De-and re-bordering the Alpine Space: how Cross-border Cooperation Intertwines Spatial and Institutional Patterns of Exclusion and Inclusion, Subordination and Horizontality

Melanie Plangger

To cite this article: Melanie Plangger (2020) De-and re-bordering the Alpine Space: how Cross-border Cooperation Intertwines Spatial and Institutional Patterns of Exclusion and Inclusion, Subordination and Horizontality, Journal of Borderlands Studies, 35:3, 443-465, DOI: 10.1080/08865655.2018.1493943

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/08865655.2018.1493943

© 2018 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

Published online: 12 Jul 2018.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 556

View related articles

View Crossmark data
De-and re-bordering the Alpine Space: how Cross-border Cooperation Intertwines Spatial and Institutional Patterns of Exclusion and Inclusion, Subordination and Horizontality

Melanie Plangger

Department of Political Science, School of Social and Political Sciences, University of Innsbruck, Innsbruck, Austria

ABSTRACT
During the last years, scholars have broken up dichotomies that have shaped our understanding of cross-border cooperation. In geography, the confrontation between a territorial and a relational reading of space has given way to approaches that stress their dialogue. In political science, a struggle between a focus on government and governance has shifted towards a recognition of their coexistence. In this sense, cross-border networks no longer appear as antipodes to territorial borders, scalar relationships, sectoral differentiation and political hierarchies. Rather, they constitute and condition each other. While both geography and political science stress how connections mingle with patterns of exclusion and subordination, scholars rarely bring spatial and institutional accounts together. This paper aims at bridging the gap between spatial and institutional approaches of cross-border cooperation. With regard to theory, it embeds similarities in their ontological focus on structures and strategies in a strategic-relational approach. Empirically, the paper examines the EU macro-regional strategy for the Alpine space. The conclusions imply that the macro-regional strategy embodies a dynamic balance of spatial and institutional boundlessness and boundaries.

KEYWORDS
Cross-border cooperation; macro-regional strategies; networks; strategic-relational approach; Alpine space

1. Introduction
For a long time, dichotomies have shaped our understanding of cross-border cooperation. In geography, scholars have debated if cross-border cooperation reflects the dominance of territorially bounded entities (Jauhiainen 2002; Knippenberg 2004) or if it dissolves borders between territories and the subordination of scales (Amin 2002). In political science, scholars have struggled if cross-border cooperation is a playing field for governments (Hall 2008) or if it breaks up boundaries vis-à-vis private actors and the subordination of political levels (Blatter 2003; Schmitt-Egner 2005).
Recent approaches stress dialogue instead of confrontation (Jessop et al. 2008; Bjørnå and Aarsæther 2010; Cochrane and Ward 2012; Davies and Spicer 2015). They emphasize that cross-border cooperation does not embody an either-or, but mixtures and overlaps that manifest themselves in different practices and discourses and at different places and times (Harrison 2013).

In approaching these mixtures and overlaps, scholars still pay attention to either the spatial (e.g. Sohn 2014; Koch 2017) or the institutional dimension (e.g. Engl 2016; Padrona Rivera and Calderón Vázquez 2017). At the same time, the manifest consequences of territorial borders are closely linked to hierarchical relationships between different levels of government (Koch 2017), and the spatial imaginary of a networked space is connected to its implications for the dividing line between governmental and non-governmental actors (Hall 2008). Actors who make sense of, mobilize and are affected by cross-border cooperation connect spaces and modes of interaction in their daily practices. While these connections appear in many studies, they are not explicitly addressed.

This paper aims at combining both spatial and institutional accounts to increase our understanding of cross-border cooperation. Therefore, it identifies two common points in their ontological focus. First, both spatial and institutional concepts emphasize that while territories, hierarchies or networks are socially produced, they gain independence from the actions that form them. Consequently, they affect the realization of different actors’ interests through excluding, including, subordinating or connecting. Second, they point at the strategic mobilization, exploitation and transformation of space and modes of interaction. Actors can aim to overcome territorial boundaries and hierarchical relationships through mobilizing connections, but they can also enforce or introduce boundaries to strengthen their position.

The paper proceeds in three steps. First, it reviews literature that deals with networks and the persistence of territory, scale, sectoral differentiation and hierarchy in cross-border cooperation. It identifies parallels between spatial and institutional concepts and embeds their key assumptions in a strategic-relational heuristic. Second, the paper turns to a particular instance of cross-border cooperation, the EU macro-regional strategy for the Alpine region, to illustrate the conceptual argument. It demonstrates how the macro-regional network emerged as a conscious spatial and institutional connecting effort of regional authorities. Third, the paper investigates how regional authorities attempted to strengthen their position by mixing spaces and modes of interaction. They aimed at inclusion and horizontal connections vis-a-vis national and EU institutions, but also sought exclusion and subordination vis-a-vis local and non-governmental actors. The conclusions synthesize the arguments brought forward in the paper. They stress that the macro-regional strategy for the Alpine region embodies a mixture of spatial and institutional patterns of boundaries and boundlessness.

2. How spaces and modes of interaction intermingle: a strategic-relational approach

In both geography and political science, disputes on the replacement of territorial and sectoral dividing lines, as well as scalar and governmental hierarchies, through networked connections are located within larger scientific debates. In geography, an emphasis on the relational character of space (Amin 2002; Marston et al. 2005) was countered by scholars
who stressed the continuing relevance of territory and scale (Brenner 2004). In the social sciences, the claim that policy-making increasingly connects interdependent actors through processes of negotiation and collaboration (Jachtenfuchs 1995) was contrasted by scholars who highlighted the continuing dominance of national governments (Bache 1999).

