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EUROREGIONS AS SOFT SPACES: BETWEEN CONSOLIDATION AND TRANSFORMATION

Abstract. National borders constitute barriers to social, economic and political processes and, thus, tend to contribute to the peripheralisation of border regions. The paper compares the evolution of two euroregions in peripheral central European border regions, whose objective is to overcome such negative border effects by promoting cross-border cooperation at the regional level. On a theoretical level, the paper argues for an understanding of euroregions as *soft spaces*. Rather than viewing them primarily as instances of state rescaling, the paper emphasizes their role as adaptive service providers for local constituencies. It is suggested that their long-term stability depends on their relation to, and the internal dynamics of, politico-administrative *hard spaces* at the regional, national, and supranational level. While hard spaces are associated with the notion of the Weberian bureaucratic state, soft spaces combine many of the ideas of the New Public Management literature. Building on an organizational ecology perspective, the paper forwards the argument that stable, resourceful, and accessible hard spaces constitute a predictable and engaging environment within which softer arrangements may compete for the delivery of services. However, the interplay between soft and hard spaces tends to have an impact on the euroregions' agendas. While EU cohesion policy provides incentives to strengthen horizontal cross-border coordination, the organizational integration of the two euroregions remained rather loose, testifying to the continued importance of domestic prerogatives.
Key words: cohesion policy, soft spaces, cross-border cooperation, governance, territory.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper shows how euroregions contribute to tackling peripherality (Kühn 2015; Lang, 2011) in Central European two border regions. It does so by applying the theory of soft spaces (Haughton *et al*., 2010) to cross-border cooperation (CBC). Specifically, the paper compares two structurally highly similar euroregions with surprisingly different track records: While the Euroregion Šumava has established

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itself as a key cross-border service provider, substantive cooperation in the Euroregion Pomoraví has ceased in the mid-2000s. As a consequence, Euroregion Šumava provides access to additional external funding, to INTERREG program design and project selection, and to place-based cross-border expert knowledge and consultation services. After the failure of the Euroregion Pomoraví, some of these functions are offered today by the remaining former Euroregion members. But cooperation is more ad hoc and less formal than before.

Reviewing the literature on cross-border cooperation, state rescaling, and EU governance, the paper argues for an understanding of euroregions as *soft spaces* (Metzger *et al*., 2015). On the one hand, soft spaces are flexible governance arrangements that aim at overcoming institutional borders and entrenched practices by inserting new ways of doing things, thus rendering decision-making and problem-solving more efficient. On the other hand, these characteristics are likely to help euroregions in adapting to rapidly changing incentive structures that are characteristic of an ever more experimentalist mode of EU governance (de Burca *et al*., Sabel, 2014; Heritier and Rhodes, 2011; Sabel and Zeitlin, 2010). As comparatively weak institutions euroregions are likely to rely on adaptive strategies and seek accommodation with more powerful but less flexible institutions (Abbott *et al*., 2013). The paper refers to the latter as politico-administrative *hard spaces*. It is argued that by forging pragmatic horizontal *and* vertical coalitions, euroregions can gain political influence, access to external funding, and improve their own capacities and service portfolio. Through these channels, euroregions can support the functional integration of cross-border regions and contribute to overcoming negative border effects.

The analysis compares the organizational structure and key activities of the two euroregions. The data consists of euroregion documents, the webpages of the individual euroregion sections, and fifty-four interviews with stakeholders from the two regions. Section two presents the theoretical perspective, characterizing euroregions as soft spaces. The third section contains a comparative discussion of the two euroregions. The discussion considers how euroregions insert new opportunities into CBC, their relation to hard spaces, and their fuzzy and fluid nature. It is argued that the flexible nature of euroregions enables them to react rapidly to changing opportunity structures constituted by politico-administrative hard spaces. The fourth section contains some concluding remarks.

2. EUROREGIONS AS SOFT SPACES

Cross-border cooperation in Europe has received ample scholarly attention in recent years. The surge in scholarship can be explained by a mushrooming of different CBC-formats across Europe in the last two decades (Perkmann, 2003).

