a given moment.’ This also raises the question of the politics of visionary planning and the depoliticization of visions. The reproduction of city-regionalist growth politics might foster confidence among potential investors, but it also amounts to a depoliticization of urban futures. The potential antagonisms of city centre development can be neutralized by presenting the city-regionalist political imaginary as the shared starting point of visionary planning while at the same time disregarding its class politics. It is a prime example of depoliticization by shifting visionary planning from a political to an economic sphere through growth model-building.

To reflect on the theme of this special issue: there is a growing need for long-term strategic and visionary planning to formulate coherent answers to the pressing planetary crises of our time. Thus, the question of the politics of visionary planning also becomes more urgent. Who gets to define these futures? What are the parameters and assumptions from which visionary planning begins? Is there the political will to interrogate the deeper structures of social organization? If, for example, ecological crises are seen as challenging the foundations of social systems, then the central issue of long-term visioning is the reinvigoration of utopianism and utopian planning – i.e., whether the principles from which urban and regional vision-making begins are politicized or merely axiomatic. This entails
a politicization of the conventional (economic) growth assumptions of urban and regional development. In the case of CCV2040, the more transformative expectations of visionary planning collide with popular ideologies, consensus-building, and growth management. This raises the question of whether vision-making is tied to the projection of the general tendencies of the present into the future, or whether it is able to take account of the possibility of – or need for – a radical break between present and future.

Despite the growing interest in analyses of depoliticization and post-politics, there seems to have been relatively little systematic interest in these concepts in the journal Regional Studies. Mössner (2016) develops a frame for post-politics and consensus-building in sustainable urban development; Lepawsky (2009) focuses on clusters as ‘anti-politics machines’ that depoliticize capital accumulation; Alonso and Andrews (2021) touch upon depoliticization in the context of privatization and asylum dispersal. But otherwise, depoliticization is mostly mentioned somewhat casually (e.g., Keating, 2017; Mouton & Burns, 2021; Zimmerbauer, 2018). This article builds upon depoliticization as a key political process in the perpetuation of urban growth politics and city-regionalism, building especially on Luukkonen and Sirvio’s (2019) recent intervention on depoliticization and city-regionalism (see also Etherington & Jones, 2018). While this article offers a specific foray into depoliticization in the context of visionary planning, depoliticization should be understood as a larger tendency of capitalist social organization to reproduce hegemonic power through an illusory demarcation between the economic and the political spheres (e.g., Burnham, 2014; Dönmez, 2019; Meiksin-Wood, 2016). This also concerns regional governance and planning.

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