Recent accounts emphasize that cross-border cooperation does not embody either territory and scale or network, or either government or governance. Rather, they find that territorial, scalar, sectoral and hierarchical effects of exclusion and subordination stand along networked effects of inclusion and horizontality. They constitute, enable and limit each other and are therefore inseparably connected.

In spatial terms, scholars study networks as one facet of space (Jessop et al. 2008) that follows conscious mobilization efforts but remains anchored in territorial and scalar orders. Territorial borders manifest themselves in different aspects (Paasi and Zimmerbauer 2016). They are actively produced, mobilized and reinforced to exclude and include, overcome to gather and share, and have manifest consequences across contexts and strategies (Brunet-Jailly 2005; Ernste, Van Houtum, and Zoomers 2009; Konrad 2015). The expression of interests (Jonas 2011) and politics (Goodwin 2013, 3) are linked to territorial jurisdictions. Actors in cross-border cooperation represent clearly demarcated scales and boundaries. Consequently, they are influenced by, but also reproduce different territorial and scalar logics (Popescu 2008; Koch 2017). The territorial organization of space meets with cross-border real-life experiences of people, who relate to overlapping, loosely bounded and loosely coupled spaces (Faludi 2013). Consequently, territory, scale and networks are closely intertwined. While networks are shaped and limited by territories, territories follow overlapping and interconnected relations (Cochrane and Ward 2012, 7; Zimmerbauer 2014). Relational and territorial aspects produce a messy picture of competing, contradicting and overlapping regional projects (Harrison and Growe 2014).

Different concepts make sense of the co-existence of territory, scale and network. “Politics of scale” approaches investigate networking as an effort to bend and transcend scalar hierarchies. In this regard, spaces of engagement (Cox 1998; MacLeod 1999) represent consciously mobilized associations. They secure territorially-defined spaces of dependence through connections with powerful interests. Local and regional actors connect at multiple scales to secure their place-specific interests (Cox 2010). The notion of “scalar politics” (MacKinnon 2011) points in a similar way at the strategic deployment of scale and network to realize certain social and political projects. The concept of “assemblages” (Allen and Cochrane 2010) emphasizes the process-dimension of networked spaces. Assemblages are, similar to spaces of engagement, consciously mobilized connections that serve the desire for influence over spatially distant forces. While they are constantly evolving, established relationships of exclusion and subordination shape networked spaces “from a distance”. In a similar vein, the notion of “soft spaces” (Allmendinger and Haughton 2009) grasps how actors design relational spaces to jump over territorial and scalar boundaries but remain embedded within their territorial constituencies.

In institutional terms, researchers examine networks as one mode of interaction among others. Scholars emphasize that governance encompasses both, functional jurisdictions that are based on connections, and territorial jurisdictions that draw on vertical interactions (Hooghe and Marks 2003; Blatter 2004). Their configuration follows actors’ strategies, established interaction patterns and institutional pathways. Network connections, understood as institutionalized or informal relationships between actors beyond formal
lines of authority (Fisman 2001), are not all-dominant, but form only one element of governance (Davies and Spicer 2015). They interact with, are limited by and influence existing patterns of separation between the governmental and the non-governmental sector, and relationships of subordination between different levels. Governments remain central because they hold important resources and competences (Baker and Stoker 2012) and ensure linkages to institutions of representational democracy (Sørensen 2006). Consequently, also hierarchies and coercion continue to shape outcomes (Davies 2014).

Different approaches grasp these interlinkages. Policy networks describe “mechanisms of political resource mobilization in situations where the capacity for decision making, program formulation and implementation is widely distributed or dispersed among private and public actors” (Kenis and Schneider 1991, 41). They provide a realm for the exchange of resources and communication (Kenis and Schneider 1991). At the same time, existing boundaries and hierarchies shape networked relationships. In contrast to governance networks, interactions in policy networks are not necessarily horizontal, but take different forms. As governments remain key actors in networks, networks neither replace hierarchies nor threaten state boundaries (Rhodes 1997; Agranoff 2006). The concept of metagovernance or “governance of governance” emphasizes the role of governments in mixing different modes of interaction. While governance networks are important to link interdependent actors, they form only one element of the governance toolbox (Bjørnå and Aarsæther 2010). Governments mix networks, hierarchies and markets, use different techniques to control outcomes and cast a “shadow of hierarchy” over governance processes (Whitehead 2003; Sørensen and Torfing 2009; Jessop 2010).

Consequently, cross-border networks promise to overcome the principle of separation that underlies territories and the differentiation between the governmental and the non-governmental sector (Nadalutti 2014; Podadera Rivera and Calderón Vázquez 2017) and the principle of subordination that underlies scalar and political hierarchies (Harguindeguy and Bray 2009; Nadalutti 2012). At the same time, they remain limited by and closely linked to established patterns and boundaries (Nelles and Durand 2014; Svensson 2015). While the concept of networks as a category of space is distinct from the notion of networks as a mode of interaction, the parallels between a confrontation of exclusion and inclusion on the one hand and of subordination and horizontality on the other hand point at close connections. The different approaches share an ontological focus on the interaction between spaces or modes of interaction (structures) and the conscious actions that target their constellation and effects (strategies) (MacKinnon 2011). To bridge the gap between both, this paper proposes to embed their assumptions in a strategic-relational heuristic (Jessop 1990, 2008; MacKinnon 2011).