The literature on CBC has often seen this trend as being part of a more general transformation of statehood (cf. Jessop, 2002; Brenner, 2004) in which territory, authority, and rights are being reassembled (Sassen, 2008). However, while CBC arrangement have grown considerably in numbers and diversified in forms (cf. Perkmann and Sum, 2001; Gänzle and Kern, 2016), the recent literature attributes a more modest role to them (Perkmann, 2005; Stead *et al.*, 2016; Svensson, 2013).

Markus Perkmann's (Perkmann 2005; 2007) approach sees euroregions as the outcome of political and administrative *rescaling processes* and *policy entrepreneurship*. His perspective centers on the idea of consolidating an institutional platform for cross-border engagement at a novel spatial scale. The approach implies that institutional consolidation enables euroregions to provide services to their constituencies, which – because of the border context – cannot be provided by national institutions. While the present paper agrees with the thrust of Perkmann's argument, it suggests that he underestimates the importance of institutional flexibility and adaptation for the long-term success of a euroregion.

Building on an organizational ecology perspective, Abbott *et al*. (2013) maintain that the mushrooming of 'private transnational organizations' (PTOs) – of which, the present paper argues, euroregions are an example – can be explained by their strategic flexibility and by their low power vis-à-vis governmental institutions. Because of these characteristics, PTOs are likely to follow organizational growth strategies that aim at avoiding conflict by finding unoccupied policy niches.

However, if euroregions strive by taking advantage of policy niches that exist outside the clearly delimited state bureaucracies, changes in the public administration of the state are likely to have a direct impact on a euroregion's opportunity structure. Therefore, the paper introduces the idea of euroregions as soft spaces. The central feature of this perspective is to acknowledge *softness* and *fuzziness* as crucial organizational attributes for overcoming the limiting effects of political and administrative boundaries. Soft spaces represent attempts to realize mutual gains by building pragmatic *coalitions* around certain issues and by pragmatically *adapting* institutional arrangements to rapidly changing opportunity structures.

The concept of soft spaces has first been developed to highlight the implications of administrative devolution for spatial planning in the UK (Haughton *et al*., 2010). Against this background, the rise of soft spaces can be related to ideas New Public Management (NPM), in which business techniques and market principles are applied to Public Administration (PA) with the intention of boosting organizational efficiency (Drechsler, 2009; Meyer and Hammerschmid, 2010; Vries *et al*., 2013). Table 1 contrasts soft spaces with the traditional hard spaces of 'Weberian' state bureaucracy.

Table 1. Contrasting Soft and Hard Spaces

Specification	Soft space	Hard space
Example	euroregion	modern nation state
Ontology	fuzzy public/private distinction network/governance space/engagement	clear public/private distinction hierarchy/government territory/sovereignty
Goals	efficient problem solving high responsiveness lean administration adaptability	effective problem solving accountability based on clear definition of rights and obligations due process and stability
Disadvantages	fuzzy accountability low effectiveness	low responsiveness low efficiency
Boundaries	low exit barriers (open) fuzzy (geography, membership, sectors) problems determine participation, approach, and extension	high exit barriers (semi-closed) clear-cut (geography, membership, sectors) rule-based problem solving within given system
Administrative	New Public Management	(Neo-)Weberian Bureaucracy

Source: own compilation.

For the purpose of this paper, three features of soft spaces are particularly relevant (Haughton *et al*., 2010, p. 52).

1. Soft spaces represent a deliberate attempt to insert **new opportunities** for creative thinking, particularly in areas where public engagement and cross-sectoral consultation has seen entrenched oppositional forces either slowing down or freezing out most forms of new development.

2. The **'hard' and 'soft' spaces** of governance are mutually constitutive, such that one cannot work without the other. The aim is not to replace 'hard' institutional spaces with new 'softer' ones, rather to create complementary and potentially competing opportunities for development activities to focus around, whether at some kind of 'sub' regional or 'sub' local government scale.

3. Soft spaces often seem to be defined in ways that are **deliberately fluid and fuzzy** in the sense that they can be amended and shaped easily to reflect different interests and challenges.

With regard to the first point (*new opportunities*), euroregions can be understood as examples of *deliberate attempts* to overcome the limiting impact of national borders on social, economic, and political processes. As such, euroregions *insert new opportunities for creative thinking* about shared problems by establishing a cross-border space, consisting of both formal institutional structures and informal personal cross-border networks. In this sense, they provide opportunities for cross-border consultation and, thus, can contribute to the rapprochement of entrenched domestic institutional practices and political agendas. In consequence,

euroregions can enable the emergence of new ideas and *new forms of development* in the cross-border region. Crucially, formal and informal cross-border institutions can reduce transaction cost and contribute to reaching mutually beneficial agreements (Keohane, 1984; North, 1990).