The strategic-relational approach focuses on the interplay of both, the effects of structures and the impact of strategies. Taking up the dimension of structures, the strategic-relational approach does not only assume that spaces or modes of interaction affect actors through excluding, including, subordinating or connecting them. It also posits that these effects touch actors differently. A given structure is “strategically selective”: it privileges some actors, resources and strategies, while it disadvantages others (Jessop 1990, 10). Some actors profit from territorial borders, scalar hierarchies, sectoral differentiation or vertical relationships; others are marginalized. Moreover, also networks produce differential effects. Some actors can gain centrality and influence in a network, while others lack the resources to connect.
The differential effect of structures is even more important as structures do not only impact on the success of actors’ efforts, but also on their interests and strategies. In this regard, the strategic-relational approach builds on and further develops neo-institutionalist accounts that stress the impact of institutions on the roles, interests and strategies of single actors (see, for example, March and Olsen 1989; Peters 2005). Actors develop their interests and strategies on the basis of an observation of the environment that surrounds them (Jessop 1990, 266). They anticipate structural effects and adapt accordingly. Consequently, structures influence what they pursue and how they proceed. At the same time, actors are not able to observe every detail of the context. Therefore, they employ ideas, which represent a picture frame that selects one section of reality, while it cuts off other parts (Jessop 2008, 234–235). As actors base their interests and strategies on both, their picture of the material world and the ideas that form this picture, their interests and strategies change when material or ideational factors change (Hay 2001). Thus, the structure and the perspective of an actor are inseparably connected.

In relation to strategies, the strategic-relational approach acknowledges that structures do not only impact on actors, but that actors also impact on structures. Actors do not just adapt to the context, but also manipulate and challenge it to foster the realization of their interests (Jessop 1990, 263). They may mobilize connections to overcome boundaries and hierarchies, enforce established orders to strengthen their own position or introduce new dividing lines. Thereby, they can stimulate effects of exclusion and inclusion, subordination and horizontality. However, the complexity of the context and the various strategies employed make it unlikely that they succeed in producing the desired outcomes (Jessop 2010, 113–114). Rather, unintended consequences and contradictory structural effects may occur.

The ability to change structural effects differs over time and space, but also among different actors (Hay 2001). Some may be in a better position to challenge established orders than others. Consequently, power appears as the ability to change the environment in which others act (Jessop 2008, 44) and can take different forms. It can draw on the animation of networks (Perkmann 2007; Harguindéguy and Bray 2009), but it can also build on the control over a certain territory and its borders (Paasi 2009) or on the governing of a vertical chain of interaction (Whitehead 2003).

Moreover, different dimensions of power can combine and be employed at different stages of a process or vis-à-vis different actors. Actors do not just have one position but are included in some and excluded from other territories and sectors, superordinate to some and subordinate to other scales and levels. Consequently, also strategies do not just draw on one dimension. They may mobilize connections, boundaries, divisions and hierarchies to overcome exclusion and subordination in respect to some, and to enforce inclusion and superiority in respect to other dimensions.

The close relationship between structures and strategies implies that the configuration of exclusion, inclusion, subordination and horizontality changes constantly. It follows the dynamic interplay of both structures that empower and constrain strategic action and strategies that produce and counteract structural effects. Figure 1 illustrates how structures, effects and strategies relate to each other.

Taking up the presented theoretical assumptions on the interplay of structure and strategy, the following two sections take a closer look at the macro-regional strategy for the Alpine region. The paper focuses on the role of regional authorities. Regional authorities have a specific place in the presented configuration of structures and strategies. While they
face subordination in scalar and domestic hierarchies and are more directly constrained by territorial boundaries than their national counterparts, they also build the focal point of EU cross-border cooperation. Consequently, they experience particular incentives to mobilize cross-border spatial and institutional connections vis-à-vis felt effects of exclusion and subordination.

The first section examines the development of the macro-regional strategy as a conscious effort of network mobilization. The second section investigates how subnational actors responded to the strategically selective macro-regional framework through mixing spatial and institutional patterns of inclusion, exclusion, subordination and horizontality.

3. Cross-border network mobilization in the Alpine space

Macro-regional strategies provide a strategic framework for cooperation in transnational areas. As they should allow for central coordination, strategic direction and connectivity, they mix aspects of exclusion and inclusion, subordination and horizontality in unique ways. They combine horizontal linkages and hierarchical relationships (Salines 2010; Nacchia 2011), territorial narratives and fluid, fuzzy boundaries (Allmendinger et al. 2014; Stead et al. 2015). The four macro-regional strategies set up so far in the Baltic Sea, the Danube, the Adriatic-Ionian and the Alpine region share many elements. They stipulate a strong role of the European Commission as central coordinator (Metzger and Schmitt 2012), require that national governments provide steering and strategic direction (Nacchia 2011) and are implemented in transnational priority area or action groups.

At the same time, the macro-regional strategies differ in their specific structures. Each macro-regional strategy is based on the leadership of specific stakeholders, which design the thematic, geographical and governance structure according to their distinct interests (Sielker 2016; Plangger 2017). In the case of the fourth macro-regional strategy in the Alpine space, the main stakeholders are regional authorities.4 This distinguishes the
strategy from other macro-regional strategies, where national governments and the European Commission play the leading role (Schuh et al. 2015; Sielker 2016). Consequently, the Alpine space represents an interesting testing case that allows examining how regional actors, cross-border connections and different kinds of boundaries and hierarchies interact. At the same time, the distinct actor constellations imply a limited transferability of findings.