With regard to the second point (*hard and soft spaces*), Euroregions do not exist in an institutional vacuum. They generally are voluntary arrangements, such as associations of municipalities. While they enjoy considerable freedom to determine their organizational form as well as their agenda independently, they usually do not have great political clout or substantial funds of their own. Therefore, they are likely to choose adaptive rather than competitive strategies in order to find policy niche in which they can develop (Abbott *et al*., 2013).

By occupying an institutional niche at the boundaries of statutory hard spaces, euroregions can offer tailor-made services to their constituencies and/or deliver services more efficiently than the respective national institutions could. On the one hand, close ties to these hard spaces can stabilize the soft space by providing access to political and financial support. On the other hand, depending on the conditions attached to this support, these ties can have an agenda-influencing effect.

Moreover, Popescu (2008) argues that since Central and Eastern European states are still involved in a process of institutional consolidation, they often view euroregions as a challenge to their sovereignty. Drechsler cautions that deregulation and decentralization practices associated with NPM are 'particularly bad if pushed upon transition and development countries because if [they] can make any sense, then it is only in an environment of a well-functioning democratic administrative tradition' (Drechsler, 2009, p. 18). In other words, the professionalization of administrative practices and the diffusion of civic-democratic values are preconditions for an 'accountable and non-corrupt' administration 'without the existence of formalized rules' (Peters, 2001, p. 167, in Drechsler, 2009, p. 18). Therefore, the paper argues, the (1) degree of centralization and the (2) degree of consolidation of hard spaces play are important for understanding the different pathways of the two euroregions.

With regard to the third point (*fluid and fuzzy*), euroregions are voluntary associations of public entities and have fluid and fuzzy membership and geographical boundaries (Rokkan, 1999). According to the theory of soft spaces, this fluid and fuzzy nature enables quick adaptation to changing opportunity structures. However, Haughton *et al*. (2013) counsel that flexibility might come at the expense of a fuzzy distribution of accountability, may lead to lowest common denominator solutions, or to strictly formal cooperation on trivial matters. Pressures for adaptation may be internal or external. In what regards internal factors, while low barriers to *exit* may limit the adaptive pressures of *voice* (Hirschman, 1978), a lower number of actors may enable pro-active stakeholders to reach consensus more easily. In what regards external factors, to the extent that successful euroregions become consolidated, they contribute to increasing institutional density in the pe-

ripheral border region. From an organizational ecology perspective, this raises the question of potential institutional conflict (Abbott *et al*., 2013). However, understanding euroregions as soft spaces with low exit barriers emphasizes their strategic flexibility and extensive adaptive opportunities. These characteristics enable euroregions to adapt to competitive pressures by finding new niches (Abbott *et al*., 2013, p. 16). Hence, euroregions can follow either a (1) pro-active entrepreneurial, an (2) adaptive, or (3) a (more passive) formal approach.

Finally, how can soft spaces contribute to overcoming peripherality (Kühn, 2015)? The paper suggests that peripherality is a lack of service-provision due *blind spots* along the boundaries of hard organizational-administrative spaces.[1] It argues that the limited adaptive capacities of hard spaces restrict them in addressing the boundary-transgressing problems of border regions. Their fuzzy and fluid nature enables soft spaces to take advantage of these rigidities by filling-in the institutional gap. This flexibility enables euroregions to realize mutual gains that would otherwise be left on the table. By offering access to external funding and by constituting a space for the joint articulation of regional interests and their political representation, euroregions can become trusted centers of expertise and knowledge storages that make the cross-border coordination of interests more efficient. On the one hand, successful euroregions are likely to consolidate or even to broaden their functions. Importantly, the processes of coalition building and that of institutional rearrangement can lead to a dilution of the initial euroregion agenda. As such, domestic political priorities may come to challenge the functional logic of cross-border regional development. On the other hand, less successful euroregions can simply dissolve and cooperation may proceed in better suited arrangements.