To approach the interplay of exclusion, inclusion, subordination and horizontality in the Alpine region, the following analysis draws on qualitative data collected through a comprehensive document analysis, interviews and participant observation at meetings and conferences. In a first step, a wide range of minutes from meetings and conferences, briefings and background documents, strategy documents, declarations and position papers has been coded. The documents were made available by involved national and subnational authorities and identified during an extensive desk research. They range from the first steps towards a macro-regional strategy in March 2010 to the first steps of implementation in July 2017. In a second step, 47 semi-structured interviews with 49 representatives of European, national and subnational authorities and transnational and civil society organizations provided additional information on positions and processes. Interviews were conducted with actors involved in the macro-regional process in Austria, Germany, France, Italy, Liechtenstein and Switzerland and with EU representatives in Brussels. Additional information was collected through the attendance of publicly accessible conferences and action group meetings between January 2016 and July 2017.

The documents, the interview transcripts and the notes were processed with the software MAXQDA 12. The analysis assigned descriptive codes to the data. Afterwards, the codes were summarized under similar headings to identify patterns. In a final step, the codes were connected to other empirical studies and the overall theoretical framework to allow meaningful interpretations (Meuser and Nagel 1991, 455–466).

The findings allow investigating the development of the macro-regional strategy as a conscious effort to overcome exclusion and subordination through spatial and institutional connections. In the Alpine space, regional network mobilization has a long tradition. Since the 1970s, the Alpine mountain range has served as a territorial frame to join forces with like-minded regions. Already in 1972, regions from Austria, Germany, Italy and Switzerland formed the working community Arge Alp. Regions in the South-Eastern and Western parts of the Alps established two further Alpine cooperation bodies, the Alps-Adriatic Working Group (1978) and the Communauté de Travail des Alpes Occidentales or COTRAO (1982). An executive official of an Italian region described regional networking efforts as follows:

Since the beginning, already before EUSALP [EU macro-regional strategy for the Alpine region], through all possible instruments, the idea of creating a network with those who have the same demands, for being able to say to Brussels, look, […] how many we are in total, we are millions.5

While especially the Arge Alp developed into a lively cooperation, regional networks appeared to have their limitations. Two processes stimulated the desire for more extensive connections. First, with the accelerating process of EU integration from the 1980s onwards, EU policies and legislation increasingly influenced the regions, while subnational authorities largely remained excluded from decision-making at the EU level (Tatham
2014). Many Alpine regions, especially in Germany, Austria and some parts of Italy, possess a wide range of legislative competences and feared a loss of territorial control. In parallel, EU structural funds allowed the regions to finance regional development projects. In the late 1990s, the EU began to financially support Alpine cooperation with the INTERREG Alpine Space Programme. The financial crisis in 2008 enhanced the importance of EU funds for regional development, while it increased the competition for territorial funds. As governments were forced to reduce domestic budgets, the regions attempted to stabilize their EU allocations (Healy and Bristow 2013). Consequently, they developed a strong interest in overcoming a perceived exclusion and subordination at the EU level.

Second, with the entering of national governments in Alpine cooperation in the early 1990s, the regions saw their influence on Alpine decision-making diminishing. In 1991, the environmental ministries of eight Alpine states signed the Alpine Convention. The international treaty formalized cooperation in the field of environmental protection and sustainable development. As national governments dominated decision-making, many regions perceived the Alpine Convention as a further loss of power over their territories (Balsiger 2015). The perceived introduction of new boundaries reinforced the fear of a loss of influence. The Alpine Convention defines the Alpine space narrowly and focuses on the core mountainous area. Therefore, it excludes large parts of administrative regions like Lombardy, Bavaria or Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes, which encompass mountainous areas and plains. At the same time, many regions felt that the focus on environmental issues was too restrictive, while regions in Italy and France perceived a certain dominance of the proactive German-speaking countries (Balsiger 2008, 15). Consequently, a wide range of Alpine regions wanted to overcome a perceived exclusion and subordination at the transnational level.

The framework of EU territorial cooperation provided a window of opportunity for these aspirations. The adoption of the first macro-regional strategy in the Baltic Sea region (European Commission 2009) created a new framework that gathered EU institutions, national governments and subnational authorities at a political and at a technical level. The new framework promised to bend separation and hierarchy through spurring extensive connections across territories, scales, sectors and levels (Gänzle 2017). As the regional executive official of an Italian region highlighted,

This one is different because there are all the three levels in this cooperation, which is the European level, the national level, the level of the member states, or non-member states, … and the regions […] What we needed was a cooperation where every government level was involved, but the leadership should be regional.6

Moreover, while macro-regional strategies do not stipulate the creation of new funds or institutions, they should allow for the more efficient use of existing means. Consequently, they provide an instrument for the targeted mobilization of institutions and EU funds.

While the regions perceived an added value in creating a macro-regional network, they do not have a formal position in the process of initiation. Therefore, it does not come as a surprise that the history of the macro-regional strategy for the Alpine region appears as a steady expansion of connections to other territories, scales, sectors and levels. First, the regions expanded their connections beyond nation-state borders. First efforts emerged in the framework of the Arge Alp. Already in 2010 and therefore one year after the
adoption of the first macro-regional strategy in the Baltic Sea region, seven regions from the Arge Alp and the national government of Switzerland called for a macro-regional strategy (Alpine Regions 2010). Afterwards, the Arge Alp expanded connections to increase leverage. It invited two French regions to elaborate a first input paper in an editorial team. While the editorial team involved only seven regions, every region was called to coordinate with other regions within its nation state to associate as many actors as possible. The prospect of an EU macro-regional strategy that would grant influence on competences and financial resources mobilized a wide range of actors. In the end, 26 regions from Austria, France, Germany, Italy and Switzerland agreed on a common input paper (Conference of the Alpine Regions 2012). As Alpine cooperation had long built on small groups of regions, the broad mobilization was a connecting success.