3. NO SOFT SPACES WITHOUT HARD SPACES

It is neither possible to expand on the precise organizational setup of the two euroregions, nor to describe their objectives in detail (but see ANNEX I for organizational structure). What matters for this paper is the contrast between their great structural similarity and their markedly different pathways. Both euroregions are trilateral associations in predominantly rural regions which were previously divided by the Iron Curtain. Both seek to overcome the effect of national border on regional economic and social life; often through the INTERREG-financed project work. Both involve federal and central states. In both cases the federal states have

[1] In this context organizations are understood as rules and practices plus agency (Abbott *et al*., 2013, p. 5).

a historical record as social market-economies, while the central states have a historical record of transition from planned- to market-economy. In both cases, there are substantial differences in the administrative capacities of the involved states. Both cases involve German and Czech/Slovak speaking sections. Both were established after 1989: the Euregio Šumava in 1994 and the Euroregion Pomoraví in 1999.

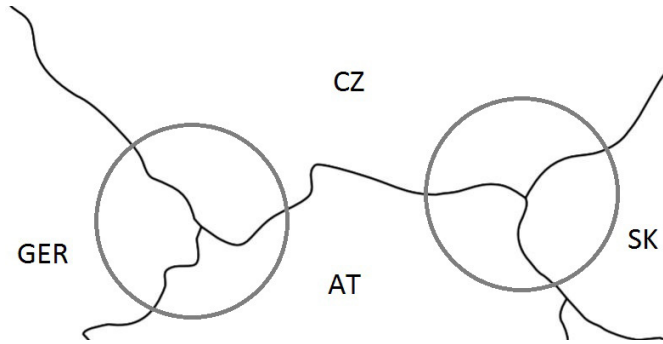

Fig. 1. Schematic Map of the Euroregions – indicating positionality and border situation
Source: own compilation

Apart from these similarities, two important differences exist: First, compared to the Euroregion Šumava, local domestic levels of socio-economic development are more similar in the Euroregion Pomoraví. Similar levels of socio-economic development are often associated with correspondingly similar sets of societal and economic challenges. In theory, this similarity should make it easier to generate common cross-border projects, based on shared needs in the region.

The second major difference between the two cases concerns the public administration of the involved states. The Euroregion Šumava encompasses two federal states with decentralized politico-administrative hard spaces. This entails substantial and consolidated administrative capacities at the regional level, as well as relatively easy access to domestic politics. By contrast, the Euroregion Pomoraví encompasses two central states with more limited administrative capacities and opportunities to access domestic politics at the regional level. In other words, the second difference between the two euroregions concerns the nature of the hard spaces as the stable/unstable context in which adaptive soft spaces search for policy niches. According to the organizational ecology perspective developed above, the paper expects that unstable and/or inaccessible politico-administrative hard spaces constitute an unfavorable environment for the development of euroregions, because of (1) heightened adaptive pressures and (2) diminished chances for vertical and horizontal coalition building. This

situation is aggravated in the two transition countries, where the politico-administrative hard spaces can serve as repositories for professional practices and civic values only to a limited degree. The following comparison will present evidence for this explanation by focusing on the three criteria of soft spaces which were developed in section 2.

3.1. New Opportunities: Filling the CBC Policy Niche after 1989

To appreciate the new opportunities which the two euroregions signify in their particular border regions, it is necessary to understand the historical context of their establishment. As a consequence of the fall of the Iron Curtain (1989), the completion of the Single Market with the Treaty of Maastricht (1992), and the major reforms of the Structural Funds (1988), the early 1990s were a particularly fruitful period for CBC in the EU. In this context, the Euroregion Šumava emerged as an attempt to revive cross-border relations between local Czech, German, and Austrian actors in a region which had been politically separated for about four decades. Its establishment also has to be seen against the background of the EU structural funds from the early INTERREG and PHARE CBC programs. Similarly the formation of the Euroregion Pomoraví in 1999 coincided with the launch of EU pre-accession support (1997) for cross-border cooperation at Austria's eastern borders (LACE-Phare CBC Assessment Report 2001). While financial assistance in PHARE CBC programs was rather limited in comparison to the INTERREG IV and V programs, PHARE CBC funds were crucial, for example, to the establishment of the regional development agencies in Šumava (www.ckrumlov.cz/rras)[2] and South Moravia (www.somjm.cz) in 1997.

New opportunities emerged again with EU accession in 2004 as EU funds for CBC grew considerably in both regions. Significantly, in the 2007–2013 programming period, the two recently established Czech regional development agencies managed the respective Czech Small Projects Fund (SPFs) in the Bavarian-Czech and Austrian-Czech programs. However, taken together the founding member of the Euroregion Šumava obtained almost twice as much money in SPFs as the two remaining founding members of the former Euroregion Pomoraví.[3] Moreover, no SPF existed between Austria and Slovakia and none of the founding members of the euregio were involved in the SPF between Slovakia and Czechia. As a result, the Slovak Zahorie region was the only region in which actors did not have simplified access to additional finance from a SPF.

[2] All online links were checked for functionality on 1.03.2017.

[3] Own calculation based on the lists of beneficiaries of the five operational programs 2007–2013: EUR 6.8 million and EUR 3.52 million.

The divergent pathways can be explained by organizational (in)stability. In what regards the Euroregion Pomoraví, both Czech and Austrian informants have suggested that it was exceedingly difficult to find and retain a reliable Slovak partner for the cooperation. Already in the early 2000s, problems in the accounting of EU co-financed projects on the Slovak side led to the discontinuation of substantive cooperation. Not even the availability of much more substantial EU funds for CBC in the last two programming periods could overcome this *crises of trust*. Overall, the persistent lack of a reliable Slovak *institutional* partner has undermined the euregio format and proven to be a distinct disadvantage for the Slovak Zahorie region. These observations are in line with the argument that 'as cross-border cooperation develops, it requires continuous support by cross-border structures as the motor for effective cooperation, and thus some form of institutionalization becomes necessary' (Martinos and Mahnkopf, 1999, p. 3). Because of contractual obligations, the euroregion formally exists until today. This was judged by one former euroregion worker as a major obstacle to rebooting substantive cooperation with changed partners. By contrast, by sizing new opportunities after the fall of the Iron Curtain and towards EU accession, the Euroregion Šumava successfully established a *horizontal* cross-border network – stabilizing the precarious links among cross-border actors – and, in this way, gained *vertical* access to substantial external funding.

3.2. Relation to Hard Spaces: Building Vertical and Horizontal Coalitions

This section explains the process of building vertical and horizontal coalitions, which was mentioned at the end of the last paragraph, in more detail. Crucially, the relationships of the individual euroregion sections to the respective national politico-administrative hard spaces vary significantly in both cases. In case of the Euroregion Šumava, close links to accessible and consolidated systems of public administration in Bavaria and Austria have contributed to the stability of CBC. By contrast, reluctant administrative decentralization in Slovakia and Czechia has been an important factor for the instability of cooperation in the Euroregion Pomoraví.

For all three sections of the Euroregion Šumava, integration into domestic politics is ensured by the composition of the three *steering committees*. However, there are substantial differences, too. To begin with, the steering committee of the Austrian section is the most heterogeneous and the euroregion administration is part of the Upper Austrian regional management. Moreover, the chairman of the Austrian section is member of the Upper Austrian parliament. The Bavarian section is the only section with a dedicated managing committee, consisting of three (out of seven) rotating elected district administrators. Local and region-

al politicians are represented in the Czech steering committee, too. However, while the chairmen of the Austrian and Bavarian sections are representatives of the district and/or state level, for almost 20 year the chairman of the Czech section has been the mayor of one small municipality. Moreover, while districts are comparatively strong administrative and/or political levels in Upper Austria and Bavaria, they have lost their significance in Czechia after a 2003 administrative reform. Overall, integration into domestic politics via close relations to politico-administrative hard spaces is more developed in the Bavarian and Austrian sections.

A similar, but more pronounced, development can be observed in the Euroregion Pomoraví. Significantly, all three euroregion sections started as private associations of municipalities, but their subsequent pathways differ. The Austrian section began as the independent 'Regionalverband Europaregion Weinviertel', but by 2015 operations had been outsourced completely to the NÖ.Regional.GmbH, the regional development agency of Lower Austria. In what concerns Czechia and Slovakia, the creation of self-governing regions (in 2000 and 2002) and the associated reluctant transfer of central state responsibilities to these lower-level politico-administrative hard spaces, changed the institutional landscape in the two countries. While the Czech section sought accommodation with the new South Moravian region, the Slovak section lost its role as a central actor in CBC.