The regions did not only mobilize across institutions, but also drew on the spatial imaginary of the Alps as a connected space to legitimate their claims. They emphasized that their efforts originated in shared common features: “Out of this commonness sprang the conviction that joint, targeted actions and coordinated projects and measures have a comparative advantage over solutions adopted by individual States” (Conference of the Alpine Regions 2012, 3). A focus on the Alps as a functionally connected space with objective common problems and challenges dissolved separations between territories, scales, sectors and levels. At the same time, it blurred political motivations and controversies between the regions, and between the regional and the national level (Olesen and Richardson 2011).

In parallel with the regions, also the INTERREG Alpine Space Programme (Gloersen et al. 2013) and the Alpine Convention (Permanent Secretariat of the Alpine Convention 2012) elaborated inputs for a possible macro-regional strategy. However, apart from the subnational level, the desire for a macro-regional strategy remained limited. At the same time, the concept of macro-regional strategies stipulated that only national governments can start a macro-regional process. Consequently, the regions had to involve their national governments.

Therefore, second, the regions expanded their connections to national authorities. As the executive official of an Austrian region emphasized, “it took a certain process of persuasion, come on, join in”. Austrian and French regions first succeeded in winning the support of their national governments. Other national authorities followed. The steering committee that consisted of seven regional authorities was expanded to involve seven national representatives. In parallel, domestic arrangements of coordination among national and regional actors emerged. Under the coordination of the French national government, the steering committee merged the initiatives of the regions, the INTERREG Alpine Space Programme and the Alpine Convention (The States and Regions of the Alpine Region 2013b). It also elaborated a joint call to the EU level (The States and Regions of the Alpine Region 2013a). In December 2013, the French national government took the issue to the European Council. The interplay of existing connections and connecting efforts culminated in a mandate of the European Council (European Council 2013).

Third, the regional authorities further spurred connections with the EU level. In the context of two laborious macro-regional processes in the Baltic Sea and the Danube region, the European Commission was skeptical about the setting up of a further macro-regional strategy. A former politician from a French region remembered a meeting with the Commissioner for regional policy:
He told me that he did not think that it appeared useful, not because it was not good, but he said that you are already very organized, you are powerful regions, what will bring it for you? […] at the beginning he accompanied it with a lot of reluctance.10

Some regions in the Alpine space established interpersonal connections to receive the support of the EU. They organized meetings and conferences with Commission officials and promoted their macro-regional idea. Especially ties between Austrian regions and the Austrian Commissioner for regional policy appeared useful in this regard. Moreover, subnational authorities connected within the Committee of the Regions and the European Parliament. They initiated resolutions within both institutions (European Parliament 2013; Committee of the Regions 2014) to raise awareness and stake their claims at an EU level. A politician of an Austrian region perceived the resolution of the Committee of the Regions as a connecting success:

[…] thereby one achieves a solidarization of the Committee of the Regions. Now we are only, the Alpine area is vanishingly small […] with this solidarization effect one has achieved that the other institutions see, there is more behind it, there are all the regions, and the Committee of the Regions is, I say, not only the representation of the regions, but also of the other authorities, of the municipalities […].11

On the basis of the mandate of the European Council, the European Commission began to elaborate the key documents. The steering committee accompanied the process and took decisions on the thematic and governance structure of the strategy. In July 2015, the European Commission presented the final strategy and the action plan (European Commission 2015a, 2015b). The Council of the EU endorsed the strategy documents in November 2015 (Council of the European Union 2015). The implementation process was launched in January 2016. Figure 2 shows the different steps of Alpine network expansion.

Regional networking efforts had succeeded. The macro-regional strategy for the Alpine region gathered EU, national and subnational actors from the seven Alpine states Austria, France, Germany, Italy, Liechtenstein, Slovenia and Switzerland in three common governance bodies (European Commission 2015b, 47–52). The general assembly builds the political level of cooperation. It encompasses national and regional politicians, adopts the guidelines of cooperation and allows for the observing participation of the Alpine Convention. The executive board continues the work of the steering committee and includes national and regional civil servants. The Alpine Convention and the INTERREG Alpine Space Programme participate as observers without decision-making rights. The annually rotating presidency can be assumed by national and regional governments. It chairs the meetings, decides on procedures and gives working priorities. The action groups build the operative level of the macro-regional strategy. They elaborate and implement concrete projects.

While the macro-regional strategy thus created a new, spatially and institutionally inclusive network, it also remained anchored within EU and nation-state borders and hierarchies. National governments and the European Commission occupy central positions, are well connected at the EU and transnational level and have more resources than subnational authorities, especially in more centralized states like France or Italy. Correspondingly, the regions feared to fall behind. On the other hand, the regions feared to lose control through opening the process to too many actors and interests. The following section examines how the regions attempted to spur effects of inclusion and exclusion, subordination and horizontality to secure their position.
Figure 2. The process of Alpine network expansion (own illustration).
4. The strategic deployment of boundlessness and boundaries

4.1. The use of connections

While the regions had succeeded in setting up a macro-regional network, they faced new threats and limitations. An executive official from Italy described regional fears as follows:

[…] convince the states to participate, but also take care that the regions remain decisive. Because otherwise the states will take over, the Alpine states, and say, you, regions, we do not need you anymore. We also did not want that.\textsuperscript{12}

To strengthen their position vis-à-vis presumed effects of exclusion and subordination, the regions drew on connections. Spatial and institutional network concepts assume that the number, closeness and character of established connections affect an actors’ ability to take influence in a network. Consequently, they measure network centrality by four indicators (e.g. Durand and Nelles 2014; Dörry and Walther 2015; González-Gómez and Gualda 2017). The indicator of degree centrality measures the number of ties an actor has with other actors. A second indicator, closeness centrality, relies on the assumption that centrality follows close links among actors. Betweenness centrality as a third indicator evaluates the extent to which an actor serves as a gatekeeper between different connections. Finally, a fourth indicator, eigenvector centrality, assumes that connections with central actors are more important than connections with non-central actors.

While central network actors do not control the network, they gain major advantage from their favorable position in exchange relationships (Neal 2011). They have, first, a strong communicative position. They can easily spread messages and thereby frame perceptions and choices (Hood 1983). Second, they have a favorable bargaining position. They possess more information than others, can easily build alliances and find support for their proposals, while their centrality makes it difficult to bypass them in decision-making or implementation. Based on these theoretical considerations, it can be expected that actors with an interest in overcoming exclusion and subordination will strive to build up connections, forge close relationships, pursue a gatekeeping position between linkages and target central network actors.

Observations in the Alpine space show that regions consciously seek network centrality across spatial and institutional contexts. The regions in the Alpine space continuously connect with other regions, their national governments and EU institutions. On the inter-regional level, they partly use existing cooperation arrangements like the Arge Alp or European Groupings for Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) to coordinate their positions, but also establish new coordination fora. To maintain and strengthen connections with the national level, the different regions engage in domestic coordination arrangements. They coordinate regularly to share information and remain anchored in the intergovernmental realm.

On the European level, the regions build connections with various EU institutions. The German regions Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg and the Austrian region Tyrol sent civil servants in the Commission working team to increase their connections with the Commission. Austrian, French and Italian regions initiated interregional groups in the European Parliament and the Committee of the Regions. The primary aim of these groups, which have minor formal competences, is the establishment of connections among members.
from Alpine regions and states, but also with other EU institutions. As an executive official of an Austrian region outlined,

[…] such a large political process simply also needs a lot of accompanying music […] to involve as many actors as possible, to avoid that anybody feels left out.13

Regional authorities also assume many functions within the macro-regional strategy to enhance their centrality. The willingness of Bavaria to administer the INTERREG project AlpGov that provides financial support and the offer of Lombardy to take care of communication can be seen within this context. Some regions also propose to host a dedicated technical structure that supports the process. The decision of Bavaria or the Tyrol to assume the annually rotating presidency of the macro-regional strategy follows similar motivations. Finally, the regions also show a strong commitment in the action groups. The action group leaders represent the most important nodes in the implementation architecture. They guide the discussion process, make proposals and communicate with other governance structures. Regions lead all nine action groups, while national governments assume leadership positions in only three action groups.

The various established connections increase the regional influence on decisions, competences and resources at the EU, the transnational and the national level. Regions can gather actors behind their priorities in the action groups, set the agenda of cooperation and call for changes in EU and national policies (Sielker 2016). They build an interface between their subnational constituencies and the EU, can gain direct information on EU procedures and positions and streamline EU funds (Stead et al. 2015). Their activities also frame broader ideas of Alpine cooperation and regional policy in an EU, transnational and national framework.

However, the maintenance of centrality demands a constant investment of resources and continuous presence. In this sense, the macro-regional network also reproduces patterns of inequality among regions. Regions with limited resources face difficulties in maintaining their presence, while resourceful regions are privileged. Therefore, it does not come as a surprise that economically strong regions like Bavaria or Lombardy assume many tasks. At the same time, already established connections, for example in the framework of preexisting interregional networks, are crucial to build and maintain relationships. In this sense, the biblical principle “to everyone who has will be given more” appears valid. The European Commission and national governments remain, due to their substantive resources and competences, key actors. Regional authorities may attempt to counter their power but have to maintain and animate linkages with them to secure the sustainability of the network. Due to their central position, national governments and the European Commission also gain further influence on matters of regional interest.

4.2 The use of territory, scale, sectoral differentiation and hierarchy

While the regions countered threats of nation-state and EU dominance through connections, they also drew on territorial boundaries and dividing lines vis-à-vis the non-governmental sector to strengthen their position. First, they targeted the territorial delimitation of the macro-regional strategy. In this sense, the regions employed territorial borders as a resource to project difference and togetherness (Sohn 2014). With regard to territory, different interests met. Regions in the periphery of the mountains, like Lombardy or
Bavaria, wanted to include their whole territory, while some regions in the core mountainous area feared that a wide territorial delimitation would privilege already powerful peripheral regions and metropolises. However, all regions were interested in increasing their impact through gathering territories (Harrison et al. 2017). As an executive official of an Italian region emphasized, the territorial delimitation also served the perceived need “[…] to be stronger in Europe. Because 14 million [inhabitants in a narrowly defined Alpine space] count for nothing in Brussels.”14 Therefore, the regions early agreed on a compromise. They favored a wide territorial frame, but also emphasized that alpine and peri-alpine regions should cooperate on an equal basis (Conference of the Alpine Regions 2012, 25).