The significance of close relations to domestic politics is illustrated by the differing degrees to which the individual euroregion were involved in the design and the project selection procedures of the respective INTERREG programs. Their involvement can be seen as an indication of how important they are considered to be by the national authorities who are responsible for the programs. As far as the programming documents show, neither of the two euroregions was consulted as a whole during the preparations of the five 2014–2020 programs (Tab. 2). Moreover, the Slovak and Bavarian founding members were not consulted at all. By contrast, the Austrian euroregion sections were consulted in all programs with Austrian participation. Finally, all the Czech section were consulted in the program with Austria but in neither of the other programs.[4]

Similarly, none of the founding members of the Euroregion Pomoraví is represented in the monitoring committee of the SK-CZ program (Tab. 3). Hence, they are in a weak position to influence project selection. By contrast, the Czech and Austrian founding members are either voting members (SK-AT program) or advisory members (AT-CZ program) in the other two INTERREG programs covering the area of the former euroregion. In the Euroregion Šumava, the founding members are represented in the monitoring committee of all INTERREG programs covering the euroregion. In the BA-CZ program, the Bavarian and Czech

[4] Some caution is necessary because the OP BA-CZ mentions only broader categories, i.e. regional managements, municipal associations which may include the euroregion sections.

Table 2. Consultation in OP CBC Programming

2014–2020	AT-BA* Šumava	BA-CZ** Šumava	AT-CZ*** Šumava	AT-CZ*** Pomoravi	SK-AT**** Pomoravi	SK-CZ***** Pomoravi
BA	NOT MENTIONED	NOT EXPLICITLY MENTIONED	–	–	–	–
CZ	–	NOT EXPLICITLY MENTIONED	Regionální rozvojová agentura Šumava, Euroregion Šumava	Regionální rozvojová agentura jižní Moravy, Sdružení obcí a měst jižní Moravy	–	NOT MENTIONED
AT	Euregio Bayerischer Wald – Böhmerwald –Mühlviertel, Regional-management OÖ	–	Euregio Bayerischer Wald – Böhmerwald – Mühlviertel, Regional-management OÖ	Regional-anagement Niederösterreich (Büro Waldviertel, Weinviertel, Indus-trieviertel), Regio-naler Entwicklungs-verband Weinviertel – Europaregion Weinviertel	Regional-management Niederösterreich (Büro Weinviertel), Regionaler Entwicklungs-verband Weinviertel – Europaregion Weinviertel	–
SK	–	–	–	–	NOT MENTIONED	NOT MENTIONED

Note: *Land Oberösterreich (2014); **Bayerisches Staatsministerium für Wirtschaft und Medien (2014); ***Office of the Government of Lower Austria (2015); ****Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development of the Slovak Republic (2015a); *****Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development of the Slovak Republic (2015b).

Table 3. Membership and Role in Monitoring Committee

2014–2020	AT-BA* Šumava	BA-CZ** Šumava	AT-CZ*** Šumava	AT-CZ*** Pomoravi	SK-AT**** Pomoravi	SK-CZ***** Pomoravi
VOTING MEMBER	–	Euregio Bayerischer Wald –Bóhmerwald – Unterer Inn, Euroregion Šumava – jihozapadni Czechy	–	–	NÖ.Regional. GmbH	–
ADVISORY MEMBER	Euregio Bayerischer Wald – Bóhmerwald – Unterer Inn	–	Regionalmanagement OÖ	NÖ.Regional. GmbH, Sdružení obci a mest jižni Moravy	–	–

Note: *Monitoring Committee OP CBC AT-BA; **Monitoring Committee OP CBC BA-CZ; ***Monitoring Committee OP CBCAT-CZ; ****Monitoring Committee OP CBCSK-AT; *****Monitoring Committee OP CBCSK-CZ).

sections are voting members. While the Bavarian section was a voting member in the AT-BA program during the last programming period, it is only an advisory member during the current period. In the AT-CZ program, the Austrian section is represented through its parent organization, the Regionalmanagement OÖ.

Overall, the evidence suggests that by gaining the trust of the national authorities responsible for the INTERREG programs, the euroregion sections can influence program design and project selection. On the whole, formal relations to politico-administrative hard spaces are most advanced in the two Austrian euroregion sections. However, as the next section will show, this situation appears to have led to a greater focus on *domestic* rather than cross-border regional development.