As the European Commission entered the process, a geographical alignment with the already existing EU funding scheme INTERREG Alpine Space Programme appeared to be the logical choice. The broad territorial definition of the INTERREG Alpine Space Programme, which is oriented towards the borders of administrative regions, corresponded to regional demands. At the same time, the regions partly changed the delimitation. Due to the strong stance of some regions, the macro-regional strategy includes the German regions Baden-Württemberg and Bavaria in their entirety, while it excludes the less interested French region Alsace. The macro-regional strategy projects the Alpine as a clearly bordered and functionally interconnected space. It creates symbolic difference vis-à-vis non-Alpine regions, has profound consequences for funding and partnership decisions and is therefore closely connected to the exerting of power (Newman 2003). Figure 3 shows the three different geographical perimeters in the Alpine space.

Second, regions addressed the division vis-à-vis non-governmental actors. They did not only draw on territorial, but also on sectoral boundaries to strengthen their stance. Many regions, but also national governments feared that the process of cross-border network mobilization would open the process for too many interests. They had concerns about losing influence, undermining efficiency and complicating efforts. As the executive official of German region indicated,

[...] this is in the end a state steering instrument, the EUSALP, and there is an inner logic that the states and regions cannot let the civil society decide what has to be done.15

To strengthen their position against the background of effects of inclusion and horizontality, regions and national governments drew on sectoral differentiation and vertical relationships. Non-governmental actors and local authorities were only minimally involved in the elaboration of the strategy. They could contribute inputs in some technical subgroups and in the public consultation process of the European Commission. However, only actors who were aware of the macro-regional strategy could participate, and it remains unclear to what extent inputs were taken up in decisions. Correspondingly, in 2013, eight observer organizations of the Alpine Convention pushed for their involvement through a common input paper (Alliance in the Alps et al. 2013). In parallel, the regions and nation states were called to coordinate with non-governmental interests within their constituencies. This gave them a strong gatekeeper position vis-à-vis the non-governmental sector.

The governance structure of the macro-regional strategy sets up a vertical framework that closes the decision-making process and ensures control over processes and outcomes. The general assembly gives objectives that should be pursued by all subordinate structures. The executive board prepares and operationalizes political decisions, monitors implementation and further develops the strategy (EU Strategy for the Alpine Region 2016a). Local authorities and non-governmental organizations do not take part at the two superior governance levels. This stands in contrast to the Alpine Convention, where both participate actively, although only as observers, in decision-making structures. Rules of procedure formalize vertical structures of control and monitoring (EU Strategy for the Alpine Region 2016b). They stipulate that the executive board monitors projects prepared in the action groups and evaluates their progress, as an executive official of a German region described:

[...] the working groups present their work programs, each working group for itself elaborates a little work program, a reporting has to be done, it has to be presented to the executive board, so we have implemented a sort of monitoring system [...] just a little bit of control, steering, coordination, these are the things we do.16

Within the action groups, local and non-governmental actors have a weak position. Only public authorities can lead action groups, with the exception of the Alpine Convention that co-leads one action group. The rules of procedure define different categories of members. Decision-making capacity requires an official mandate by a region or a nation state. All other actors may participate when invited but cannot take part in decisions. The participation of non-governmental actors depends on the willingness of the group to involve them. Every action group has a certain freedom of maneuver and can involve them on a regular basis, consult them when it perceives an added value or exclude them altogether. The action group leaders, mostly subnational authorities, have
a key role in proposing procedures. The only structures that stipulate an involvement of a broad range of actors are the annual forum and an online knowledge exchange platform. Both aim at gathering ideas and informing about the macro-regional strategy but are only loosely connected to the decision-making structures.

The mechanisms of exclusion and subordination can limit the problem-solving capacity of the macro-regional strategy. Tensions between territorial delimitations and functional networks and between institutional horizontality and sectoral differentiation may shape outcomes. While the regions pursued territorial balance through processes of bordering, they also disguised difference and controversy with the spatial imaginary of a functional, quasi-natural network. Consequently, the macro-regional strategy may face difficulties in accommodating political controversy (Olesen and Richardson 2011). Current conflicts on different political aims and strategies in the field of transport exemplify this tension (orf.at 2017). While transport is one subject of macro-regional cooperation, struggles between regional politicians are carried out outside the macro-regional realm.

At the same time, research finds that only an involvement of a broad range of actors from different levels and sectors ensures sustainability and effective outcomes (Boman and Berg 2007; Engl 2016). Moreover, local authorities are crucial to stimulate cross-border activism (Perkmann 2003). First action group meetings show that the mobilization of actors appears challenging. The macro-regional strategy remains anchored in national and regional administrations and does not reach out to the wider public. It mainly draws on some very active regions, while many public authorities participate marginally. In the long term, its limited ability to mobilize across established boundaries could significantly reduce the impact of macro-regional efforts.

These limitations imply that efforts to strengthen connections beyond sectoral and scalar boundaries can improve the impact of cross-border cooperation. In this regard, more openness and transparency, especially in the process of implementation, a stronger use of deliberative and participative elements and capacity building among non-governmental and local actors appear important. An active incorporation of a wider circle of participants can stimulate projects that leave established approaches and enhance visibility and relevance, also for the electorate, politicians and EU institutions.

In the Alpine macro-regional strategy, structural patterns of exclusion and subordination institutionalized in EU territorial cooperation, in transnational regimes and in the single nation states met with regional strategies to connect across spatial and institutional boundaries. The outcome illustrates how both structure and strategy produce diverse landscapes of exclusion and inclusion, subordination and horizontality. The macro-regional strategy offers regional authorities new opportunities to connect and exert influence. The emerging connections moderate excluding and subordinating effects of EU and transnational regimes and increase the centrality of regional authorities in both EU and Alpine contexts. They also give national governments and the European Commission influence on issues of regional development. At the same time, they reinforce established boundaries between the territorial and the functional, the regional and the local and the public and the private realm.

5. Conclusions

This paper has examined how the interplay of structure and strategy generates specific spatial and institutional patterns of exclusion and inclusion, subordination and
horizontality in cross-border cooperation. Therefore, it has drawn on different approaches that combine network approaches with notions of territory, scale, sectoral differentiation and political hierarchy. While networks capture the fluidity and inclusivity of cross-border cooperation, the deployment of spatial and socio-political concepts of territory, scale, sectoral differentiation and hierarchy points at the continuing presence of exclusion and subordination. As the different approaches touch the interaction of structures and strategies, the paper has embedded them in a strategic-relational heuristic. In this sense, spaces and modes of interaction materially affect actors in realizing their goals. At the same time, actors’ strategies influence the weight and configuration of structural patterns.

Specifically, the paper has focused on the EU macro-regional strategy for the Alpine region. This cross-border cooperation follows conscious efforts of regional authorities to gain influence on distant and dispersed actors, processes and resources. To increase their leverage, the regions steadily expanded their connections at the subnational, the national and the EU level. The spatial imaginary of a functional, quasi-natural Alpine network discursively dissolved separations between territories, scales, sectors and levels. While established boundaries and hierarchies limited their influence, they pursued network centrality to overcome subordination and exclusion. At the same time, they enforced territorial delimitations to secure a balance of power. They also sought effects of subordination and exclusion vis-à-vis local and non-governmental actors. Thereby, they produced new tensions between territorial and functional, scalar and relational, separated and networked, and hierarchical and horizontal spheres.

The resulting mixture of spatial and institutional patterns of boundaries and boundlessness will differ from cross-border cooperation to cross-border cooperation, from macro-regional strategy to macro-regional strategy. It is closely linked to the structures at stake, the stakeholders’ strategies and the ideas that surround it. Therefore, research has to investigate how different ideas, interests, strategies and structural opportunities and constraints come together at different places and times to produce unique and dynamic outcomes.

While macro-regional mobilization was no easy task, the regions in the Alpine space cannot rest on their achievements. The maintenance of centrality requires considerable resources, a constant presence within the network and an animation of connected actors. Patterns of hierarchy and territory complicate regional efforts. The long-term impact of the macro-regional strategy also depends on the ability to mobilize adequate spatial imaginaries and diverse actors, competences and resources. In the context of new threats and costly efforts, Alpine regions may resemble Sisyphus. To reach out to powerful actors, they initiate new network spaces. Thereby, they create new relational and governance realms that expose their interests to contestation. As they draw on and act within frameworks set by superior scales and levels, they also reinforce established nation-state and EU hierarchies. In parallel, regions limit the impact of their efforts through excluding and subordinating stakeholders and interests. What follows is not only a perpetual quest for new regional arrangements, but also an infinite search for scientific concepts that grasp the resulting strange coexistence of spatial and institutional boundlessness and boundaries.
Endnotes

1. This paper uses the term cross-border cooperation to denote all forms of cooperation among subnational authorities across nation-state boundaries (Perkmann 1999). The EU uses the term territorial cooperation as an umbrella term for transnational and cross-border cooperation between regions, cities and municipalities.

2. The vertical differentiation of space is referred to as “scale” (Jessop 2008, 104–106), while the term “level” describes the vertical differentiation of institutional competences (Hooghe and Marks 2001, 125).

3. The paper employs the term regional authorities for the representatives of the executive of subnational regions. While the term region is ambivalent and can refer to diverse regional configurations, the paper draws on the EU NUTS (Nomenclature des unités territoriales statistiques) scheme that forms the basis of EU territorial cooperation. NUTS 2 regions, for example German and Austrian Bundesländer, French régions or Swiss Kantone, are the primary units of the macro-regional strategy in the Alpine space.

4. While a broad range of regional authorities was involved in pushing for and elaborating the macro-regional strategy, some regions were particularly active. Among them, we find Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg in Germany, (Auvergne-)Rhône-Alpes in France, Tyrol, Carinthia and Salzburg in Austria, Grisons and Ticino in Switzerland and the Northern Italian regions, especially Lombardy, Piedmont and Veneto and the provinces Trentino and South Tyrol.

5. Interview with a regional executive official from Italy, June 15, 2017, translated from Italian.
6. Interview with a regional executive official from Italy, October 11, 2016.
7. The seven regions were the German region Bavaria, the Austrian regions Tyrol and Vorarlberg, the Italian provinces South Tyrol and Trentino and the Swiss region Grisons.
8. In the editorial team, the German region Bavaria, the Austrian region Tyrol, the Italian regions South Tyrol and Lombardy, the French regions Rhône-Alpes and Provence-Alpes-Côte d’Azur and the Swiss region Grisons participated. They represented the Alpine regions within their respective nation states.

Acknowledgments

The author thanks Andreas Maurer, Jörg Balsiger, the editor of Journal of Borderlands Studies and three anonymous reviewers for their valuable and helpful comments.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.
Funding

This work was supported by the [University of Innsbruck]; the [Austrian Federal Ministry of Science, Research and Economy] under Grant [Marietta Blau Grant]; and the [Tyrolean Science Fund].

References