3.3. Fluidity and Fuzziness: Adaptation and its Impact on the Euroregion's Agenda

The last section analyzed the positive effect of strong ties to hard spaces. This section asks how these ties affect the agenda of the respective euroregion sections. In what regards the Euregio Šumava, both the Bavarian and the Austrian sections have developed a broad portfolio of competences. However, while the

Bavarian section remained predominantly focused on CBC, the Austrian section is increasingly occupied with domestic regional development. As such, the Upper Austrian regional management mentions five thematic priorities: innovation, sustainability, quality of life in the region, future challenges, and partnership. Only the partnership priority explicitly addresses cross-border issues (www.rmooe.at/ziele). The focus on domestic regional development becomes more evident when the mission statements of the Bavarian and Austrian sections are compared. On the one hand, the Bavarian section defines itself as a hub for *cross-border* cooperation and clearly presents cross-border cooperation as its main operative field (www.euregio.bayern). On the other hand, the Austrian section stresses its nature as a competence center and a hub for regional development in the *Mühlviertel region*. Indeed, the combination of cross-border and national regional management is presented as a distinctive advantage of this arrangement (www.euregio.at). However, the priority of domestic politics over cross-border issues is also illustrated by the fact that of the nine staff members of the Austrian regional office only one position is dedicated to cross-border cooperation. In comparison, the Bavarian section has an independent office with eight staff members, who are exclusively occupied with CBC within the euroregion, as well as additional staff for transnational cooperation, the recently established supraregional Euroregion Danube-Vltava, and a Europe Direct info point (www.euregio.bayern). Testifying to its considerable independence from domestic politics, the focus of the Czech section remains narrowly on CBC (www.euregio.cz). In the current programming period this includes the management of the SPF BA-CZ (EUR 2.63 million) as well as a project to improve euroregion governance and networks (www.euregio.cz).

In what concerns the Euroregion Pomoraví, the Czech SOM JM and the RRA JM, too, have developed a broad service portfolio in which CBC plays a certain role. However, the focus of SOM JM in the year 2016 is 'to be a credible partner in the South Moravian region in addressing specific issues related to the development of the region'. Furthermore, the SOM JM seeks to be the 'first partner of the South Moravian region in the implementation of projects addressing the problems defined in the South Moravian Region Development Programme' as well as a 'partner of the regional authorities in the preparation and implementation of the Cohesion Policy documents 2014-2020'. The final point on the list is the goal to give a 'clear and factual explanation of the role of SOM JM within the South Moravian region' (www.somjm.cz/zamereni/). This evidence suggests that the SOM JM and the RRA JM are seeking a cooperative relationship with the South Moravian region. As a consequence, their focus increasingly lies on the development of the South Moravian region. The Austrian Regionalverband Europaregion Weinviertel continues to exist formally as an independent association of municipalities. However, the operative work is done entirely by the NÖ.Regional. GmbH, which lists eleven broad priorities in their mission statement – of which

EU cooperation is one. Here too, CBC appears as a tool for the development of the domestic Weinviertel region rather than as a strategy that contributes towards the making of a cross-border region.

Finally, even though all the euroregion sections emerged in the 1990s in reaction to the fall of the Iron Curtain and newly available EU funds for CBC, over time close relations with domestic hard spaces have shifted the focus of their work somewhat towards domestic regional development rather than cross-border cooperation. The Bavarian and Czech Šumava sections are exceptions to this trend. Moreover, the comparison of the two Czech sections is interesting: On the one hand, the Šumava section occupies a central role in the BA-CZ program but has developed weak ties to the consolidating Czech regional level. On the other hand, the South Moravian section strives both to develop a closer relationship with the domestic regional level and to secure its position in the AT-CZ program. Overall, however, while EU cohesion policy provides incentives for strengthening horizontal cross-border networks, national prerogatives remain central.

4. CONCLUSION

The paper has argued that viewing euroregions as soft spaces helps to make sense of their different pathways. In particular, the paper proposed that the consolidation of a euroregion crucially depends on finding a policy niche and on forging vertical and horizontal coalitions with national and supranational hard spaces. The paper hypothesized that politically decentralized states with higher administrative and financial capacities at the local level are a major stabilizing factor for euroregions because they are more accessible at the regional level, they can provide crucial political support, and because they provide a relatively steady environment to which entrepreneurial soft spaces can adapt.

The evidence shows that softness can be an advantage as well as a pitfall for euroregions. This confirms Drechsler's claim that 'flat hierarchies are a matter of appropriateness and depend in their suitability entirely on context' (Drechsler 2005). However, the analysis has also shown that the failure of the Euroregion Pomoraví did not result in the failure of cooperation altogether. Indeed, the domestic sections of the former euroregion continue to cooperate in the absence of any dedicated cross-border institutional framework. However, the intensity of cooperation, especially with Slovak partners, is comparatively low. As such, the case of the Euroregion Pomoraví can be interpreted as a case of institutional transformation, induced by problems inside the euroregion and by the consolidation of the regional politico-administrative scale as a central actor in CBC.

When conducive external circumstances (accessible and stable hard spaces) meet conducive internal factors (entrepreneurship and forging of close relations with hard spaces), euroregions can consolidate their position as central players and even broaden their service portfolio. This is what happened in the Euroregion Šumava and it indicates an overall hardening of the soft space (Metzger and Schmitt, 2012). Due to the close relations to national politico-administrative hard spaces, the involvement of the individual sections in INTERREG programming and project selection, the management of dedicated EU funds in the SPFs, and a growing host of other services, the Euroregion Šumava has made a substantial contribution to overcoming peripherality.

However, as the analysis of the individual sections has shown, close relations to hard spaces can significantly influence the euroregion agenda. This is what happened in both Austrian sections. While a 'domestication' of the individual sections was expectable after the failure of the Euroregion Pomoraví, the Austrian turn towards domestic regional development indicates the resurgence of national and regional prerogatives. The interviews tentatively suggest that, Austria being a net-contributing EU member, the high administration costs of the INTERREG programs and their perceived low effectiveness may have played a role in this shift.

Finally, if Europe increasingly resembles a 'polycentric system, which is split into multiple overlapping arenas that are characterized by loose coupling' (Zielonka, 2006, p. 141), pragmatic *coalition-building* is likely to become more important as a strategy for overcoming peripherality. Therefore, future research on the nature of the ambivalent cooperative/competitive relationship between soft and hard spaces is warranted. What effect does the success or failure of euroregions have on domestic administrative systems in transition? Under which conditions will EU member states embrace adaptive soft strategies and when will they try to rein them in?

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5. APPENDIX

Appendix 1. Euroregion Šumava – Bayerischer Wald – Unterer Inn – Mühlviertel

EUROREGION GENERAL ASSEMBLY		
AT – Mühlviertel	CZ – Šumava	GER – Bayerischer Wald
Euregio Bayerischer Wald – Böhmerwald Chairmen (external function) Members of OÖ Parliament (*Landtagsabgeordnete*) Steering Committee	Euregion Šumava – Jihozápadni Čechy Chairmen (external function) *Mayor* Steering Committee	Euregio Bayerischer Wald – Böhmerwald Unterer Inn Chairmen (external function) District Administrator (*Landrat*) Steering Committee
OPERATIONAL LEVEL		
Regionalmanagement Mühlviertel	Regionální rozvojoví ágentura Šumava	Euregio Bayerischer Wald – Böhmerwald Unterer Inn
WORKING GROUPS		

Appendix 2. Euroregion Weinviertel – Pomoraví – Záhorie

EUROREGION GENERAL ASSEMBLY		
AT – Weinviertel	CZ – Jižní Moravy (SOM JM)	SK – Západní Slovensko
Regionalverband Euroregion Weinviertel Chairmen (external function) Member of Federal Parliament and Member of NÖ Parliament *(Landtagsabgeordnete*) Steering Committee	Sdruženi města obci Jižní Moravy (SOM JM) Chairmen (external function) *Mayor* Administratation Jihomoravsky Kraj Steering Committee	Regionálne združenie Záhorie Chairmen (external function) *Mayor* Private Person Steering Committee
OPERATIONAL LEVEL		
Weinviertel Management Euroregio Service	Regionální rozvojoví ágentura Jižní Moravy (RRA JM)	Regionálne združenie Záhorie Euroregio Service
WORKING GROUPS		

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